

Contemporary Israeli Haredi Historiography and Collective Memory of the Holocaust¹

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Rabbi Avraham Yesha'ayahu Kareliz (1878-1953), known as the *Hazon Ish*, was arguably the most important and influential Haredi rabbi in Palestine/Israel since the early 1930s.² In a small book, entitled *Faith and Confidence (=Emunah Ubitahon)*, published after his death, he discusses various ethical and moral issues. Exploring the limitations and problems of the human imagination, the author states that

chronicles and the history of the world coach the wise person in his way, and are the foundations of his wisdom. And whereas man loves to innovate and lecture to an audience, many lies have accumulated in history books, since by nature man does not hate the lie, and many love it and entertain themselves with it, therefore the wise must select the stories in order to receive the truth and disseminate the lies, and here is where imagination has ample opportunities... to decide hastingly.³

¹ The following points are based upon a lecture delivered at the Scholars Seminar of the International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, March 15, 2000. Please keep in mind that this is a preliminary, general outline; a detailed article has been presented for publication. This discussion focuses on Ashkenazi Haredim; Sephardi-Haredi confrontations with the Holocaust deserve separate attention. This presentation is part of a wider project exploring popular religion and culture in Israeli Haredi society. Finally, my discussion assumes certain knowledge of Haredi society, which can be found in the works mentioned in the footnotes.

² To the best of my knowledge, no full-scale study of his life and works exists. Some important aspects are discussed in: S.C. Heilman and M. Friedman, "Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim," M.E. Marty and R.S. Appelby (eds.), *Fundamentalisms Observed*, Chicago and London 1991, pp. 229-233; L. Kaplan, "Hazon Ish: Critic of Traditional Orthodoxy," J. Wertheimer (ed.), *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, Cambridge, MA, and London 1992, pp. 145-174. Haredi writings on him deserve a separate discussion.

³ *Sefer Hazon Ish Emunah Ubitahon*, Tel-Aviv 1984, p. 11.

In other words, the human imagination influences authors of many history books to be biased. The author was a staunch Orthodox authority who strongly opposed Zionism, the State of Israel, secularization and many aspects of modernity. Surprisingly, therefore, this rejection of historians and history books is not based upon an inherent religious argument, but rather one which has been and is raised frequently by secular as well as religious people in various social, political and academic debates.

An examination of religious historiography, which addresses a society other than its elite and aims to shape its historical perspective and awareness, as in the Haredi case, must focus on its numerous expressions in both elite and popular sources. This approach enables us to uncover various trends and tactics, implicit and explicit, which compliment and contradict each other at the same time. Furthermore, this method will shed light on several possible stages in the development of Haredi historiography of the Holocaust.

At the risk of stating the obvious about Orthodox historiography, although overlooked at times, we must remember the following two most important characteristics of religious historiography:

- 1) All events are perceived as ruled by God and part of a divine grand plan of the world and humanity.
- 2) It presents, in many cases, a counter-history, although not always intentionally or in response to that written by academics.

Consequently, the absence of these characteristics from any religious historiography would be far more surprising than their appearance.

These aspects of nineteenth-century Jewish Orthodox historiography have received scholarly attention in recent years, as well as their writers' knowledge of and

confrontations with academic and ‘other’ histories.⁴ These important works provide the foundation for understanding the role of this historiography in shaping and preserving Orthodoxy from within. However, much less attention has been given to Haredi historiography,⁵ even though Haredim are a “product” of Jewish Orthodoxy.⁶

Furthermore, the important impact that numerous ethnic and religious groups comprising Haredi society⁷ have on the historiographical styles which developed within it, have not received adequate attention.⁸ For example, the authority of Hasidic rebbes and Mitnagdic rabbis, as well as the social structure of these two groups and their numerous sub-groups, differ greatly and have a profound impact on the characteristics of the historiography which emerges from them. Furthermore, friction

⁴ See for example: A. Rapoport-Albert, “Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism,” *History and Theory* 27, 1988, pp. 119-159; D. Asaf, *Derekh Hamalkhut: R’ Yisrael Merozhin Umekomo Betoledot Hahasidut*, Jerusalem 1997, pp. 24-33, 40; Y. Barnai, “Yahasah Shel Hahistoriografiyah Haortodoksit Lashabtaut,” *Yahadut Zemanenu: Shenaton Leiyun Ulemehkar* 9, 1995, pp. 19-42; I. Bartal, “True Knowledge and Wisdom: On Orthodox Historiography,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 10, 1994, pp. 178-192.

⁵ A comprehensive work on this wide-spread phenomenon does not exist, let alone any of the numerous topics this literature addresses. For some isolated references and discussions, see: D. Asaf, “‘Kevod Elokim Haster Davar’ - Perek Nosaf Bahistoriografiyah Haortodoksit Shel Hahasidut Be’erez Yisrael,” *Katedrah* 68, 1993, pp. 57-66; K. Caplan, “Hahevrah Haharedit Beyisrael Veyahasah Lashoah - Keriah Mehadash,” *Alpayim* 17, 1999, pp. 176-208; M. Sompolsky, “Jewish Institutions in the World and the Yishuv as Reflected in the Holocaust Historiography of the Ultra-Orthodox,” Y. Gutman and G. Greif (eds.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period: Proceedings of the Fifth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference*, Jerusalem 1988, pp. 609-631.

⁶ I hold that the Haredim are an offshoot of Orthodoxy, a modern phenomenon quite different than traditional Judaism, and more a diversion of the latter rather than a continuation of it. The basis of this argument and some of its political, institutional and halakhic expressions and implications can be found in: J. Katz, “Traditional Society and Modern Society,” S. Deshen and W.P. Zenner (eds.), *Jewish Societies in the Middle East*, Washington D.C. 1982, pp. 33-47; *Idem*, “Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 2, 1986, pp. 3-17; *Idem*, *Hahalakhah Bemeizar: Mikhsholim Al Derekh Haortodoksiyah Behithavutah*, Jerusalem 1992; M. Samet, “The Beginnings of Orthodoxy,” *Modern Judaism* 8(3), 1988, pp. 249-270.

⁷ These groups and sub-groups and the tensed and complex relationships between them have been raised by scholars in numerous ways. See for example: T. El-or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World*, Boulder, CO, 1994; I. Greilsammer, *Israel: Les Hommes En Noir*, Paris 1990; S.C. Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry*, New York 1992; *Idem*, “Quiescent and Active Fundamentalisms: The Jewish Cases,” M.E. Marty and R.S. Appleby (eds.), *Accounting for Fundamentalisms*, Chicago and London 1994, pp. 173-197; S.C. Heilman and M. Friedman, “Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim,” Marty and Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*, pp. 197-265.

⁸ For a general statement to this effect see: Asaf, *Derekh Malkhut*, p. 25 note 22. The importance of these factions, regarding the correlation between their stand toward Zionism and response to the Holocaust, is illustrated in: D. Porat, “‘Amalek’s Accomplices’, Blaming Zionism for the Holocaust:

among Haredi groups lead us to explore the possibility that certain aspects of their historiography are aimed at other Haredi or religious groups and writers, rather than academic or ‘secular’ works on the past.

In the case of the Haredim and the Holocaust we are dealing, for the most part, with a popular phenomenon. In other words, materials which address the average person. Therefore, in any attempt to analyze these sources we should be aware of how they are expressed in popular books, memoirs, live and recorded sermons, newspaper articles, juvenile literature, plays, dramas, and pedagogical materials. Therefore, we must address this topic from the perspective of historiographical styles and the various goals of the authors to influence popular approaches to history. Overall, we find that the strong Haredi tendency to blame Zionism, the Zionist movement, and its leadership in the Yishuv (Jewish settlement in Palestine), which have been well-documented by Menachem Friedman and Dina Porat,⁹ is one genre, one part of a larger picture.

There are several possible categories or parameters to explore this vast and ever-growing material:

- 1). Chronological/generational: There are significant differences between the writings of Moshe Praeger and Moshe Scheinfeld, two of the most prominent Haredi writers in the 1950s-1970s, and those more recent of Rabbi Yoel Schwartz or Ruth Lichtenstein.
- 2). Current geographical placement of writer: American Haredim differ from their Israeli contemporaries, in so far as they confront different challenges.

Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel During the 1980s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27(4), 1992, pp. 695-735.

⁹ M. Friedman, “The Haredim and the Holocaust,” *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 53, 1990, pp. 86-126; Porat, “Amalek’s Accomplices.”

- 3). The internal group-identity of the writers, i.e. Hasidim, Mitnagdim, Edah Haredit etc.
- 4). Stand toward Zionism.
- 5). Styles of writing history, for example: stories, anecdotes or writing history.
- 6). Influence of academic research.
- 7). Internal Haredi audience or external “other” audiences. An example of the former is Rabbi Eliezer M. Shakh’s statement made over ten years ago. Shakh said that “God held an account, one for one, a long account which stretches upon hundreds of years, until it accumulated to an account of six million Jews,” concluding that “if a Jew’s belief in this is not complete, he is an infidel.” This, we contend, is a direct response to the Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson’s earlier statement that “A dreadful Holocaust... cannot be a punishment on sins,” and does not attempt to address academic or other histories.

Some of the leading rabbis of the Mitnagdic camp in Haredi society, such as: Yizhak Hutner, the Hazon Ish, and Rabbi Eliezer M. Shakh, agree, each in his own way, that the Holocaust should be viewed as another tragic event in Jewish history, for which we have a set of traditional terms (i.e. *gezerot*, *hurban*, *perat*) and theological approaches to explain them (for example, reward and punishment). However, the younger generation of Haredi writers, both Mitnagdic and others, seems to adopt an opposite approach, which is best illustrated in their use of the term *Shoah* and their outlook vis-a-vis the uniqueness of the Holocaust as opposed to it being another event in Jewish history. For example, Ruth Lichtenstein states in her introduction to *Edut* that “there are grounds for the heavy fear that the whole topic [of the Holocaust] will turn into a distant topic and a chapter in Jewish history, as we look upon bitter periods in Jewish history, such as the slaughter of Jews during 1648-1649 or the Crusades.”

We can point to a clear and unquestionable trend over recent years: Haredi writers are exposing themselves more and more to scholarly research, although this exposure varies greatly. Unlike twenty, thirty, or more years ago, academic sources are now cited openly, although not always accurately and often in a negative context. It seems that their most common academic “heroes” are Shabtai Beit-Zevi and Tom Segev. Nevertheless, academic works are utilized in order to “prove” certain arguments. Furthermore, I would argue that in the course of this exposure to academic sources Haredi writers are influenced by them. Both those who accept academic sources partially and those who reject them are influenced by them, primarily in incorporating the complexities of social-historical reality.

The following words of a Haredi writer, who is influenced by Dina Porat’s work, serve as a good example: “This is not a total accusation against these [Zionist] leaders claiming that they could have saved it all, since the results of the general battlefields in Europe are known... the ‘I blame’ that arises from our research is that even in the places and cases where individuals or groups could have been rescued... also then all initiative and ability disappeared and were replaced by apathy..., indifference and standing aloof.” Furthermore, there seems to be an inverse correlation between the degree of recognition of the complexity of reality and relating to the Holocaust in terms of reward and punishment. As one increases, the other decreases.

The rising awareness to historical reality can be seen in the structure of Haredi historiography on the Holocaust. Thus, it is interesting to see how these Haredi writers tackle certain problematic issues, as a result of the character of present-day Haredi society. For example:

1). Starting from the First World War and not from Nineteenth Century racial antisemitism. This, since Haredi writers hold that antisemitism is, by definition, religious.

2). Certain “coalitions” and collaborations between Jews from different backgrounds are absent or minimized, and if they are present - it tends to be in an apologetic tone. A good example is the following statement: “Although it [the working group] was composed of Haredim, Zionists and Neologs who cooperated for temporary needs - it arrived at achievements as a result of the unity that prevailed within [the group] and not from making calculations regarding who to save.”

Another way to better understand how this historiography trickles down into Haredi society, is to examine pedagogy and curricula. In other words, what historical perceptions arise from materials which serve Haredi teachers? To be sure, we do not know what exactly is said in the classroom, but we can examine what kinds of guidelines teachers receive in the course of their preparation. A great deal of thought has been given in certain Haredi circles in recent years to the question how should Haredi educators teach the Holocaust? This should be seen as part of a wider trend in Haredi education which is consistently revising educational approaches and materials in all topics - from mathematics to history.

The focus on teaching the Holocaust in Israeli Haredi society is connected with women’s education, as none of this applies to the men’s yeshiva world, and it evolves around the *Beit Ya’akov* seminar and *mikhlelet yerushalayim*. These institutions are central and influential in significant parts of Israeli Haredi society, and therefore present an excellent case-study to denote patterns of continuity and change within this

society. I would like to focus on some pedagogical materials, which deal primarily with the Jewish religious stand during the Holocaust period.

The educational goals of these materials are not overt. The sources are all of rabbinical nature and from the period of the Holocaust. They focus, for the most part, on daily religious life and dilemmas that Jews faced in ghettos, work and concentration camps, and killing sites. These sources are accompanied by short historical entries, which place them within a historical context, and explain basic terms as well - both historical and halakhic-legal.

These pedagogical materials include survivor testimonies. Some of them are Haredim style the 1950s-1960s, which are different types than those of the 1980s-1990s, for example: Avraham Fucks, Moshe Praeger, and Yehiel Granetshtein, others are closer to the Zionist-Religious camp, like Yehoshua Eibeshitz, and, Dr. Mark Devorzesky. All of them have in common a certain open attitude toward history, religiosity and love for religious people and life, especially Haredim. Moreover, we rarely find in their writings a word of criticism on Haredim. Finally, several articles published in academic or semi-academic publications are included, focusing on religious life during the Holocaust based upon primary sources from the Holocaust period.

These pedagogical materials do not discuss some of the issues mentioned earlier which are at the center of Haredi historiography. For example, the debate regarding Zionist leadership and the Yishuv is absent; no reference is made to theological aspects or the flight of rabbis; there are no miraculous stories like those so frequent in contemporary Hasidic materials on the Holocaust.

Clearly, the focus is historical, presenting responsa in a historical context, a phenomenon which could arguably be considered a revolution in Haredi circles. This,

since Haredim tend to perceive these sources as a religious text, assuming that their historical context is not necessary in order to understand them. Simultaneously, however, a closer look at the use of these materials leaves the reader with an a-historical picture which avoids addressing some of the fundamental complexities of religious life during the Holocaust. This, I argue, is due to current Haredi educational goals.

Two examples will suffice:

- 1) The concentrated use of Halakhic sources creates the perception that notwithstanding the horrific circumstances observant Jews faced during the Holocaust, they still lived according to Halakhic rulings. However, numerous sources, much less documented than the former, suggest that this was not the case. Due to circumstances beyond their control, many religious Jews did not adhere to Halakhah. Furthermore, one is clearly left with the impression that religious Jews continued to believe in God without a doubt, which we also know not to be accurate from, among others, memoirs of observant Jews and the writings of the Rabbi of Piasezna.
- 2) Much more significant in many ways is the problematic picture of how Jews endangered their lives in order to meet religious demands such as kosher food, as well as observing the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. According to the Orthodox interpretation of Halakhah, if a period is categorized as one of religious persecution (*sheat hashemad*), then every individual is demanded to put his/her life at stake for as little as how one ties his shoes. However, if it is not an era of persecution the basic ruling is that the value of life is stronger than religious demands, with the exception of three fundamental cases (idolatry, killing a fellow Jew, and incestuous relationships). To the best of my knowledge, the rabbinical responsa and other writings from the Holocaust do not define this period as one of religious persecution, with the exception

of the debate which took place in Germany in the mid-1930s following the ban on slaughtering animals in accordance with Halakhah. Consequently, the presentation of Jews risking their lives, as well as others, to bake mazot or observe the Sabbath stands in opposition to what a rabbi would rule under these circumstances. We have many examples of rabbinical rulings or behaviors which support this argument; for example, the ruling of rabbis in Vilna in September 1942 that Jews must work on Yom Kippur.

Many Haredi pedagogical materials leave us with the clear impression that notwithstanding everything, observant Jews continued to ask Halakhic questions and accept rabbinic rulings. However, this was not always the case, primarily due to the ever-lasting gap between rabbinical Halakhic rulings and the Halakhic instinct, intuition or emotion of an average person. In other words: Many times the instinct of the average person, not always as learned, lead a person to act differently or even in contradiction with a rabbinical ruling. To be sure, this has nothing to do with the Holocaust; it existed for centuries, and continued during the Holocaust. For example, Rabbi Aryeh Merlikh, a Haredi who recently published his memoirs, notes that while in Dachau, a rabbi tried to convince him to eat non-kosher meat, but nevertheless he refused.

Within a Haredi society with a heavy emphasis on rabbinical authority, and even a stronger importance of the written word vis-a-vis the spoken word in the last few decades,¹⁰ this gap, between Halakhic ruling and instinct, intuitions or emotions of the average person is unacceptable.

No one would not be surprised to find an a-historical presentation or message in sources written by people who have not been exposed to the complexity of the

¹⁰ M. Friedman, "Life Tradition and Book Tradition in the Development of Ultraorthodox Judaism," in: H.E. Goldberg (ed.), *Judaism Viewed From Within and From Without: Anthropological Studies*,

historical reality. However, it is most interesting to find its expression in materials written by those who know, use and even appreciate the historical context presented in academic works.

The growing Haredi exposure to academically oriented works on the Holocaust in recent years is unquestionable and its influence and implications are clear. The degree of this exposure varies greatly. However, since the materials discussed are for the most part popular literature, we are still left with the following question: How are these popular sources read, digested and accepted by Haredi readers?

It seems as though another example of change within contemporary Haredi society vis-a-vis the Holocaust relates to their fascinating love-hate relationship with Yad Vashem in recent years. On the one hand, the rising number of Haredim who visit the Museum; the rising number of yeshivah students and *Beit Ya'akov* teachers who use the resources of the Pedagogical Center; numerous official and unofficial ties between Haredi educators and the International School of Holocaust Studies; and the invitations of Yad Vashem staff to lecture to Haredi audiences on various historical topics. On the other hand, the fierce Haredi condemnation of Yad Vashem in 1995 following demands to remove pictures in the Museum of women who were forced to undress by the Nazis, as well as internal Haredi opposition to the growing connections between Haredi teachers and Yad Vashem.

Much additional research is needed to study the Holocaust in contemporary Haredi popular sources. Overall, the emerging picture is one of an increasing Haredi interest in the Holocaust over time - similar to that of Israeli society in general.

Albany, NY, 1987, pp. 235-256; H. Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition* 28(4), 1994, pp. 64-130.