

Jewish Religious Practice Through the War:
God, Israel and History

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Research into Jewish religious life in the ghettos, camps and D.P. centers (She'erit Hapeleitah) has already been conducted within the areas of holiday and life-cycle ritual observance, rabbinical leadership, responsa literature, Torah study, religious ideology and hagiographic implications. In particular, I have in mind the work generated by the Finkler Institute of Bar Ilan directed by Dan Michman; and by Leah Langleben, Michal Unger and Esther Farbstein.

I am approaching the subject from the history-of-religions perspective—as defined by Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. I am concerned with the existential apprehension of the transcending sacred reality (God) and the temporal and spatial expression of that apprehension. The language of the discipline speaks of religion as an encounter between the realm of time and finitude (“profane” or “secular”), and the realm of eternity and infinitude. This necessarily fleeting “hierophany” (appearance of the sacred) is retained (never totally) through the vessels of religious scripture, physical structures (here, synagogues), the liturgical calendar (holidays), symbols (e.g., Tefillin) and prayer.

In Judaism the encounter and its retention in time and space is enunciated in terms of, and circulates around, God’s relationship to the nation of Israel through the covenant in history—where the vessels of time and space are permeated with the theme of divine intervention (collectively but also individually) into empirical history. This is what the theologian Yitshak

Breuer called “metahistory.” Conversely, Judaism is threatened when metahistory collapses.

Thus the great dilemma: “Where was God during the Holocaust?”

In the three months of research ahead of me at the archives, I hope to be able to substantiate this hypothesis: A pattern emerges from Jewish religious life as it shifted from the weeks of the war’s onset (I’ll refer to Poland, fall 1939) to occupied territory and ghetto (here, in the east), to camp and finally to D.P. centers—as portrayed by the data in the specific areas of prayer, Passover and the Yamim Noraim:

1. At the onset the traditional encounter between the realms of the secular (finite) and sacred (infinite) and its metahistorical expression remained intact.
2. In the ghetto the relationship became attenuated. The metahistorical (or “mythic”) vocabulary and structure remained in place, but its content became weakened. God’s existence was not doubted, but the connection to present reality became blurred in three specific ways: Mythic language about divine activity in history began to separate away from the empirical realities and to become irrelevant. Second, the original metahistorical meaning became reversed (Passover, e.g., came to mean imprisonment instead of liberation). Third, the ritual enactment of the myth became transformed or impossible to realize (there was no way, e.g., to sound the Shofar), in effect threatening the myth. Beyond the blurring, sometimes the metahistorical vocabulary was transferred to an apocalyptic realm—transcending the issue of its application to the present.
3. In forced labor and concentration camps the dual realms of finite/profane and infinite/holy disappeared, along with the metahistorical expression of this relationship. Instead, the realm of human activity came to encompass sanctity.

(Retroactively considered, it appears that the realm of God became sublimated into that of man): Specifically, the Jew's assertion of his own sacred life; the sanctification of his immediate environment; and man's sacred expression of God's existence—all voluntary actions—assumed centrality. Ritual acts of Kiddush Hashem, i.e. of sacred invocation of God's name unto death, became reverberations or outward projections of human life and affirmations of that life. God's independent sphere could not be discerned, and the invocation of His name projected the sanctity of human experience.

4. During the She'erit Hapeleimah the two realms (finite and infinite) re-emerged and metahistory opened up once again. God's actions in history could once again be identified.

A. Prayer

Part of a sixty-four page Yiddish document in the Ringelblum archives, a series of contemporaneous eye witness reports about Skempe, Belkhatow and Warsaw from 1939 to 1941, copied by a single writer, describes the early September 1939 flight of Jews from Skempe (near Lipno) Poland from advancing German troops under the guidance of Rabbi Yosef Gelernter (later a member of Warsaw's Central Refugee Committee). He told his congregants that their flight pointed to Israel's mission for the sake of monotheism and morality, even amidst suffering (Citing R. Akiva, Berakhot 61^b), in the face of eternal hatred ("Sinat olam le'am olam." Source?). Thus it was with the Jews of the Crusades and the Inquisition. The response had to be the prayer: Shema Yisrael: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One ("dos tragish Leb'n fun unsere Eltern di Kadoshim fun yener Tsayt, ot in azelkhe bitere Shmertsen hobn unzere Eltern oysgehoykht zayre haylike Neshamot mit di letste verter oyf zayner Lipn: Shema Yisrael

Hashem Elokeinu Hashem ehad”). Gelernter assured his congregants that God would not cast them away or break their covenant and would even return them to their border (Leviticus 26:44; Jeremiah 31:16). His group reached the General Government border town of Dobrzyn-Wista on 8 September, Erev Shabbat, not knowing whether to continue. Invoking the precedent of Joshua’s plea for Sabbath’s onset to wait until he could conclude his battle victoriously (Citing Pirkei Derabi Eliezer ch. 52 to Joshua 10:12), Gelernter asked them to stop for the Sabbath—making a miracle possible. They stayed in place and on Selihot (10 September, Sunday AM) they prayed, saying over and over again with special emphasis:

The soul is Yours [God]. The body is Your work. Have mercy on Your people (Amalekhah) [i.e., in history], O have mercy on Your people. (‘Lekhah yom....’ Selihot Lekhal Yom).

Throughout this episode, the God of prayer remained the God of metahistory.

2. Ghetto

In the ghetto the metahistorical expression was not destroyed, but it was upset. In Lodz, Yerahmiel Breimann recorded, at the time, this anonymous prayer:

Our endurance is under strain.... You have visited upon us a daily torrent of retribution, famine.... We beg You, our Father in heaven, restore Israel.

First, the writer affirmed the existence of God and the connection to His people. He was there to be prevailed upon to remove the suffering. But second, His terrible action in history remained unexplained, breaking the cycle between God, His people and history in the mind of the worshiper. In a posting in this vein which Breimann also recorded, the author stated that it was appropriate to express to God the extent of the ruin and the expectation that He would not remain silent as His enemies continued to wreak havoc (Psalms 83). But the tragedy’s meaning

remained untouched. According to Yehudah Leib Gerst's post-war report (1947) about Lodz, some yeshivah students who gathered for a third festive Sabbath meal (in summer 1944) recited the sixteenth century mystic Yitshak Luria's mystical hymns and expressed a yearning to envision the messiah ("Lemehere ziv dize'er anpin") and grasp the sacred meaning to the blood-sanctifying events. Here, the metahistorical meaning was transferred into a post-historical realm. (Greenberg, "Gersht's Religious Ascent Through the Holocaust," Holocaust and Genocide Studies 1999).

During the summer 1942 deportations to Treblinka a prayer was drafted in Warsaw by Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, Shimon Shtokhamer and Aleksander Zisha Friedman for daily recital, begging God to hear the plea of the afflicted and to wreak vengeance (Psalms 94, 102 and 142). The metahistorical structure remained in place:

We, the children of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, are being driven and chased and afflicted and led like sheep to slaughter. May Thy will be done, O beloved God, and may it be that we find shelter from all evil, and may Thou rescind all persecution intended for us (zol zayn dayn Vilen, liber G-t, unz tsu beshirmen fun ales Shekhtn un du zoltst mevatl zayn fun unz ale shlekhte Gezerot).

Then, the author beseeched God to intervene. Specifically, as He had with the Egyptian exodus, Abraham and Nimrod, Jacob and Esau, Mordekhai-Esther and Haman. Here, (1) The God-man relationship was affirmed; (2) The metahistorical structure remained specifically in place; and (3) Nothing was said about why the God of metahistory was letting His people suffer—interrupting His relationship with Israel in history. Here too, the cycle was broken: God intervened in history in the past, He can be expected to intervene in the future—but the meaning

of the present remained unknown. (Ringelblum Archives AR II/371 and Editor, “Tefillah Mi’emek Habakhah,” Hatsofeh 12633 (30 April 1981): 3).

The disjunction between God’s existence and the historical reality was confirmed by later recollections about Slobodka elicited by Leah Langleben. When the news about the Aktion against children in Shiauliai (7 November 1943) reached Slobodka, the Head of Yeshivat Ohel Mosheh, Shmuel Maruk, asked a group of children if they wanted to live. If they did then they should pray to their Father in heaven to give them life. They all shouted out their plea to Him (Gibralter-Langleben 1994); God existed, controlled history—but mysteriously so. Maruk’s [nephew] Shmuel ben Menahem Deutsch recalled being challenged by a Gentile in a partisan brigade to explain how God could let the slaughter happen but still exist for the worshiper. He cited God’s demurral to the angel’s challenge of “Is this the Torah and this its reward?” when they saw great tannaitic rabbis being killed (Menahot 29^b) and he, Deutsch, answered: We pray to God: “Look from the heavens. See how we are despised by the nations.... Nevertheless (bekhal zot) [God] [i.e., without understanding how You act in history] I have not forgotten your name” (Deutsch 1994 in Langleben, “Hayim Shel Kiyuin Mitsvot Velimud Torah Begeto Kovno-Slobodka, 1941-1944” 1995 and 03/7622).

3. Camps

In the camps the metahistorical structure was set aside. The relationship to God was directed back into the Jews’ own realm. Sanctity coincided with the range of the Jew’s sacred life itself, his sanctification of his immediate space and time, and his declaration of God’s sacred existence.

The rabbis of Bergen Belsen directed the recitation of the following, to be expressed with “heartfelt intention,” before eating Hamets on Passover:

Our Father in Heaven, behold it is revealed and known to You that it is our will to do Your will and to celebrate the holiday of Passover with the [act of] eating Matsoh and with the observance of the prohibition of Hamets. But to our hearts' anguish [we see that] our slavery prevents us from doing so. Our [very] lives are in danger. [But] we are ready to observe Your commandment of "He shall live by keeping My statute" (Vehai bahem) [Leviticus 18:5] and not die [by keeping them] (yamut bahem). And to be attentive to Your warning, "Take heed and keep your soul diligently" [Deuteronomy 4:9]. Our prayer to You is that You should give us life and make us vital and redeem us quickly so as to keep Your laws.

Here, (1) The current situation was deemed to be separate from others: Now life itself was at stake. (2) God's relationship to the Jew through the metahistorical drama of Passover was displaced by a relationship which preserved human life. (3) The authors freely determined that, given the either/or of life with Hamets or death without it, sanctity was primarily a matter of human life, and God's role was to support human life. (4) The restoration of God's laws pertaining to metahistory (specifically as enacted with the Matsoh of Passover) was a function of life as sacred. At the end of the prayer the standard "Who has given us life and kept us vital and brought us up to this time" ("Shehehiyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazeman hazeh") was replaced with "You should give us life, make us vital and redeem us quickly so as to keep Your commandments" ("Shetehayeinu utikayemeinu utega'aleinu bimeheirah lishemor hukekhah") (040/11). (See Yonah Emanuel, "Pessah 5704 Bebergen Belsen" in Yesupar Lador. Jerusalem: Mossad Yitshak Breuer, 1993-94): 122-124.

Later camp (after 1967) testimonies affirm this assertion of life-as-sacred and sanctification of the inmates' immediate environment in prayer. In Auschwitz the tailor Shlomoh

Moshkovitz testified, that being forced to cut up Taleisim (prayer shawls) was like being forced to cut up the bodies themselves of the worshipers: “The most painful moment came when the holiest feelings of the Jewish person were diminished” (Yad Vashem Archives 03/3974). Leah Schnop said she wasn’t a heretic for a single day, i.e. continually sacred because she recited the Shema Yisrael and the Modeh Ani (03/5223); Shoshana Efrati told how women took half hour turns at their hut’s peephole to read from their one Siddur (03/10813); Tsevi Koplowitz testified that he bought a Siddur for bread. Not knowing what to do with it, used it like an amulet to guard him (03/5278). Here, the ritual act itself assumed centrality. One may speculate that metahistorical reflections or other considerations about the transcending divine reality were involved. But these witnesses chose to recall the act itself, the ritual sanctification of the self and its immediate surrounding.

The “immanentist” focus was echoed elsewhere: Hermann’s telling how he protected his Tefillin as he was rendered unconscious for surgery in Mauthausen (03/9972); Hannah Tessler’s report about how Kovno-made miniature Tefillin had a calming effect when the men of Kaufering kissed them (03/10015. See Langleben-Deutsch); recollections about how one person recited the prayer from memory and others repeated the words in Klooga and Jawiszowice concentration camps (Segal 03/10167, Cohen 03/7061). Finally there is the essay of David Weiss-Halivni about Wolfsberg. The author states that Rosh Hashanah prayers were recited there as they always were. Notably, this included the plea to God to assert His rule of righteousness over the power and freedom of the perpetrators who presumed to act like God (“Eloheinu ve’elohei avotenu melokh al kal ha’olam bikhevodekhah.” Eighteen Benedictions). Retrospectively, the prayer for Weiss-Halivni was a crystallization of the Lurianic drama of God’s vacillating presence in and absence from history for the sake of allowing human free will.

But in Wolfsberg itself, the metahistorical consciousness was absent. Instead, it was to the S.S. that he pleaded for life—and did so using the term he always used to plead before God—Rahamim (mercy). That is, the sanctity of life was central—even absolute. It was to be asserted, even if God and His own Rahamim were removed from immediate consciousness (Mahzor Wolfsberg, ed. Guterman and Morgenshtern).

4. She'erit Hapeleitah

The distinction between the realm of the sacred and the realm of the secular from which man reached upwards and their rapport as enunciated metahistorically were both restored after liberation. A 1945 prayer by Dutch children in Jordanbad stated:

We thank You [God] for saving us. And for sparing the Land of holiness [Erets Yisrael] from the evil ones. May it now be Your will to help and return us to our freedom, to our Land, and to purify our heart [so as] to worship You there.

God existed and He related to Israel in history.

On 20 April 1948 the rabbis in Bergen Belsen called for a public recitation of Psalms in response to the war going on in the Yishuv, to awaken divine compassion (Rahamim) in order to bring down the enemy. On 1 May, invoking the metahistorical “Remember what Amalek did to you” (Deuteronomy 25:17), they called for a public memorial service on the last day of Passover for all those killed in sanctification of God’s name by the Nazi murderers. With the image of those being murdered before them, and by their merit, the worshipers in Bergen Belsen would be worthy of final victory and redemption.

B. Passover

1. Ghetto

By the time of the first Passover of the war, the shock of the onset was yielding to the reality of ghettoization (Piotrkow Trybunalski – October 1939; Lodz – 30 April 1940; Warsaw – November 1940; Kovno/Slobodka – August 1941). In some instances the holiday retained both the content and the structure of God and man relating metahistorically. According to his 1961 recollections, Aharon Carmi in Warsaw had integrated the current plight into the Passover drama. He adapted the Haggadah, identifying the wise son as the one who revolted, the innocent one as the one who believed the Germans. The Avadim Hayinu was grafted onto the present:

‘We were slaves’ in the ghettos of Poland / To Hitler may his name be erased, the Führer
of Germany.

‘And they brought us forth from the ghettos...’ to be killed and for forced labor.

And they led us naked into the snow and ice.

The Dayyeinu:

‘If He brought us forth from Egypt....’

If He set a ruler over us without a Judenrat, it would be enough.

If He assigned the Judenrat but not the Jewish police, it would be enough.

And Vayehi Bahatsi Halayla:

‘And it was at midnight....’

The night watch unit was on the ghetto walls ... at midnight.

A spy against the Jewish underground was caught in the dark of night, put in prison day
and night ... at midnight.

There is a reign of day and a reign of night.

The day to the Germans, the night to the underground ... at midnight.

(Carmi, “Sippuro” in Min Hadeleikah Hahi, p. 113). There is also Meir Basok’s 1950 memory of R. Naftali of Cracow, a student of Rabi Yissakhar of Belz. He dressed in a Kittel (worn for moments between time and eternity) on the last day of Passover, poured a stream of water on the floor, which he and his neighbors walked over (“Basha’ar Harivi’i,” Hatsofeh 3881. 2 October 1950:4).

But generally, the metahistorical content was not maintained intact. It became difficult or impossible to carry on the ritual—thereby threatening the myth. For example, in 1940 Ha’arets transmitted a report from a woman who escaped Poland, which described the Seder as similar to the last meal before fasting on Tisha B’av, and filled with anxiety that the Germans were planning to make house searches at any moment. Matsot had risen in price, and most of the Jewish population could afford them only for the Seder nights—truncating the ritual (“Aharei Haperaot Bevarshav,” Ha’arets 6294. 14 May 1940:2). Beyond this, the content of metahistory and its ritual enactment were changed into something negative. The metahistorical terminology remained—but was transformed.

The anonymous author of the Ringleblum document cited above wrote on 11 April 1941 in Warsaw that the drama of ancient liberation reminded Jews only of their endless exile (“Erev Pessah in Varshaver Geta.” 11 April 1941). In 1945, She’arim related a report that tears filled the first cup of raisin wine at the 1942 Seder, and that the other three were filled with beet-root soup (A. G., “Pesahim Sham ... Hapesah Ha’aharon,” She’arim 12 (28 March 1945): 5). In 1946 R. Yehoshua Mosheh Aaronsohn wrote in his Zikhronot that the laborers in Warsaw could not hold a Seder until well into the night, and then they were capable only of talking about their own slavery—and not about any inevitable liberation. With bathing prohibited, he continued to say, their own sweat and dust had become the Mikveh to “purify themselves” for the holiday (Alei

Merorot: Zikhronot 63-64. See Tsevi Shner, “Mifal Hatend Shel Harav Misanik” in Yediot Beit Lohamei Hagetaot. Tishrei 5717 as cited by Yehoshua Eybeschuetz, Shoah Ugevurah: Yalkut Bibliografit. 1981). Later, in 1972 Yehoshua Eybeschuetz wrote that when the door was opened for Elijah, who heralded the messiah, and the celebrants recited the “Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations,” what they really expected was the S.S., coming to take them for forced labor. (“Al Matsot Umarorim Yokhluhu,” She’arim 6315 (29 March 1972): 6; and 6316 (31 March 1972): 4. Reports from 1961 and 1970 about the 1943 Sedarim at the house of R. Eliezer Yitshak Maisl (the grandson of R. Eliyahu Hayim Maisl of Lodz) recalled that the red wine evoked the image of Jews being killed. “Pour out Thy wrath” made the participant think of the death which loomed above them. Tuvia Buzhikovsky spoke of the reversal of the meaning of the metahistorical drama, for Maisl: The more the rabbi immersed himself into the reading of the Haggadah (a joyous experience), the more he sunk into despair. The current oblivion seeped through Maisl’s thoughts about the ancient redemption (Buzhikovsky 1970; Bein Kirof Noflim. Beit Lohamei Hagetaot 1970, pp. 42-43; Carmi and Frimer, Min Hadelikah Hahi Bei Lohamei Hagetaot, 1961).

The reversal of meaning, diminishing the metahistorical content and the tie to God through it, was echoed elsewhere. Eliezer Unger reported to Hatsofeh on 7 April 1944 that at a Cracow Seder the recitation of “And when I passed by there and saw the weltering in thy blood I said to thee, In thy blood live! Yea, I said to thee, In thy blood live” (“Tsei ulemad...,” Haggadah) evoked crying at the thought of the reality of the blood (“Pessah 5703 Bekrakov,” Hatsofeh 1904. 7 April 1944. p. 7). In Radom in 1942, with the impact of the 17 March deportations of Lublin’s Jews upon them, when the door was opened for Elijah, instead of feeling confidence in divine protection (as “Leil Shemurim” implied) the participants saw only darkness and the curfew (Kuntsman to Hayim Strauss, “Shabbat Umoed Bagetaot Hageral Government

Shebepolin,” 1975). Natan Markovitch recalled that during Passover 1942 in Slobodka children started bleeding in their mouths when their teeth broke from the cold as they sucked on their Matsoh—and all he could think of was “In thy blood live” (Ezekiel 16:6; “Tsei Ulemad....” Haggadah) (Langleben). The same negation or reversal of mythic/metahistorical values is found in Rivka Velba’s recollection that the 1944 Seders in Slobodka. Instead of evoking the return of the infant (Moses) to its Moses, the service was interrupted by house-to-house searches for children by German police (Langleben 1994). In 1959 Ya’akov Sternberg recalled how the phrase “and they labored us and made us suffer hard and the children of Israel moaned from the labor and cried out” (“Tsei ulemad”) was being fully realized then and there. (Sternberg in Sefer Krakov 1959, p. 413).

2. Camps

In the ghettos the flow between God and history, and that between God’s relationship to the Jewish people through the myth and its ritual enactment, were interrupted and diminished. In the camps the reality of the present was deemed to be separate from all others, God’s relationship through history was lost, and the Jew left to sanctify himself, his universe and even God.

There is some data to the contrary. At the 1942 Seder in Konin labor camp, R. Yehoshua Mosheh Aaronsohn, writing soon after the war, said the participants cried uncontrollably at the Shehehyanu blessing (Who has given us life until now) at the end of the Kiddush. He told them that they must not waste the blessing (Berakhah levatalah) but indeed celebrate the ancient freedom—no matter the present reality. He explained that the Haggadah text “The days of your life—i.e., the days; All the days of your life—i.e., the nights” meant that even in dark days of pain and degradation, Jews had to carry out the Mitsvah of retelling the miracles of the Egyptian exodus—for the Mitsvah was a source for future redemption (Alei Merorot: Zikhronot 145).

According to a 1979 account, in Bergen Belsen R. Yisrael Shapira of Blozhov concluded a Seder statement about the unprecedented events with:

But please do not despair my young friends. For this is the era of the onset of redemption. The Haggadah states: We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. The word Avadim is an acronym for David ben Yishai avadekhah meshihekchah: David son of Yishai your servant your messiah.

(Eliach, “Leil Haseder Bebergen Belsen,” Hadoar 58 no. 22 (9 Nissan 5739): 353 as cited in “Shemirat Hamasoret” in Mahanot Harikuz Hanatsin. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1984).

The separating out of the current situation and the sanctification and amplification of the human sphere may be found in the same 1942 Seder statement by Aaronsohn:

In addition to the substance of the matter of Passover, and the sanctity of the holiday, it was important for us to work also from the spiritual (nafshit) and ideal side against our blood-enemies who set out to destroy us both in spiritual (ruhanit) and physical terms.

He recorded that there was only a small amount (kezyit) of Maror. It was decided to divide it up between those who had been beaten most severely—compounding and deepening the bitterness rather than alleviating it. The participants realized, he wrote, that the current slavery was exponentially greater than that in Egypt. The cruelties were outside the path of nature.

(Zikhronot 144/145). As to the 1943 Seder in Konin (Aaronsohn was there through mid-August. See Theo Richmond, Konin): It amounted, he said, to a Tisha B’av service. (Zikhronot 172/173).

Yeshayahu Rekhter’s 1967 testimony about the 1943 Seder in Hasag-Skarzyski-Kamienna brings forward the attempt to sanctify the immediate profane reality. The participants used their coffee for wine, their food as the burnt offering, and they themselves served as Maror

(“un Maror hoben mir ale gehat mer vi genug”). Each knew the Haggadah by heart, he said, implying that they themselves became the Haggadah myth (03/3530). According to the 1979 report, R. Yisrael Shapiro’s Seder words were essentially an expression of the unprecedented character:

What differentiates this night from all other? ... In all other nights we eat Hamets or Matsoh. Tonight only Matsoh. In the past, through all the long nights of exile, we Jews ate Hamets and Matsoh. Hamets means bread that rises. Matsoh means bread which is flat and has no height. In the past nights of exile there were also days of the spirit’s ascent, moments of creativity. But tonight, in the era of the Shoah, all is Matsoh. We are at the lowest level, in the valley of tears. There is no ascent, and no relief.

(Eliach, “Leil Haseder Bebergen Belsen”). Yehoshua Tessler described the Matsoh in Kaufering as a Lehem oni (bread of affliction, Lahma anyah), the likes of which never existed—the participants were struck at the contrast between the current reality and the redemptive motif of the Seder: “Who redeemed us and redeemed our fathers.” (03/6892).

3. She’erit Hapeleitah

The fractured historical relationship between God and Israel found in the Passover ritual in the ghetto; and the separating out of the unique present reality and its sanctification found in the camps—with the removal of metahistorical context with its divine author—yielded to the restoration of the relationship following liberation. God’s otherness and man’s access to this otherness found expression in this Haggadah adaptation by “Yoesseleh Foehrenwalder” in Foehrenwald D.P. camp 1946:

‘We were slaves [unto Pharaoh in Egypt]’ and became slaves [again in Europe] and are now packed into camps.

‘If [God] had not brought [our ancestors out of Egypt].’ ... [So it is now with Dr. Zalman Grinberg, Head of the hospital for political prisoners in Germany]. If he did not travel to America, our cousins would still not know how deeply we have been burned.

‘Even if we were all wise.’ ... [Wise?] Try to be wise when you are forced to beg for food.

‘If we were all endowed with knowledge of Torah.’ [Even if we were], we still would not know why we should [ever] help to rebuild Europe.

‘And pour out Thy wrath [upon the nation that knows Thee not].’ [This time], with the atom bomb.

‘Next year in Jerusalem.’ [Yes, but] without the English mandate.

(Yoesseleh Foehrenwalder in Bamidbar 15 April 1946).

The restorative nature of the new awareness was made explicit by the Va’ad Agudat Harabanim in the American zone in 1948. An announcement acknowledged that the holiness of the Passover holiday of redemption had been displaced by the realities of ghettos and camps. But now the Jews were liberated. And with God’s help they were now worthy of celebrating the exodus from Egypt and the redemption. The rabbis called for the restoration of the sacred holiday of Passover as it was celebrated before the war—thereby strengthening the future existence of the Jewish people. Thus: (1) The celebration of God’s connection to Israel in history, Passover, had in fact been set aside by the tragedy—but not destroyed. (2) God’s presence in history was evident in the fact of the Displaced Person’s survival. (3) It was now left to the Jew to restore his own role in the relationship—by celebrating God’s presence, and (4) The restored relationship would provide strength for the future. That is, the broken cycle between

God, Israel and history had been repaired. God was there in the past, would be there in the future—and was also there in the historical present (070/29. MIP 43).

C. Yamim Noraim

While Passover is a festival for expressing God's connection to collective Israel in history, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are festival-expressions of God's connection to the historical individual within the nation of Israel. The relationship is concentrated around the Jew's Teshuvah (penitent return) and God's Rahamim (mercy).

1. Onset: 1939

Reports about the Yamim Noraim, which coincided with or immediately followed upon the invasions, indicate that the relationship remained intact, and consciously so. The Skempa Jews praying on the first day of Rosh Hashanah in Dobrzyn-Wista, according to the contemporary account, pleaded (apparently during Tashlikh) “Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O Lord! Lord, hear my voice! Let Thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication” (Psalms 130:2), with such fervor that the report said the plea ascended in ecstasy through the gates of Rahamim up to the throne of glory—even as those standing watch urged them to lower their voices. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah Gelernter recognized that in fact, all mankind was passing before God like a flock of sheep to be judged for slaughter—evoking in his mind the rabbinic interpretation of Leviticus 27:32, where each tenth lamb was sacrificed, and sanctified (“Vekhal ma’aser bakai vatson, kal asher ya’avor tahat hashevet ha’asiri yehiyeh kadosh La’adonai”): Lambs gathered at the door of their shed to be close to their mothers, who waiting desperately at the other side to find out which of their children would be marked red—for sacrifice. (Bekhorot 58^b. See Rambam, Hilkhot Bekhorot 7:11). On Yom Kippur (23 September), back in Skempa, fearing that his congregants would be taken to forced labor like the

Jews of Lipno and their rabbi Shmuel Halevi Brot, he invoked the High Priest's plea "may your homes not become your graves" ("Ve'al anshei sharon Hashem Yerahem yehi ratson shelo ya'asu bateihem kivreihem." See Ta'anit 22^b) and the congregants prayed to God desperately during the closing services (Neilah) to open up His gates of Rahamim to them (Ringelblum). That is, the metahistorical stream continued, the mythic language of God's actions fit together with the empirical realities of the present.

The Kol Nidrei worshippers in Beldhatow (near Piutrkow, Trybunalski) in 1939, according to the contemporary report, hoped that their atonement (Kapparah) would elicit God's Rahamim—although they would instead be beaten the next day, forced to trample on Sifrei Torah and to pile up Torah scrolls, Tefillin and Taleisim and set the pile afire (the fire lasted eight days) (Ringelblum). In Warsaw, according to the 1940 report of Sh. Zakh to Hatsofeh, one rabbi interpreted the troubles as a mythic confrontation between Melekh evyon and Melekh elyon, temporal—indeed impoverished—vis a vis eternal powers (Source?) ("Rosh Hashanah Bemartef Bevarshav," Hatsofeh 842. 2 October 1940:11); and Mosheh Prager, writing in 1942, recalled how Warsaw's Jews in 1939 responded with Teshuvah (presumably in prayer and action) to the fact that each confronted the either/or choice of the Netaneh Tokef prayer: "Who shall live and who shall die, who by stoning..." (Prager, "Rosh Hashanah Bevarshah Habo'eret," Hamashkif 1016 (17 September 1942): 2). According to the report received by L. Bein in 1945, after Kol Nidrei in 1939 the Hymn of Unity was recited in Warsaw, as was customary, through the night: "I will sing to my God as long as I live. The God who has sustained me in all things through my life. To this day Thou hast taken me by the hand." Shir Hayihud ("Sheshet Yemei Kippurim," Hatsofeh 2344. 15 September 1945:). The Jews of Lodz in 1939, Yehudah Leib Gerst wrote in 1947, worshiped Yom Kippur at home in Tallit and Kittel, adding Psalms 102:

“Mine enemies approach us all the day.... He hath regarded the prayer of the destitute. They shall perish but Thou shalt endure.” (Greenberg).

2. Ghetto

The reports and recollections of the 1939 Yamim Noraim evidence the conscious retention of the Teshuvah-Rahamim relationship, i.e., the expressions and awareness of interaction between God and individual Jew in history. The data about the ghettos, like those about Passover, point to the weakening of the ritual enactment of the myth and the transformation of its content into something negative.

In Warsaw, according to Shmuel Rothstein’s 1945 report, Ya’akov Naftali Tab, Admor of Zwolen, accelerated the Yom Kippur prayer [in 1940?], in view of the trouble, conducted Neilah at 2:00 PM—and then went home and thanked God for getting him through the danger (Birkhat Hagomel: “Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, king of the universe, who bestowest favors on the undeserving and hast shown me every kindness”). (“Kol Nidrei Bemartef,” She’arim 35. 13 September 1945: 2. Cited by Strauss). Bein’s report of a Polish escapee tells of how Warsaw Jews poured out their hearts in pleas for divine Rahamim during Kol Nidrei 1940. On Yom Kippur day they were taken to forced labor. In 1941 Warsaw Jews were taken from synagogues in Taleisim and photographed (Bein, supra). Jews left alive in Warsaw 1943, in Pawiak prison, according to Hirschaut’s 1948 testimony, were mindful of their broken ritual; as they read from a Mahzor in Hitler’s prison, facing guns. Beit Ya’akov journal told of a Saloniki Jew, serving as Hazan, added these words:

Sovereign of the world, after what has happened to us in Auschwitz, after the flames and destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, we turn to you at the last moment with this final request: Guardian of Israel, guard over this last remnant of the nation of Israel. Let not

the last refugees of the children of Israel, who have sacrificed themselves for the sake of Kiddush Hashem, be lost. We stand upon the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto and proclaim in a loud voice, ‘The Lord is God.’ [Adonai hu Ha’elokim; i.e., the final words of the Neilah service].

Bewildered and agitated over the images before his eyes, after this he could not continue to pray (cited by Strauss, p. 146).

The shattering of the Yamim Noraim enactment of the Teshuvah-Rahamim relationship was reflected in the death of Rav Naftali of Cracow. R. Naftali had stopped praying in despair over the fact that the messiah did not come by September 1942. On Yom Kippur 1943 he fled from his work brigade to protect the tombstone of R. Mosheh Isserles (d. 1572) and was shot to death in the attempt (supra). The collapse of the ritual and the negative transformation of its content are evident in reports from Lodz. In 1945/6 Yehiel Volf wrote that in 1941, following Tefillah Zakhah (“Sovereign of all the world. Av Harahamim...”) when the Hazzan opened the Kol Nidrei services in the Kina Bayka (form a movie theater) with “And by the authority of the heavenly court and by the authority of the earthly court all personal vows we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next, we publicly renounce” (“Al da’at hamakom”), Gestapo troops in attendance smirked and whispered to one another (P-5/14 Alef). In the late 1940’s Pinhas Vindboym said that in 1940 the Gestapo took pictures (Yasny collection. P-5/14 Alef. A. Volf Yasny, Di Geshikhte fun Yidn in Lodzh, 1960; pp. 446-449 and Unger, “Hahayim Hapenimi’im Begeto Lodz, 1940-44,” 1997). As recorded by Breimann in 1942, during the Rosh Hashanah which came the day after Sperre, people were afraid to pray even in inner rooms—lest the sound of the Shofar be heard. Would the sound of the Shofar bring them death rather than uplift them? Eliezer Barukh said that his father’s work was so dirty on Rosh Hashanah 1942 that

he could not utter a word of prayer while doing it—but in the afternoon he still declared to God (in Yiddish): “All powerful Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: By merit of the innocent children who study Your holy Torah, have pity on your people Israel.” On Yom Kippur the father refused to eat: “You want me to eat? Haven’t we Jews sinned enough?”—to which the son added (in 1945) that the night before, shift workers were beaten to death for reciting the Kol Nidrei. Only God’s Rahamim could have saved them, he observed—and it never came (684/5). When Uri Finkel returned to Rakow in 1945 and found the Kehillah’s Pinkas, he added that on Yom Kippur 1941 the Fascist murderers drove the entire Jewish population to the market place. They were forced to bring some 60,000 books, a few hundred Torah scrolls and burn them. The fire lasted the entire day and the smoke spread far from the town. Jews were forced to sing and dance around the bonfire and those who could not were shot on the spot. In 1970, Z. Tshileh testified that forty Jews were wrapped in Torah scrolls and burned to death (Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People PL/653 and Yad Vashem Archives 03/3936 [1970]).

3. Camps

Testimonies about the Yamim Noraim in the camps move the weakened and transformed ritual of the ghetto and the separation between metahistory and empirical reality (with awareness of God’s presence nevertheless) which took place there, towards attempts to sanctify the holidays and thereby (moving from man to God) to sanctify God’s name –without awareness of the metahistorical connection. The Yamim Noraim in Skempa 1939 had grafted the tragic events onto the Teshuvah-Rahamim dynamic. Those in the ghetto maintained the dynamics’ language and structure, as the content changed. The Yamim Noraim services in the camps became moments of sanctity in and of themselves.

In his contemporary diary, Aaronsohn wrote that on Erev Yom Kippur 1942 the inmates of Konin were warned about an investigation into the fact that potatoes had been found near the camp fence. But they went ahead and held quick Kol Nidrei services—held more secretly, he wrote, than those of the converts (Anusim) in Spain. They managed to make it through the Eighteen Benedictions (Alei Merorot Megillat Beit Avadim, p. 116); in his 1946 Zikhronot version of 1946 he said they only got through the first three words of the Kol Nidrei (“Al da’at hamakom”) before their captors came in, accused them of every conceivable crime, and beat them (Zikhronot, p. 169).

The testimonies from the 1960’s speak of acts of sanctification in and of themselves. Hayim Saltsberg reported that laborers in the Shitashky camp outside Radom lost track of secular time as they prayed during the morning of Yom Kippur (in 1942), and failed to report back in time. They remained praying all day in the barracks. In the middle of Neilah they were taken by German Gendarmes and killed (Sefer Kuznitz 1969, p. 435). In Hasag-Skarzysko Kamienna the Radoshitser Rav Yitshak Shmuel Eliyahu Finkler succeeded in having a kosher Shofar produced. This, after he was first brought the skull of a Beheimah (a cow?), which could not be used. Those present reported that the Tekiyah ascended to the throne of glory, pleading for the evil decree to be torn up. (Daughter Malkah Granatshayn 03/3323. 1968. Y. Granatshtayn in Piotrkov-Trybunalski Sefer Zikaron, p. 859. See Emil Fackenheim, Jewish Return to History). In Stutthof concentration camp the Kol Nidrei services were held in a water pit and without a Mahzor (Bendavid 03/2719). In a camp near Deblin the Al het was recited word for word (Tsevi Eichenbrenner 03/3000). Testimonies from the 1990’s tell of Mahzorim being composed on cement-bag paper (Dernau? By Shen 03/10147 and Jawiszowice by Cohen 03/7061); of using a single Siddur for services in Vaihingen concentration camp (Perl 03/6364); of a young girl being

able to recite the Kol Nidrei service by heart, others repeating after her, in Salzwedel concentration camp (Alpanes). In Gleiwitz concentration camp the inmates continued to recite the Kol Nidrei while the Germans beat them (Karat 03/9831). In Auschwitz the testimonies tell of fasting on Yom Kippur (Fruchter 03/0618, Kirsch 03/10513, Rosenblatt 03/6366); of a Shohet's daughter reciting Kol Nidrei by heart (Weingarten-Fixler 03/6700), of a group praying in the toilet—with a Siddur—which did not contain the Kol Nidrei. There are explicit testimonies of sanctification of self and the moment: Individuals risking their lives by requesting permission to hold services (Farkash 03/9502, Moshkovitz 03/3974); the head tailor in Auschwitz explaining to a Kapo that Yom Kippur was the holiest day for the Jew, when the dead accompanied the living. Could they set aside a few Taleisim, instead of curring them up as required, for their use on Kol Nidrei? They were permitted to hold services, the witness added. When it came time for the elderly leader to begin, his lips trembled without a sound. He did not have the strength. The silence was overwhelming until the words of holiness ripped forward—sanctifying a moment within the radically profane universe (Moshkovits 03/3974).

4. She'erit Hapeleitah

The Teshuvah-Rahamim dynamic opened up again when history made it possible—after the liberation. Complete services were held in the free atmosphere of Bergen-Belsen in [1945]—with two hundred soldiers from the Jewish brigade expected. To accommodate the large crowds [in 1946] the services were held in the movie hall (070/29, MIP 43).

Conclusion

I have set forth an hypothesis about a pattern of prayer, Passover ritual and Yamim Noraim which may be detected when the catastrophe is periodized into onset, ghetto, camp and She'erit Hapeleitah.

1. At the onset, there was a conscious metahistorical connection between God and man. It preserved their separate realms, and enunciated Judaism's (possibly distinctive character) as the religion of the God of history. In prayer, God's mercy was evoked in the belief that the suffering had meaning and would find a positive resolution. On Yamim Noraim the Teshuvah-Rahamim dynamic applied fully to present tragedies.
2. In the ghetto, God's existence and presence were not in question. But the content was: What was the meaning of the present tragedy, given His existence? What could be said about the cycle of God's relationship to history, if His presence in the past and the future were discernible—but not in the present? If its meaning could only be revealed with redemption? If the ritual which supported the myth was being shattered and its message turned upside down?
3. In the camp, the language of metahistory disappeared—and with it, God's apprehensible presence which was connected to it. The contemporary reality had no connection to anything that happened before to Israel-in-covenant-with-God. In this crisis, the Jew chose to sanctify himself and his environment—in whatever way possible. The conscious metahistorical connection of the onset disappeared; the metahistorical terminology and structure of the ghetto was no longer present. Now God was manifest in, or overshadowed by, the assertion of human life and in the human acts of sanctification.
3. In the D.P. centers the origin of relationship was restored. God was manifestly real and present in Israel's history—possibly so, one may speculate, because His sacred reality was temporarily taken up by the life of man.

This pattern will now be tested by unpublished materials I hope to find (in addition to those cited here) which were produced during the war itself. Hopefully, there is data about the respective shtetl, ghetto and camp contexts; about the particular Passover and Yomim Noraim observances (or parallel ones); possibly about individuals who testified at the onset and then in ghetto, camp and D.P. center. There is a large amount of periodical material to be seen, and further testimonies. All the published sources will have to be subjected to hermeneutical scrutiny. For example: How were the periodical articles processed by the editor? What religious orientations determined the hagiographic collections? To what extent do the later testimonies affirm the wartime data?

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