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## Holocaust Indictments

For many Jews, the Holocaust provided incontrovertible vindication – alas too late – of the Zionist thesis. It proved that antisemitism is endemic, at least in Christian European society, and that the Jews need a country of their own, at least as a refuge when all other avenues are closed to them. The starkness of that lesson helped persuade the world to support the creation of the State of Israel after the Second World War. And Israel for its part, long since grown powerful and controversial, still takes care not to let the lesson fade. Every official visit to the Jewish State begins at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, where the foreign dignitary lays a wreath in memory of Hitler's six million Jewish victims.

For American Jewry, the lesson took longer to sink in. At first there was denial and suppressed guilt over what had happened in 'the old countries', and a lingering scepticism over the viability of the Zionist solution. It was the trauma and victory of the Six Day War in 1967 that sealed the bond between the Holocaust and the State of Israel in the Diaspora mind.

'In May and June of 1967,' one writer recalled, 'the Holocaust was on almost every American Jew's mind; the result was an outpouring of emotion unlike anything they had ever experienced.' Religious thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote soon after the war: 'Many of us felt that our own lives were in the balance, and not only the lives of those who dwelt in the land; that indeed all of the Bible, all of Jewish history was at stake . . . The world that was silent while six million died was silent again, save for individual friends. The anxiety was gruelling, the isolation was dreadful.'

That experience released wellsprings of ethnic feeling and identity that many American Jews had kept bottled up in the post-immigration decades of determined acculturation. The era was one

of awakening particularism among other groups too. But for the Jews of America, in the words of Jacob Neusner, their re-ethnicization 'could not have taken the form that it did – a powerful identification with the state of Israel as the answer to the question of the Holocaust – without a single, catalytic event . . . the 1967 war.'\*

One of Jewry's leading philosophers, Emil Fackenheim, has endowed survivalism with theological dignity. 'What does the Voice of Auschwitz command?' he asks. 'Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. Jews are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish People perish . . . The commanding Voice of Auschwitz singles Jews out . . . It was this Voice which was heard by the Jews of Israel in May and June 1967 when they refused to lie down and be slaughtered.'†

Some liberal critics, though, like writer Leonard Fein, have attacked this 'obsession' as 'self-defeating', a reflection of 'both confusion and shallowness'.

For the haredim, not only was the Holocaust no vindication of Zionism; it has become a vindication of their anti-Zionism. This is all the more difficult for others to comprehend since the haredim, proportionally, suffered much greater destruction in the Holocaust than non-Orthodox Jews; they comprised a substantially higher percentage of those communities that were wiped out than of those (in America, Palestine and elsewhere) that survived. Moreover, the haredim have benefited the most from what Neusner calls the 're-ethnicization' of American Jewry brought on by a belated readiness to grapple with the Holocaust. This re-focusing on Jewish particularity has helped the haredim become less self-conscious. It has enhanced their ability to retain their younger generation and to attract others to their fold. Haredism has also benefited from a parallel development in Israel: the growing capacity of second- and third-generation Israelis to deal with the Holocaust and with pre-

\* Jacob Neusner, *Israel in America* (Boston: Beacon Press 1985), p. 114.

† Emil L. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks 1972), p. 84.

Holocaust European Jewish life, unencumbered by the dogmatic 'rejection of the Diaspora' preached by Israel's founding fathers.

Nevertheless, the extraordinary fact is that the Holocaust and its effect on surviving Jewry changed nothing in haredism's profound opposition to the Zionist solution of 'the Jewish problem'. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy there were, as we have seen, certain tentative signs of reassessment among some haredi survivors. But as haredi communities grew in size and assertiveness, they resumed the condemnatory attitude that had been adopted by their pre-war leaders – many of whom died in the Holocaust – to political Zionism.

One such leader who survived, the hasidic Rebbe of Satmar, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum (1887–1979), wrote from his post-war refuge in Williamsburg, New York, that the existence of the Zionist Movement had in fact been a primary *cause* of the Holocaust. God's wrath had been kindled against the Jews because they had sought to recover their Land and their sovereignty before His good time. After the 1967 war, he produced a second book reiterating his thesis, to disabuse anyone who might have been misled into seeing Israel's victory as a sign of God's approval.

Rabbi Teitelbaum, both before the Second World War and after, was considered an extremist even by the haredim. But this was largely due to his refusal to join with the mainstream haredi leadership in the Agudat Yisrael movement rather than to any radical ideological differences over the rights and wrongs of Zionism.

Haredi rabbis between the two world wars advised their followers not to emigrate from Europe to Israel (British-ruled Palestine as it then was), despite rising antisemitism throughout Eastern and Central Europe, and despite the looming threat of Hitler. No other country was prepared to admit large numbers of Jewish refugees. Granted, not all haredi rabbis opposed *aliyah* (lit. ascent; immigration to Israel). And those who did oppose it were not always consistent; they did not recommend their views to all of their followers at all times. The Zionist leadership, moreover, was not generously disposed towards the haredim in the disbursement of the limited number of immigration certificates made available by the British.

In the late 1930s, when the situation had become desperate, the British authorities closed the gates of Palestine almost completely, in response to Arab political pressure. Yet even in the Nazi ghettos and death camps most haredim refused to condemn or criticize their rabbis, or even admit that they had been mistaken. A bitter controversy over the rabbis' role has raged in Jewry ever since, and it accounts in large part for the poignant but often perverse complexity that characterizes the haredi attitude to the Holocaust.

'Who exactly are these heads of yeshivas and rabbis who supposedly ruled against emigrating to Eretz Yisrael [the Land of Israel]?' ask the authors of a recent major haredi work on Holocaust history and theology.\* 'Agudas Yisrael was the generally recognized organization representing the anti-Zionist element of the Orthodox public prior to the Holocaust. But all the recognized leaders of Agudas Yisrael were themselves preparing before the War to emigrate to Eretz Yisrael.'

Of the three important leaders mentioned in this context, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan ('the Hafetz Haim') died in 1933 at the age of ninety; Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman heroically returned from the US to Europe after war broke out, to die with his yeshiva students; and the hasidic Rebbe of Ger, Avraham Mordechai Alter, announced in Jerusalem in 1936 that he had moved permanently to Eretz Yisrael, only to succumb to his hasidim's pressures and return, several months later, to Poland.

The book, the first such comprehensive study to be published in English, argues that the fact that these leaders did not succeed in reaching Eretz Yisrael 'only underscores the almost insurmountable obstacles that stood in the way of aliyah – the same obstacles which prevented a great number of Zionists from realizing their aspirations as well.'

Scores of other revered rabbis, however, did expressly discourage aliyah, a fact that the book denies with some deft casuistry: 'A decisive majority of Torah sages did not take such a stand. The widespread misconception to the contrary is most likely due to popular confusion between the battle against Zionism with an

\* Rabbi Yoel Schwartz and Yitzhak Goldstein, *Shoah – A Jewish Perspective on Tragedy in the Context of the Holocaust* (New York: ArtScroll/Mesorah 1990).

imagined battle against emigration to Israel.' But compare the Warsaw Ghetto diarist, Rabbi Shimon Huberband (1909–42): 'The Rebbe of Ger, like the majority of Polish rebbes, opposed settlement in Eretz Yisrael. If the Rebbe of Ger had ordered his hasidim, among whom were thousands of very rich industrialists, to make aliyah to Eretz Yisrael, the situation of the Jewish communities both of Eretz Yisrael and of Poland would have been different . . .'

The Rebbe of Ger, it should be noted moreover, was the most favourably disposed – or at least the most ambivalent – of all the major haredi leaders towards the Zionist settlement of Palestine. The haredi leaders in Galician Poland and Hungary were, as a rule, more extreme than the hasidic rabbis of central Poland (Ger was near Warsaw) in excoriating the entire enterprise. The sad facts are all the sadder when it is recalled that virtually all pre-Zionist aliyah to Eretz Yisrael – there was a steady trickle from Europe throughout the previous century – comprised haredim, rabbis and followers, whose piety impelled them to live and die in the holy land.

But once the non-Orthodox – and, to be fair, in many cases anti-Orthodox – Zionists took control of Jewish life in Palestine, the haredi leadership, by and large, developed reservations towards aliyah along the lines of their earlier vigorous reservations towards emigration to America. Materialistic, liberty-loving America spelt secularization to the leading haredi rabbis at the turn of the century; it is no accident that hardly any of them followed the millions of their co-religionists who were streaming across the Atlantic. Zionist Palestine spelt outright rebellion against the old religious order. Traditional religious love of Zion was superseded among the haredim by loathing for the Zionists. The historic opportunity presented by the Balfour Declaration of 1917 was not understood, and was consequently missed, by the haredi rabbis as by most of the rest of the Jews of Europe. By the late 1930s, barely half a million Jews had settled in 'the Jewish National Home in Palestine'.

Haredism blames Zionism for the Holocaust on three counts. The metaphysical charge sheet, as we have seen, was drawn up by the Satmarer Rebbe: the Zionists presumed 'to hasten the End';

1. Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Shach addressing an audience in Jerusalem.



2. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (centre) watching a parade of his hasidim in New York.





20. Priestly blessing at the Western Wall in Jerusalem during Passover. The *cohanim* or priests cover their heads with their prayer-shawls while reciting the blessing.

therefore God took terrible revenge on the whole nation. Another leading post-war American sage levelled a purportedly historical accusation against Zionism, while a third laid grave personal indictments against individual members of the Zionist wartime leadership.

The 'historical' accusation against Zionism was advanced by Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, who was dean of the large Rabbi Chaim Berlin yeshiva in New York and greatly revered in haredi circles. 'In 1923,' he writes, 'Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* . . . This was read by Haj Amin el-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who joined with Hitler to found one of the most significant alliances of modern times [*sic*]. There is ample documentation that not only did the Mufti visit Hitler . . . but indeed with Adolph Eichmann he visited the Auschwitz gas chamber incognito to check on its efficiency.'\*

There is indeed ample evidence that el-Husseini, the leader of the Palestinian Arabs, enthusiastically supported Hitler and hoped the 'final solution' would succeed in Europe, and take care of the Jews of Palestine too. But Hutner goes on to *blame* the Zionists not only for el-Husseini's hopes, but also for the fact that Hitler realized them. 'It should be manifest,' he writes, 'that until the great public pressures for the establishment of a Jewish state, the Mufti had no interest in the Jews of Warsaw, Budapest or Vilna . . . Once the looming reality of the State of Israel was before him, the Mufti spared no effort at influencing Hitler to murder as many Jews as possible . . . This shameful episode, where the founder and early leaders of the State were clearly a factor in the destruction of many Jews, has been completely suppressed and expunged from the record.'

It was to divert attention from 'its own contribution to the final catastrophic events,' according to Rabbi Hutner, that 'those in the State in a position to influence public opinion circulated the notorious canard that Gedolei Yisrael [Great Men of Israel] were

\* Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, 'Holocaust – A Rosh Yeshiva's Response', talk originally published in *The Jewish Observer*, October 1977, and included in Rabbi Nisson Wolpin (ed.), *A Path Through the Ashes* (New York: ArtScroll 1986), pp. 39–55.

responsible for the destruction of many communities because they did not urge emigration.'

The same tendency to polemical extremism is apparent in the haredim's historical treatment of the ghetto uprisings, in Warsaw, Bialystok and other towns, which inevitably ended in failure and brutal suppression. Here the initial manifestation of tortured historiography appeared on the Zionist side. The State of Israel proclaimed the date of the Warsaw uprising as its annual Holocaust memorial day, dubbing it 'The Day of Holocaust and Heroism'. The choice of date and title implied that the handful of ghetto fighters and partisans, mostly Zionists and socialists, represented all the Jewish heroism in the Holocaust. As though the faith, humanity and dignity of so many others, even at the entrance to the gas chambers, were not heroism of a no less noble kind.

The young Zionist State was profoundly embarrassed by the 'sheep to the slaughter' image of European Jewry, by the way the victims had 'cooperated' in their own destruction, setting up 'Judenrats' (Jewish councils) to organize slave labour and eventual deportation. It took the national poet, Natan Alterman, to explain, in a controversial work originally written in 1960,\* that the moral considerations of the Judenrat leaders were weighty and not necessarily despicable or dishonourable: the leaders sought to preserve as many lives as possible for as long as possible. The ghetto fighters, on the other hand, by launching their inevitably hopeless uprisings, may well have shortened whatever chances the ghetto inmates had. They, too, had to weigh up heavy moral questions, Alterman wrote. Some might have been more motivated, he suggested, by the urge to fight the fascists than by the need to save Jewish lives.

But while Alterman sought to redress the balance, the haredim in their anti-Zionist zeal distort it in the other direction. Their Holocaust literature plays down the roles of some haredi rabbis (Rabbi Menahem Zemba of Warsaw is the outstanding example) in actively supporting the Zionist-led ghetto uprisings. The Agudat Yisrael leader in wartime Palestine, Rabbi Moshe Blau, referred to

\* Natan Alterman, *Al Shtei Hadrachim*, ed. Dan Laor (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House 1979).

such rabbis as 'individuals who were misled or else forced to act as they did'. Blau further accused the ghetto fighters of 'hastening their own deaths and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of others'. For him, the rebellion betrayed a 'lack of heroism, a lack of capacity to live and suffer'.

Values like honour and national pride are brushed aside as 'non-Jewish' by Blau and by post-war haredi writers. Thus, an article in the haredi newspaper *Yated Ne'eman* on Alterman's position is tendentiously headlined: 'The ghetto rebels forced suicide upon the ghetto inmates, and denied them the chance of being saved in the concentration camps.' Blau and the later haredi writers similarly ignore or downplay the reported decision by Rabbi Zemba and two other rabbis who survived in the ghetto until near the end, to reject an offer of personal asylum from local dignitaries of the Roman Catholic Church. \* 'We know,' said Rabbi David Shapiro, 'that we cannot help our community in any way. But the very fact that we do not leave them, that we stay with them, may give them some encouragement. I cannot leave these people.' Rabbi Zemba delivered their reply: 'We have nothing to discuss.'

Perhaps the most telling example of haredi Holocaust historiography is the extensive (and still growing) 'miracle' literature, in which the escape stories of rabbis and yeshiva students are recounted in language of wonderment and gratitude at the divine intervention on behalf of these righteous men. Virtually every hasidic sect whose rebbe managed to flee has published an account of the episode, usually entitled 'The Miracle of the Salvation of . . .' Several mitnaged yeshivas whose students and faculty escaped from Lithuania through Siberia, China and Japan, and eventually relocated in America or Israel, have also contributed to this special genre of haredi literature.

These works, carefully compiled and edited, consistently omit any treatment of the issues that, to a non-haredi reader, cry out for consideration. They gloss over the failure of their heroes to understand the threat earlier, and to emigrate and urge their

\* The incident is cited by Gideon Hausner, the Israeli State Attorney who prosecuted Eichmann, in his preface to Rabbi Shimon Huberband's diaries of the Warsaw Ghetto, *Kiddush Hashem: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life in Poland During the Holocaust* (New York: Yeshiva University Press/Ktav 1987).

followers to emigrate while there was still time. The failure is compounded because haredi rabbis – unlike Zionist leaders or any other non-Orthodox leaders – had it in their power to command their followers to emigrate, and to be obeyed. Haredism, moreover, posits as a fundamental tenet that great rabbis are endowed with prescience. In fact, haredi authors go to exegetical lengths to prove from the writings of Rabbi Meir Simcha Hacoen of Dvinsk (d. 1927), of Rabbi Wasserman and others that they knew, or at least felt, what was going to befall the Jewish People.

The ‘miracle’ books ignore the fact that several of the leading figures (the Rebbe of Ger, the Rebbe of Belz and the Rebbe of Satmar were among the best-known) agreed to be smuggled out of occupied Europe (usually with massive monetary and political help from the outside) while leaving other members of their families, and their followers, behind. They ignore, too, the obvious questions such conduct would seem to pose regarding these leaders’ leadership. Yet the haredi literature is unanimous in praising Rabbi Wasserman for going back voluntarily to be with his yeshiva at its time of supreme agony.

Finally, and typically, the ‘miracle’ literature uniformly underplays the roles of non-haredim, especially Zionists, in aiding the escape of several of the haredi rabbis and yeshivas. Zorach Warhaftig, a Polish Orthodox-Zionist leader who was later to become an Israeli minister, was instrumental in the eleventh-hour flight of several rabbis and hundreds of their students from Soviet-occupied Lithuania to the Far East, before the Germans marched in. He gets scarcely a mention in the haredi books.

The haredim argue that the rabbis who saved themselves were thinking of their responsibility for the Jewish future: they fled in order to reconstitute their yeshivas and congregations. And they point out that most of the hasidim who were left behind would gladly have agreed to give their lives so that their rebbe should be saved.

There is scant evidence – though there is some – of resentment among the faithful. An Israeli researcher cites the written testimony of a Jewish gas-chamber attendant (*Sonderkommando*), who himself later perished at Auschwitz, describing a noted hasidic rebbitzin railing against the Belzer and other rebbes. They ‘always

calmed the people’ instead of telling them to emigrate, Rebbitzin Chaya Halberstam of Stropkov noted bitterly as she walked to her death. ‘Heaven concealed the truth from them. But they themselves fled to Eretz Yisrael at the last moment. They saved themselves, and left the people like sheep to be slaughtered. In my final minutes of life, I implore You, Forgive them for their great defilement of Your Holy Name.’\*

But a more representative account of haredi sentiment is probably that of Hanina Shiff, now of Jerusalem, who is the *gabbai* (‘chamberlain’) of the Gerer hasidic court. ‘God forbid,’ he says, ‘that we should have been resentful [that the Rebbe had escaped]. On the contrary.’ Other haredi survivors recall feeling pleased and relieved to learn that their rebbe had escaped.

Shiff suffered the horrors of Treblinka and Auschwitz as a teenager. The youngsters were strengthened, he says, by older hasidim who would recount stories of rebbes. Criticism of the Rebbe of Ger for not encouraging emigration? Absolutely not, he says. ‘Firstly, the Rebbe did send some people to Palestine. It was hard to make a living here. Anyway, what was from Heaven.’

Revealingly, though, Shiff recalled that the then Rebbe’s son and successor, Rabbi Yisrael Alter, who fled with his father and other relatives, but left his wife, children and grandchildren in Warsaw, ‘didn’t want to listen to our stories. He was like a father and mother to us [after the war. But] he couldn’t bear to hear. He would turn to something else. It was too painful for him.’

Much more disturbing to historians and laymen alike than Rabbi Hutner’s ‘historical’ accusation are the personal indictments levelled by Rabbi Michael Ber Weissmandel, a haredi leader of

\* The same Sonderkommando, who may himself have been a rabbi, recorded, too, the last moments of the hasidic Rebbe of Boyan-Cracow, Rabbi Moshe Friedman. Standing naked amid his followers, he grabbed the lapel of a German officer. ‘The Jewish People will never die,’ he proclaimed. ‘It will live for ever, and our blood will not rest until terrible vengeance has been wrought upon the bestial German nation.’ Then he put on his hat and led the Jews in reciting the sacred affirmation of faith, ‘Hear O Israel’. ‘They were all imbued with the loftiest spiritual purity,’ the diarist attested. Rebbitzin Halberstam and Rabbi Friedman are quoted in Mendel Piekartz, *Ideological Trends of Hasidism in Poland During the Interwar Period and the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute 1990), pp. 412ff.

Slovakian Jewry, against Zionist emissaries in neutral Switzerland and Turkey, and against the Zionist establishment in Jerusalem and New York.

Weissmandel, a young scholar and communal leader, claimed that he, together with several other (non-haredi) Jewish leaders in Bratislava, had succeeded in stopping the deportations of Slovakian Jews to the death camps in the summer of 1942 by paying \$50,000 to a senior SS officer. The Bratislava 'working group' had to beg, cajole and threaten in order to raise that sum from Western Jewish organizations. But their pleas fell on deaf ears when they subsequently urged, in innumerable cables and letters addressed to Jewish and Zionist officials, that this money-for-blood arrangement could be applied elsewhere to save Jews still alive in the Axis-occupied lands from the gas-chambers.

In a bitterly accusatory book\* published after the war, Weissmandel recalled how one Zionist emissary had responded to his 'Europe Plan' by assuring the working group that the reports of Nazi atrocities in Poland were 'exaggerated in the way of *Ostjuden* [Jews from the East].' This emissary wrote to the Bratislava Jewish leaders, according to Weissmandel, that 'only with blood will we have a State.' He contended that it was 'a hutzpah for Jews to expect the Allies to grant permission to transfer money to the enemy.'

'How could we dream,' wrote Weissmandel later, 'that the nationalist Zionist would come and say: Your blood is the easier side; shed it happily, for with it we shall purchase the more important side – the Land.' In the event, the deportations in Slovakia itself resumed in 1944. Weissmandel survived by jumping off a train en route to the death camps.

Historians are divided as to whether the working group's original payment was indeed the cause of the two-year suspension in the liquidation of Slovakian Jewry. But they are united in their respect for Weissmandel as a leader, a visionary, and the victim of tragic frustration that left him a broken and bitter man. Prof.

\* Rabbi Michael Dov Ber Weissmandel, *Min Hameitzar* (Jerusalem: Zeirei Agudat Yisrael 1960). See also Abraham Fuchs, *The Unheeded Cry* (New York: ArtScroll/Mesorah 1968).

Yehuda Bauer, an eminent Israeli Holocaust historian, records how Weissmandel conveyed to Jewish leaders abroad detailed maps of Auschwitz and precise timetables of the death-trains to the camp, in a desperate, futile effort to help persuade Roosevelt and Churchill to bomb the Nazi murder machine.

Some students of the period see in Weissmandel's story an example of the certain streak of callousness that permeated the Zionist establishment, in Palestine and in the US, in their rescue efforts during the war. Some discern outright antipathy towards the haredi (anti-Zionist) victims of Hitler. Certainly the Zionists' undeviating dedication to achieving their political goals *after* the war, coupled with their deep ambivalence towards the Eastern European Diaspora, sometimes generated impatience or even indifference towards the victims.

It is not at all clear, though, that the Zionist and Western Jewish organizations had as much influence as the haredim ascribe to them. Nevertheless, the haredi grievance over real and perceived instances of insensitivity or outright discrimination is deep. It is propagated with conviction, moreover, by educators and apologists throughout the haredi world. Every haredi yeshiva student knows of Weissmandel and his book (though not many have actually read it). Every one of them believes axiomatically that the Zionists turned their backs on the suffering Jews of Europe, and especially on the haredim amongst them.

In this, according to haredi thinking, the Zionists were behaving true to form, because Zionists were essentially godless Jews who had rebelled against their own faith and their people's divine destiny. Zionism was a product of Modernity, along with Reform Judaism, socialism, and assimilation. These were the scourges of our age, the causes of our suffering. The three indictments of the role of Zionism – the metaphysical, the historical and the personal – have been subsumed in haredi thought into a broader condemnation of secularism, indeed of Modernity itself, as the underlying 'reason' for the deaths of six million Jews. Lusting after Modernity was the sin, Holocaust the punishment.

The doctrine that Jewish sin causes Jewish suffering is rooted in the Torah itself. Deuteronomy 28:15 warns, for instance: 'If thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe all

his commandments and his statutes . . . then all these curses shall come upon thee and overtake thee.' 'Because of our sins,' says the festival prayer-book, 'we were exiled from our Land.' When private tragedy strikes, the Talmud advises the individual to 'search his deeds'. When an entire community is hit by disaster, the rabbis decree fast-days and penances.

Accordingly, the Holocaust, representing suffering on an unprecedented scale, was attributed to heinous sin. 'How terrible is the situation of our people,' wrote the Rabbi of Vilna (Vilnius), Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky, in the summer of 1939.

The whole Jewish People drowns in rivers of blood and seas of tears. In the Western countries, the Reform Movement has struck at the roots, and from there [i.e. Germany] the evil has gone forth now, to pursue them with wrath, to destroy them and expunge them. They [i.e. the non-Orthodox] have caused the poison of hatred against our people to spread to other lands as well.

Despite all this, the people have not yet understood of why they are so persecuted; they have been struck with blindness . . .\*

Rabbi Grodzinsky died before the Nazis destroyed his community. Another noted haredi thinker who fled Europe in time, wrote in England soon after the Holocaust that the monumental sin worthy of 'the awful destruction which has descended upon our generation' was the Jewish People's failure to respond religiously to the Emancipation. Rabbi Eliahu Dessler wrote:

It is clear that the era of the Emancipation was given to us by God to serve as a time for preparation for the coming of Moshiach. To this end, the yoke of exile was eased from upon us . . . But we used the situation to mix with the Gentiles and imitate them.

The process of assimilation has been progressing at an ever-quickenening rate for a long time, and yet the disaster has not overtaken us until now. This is because the Holy One Blessed Be He delays his anger. He does not punish until we have

\* Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky, *Achiezer*, vol. III (Vilna 1939), Introduction.

reached the limit and there is no longer hope that kindness will lead to improvement.\*

Rabbi Hutner, a multi-faceted figure who studied philosophy in Berlin as well as Talmud in the yeshivas of Lithuania, interprets the Holocaust as the culmination of Jewry's 'Era of Disappointment' in which all its misplaced hopes and expectations from the Emancipation, liberalism and Modernity were dashed. 'From trust in the Gentile world, the Jewish nation was cruelly brought to a repudiation of that trust . . . Disappointment in the non-Jewish world was deeply imprinted upon the Jewish soul.'

This in turn, Hutner argues, should lead to a national repentance, as prescribed in those Torah passages which prophesied suffering as punishment for sin. The suffering and the consequent 'disappointment in the Gentiles' are the necessary 'chronology and impetus for the teshuva [repentance] of Acharis Hayamim [the End of Days],' and Hutner takes heart from the back-to-Orthodoxy 'teshuva movement' that was then at its height in the US. Rabbi Dessler, in his Holocaust reflections, went on to exhort: 'If, after the terrible destruction, we find ourselves on the verge of a new era of Divine kindness, let us not repeat our foolishness. Let us recognize the hints from Above, and return in complete teshuva.'

It was in this context that Rabbi Shach fired off one of his controversial broadsides in December 1990. 'Another Holocaust could befall us tomorrow,' he warned, because of the secularism of Israel society. 'Remember what an old Jew is telling you. God is patient. But he keeps a tally. And one day his patience runs out, as it ran out then, when six million died.'

For many Jews, the very words 'another Holocaust' are almost sacrilegious. But haredism, in keeping with its crime-and-punishment approach to all history, including the Nazi Holocaust, refuses as a matter of dogma to invest the Holocaust with any uniqueness. It was different in degree, but not in kind, from previous punishments meted out by God to His sinful people. Indeed, Haredi theologians balk at the very term 'the Holocaust' (certainly at the definite article and capital H) and its Hebrew translation, *haShoah*.

\* Rabbi Eliahu Dessler, *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, vol. IV (Jerusalem: Vaad Lehafatsat Kitvei Hagra Dessler 1983), pp. 124-5.



They prefer the word *hurban* (destruction), which was traditionally used to denote the destruction of the Temple and major subsequent disasters. 'Is the term Shoah acceptable?' writes Rabbi Hutner. 'The answer is CLEARLY NOT.' The word 'implies an isolated catastrophe, unrelated to anything before or after it.' For Rabbi Hutner, such an approach is 'far from the Torah view of Jewish history. The Hurban of European Jewry is an integral part of our history.'\*

The former British Chief Rabbi, Lord Jakobovits, who rejects the haredi Holocaust theology, nevertheless recognizes it as a key to the present strength and increasing vitality of the haredim. 'Only by recognizing in the Holocaust a replication of Jewish history's cycle of appalling catastrophes followed by survival and regeneration could they focus on the future rather than on the past. The gains derived from this outlook,' Jakobovits continues, 'have surpassed the most optimistic expectations and forecasts which could have been given credence in the shattered world of forty years ago . . . Today there is more strict observance and daily advanced Talmud study in New York, let alone in Jerusalem, than there ever was in Warsaw or Vilna.'

'Single-mindedness was the one essential ingredient in the extraordinary dynamics galvanizing this colossal achievement.'†

Jakobovits's perception is trenchant. Arguably, though, it could admit of a further, vital ingredient. The haredim's single-mindedness during the Holocaust was not consciously focused on survival and regeneration, but rather on the simple – yet infinitely difficult – need to keep performing their duties as haredi Jews. 'Single-mindedness' implies a deliberate, reasoned reaffirmation of faith. Haredism, which is above all practice-oriented, enabled its stubborn, resilient adherents eventually to achieve that reaffirmation, but almost as a by-product of their ongoing practice.

The story, even if apocryphal, of the group of Jews during the Holocaust who put God on trial for abandoning His people

\* Hutner, in Wolpin (ed.), op. cit.

† Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, *Religious Responses to the Holocaust* (London: Office of the Chief Rabbi 1988), p. 13.

exemplifies this inner strength. They found Him guilty – and then adjourned to pray the evening prayer.

On a more empirical level, Reeve Robert Brenner's study of Holocaust survivors has shown that a high proportion of the haredim amongst them remained loyal to their haredism. The more Modern-Orthodox, by contrast, suffered serious and sustained erosion of their religious commitment in the post-war years. The researcher surveyed a group of 708 Israeli Holocaust survivors, questioning them about their level of religious commitment before the war, immediately after their liberation, and twenty-five years later. He concluded:

The more intensely observant, the more likely to remain observant; the less intensely observant, the greater the likelihood of becoming non-observant. Sixty-one percent of the ultra-observant stayed ultra, whereas only nine percent of the moderate stayed moderate. Our study conveys the case for the retentive strength of the assiduously observant, and the holding power of religious upbringing.\*

Perhaps the case of the hasidic Rebbe of Klausenberg, Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam, later of Union City, New Jersey and Netanya, Israel, most vividly illustrates these scientific findings. He lost his wife and eleven children in the camps. On the Friday night after his liberation, the story is told (again, it may be legendary, but it is didactic, and illustrative), he set about organizing his shabbat tish, the festive meal. But he had no shtreimel, nor indeed any formal headgear. He could hardly conduct a tish without a hat. Eventually, someone produced an SS officer's cap, which Rabbi Halberstam donned with what must have been mixed feelings. The tish proceeded, as it had in Klausenberg (Kluj, Romania) before the Nazi interruption.

In the following months, Rabbi Halberstam played a major role in organizing religious and social life in the Displaced Persons camps, and many of the refugees, Orthodox and secular, remember him to this day with warmth. But his first concern had been to

\* Reeve Robert Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors* (New York: The Free Press: 1990), p. 46.

perform his time-hallowed duties as a rebbe, holding the traditional shabbat tish.

Haredism, perhaps because of its view of history, does not torture itself with theological questions. 'For those who doubt and ask, there are no answers,' a Slovakian haredi rabbi wrote during the Holocaust. 'For those who do not doubt, there are no questions.' The Rebbe of Piastchene, a heroic figure who functioned as a spiritual leader and counsellor in the Warsaw Ghetto right up till the very end, wrote in 1942:

Unfortunately there are some – even among those who were complete believers – whose faith has been damaged. They ask, 'Why have You abandoned us?' . . . If a Jew speaks this way as a form of prayer and entreaty, pouring out his heart to God, that is good. But if, Heaven forbid, he asks his question sceptically, if deep within his heart his faith is deficient . . . then he is torn and distanced from Him.\*

Instead of asking questions about God, which could not be answered anyway and could lead to despair, haredi 'single-mindedness' in the misery of the ghettos and camps focused on specific, practical, halachic queries. A woman must immerse in the mikve on the seventh night after her menstruation ends. But the women in the ghetto of Vrbo, Slovakia, were under curfew at night, so they had to go to the mikve during the day. If her eighth day was shabbat, might a woman go on the seventh day? Rabbi Yitzhak Weiss, the local Rabbi, in his reasoned responsum, cited ancient precedents and stressed the importance of the mitzva of procreation in his decision to permit the early immersion.

In Warsaw, one of the first measures the Nazi occupiers took in 1940 was to close the mikves and forbid their use on pain of death. Orthodox women – and hasidic men, who bathe in the mikve as an act of spiritual purification – took to commuting to nearby villages. When trains and 'Aryan' trolleys were barred to Jews, they returned to using the Warsaw mikves, slipping in through cellars and back-entrances while the main doors remained padlocked.

\* Quoted in Schwartz and Goldstein, *Shoah*, p. 58.

In the words of Rabbi Huberband, the Warsaw Ghetto diarist whose writing was discovered in 1952, buried in milk-churns:

Due to fear of detection, they heated the mikve only once a week. At night, the hole in the basement wall was sealed. 'Business' was conducted in this way for endless weeks. The official entrance to the mikve was pasted over with a notice stating that bathing in the mikve would be punished by anywhere between ten years in prison and death. Meanwhile, Jews bathed undisturbed, scoffing at the notice.\*

In Treblinka concentration camp, secret prayer services took place morning and evening. The question troubling the participants, which they posed to a rabbi-inmate, was whether it was acceptable for them to pray the morning prayer before sunrise, which is its halachic time. They needed the darkness to conceal their service, and at daybreak they were marched off to their slave-labour.

Almost unbelievably, there were Jews who managed to smuggle their tefillin into the camps. According to Eliezer Berkovits, a major modern-day Jewish philosopher, in his book *With God in Hell*: 'There were Jews who hardly ever missed saying a few words of prayer with tefillin on, in Auschwitz, in Buchenwald, in Maidanek. We know of some remarkable stories of the devotion and self-sacrifice that Jews invested in their efforts to secure a pair of tefillin and put them on daily.'†

There are recorded instances of men who knew sections of the Talmud by heart 'holding classes' as they were marched to and from the slave-labour sites each day. The Jerusalem scholar Baruch-Bernard Merzel, who spent five years in Auschwitz, remembers finding odd pages of the Talmud that had been used by the Poles as wrapping paper. The inmates carefully concealed them at their workplace each night, taking them out in the morning to learn. Berkovits tells of two Dutch Jews 'who somehow managed to lay their hands on a copy of the Bible. They would squeeze into

\* Huberband, *Kiddush Hashem*, p. 197.

† Eliezer Berkovits, *With God in Hell* (New York & London: Sanhedrin Press 1979), p. 5.

the middle of the ranks of the slave-labourers and study Torah together.'

Not that any form of regular religious practice was the norm in the camps, even among the haredi inmates. It was very much the exception. 'Don't exaggerate the so-called "religious life",' says Merzel. 'Even performing one mitzva was a tremendous *messirus nefesh* [self-sacrifice]. And sometimes you didn't do it for God. Putting on tefillin gave *you* strength.'

Sometimes the 'big questions' and the specific halachic queries merged. Rabbi Zevi Hirsch Meisels of Vac, Hungary, who also survived Auschwitz, recalled being asked for two halachic rulings on the same day. The first involved a congregant whose only son was about to be led away to the gas chambers. Could the father ransom his son for money, in the knowledge that another boy would be killed in his place? Then a fifteen-year-old approached the rabbi to ask whether he might offer himself in place of a noted Talmud scholar who was about to be taken to his death.

Rabbi Meisels failed to answer either of them. 'My dear friend,' he recalled saying to the first questioner. 'How can I render a clear decision for you? Even when the Temple stood, a question concerning matters of life and death would come before the Sanhedrin. But I am here in Auschwitz without any books of law, without any other rabbis, and without a clear mind because of so much suffering and grief . . . Do as you wish, as though you had not asked me at all.'\*

In an incident in the Kovno Ghetto, recorded by a survivor, Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, a 'big question' and its halachic ramification were answered instinctively not by a rabbi, but by a Jewish mother. She had given birth to a baby boy after five years of childless marriage. But the Germans had forbidden Jews to have children. In Eliezer Berkovits's words: 'Just as the mohel was about to begin, the grinding of auto wheels was heard and the men of the Gestapo were getting out in front of the house. Terror struck all

\* Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Meisels, *Mekadshei Hashem* (1955), vol. I, pp. 7-9; cited in Robert Kirschner, *Rabbinic Responsa of the Holocaust Era* (New York: Schocken Books 1985), pp. 111ff.

those present . . . It was the mother who showed the most courage. She turned to the mohel and ordered him: "Hurry up! Circumcise the child. Don't you see? They have come to kill us. At least let my child die as a Jew."\*\*

\* Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, cited in Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, p. 44.