

**RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO THE
HOLOCAUST**

BY

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COURSE: THE FINAL SOLUTION: PERSPECTIVES ON THE HOLOCAUST

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“Do not judge your fellow until you are in his place.”

Hillel, Pirke Avot

(Ethics of our Fathers) 2:5

“Under abnormal circumstances, it is normal to act abnormally.”

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

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Introduction

In recent times, much has been written about the many heroic examples of armed resistance carried out by the Jews against the Nazis during World War II. In the forests, ghettos, and camps, in the face of hopeless odds, with little food, ammunition, or support from the local population, Jews fought back against the relentless Nazi killing machines. Somewhat less appreciated, however, is an alternative, but no less significant form of Jewish resistance that occurred during the war: the valiant struggle by many Jews to preserve their religion, to maintain their spiritual dignity, even when confronted with almost certain death.

The thrust of this paper will deal mainly with this response, as it attempts to document the reaction of the religious community – its leaders, its members, its philosophies, and its “halakhic” system – to the various crises presented by the Holocaust. First, however, a discussion on the religious perspective of resistance (active and passive) will be presented in a question and answer format.

Resistance in the Religious Community

Q: What attitude did religion dictate towards armed resistance?

It seems that the Halakha did not play a major role in this area, since, from a strict legal viewpoint, armed resistance was certainly permitted, even demanded, as the Talmudic dictum “He who comes to kill you, rise up early and kill him first” clearly indicates. Ideology, however, seemed to be the determining factor in this area. Thus many Chasidic leaders approached the issue of armed resistance with a Kabalistic (mystical) stance. Joseph Walk in his article entitled “The Religious Leadership during the Holocaust,” sums up their attitude in the following manner:

Most of the Hassidic rebbes, believed that they were living through a period in which “God was hiding his presence” and in which “strict justice” prevailed. This judgment upon them, they believed, was dictated by Divine Providence, and accordingly was to be accepted out of love for God. It was forbidden even to pray that the Judgment be rescinded, for they were experiencing the “birth pangs preceding the Messianic era, the unavoidable tribulations heralding the return to Zion,” and “can one avoid these pains?” Because they firmly believed that it was the will of God, many of the Hassidic leaders saw fit to offer themselves as “sacrifices on behalf of the community,” and as Rabbi Akiva in his time, they marched to death at the heads of their flocks, and were even willing to renounce life itself rather than transgress the most minor prohibitions. (e.g.: the shaving of their beards which was, in their eyes, and in the eyes of their foes, a symbol of their Jewishness.¹

So much for the Chasidic response. The non-Chasidic Orthodox response was naturally not quite so mystical, but still partially resembled that of their Chasidic counterparts. Thus during the heated debate in the Warsaw Ghetto surrounding the need for armed resistance, Rabbi Zusye Frýdman, the representative of Agudat Israel (one of the largest political bodies that represented both the Chasidic and non-Chasidic elements of Orthodox European Jewry) declared:

“I believe in God and I believe that a miracle will take place. The Lord will not allow His people to be annihilated. We must wait; we must wait for a miracle. To fight the Germans does not make sense. The Germans will wipe us out in a couple of days. I ask you, my friends who believe in the Allies, why are you gripped by despair? Do

you not believe that the Allies will win and bring you freedom? And you, my friends who are counting on a revolution and the Soviet Union: do you not believe that the Red Army will bring you freedom? Trust therefore in the Red Army, Dear friends, persevere and have faith and we shall be rescued!"²

Yet many other Orthodox Rabbis demurred. Rabbi Menahem Zemba, also a prominent leader in the Agudat Israel party, took issue with Rabbi Frýdman according to Alfred Katz, author of *Polands' Ghettos at War*, and called for "a mass uprising against German brutality. Not to fight the Nazis, he insisted, would be immoral and against Jewish principles." ³

The acceptance of martyrdom, by the Chasidic leaders (a position already outlined earlier) was also objected to by a number of rabbinic authorities. As Walk writes:

There were those who asked: "Even if the Germans do not intend to do direct harm to the Jewish religion, can Torah and faith exist when there is no life?" There were also those who claimed that "the honour of Torah" was of less importance than "Jewish lives," and that the traditional religious value of "dying for the sanctification of the name of God," (Kiddush ha-Shem) should give way before the more basic value of "sanctifying life," (Kiddush hahayyim) (a term attributed to Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum), or in other words, the precedence of physical survival over all else. In Rabbi Zemba's words: "When conversion can no longer save one's life, the martyrdom of a Jew can no longer be considered a sanctification of the name of God. [but]... his struggle to live."⁴

Q: To what extent did religious Jews take part in armed resistance?

From the literature available in this area, it appears that there were no religious groups that organized armed resistance, thus the question has been presented in terms of individual participation. Yisrael Gutman in his recent work "The Jews of Warsaw 1939 – 1943," asserts that the resistance movements in the Warsaw Ghetto did draw some support from the religious segments of the population, although not in an organized fashion:

At the end of October, the negotiations between the various political bodies in the ghetto were completed, and the Jewish Fighting Organization was reconstituted in a new format that united the majority of the political forces active in the ghetto underground (with the exception of the Revisionists and the religious factions). As we shall see, the Revisionists established a separate fighting organization, while the religious movements were never integrated as an organized force into either of the frameworks preparing for armed resistance. Members of Agudat Yisrael and Mizrachi could be found within the framework of activities that centered on the 'Self-Help,' and we also know of many instances of resistance expressed through the organized observance of religious commandments, in defiance of explicit orders issued by the occupation regime. Yet the members of these factions did not constitute a distinct unit within the resistance organization.⁵

This being the case, it seems safe to state that less armed Jewish resistance arose from the religious sector of the community than from their secular counterparts.

Dr. Aryeh Kubayov quoted in *Jewish Resistance in Nazi Occupied Europe*, attempted to explain this tendency in the following manner:

...Much has been written about the objective conditions that are indispensable for the existence of a resistance movement, and, to begin with, a friendly environment, the readiness of the surrounding population to help. Little has been said of an essential subjective condition: the psychological readiness of the resisters to resort to violence. The majority of Eastern European Jews were God-fearing people; prayers and learning took up a good part of their time. To them, their life on earth was an antechamber to the hereafter. Most of them would never agree to kill. To many of them, the readiness to kill demanded a tremendous inner revolution.

They had bitokhen, an untranslatable Hebrew Yiddish word, which means '*reliance upon God.*'⁶

In other words, the carrying out of acts of armed resistance was a radical break in the history of the Jews. Moreover it was a break that was felt even more sharply in the religious community whose conservative (read 'religious') makeup made them least receptive to change, as did their mode of existence.

Q: What was the prevalent form of resistance among the members of the religious community?

The most common form of resistance practiced by religious Jews has been variously categorized as "passive," "spiritual," "moral" or "inner" resistance. Since the Nazis made it clear that they were out to destroy the Jews physically and spiritually, in both body and soul, religious Jews made it a point to fight and try and retain their spirituality. To

achieve this end Jews in both ghettos and concentration camps, would often risk their lives for the sake of the completion of various Mitzvot. For specific examples of these acts of spiritual heroism, the reader is directed to choose from a number of books that deal with this matter. (Yaffa Eliach's *"Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust"* is a most recent example).

This spiritual resistance was carried out by religious Jews even as they were being executed, so that they would be able to die *biKedush Hashem*, while sanctifying the Name of God. (For specific examples, see section dealing with the religious leadership and the next excerpt.) It should be noted that acts of spiritual or moral resistance were by no means confined to members of the religious community, and there were also many secular Jews who, in their own way, morally resisted the Nazi persecutions. However, Jewish tradition naturally provided both the confrontation and the framework needed for symbolic protest, with the result being that even some "secular" Jews found themselves engaging in religious forms of resistance.

As has been shown above, for whatever the reason, the religious community generally did not participate in organized forms of armed resistance. Yet this does not mean that they looked down upon armed resistance (except, of course, for those Chasidic Rabbis quoted earlier who believed that the Nazi persecutions were to be accepted as a judgment dictated by Divine Providence). The following excerpt shows how both forms of resistance, physical and spiritual, were regarded as equally significant:

The Jews of Kelme, Lithuania were already standing beside the pits, which they had been forced to dig for themselves-standing ready to be slain for the Sanctification of the Name. Their spiritual leader, Rabbi Daniel, asked the German officer in command of the operation to allow him to say some parting words to his flock, and the latter agreed but ordered Rabbi Daniel to be brief. Speaking serenely, slowly, as though he were delivering one of his regular

Sabbath sermons in the synagogue, Rabbi Daniel used his last minutes on earth to encourage his flock to perform Kiddush Hashem in the proper manner. Suddenly the German officer cut in and shouted at the rabbi to finish so that he could get on with the shooting. Still speaking calmly, the Rabbi concluded as follows: "My dear Jews! The moment has come for us to perform the precept of Kiddush Hashem of which we have spoken, to perform it in fact! I beg one thing of you: don't get excited and confused – accept this judgment calmly and in a worthy manner!"

Then he turned to the German officer and said: "I have finished. You may begin."

The second instance happened at Kedainiai. The Jews were already inside the pit, waiting to be murdered by the Germans, when suddenly a butcher leaped out of the pit, pounced on the German officer in command, and sank his teeth into the officer's throat, holding on till the latter died.

When Rabbi Shapiro, the last Rabbi of Kovno, was asked which of these two acts he thought was more praiseworthy, he said: There is no doubt that Rabbi Daniel's final message to his flock concerning the importance of the precept of Kiddush Hashem was most fitting. But that Jew who sank his teeth into the German's throat also performed the precept in letter and in spirit, because the precept includes the aspect of action. "I am sure that if the opportunity had presented itself, Rabbi Daniel would also have been capable of doing what the butcher did," Rabbi Shapiro added.

Rabbi Moshe Aharonson testifies: “Most of the Jews immured in the ghettos and the labour and death camps were psychologically ready to resist and fight. But their resistance was expressed in different ways, by each person according to his character and personality. Some went out to kill, and be killed if necessary, in order to avenge the spilling of Jewish blood, while others sought to put into practice the principle, ‘if someone comes at you to kill you, kill him first, or let my soul perish together with the Philistines’.” (Rabbi Moshe Iehoshua Aharonson, “Sefer Ieshuat Moshe,” introduction to Nachmanides’ “Sefer Hegeulah,” Jerusalem 2959.)

On the other hand, Rabbi Aharonson continues, “there were those who out of consideration for the lives of others did not allow themselves to take the path of revenge which meant sure death for themselves and their fellows, but who resisted in another way, which, to be sure, did not involve blood revenge but which nevertheless called for courage and fortitude: observing the precepts of the Torah even where it was dangerous to do so; living a moral and ethical life in the face of temptations to behave in a bestial manner and in the face of degradation. In this stubborn, unrelenting war for their human and Jewish dignity, they expressed the highest form of Jewish heroism in the same manner as those who took up arms against the enemy.”^{7&8}

Q: *How were the religious Jews viewed in the eyes of the secular Jewish community?*

In the various diaries and memoirs written during and after the war – mention is often made of the heroic acts performed by observant Jews in defense of their religion. On the other hand, echoes of dissatisfaction with their position also comes through. For instance, Emmanuel Ringelblum, the famed Warsaw Ghetto Historian, wrote, “*The Orthodox satisfied with the Ghetto. They argue – the Rabbi who is the son of Samuel of Zbytkow – that this is how it should be. Jews should live apart.*”⁹ Ainsztein, in *Jewish resistance in Nazi occupied Eastern Europe*, supplements this comment by writing:

In the Warsaw ghetto the same people helped Kon’s and Heller’s work by telling their numerous followers that the ghetto was not only the Lord’s punishment for Jewish desertion of orthodoxy and atheism, but a blessing in disguise designed to bring the Jews back to the state of piety and isolation in which they had lived before the French Revolution. As, unlike Bialystok, Vilno or other Jewish ghettos in Lithuania and Byelorussia the Hassidic element was relatively numerous in Warsaw, the effect of the views propagated by Kon’s and Heller’s protégés was most useful to the Nazis, for it helped to create an atmosphere of fatalism.¹⁰

And so too, in another entry Ringelblum writes, with obvious distaste:

“In the Prayer House of the Pietists (Chasidim) from Bradaw on NoWolipie St. there is a large sign: *Jews, Never Despair...* The Pietists dance there with the same religious

fervor as they did before the war. After prayers one day a Jew danced there whose daughter died the day before.”¹¹

In post-Holocaust literature, the concept of spiritual resistance, even at the moment of death, in other words Kiddush Hashem, has often been left unappreciated by the secular community. Thus Terence Des Pres, in *The Survivor*, talks about the concentration camp as being a place where:

“Machines reduce courage to stupidity and dying to complicity with aggression.”¹²

More to the point is what Paul Robinson is quoted as saying in a discussion recorded in *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust*:

There was talk today of passive resistance. This kind of resistance is possible only under a certain set of conditions. Gandhi and Nehru followed by the Indian intelligentsia, conducted passive resistance against the British. I would like to see, however, how passive resistance would have worked under Nazi rule. Would the leaders of passive resistance against the Nazis have lived in palaces and sometimes received their meals from the Viceroy? Passive resistance as an approach to the Nazi regime is meaningless. It is based on the premise that this type of resistance can influence the rulers, whereas either passive or active resistance could not sway the Nazis.¹³

It is obvious that a Gandhi like type of resistance, where the hope was to eventually humanize the oppressors, would never have worked against the ruthless Nazis. What the dying Jew was clinging to, however, was his relationship with God, which no amount of Nazis or their forces of mechanized destruction could render meaningless. It was this idea

of Kiddush Hashem that enabled the Jewish victim to transcend the Kingdom of Auschwitz.

Religious Life under Nazi Persecution

To what extent was the religious life of the orthodox community affected by Nazi oppression? How much control did the religious leaders of the community exert over their followers? The following section will attempt to address these issues.

As stated earlier, numerous accounts have been recounted that attest to the intense devotion that many Jews shared in clinging to their religious practices. Rabbi Shimon Huberband, (an important member of Ringelblum's *Oneg Shabbat* group), in his war time diary¹⁴, also cites numerous examples of heroic acts performed by the religious populace of the Warsaw Ghetto while trying to fulfill certain Mitzvot. Literally hundreds of the ghetto occupants, he writes, used to sneak into the Mikvah regularly, even though the sign affixed by the authorities to the outside of the Mikvah clearly warned of the possible death penalty for such actions. (Joseph Walk maintained that religious Jews were rarely found among the Ghetto Police, and certainly not among the Kapos in the concentration camps.)

On the other hand, Huberband also documents many cases of severe moral slippage in the religious community of the Warsaw Ghetto. The most blatant case he records is that of the 200 members of the *Gur* Chasidic movement, most of them students between the ages of 17 and 28, who founded their own *Shteebil*. These Chasidism moved out of their parents homes, refused to address their mothers and sisters, referred to them in conversation as 'the member of my father's household,' and even applied the laws of *Yichud* to them! The 'students' did very little learning, since they spent a large part of their time on the streets – harassing passersby for handouts. The money that they would procure would go for food, but more significantly for drink, which played a very important role in their Chasidic meals. These affairs were consistently marked by extreme drunkenness and wild dancing – much to the consternation of the residents of the Ghetto.

As Huberband writes:

“The inhabitants of No. 9 Mila St. became filled with wrath and anger when they saw and heard, night after night, the uncivilized, singing and dancing of this group, at a time when Jewish blood was being spilled like water.”¹⁵

To support their particular lifestyle, Huberband writes, the students eventually resorted to blackmailing the wealthier members of the ghetto, and even began to steal from their own parents. Huberband produces a letter written by the brother of the Gerer Rabbi begging the students to curtail their shameful activities, but even then they refused to heed his call. Rabbi Huberband finally concluded this section by mournfully noting, “Until this very day there has never been a greater desecration of the name of God.”¹⁵

Other sources too reveal a drop in religious observance under German pressure, and also the powerlessness of the leaders to stay this trend. Thus Ringelblum writes in his diary:

The following is typical of the present attitude of Polish Jewry to philanthropy. Two years ago the Chassidic rabbi of Ruzyn wrote his disciples in Lublin to sell their furniture and give the proceeds to charity. It was his understanding that they were not doing any business and had no ready cash. His disciples disobeyed him and did not sell the furniture. Then the Germans confiscated almost all the furniture in every Jewish home in Lublin. Later, the rabbi wrote his disciples to sell their furs and give the proceeds to charity. Again, his Chassidim disobeyed him. And again the Germans came, this time to confiscate the furs. Finally, the rabbi wrote his disciples to sell their Sabbath clothes

and give the proceeds to charity. His disciples disobeyed him once more, and the Jews were deported from Lublin.¹⁶

Isaiah Trunk, in his work *Jewish Responses to Nazi Persecution*, in writing about the reaction of religious Jewry to Nazi persecution, first lists the many accounts that describe Jewish perseverance in remaining loyal to their religion. But then he writes:

On the other hand, there were quite different reactions. Some pious Jews lost their faith and began eating unkosher food and violating the Sabbath—a kind of rebellion against God, who was deserting his Chosen people. In one small ghetto in the Kalisz area (German name Heidemuhle), a trial was held with God as the accused.

Hillel Zeitlin, in his answer to the Oneg Shabbos questionnaire, remarked in regard to the religious life:

Unfortunately, we must admit that the Jews have turned out to be much weaker, much less resistant, than we thought. They are unable to endure even the slightest temptation, as we saw even before the war in the struggle against the slaughter prohibition and for kosher food. They ate unkosher meat even when the difference in price was negligible. And we saw the same thing in the fight for Sabbath repose...

The provincial Jews have proven to be better. They have not yet had their old Jewish sense of compassion torn out- of them.

Provincial Jews are willing to sacrifice their own lives, they give away their last crust of bread to send packages to relatives, friends, even strangers in Warsaw.

It is also sad that there are no Messianic dreams in the ghetto. No dreams of redemption, I mean redemption in a higher, spiritual sense. People think in purely materialistic terms. Redemption means going back to an easy life, the fleshpots of Egypt. There is, of course, a feeling that these sufferings herald the coming of the Messiah, but no one wishes to draw the property inferences, and so we do not see them preparing themselves, girding themselves for the higher spiritual Messianic Redemption.¹⁷

In conclusion, it would seem that the Nazi persecutions elicited widely varying reactions from observant Jews: for some it was an opportunity to scale new heights of religious devotion, while for others religious life eroded greatly. Considering the taxing conditions fostered by the Nazi persecution of the Jews, the former reaction is by far the more remarkable one and it is for this reason that post-Holocaust literature has, quite justifiably, tended to focus its attention on the heroic side of the religious Jew trapped in the reign of terror of Nazi Europe.

The Response of the Religious Leadership

The next issue to be approached is that of the response of the religious leadership during the Holocaust. The collection of response literature written during the war (or as a result of the war) indicates that the rabbis who ruled on the She'elot approached the various issues with a humane and compassionate attitude. They empathized deeply with the plight of their followers, and wherever they could they tried to make the Halakha as flexible as possible. (It should be noted, however, that even when they issued lenient rulings – permitting the eating of food on Yom Kippur, for example – they themselves would

follow the stricter interpretation.) In one particular case (to be described in full in the next section) Rabbi Zvi H. Meizels was so upset by the tragic consequences of the Halakhic ruling, that he refused to issue any decision.

The attitude of the religious leadership towards cooperating with the Germans, either directly or through the Judenrat, was not uniform. Thus Walk writes:

In explanation, the single example of Greece will suffice. The Rabbi of Salonika was fully willing to implement the German demands, and in so doing aided in the deportation of the Jews of his city; while the Rabbi of Athens, with the assistance of the Greek partisans, refused to accede to the wishes of the Germans, and succeeded in destroying the lists of the members of the community. He fled, together with three hundred other Jews, to a safe hideaway in the mountains.¹⁸

Walk goes on to claim that in most of the ghettos the rabbinic authorities flatly refused to have anything to do with the Judenrats. And even in the few cases where the rabbis did cooperate with the Judenrats it was only for the purest of motives:

Rabbi Shlomo Leitner of Radzymin instructed his Hassidim not to have any contact with the Judenrat, warning them “whoever crossed the threshold of the Judenrat would have no share in the world to come.” In most of the ghettos, the rabbis refused to cooperate with the heads of the Judenrats, even when the latter attempted to bribe them with promises that their names would be crossed off the lists of those to be deported, and also refused to support the *parnassim* who, without permission, took over the control

of the community, as in Lodz, Vilna (Vilnius), Sosnowiec and Bedzin.

However, this concept was not necessarily prevalent. In Mannheim, Rabbi Grunwald was chosen as chairman of the community ~ this is a unique example ~ and Leo Baeck was recognized by all, Jews and non-Jews alike, as the leader of German Jewry. In Poland and Lithuania too, Torah scholars joined the Jewish Councils, particularly in the smaller communities where they could influence the Council's actions and guide their decisions, and they were even willing to serve as heads of the Judenrats when this could serve a useful purpose. The rabbis were discriminating, and those heads of the Judenrate found worthy - received their support and blessing; as Rabbi Jacob Moshe Schmuckler told Dr. Elhanan Elkes (Kovno): "Only in the Nazis eyes will you be head of the Judenrat; in our eyes you will be head of the Judenrat; in our eyes you will be the head of our community; you will be our leader, defend us, you will be with us, and we with you." In other words, their actions determined the worth of the community leader.¹⁹

The actions of the Judenrat have been the subject of a large amount of scrutiny since the close of WWII. It is clear that while some of its members were clearly villains, others were genuine heroes, and still others fell somewhere in between these two extremes. The religious leadership, however, generally did not cooperate with the Nazis or their representatives, and when they did - it was only with the best of intentions in mind.

While most of the literature would seem to support this contention, Reuben Ainsztein, in his *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe*, accuses some of the leaders of Agudath, Israel in the Warsaw Ghetto of nothing short of active collaboration:

While Gancwajch (a notorious Nazi collaborator) tried to act as the benefactor and sponsor of Jewish culture in the ghetto by helping financially the ghetto theatre and paying a number of writers and artists regular monthly stipends, Kon and Heller devoted large sums of money to the maintenance of religious schools and institutions and extended their protection to many Hassidic rabbis. Before the war the same rabbis had been members of the Agudath Israel Party, which had been notorious for its readiness to collaborate with the most anti-Semitic Polish governments in return for personal or sectarian advantages. In the Warsaw ghetto the same people helped Kon's and Heller's work by telling their numerous followers that the ghetto was not only the Lord's punishment for Jewish desertion of orthodoxy and atheism, but a blessing in disguise designed to bring the Jews back to the state of piety and isolation in which they had lived before the French Revolution. As, unlike Bialystok, Vilno or other Jewish ghettos in Lithuania and Byelorussia the Hassidic element was relatively numerous in Warsaw, the effect of the views propagated by Kon's and Heller's protégés was most useful to the Nazis, for it helped to create an atmosphere of fatalism.²⁰

In yet another place Ainsztein writes that: "Two Rabbis belonging to the Agudath Israel Party, Blumenfeld and Glicenstein, made propaganda on his [Gancwajch's] behalf among

the Hasidic elements and saw to it that no resistance should take root in the religious schools and colleges.”²¹

Ainsztein is obviously not a great supporter of Agudath, Israel, and in fact, he later goes on to make the claim that this party “was known in Poland as the party of Mayofesniks, a Yiddish equivalent of the American Negro’s epithet “Uncle Tom”.”²²

The impression conveyed by Ainsztein’s writing is not an accurate one, for we have already established firmly that the non-resistance position taken by some of the Chasidic and non-Chasidic elements of groups like Agudath Israel was based on solid ideological underpinnings and this decision (of non-resistance) was certainly not influenced by the notion that with this stance they could thus gain many concrete favours from the Nazis. What can be said, however, is that once this stance was determined, according to the documentation provided by Ainsztein, certain elements of Agudath Israel used this position as a means of procuring favours from the Nazis and their middlemen. This charge, however, is not corroborated by any other writings in this area, save that of Ainsztein’s.

Perhaps the finest hour for the religious leadership may be found in the manner that they prepared their followers to meet with death. In account after account, we consistently find the rabbis urging their followers not to grovel or cringe in the face of their German executioners, but rather to face their ends courageously, standing erect and maintaining their faith in God. Here is one such example:

On July 15, 1941, all the Jews of a certain region were ordered to assemble in the town squares. They were all taken to a forest near the hamlet of Tirkeszli, near Mazeikiai. There the men were separated from the women, and the men themselves were divided into two groups: on one side the common people and on the other the well-to-do, the communal leaders and the rabbis. While many

thought they were to be taken to do forced labour, the rabbis realized immediately that they were going to be killed, so they put on their prayer shawls and Tefillin (Phylacteries). The rest of the men followed suit, and so attired they marched to their death.

Rabbi Kalman Maggid, who was close to the age of 70, he got up before the throng and exhorted them not to despair and not to display any signs of grief. It is forbidden, he said, to give the Germans the pleasure they seek ~ the pleasure of seeing the Jews downhearted just as they are about to go up to Heaven to stand before the *Almighty*. “It is our duty to die as Jews, to die in the manner befitting a holy people, to die like the children of our Patriarch Abraham, to sanctify the Name of God!” Then he said in a ringing voice: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God...” And the entire throng responded: “...the Lord is one!”²³

In fact, the religious leaders of many Jewish communities showed remarkable devotion to their followers, and even turned down rescue offers for themselves in order to be with their people during their time of suffering. Thus Walk writes:

There was however, undoubtedly an additional factor which strongly influenced the religious leaders – these were the overwhelming majority – who refused to abandon their flocks in time of distress, who returned the entry visas to the free countries, and even rejected the chance of fulfilling their dreams of emigrating to the land of Israel, asking, “When the survival of the Jews of the Diaspora hangs in the balance, can the leaders of the community rightfully emigrate to Israel?” There were even Hassidic rebbes who

later returned to Europe, and others who went back into the enclosed ghettos, to be with their followers in their time of need. Both in the East and in the West, Rabbinic leaders announced that they must remain there as long as there was a single Jew still to be found in the ghetto. Rabbi Leo Baeck, of Berlin, was of this opinion, and so too was Rabbi Joseph Carlebach of Hamburg, who revealed to a friend, on the eve of his deportation to Riga, that he was glad that the Gestapo had freed him from the tragic conflict of having to choose between his responsibilities as a father and as a community leader. Concerning such leaders and Hassidic rebbes who categorically refused to succumb to the entreaties of their Hassidim who sought to save them, and went to their death together with their followers, one can justly say: "Greater is the reward of he who sacrifices himself for the sake of the Jews than of he who sacrifices himself for God alone."²⁴

.....

The exemplary conduct of these religious leaders served to encourage and give strength to the other members of the community, perhaps to an even greater extent than their words and teachings. It is not merely coincidental that a non-religious observer, the psychologist Victor Frankl, records the fact that the religious Jews of the ghettos and the camps had a much greater capacity to withstand the horrors of the Holocaust than the non-religious. This achievement can, in no small way, be credited to the religious leadership, from whom they learned to appreciate and understand that there was meaning to their life, just as there would be meaning in their death.²⁵

Perhaps it is most fitting to conclude this section with Rabbi Ephraim Oshry's account of the death of Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman, who, like so many other rabbis mentioned, returned to Europe from America in order to be with his people during their time of travail.

“On the eleventh of Tamuz 5702 (July 6, 1941), he was sitting with a group of rabbis and Roshei Yeshivah, great Torah scholars, who were gathered in the Kovno ghetto, giving his she'ur in the tractate Niddah. All present were so deeply engrossed in the subject matter that they did not react for a moment when a band of Lithuanian fascists broke into the room. The Lithuanians were enraged and began to fire their rifles; then the rabbis rose from their places, trembling. One of the Lithuanians taunted them. “You were organizing a revolt in order to go to Israel. But we caught you! You will not escape! Come with us!’ They were lined up ready to be marched away when Rabbi Wasserman turned to his fellow prisoners and said, in his quiet and tranquil voice. ‘It appears that in Heaven they view us as tzaddikim [righteous men] worthy to atone with our lives for the people of Israel. We must, therefore, immediately repent here and now, for the time is short and the Ninth Fort [the place of execution] is near. We must remember that we will in truth be mekadeshei ha-shem, those who sanctify God’s name. Let us therefore go with heads erect, let us, God forbid, have no unworthy thoughts, which like pigul, unfit intention, in the case of a sacrifice rendered it invalid. We are now about to fulfill the greatest commandment – that of Kiddush ha-shem. The fire which will destroy us is the flame out of which the Jewish people will be rebuilt.”²⁶

The Halakha Confronts the Holocaust

In this final section we will be assessing the role that the Halakha played in addressing the moral and religious questions presented by the Holocaust. The first She'elah to be dealt with was by far the most prevalent problem for religious Jews during the war years. The Nazis issued numerous proclamations outlawing various religious practices, and enforced the death penalty for those that would not heed these ordinances. The religious Jew was faced with basically three halakhic options. In order to fulfill these Mitzvot, martyrdom was: (1) obligatory

- (2) permitted
- (3) prohibited

A careful study of Holocaust literature reveals that there was no consensus on this matter – in practice or in Halakha. Thus there were Jews who suffered martyrdom in order to fulfill certain Mitzvot, while there were other Jews who violated certain precepts because they felt that, even from a religious viewpoint, their first and foremost duty was the preservation of life. Both courses of action may claim some legitimate grounding in Halakha. The following is a brief summary of the laws concerning martyrdom.

- A) Except for three instances (idolatry, adultery and murder) a Jew is obligated to violate every commandment in the Torah in order to save his life.

- B) In a time period, however, when the gentile nations are trying to force the Jews to abandon their religion, then a Jew must give up his life rather than violate any of the laws of the Torah, no matter how minor. In fact, in a time of religious persecution, one is even forbidden to “change the manner of lacing one’s shoes”²⁷ (if that is the edict that is proclaimed.).

For the Jew who decided that martyrdom was obligatory the rationale was quite straightforward: The Holocaust was definitely a time of religious persecution, and therefore the laws in category B) were to be followed.

For those individuals that insisted that the Halakha demanded the preservation of life and not martyrdom a number of approaches may be offered to explain why the rules of category A) and not B) were felt to prevail.

1. The laws in category B) only apply when the enemy is trying to force the Jew to give up his religion and adopt an idolatrous one instead. While it is certainly true that the Nazis were interested in destroying Jews both physically and spiritually, their motive behind the prohibition of religious activities was not to convert the Jews to a different religion. The basic goal was to annihilate all Jews – but to make their victory more complete the Nazis wanted to crush the spirit of the Jewish people while they were yet alive. Thus, in effect, the Nazis were forcing their victims to be the witnesses of their own executions – to watch how their inner spiritual existences were slowly extinguished while their external physical bodies continued to function. Since, however, the Nazis' main goal was the eventual total annihilation of the Jewish people, observant and non-observant alike, their attack was not primarily one on religion (although, as explained above, they did try to eliminate religion in order to effect dehumanization) and therefore category B) is inapplicable. Martyrdom is, hence, inappropriate because far from frustrating the enemy's design, it is in fact accomplishing an end that is entirely desirable to them.²⁸
2. The rulings of B) only apply when the Jewish people are singled out for persecution by their enemies.²⁹ During WWII Hitler sought the elimination of many minority groups besides the Jews, the gypsies being the most notable example. Indeed Hitler's policies of genocide were tied to his theories regarding the impure strains of blood that he maintained characterized the makeup of "inferior" races. Since his policies were "racial" and not "religious," and moreover since they were not directed solely against the Jewish people – it may be argued that the laws of category B) do not apply.

3. In instances when religious precepts were being violated Shev Vial Taaseh, in a non-active fashion (not putting on Teffilin, for example), the Ran is of the opinion that category B) does not apply, since the enemy could any way physically not allow the Jew to perform the given precept.³⁰ (This position is a rather weak one in light of the previously quoted Talmudic statement that required martyrdom even in such minor cases as “the changing of the manner of lacing one’s shoes,” although in defense of the Ran, it could still be argued that this is a case of an “active” violation.)

The first two of the above exclusions place the religious persecution of the Holocaust in category A), where one is presumably *obligated* to violate the laws of the Torah in order to preserve life. This however, is only one view (that of the Rambam). Many authorities maintain that while category A) does not require martyrdom in cases of religious coercion (save for the three most grave violations), the voluntary act of martyrdom is certainly permitted and is even considered praiseworthy.

Thus the Halakha may be used as a source for either prohibiting, permitting or obligating the course of martyrdom for the religious Jew during the Holocaust. Since this area of Halakha is so open to interpretation, the response of the religious community was naturally quite diverse.

The response of the Halakha in other areas was equally diverse. In some situations it would urge the individual to try and rise above the oppressive conditions enforced by the Nazis, while in other situations the Halakha would recognize the grim harsh realities of human suffering, and the need not to accentuate it. Here are two *Sheelot* that serves to illustrate this apparent dichotomy.

One *She'elah* concerned itself with the blessing recited by observant Jews every morning, thanking God “for not making me a slave.” In light of the oppressive slave like conditions that the Nazis had subjected the Jews to, questioned one inhabitant of the Kovno Ghetto, would it not be patently dishonest to recite this blessing? The Halakhic answer to this

query was clear and straightforward: The blessing ‘thanking God’ for the gift of freedom is referring to spiritual not physical freedom. And while the enemy may temporarily be physically in control of the Jews, they will never be able to become masters over their spirits, and, ‘on the contrary,’ the *teshuvah* went on to say, “especially at this time is the obligation upon us to recite this blessing, in order that our enemies and oppressors recognize that in spite of the fact that we are in their power to do as their evil desires dictate, we still see ourselves not as slaves but as free men.”³¹ This response was certainly capable of providing a profound and up lifting psychological effect on the despondent occupants of the ghetto.

The second She’elah deals with a far more tragic situation. An inhabitant of the Kovno ghetto was desperately afraid of the occurrence of the following scenario: The SS troupes would come into the ghetto, but before they would execute him, they would first torture his wife and children to death in front of his own eyes. Then of course, they would brutally murder him too. (It is important to note, that these fears were entirely justified.) To spare himself such unendurable agonies, the questioner wondered, if he would not be allowed to take his life into his own hands. In this case the Halakha did not hand out lofty platitudes about trust in God, or the freedom of the human spirit. Nor did it advise the questioner not to be concerned, since he and his family would all be dying *bikidush Hashem*, and would thus merit eternal life. The Halakha looked at the stark realities of the given situation – the fact that death was imminent, and at the unspeakable horror of someone being forced to watch the torturous death of his loved ones – and ruled that suicide was permissible.³²

The two decisions recounted in the lines above were made by Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, the presiding Rav of the Kovno ghetto during the period of Nazi occupation. It is of significant importance to point out that in the latter decision, Rabbi Oshry was careful to ensure that the ruling was not publicized, even though he was convinced of its legality. His obvious motive was to avoid a large outbreak of suicides based on his decision. This decision also illuminates another facet of halakhic methodology. It shows that the Halakha is not a dry static system confined inside the pages of ancient tomes, waiting to

pronounce on every situation. Rather the Halakha results from a combination between the actual written ruling and the application of the presiding Rav to the given situation. Thus the criteria for a “posek” requires not merely an encyclopedic knowledge of the codes, but also the wisdom that governs the appropriateness of their application.

The delineation made in the previous paragraph between the Halakha and its application also presents itself in a slightly different fashion in the following She’elah. In 1944, in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, a selection was made among the youths of the camp, for death in the gas chambers. A father of one of the boys selected was in a position to free his son (by bribing one of the Kapos) but this would mean that another boy would be rounded up and executed in his stead. The man approached Rabbi Zvi Hersh Meizels and asked him if this act was permissible. The Halakha in this situation is unequivocal: One is not allowed to save the life of one individual at the expense of another. The problem was that Rabbi Meizels knew that this decision would effectively sign the death warrant for this man’s son. Yet if the Rabbi ruled favorably to the father, he would be just as guilty of causing the death of another unknown youth. Faced with this intractable situation, Rabbi Meizels refused to issue a ruling. The father, however, insisted on receiving a decision, and much to Rabbi Meizels’ discomfort, kept on pressing him for one. Finally, after seeing that the Rabbi would not budge, the father concluded:

“Rabbi, I have done what the Torah has obligated me to do. I have asked a she’elah of a rav. There is no other rav here. And if you cannot tell me that I may ransom my child, it is a sign that in your own mind, you are not certain that the Halakha permits it. For if you were certain that it is permitted, you would unquestionably have told me so. So for me your evasion is tantamount to a pesak din—a clear decision – that I am forbidden to do so by the Halakha. So my only son will lose his life according to the Torah and the Halakha. I accept God’s decree with love and with joy.

I will do nothing to ransom him at the cost of another innocent life, for so the Torah has commanded!”

In spite of the rabbi’s importuning, the father persisted in his decision. All that day of Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Meizels writes, the Jew from Oberland went about murmuring joyfully that he had the merit of giving his only son’s life in obedience to the will of the Creator and His Torah. He prayed that his act might be as acceptable in the sight of the *Almighty* as Abraham’s binding of Isaac, of which we are reminded in the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading and prayers.³³

It seems safe to surmise that Rabbi Meizels knew the actual Halakha, but refused to issue a ruling (one way or another) when he saw the horrible consequences of its application. In this case, however, that is exactly what was being sought. The father could not bare the thought that his son would die while he could yet save him. He could not accept Rabbi Meizels non-decision on the matter because that deprived his son’s death of meaning, and forced him to actually become his son’s executioner. What the father wanted was a straight Halakhic ruling even if it was negative. Eventually, from Rabbi Meizels refusal to deal with the issue, the father was able to draw his own halakhic conclusion on the matter, and thus he found a source of some consolation for the death of his son.

The Halakha provided a similar consoling effect in Rabbi Shimon Huberband’s ruling (found in his wartime diary, entitled *Kiddush Hashem*) that even those people who were killed only because they were Jewish (and did not die performing some mighty act of physical or spiritual resistance) were still to be regarded as having died Bikidush Hashem – their deaths were to be considered as a sanctification of the Name of God. For the debilitated survivor, who witnessed numerous members of his family and community struck down in horrible fashion; this ruling was certainly a source of some consolation.

Again the Halakha provided meaning and significance for random, brutal and at times less than heroic deaths.

The actions of the Judenrat will be the final area to be examined from the Halakhic perspective. The dilemma that the Judenrat found themselves mired in on countless occasions required the members to facilitate the evacuation (and eventual extermination) of a certain amount of Jews from the ghetto. If the Judenrat would not provide this service (i.e.: preparation of lists, gathering of men, handing out of work permits, etc.) the Nazis would simply proceed to wipe out the entire ghetto or a large part of it, without a moments hesitation. The Judenrat would usually end up complying with the Nazis demands (albeit reluctantly), because if they refused to, this marked group in question would be executed anyway along with many others. Hence, logically, from a numerical point of view, the Judenrat was actually saving lives. The Halakha, however, does not concern itself with the mathematical results of the situation, and in fact, rules in direct opposition to the previously cited line of reasoning. Here is the relevant Talmudic passage:

“A company of men is confronted by non-Jews. They say, give us one of your number who we will kill. If you do not we will kill all of you. Even though all of them will be killed let them not deliver a single Jewish soul into their hands.” (Tosefta to Terumot 7:13).

Many have been inclined to claim that in the situation that the Judenrat found themselves, there were no right or wrong actions. The Halakha, however, by definition maintains that to every situation in life there is either a right or a wrong response. In this particular situation the Halakha ruled that any act of cooperation with the Nazi murderers made the victims themselves collaborators in the act of murder, and, therefore, regardless of the numerical consequences, no action was to be taken.

On the other hand, the Halakha must not be used as a source of condemnation of the Judenrat, for Jewish law recognizes the concept of Force Majeure, and would certainly appreciate the extenuating circumstances that surrounded the actions of the Judenrat. (For example, if an individual transgresses the prohibition of idolatry or murder under the threat of death, even though by law he was supposed to surrender his life rather than commit the offence, he is still not held responsible for the act).³⁴ What the Halakha does say is that there is always a correct, moral way to act, even while acknowledging that at times it is extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible to follow that path.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to deal with the response of the religious community to the Holocaust on a number of fronts. For the most part, it proved extremely difficult to document the general pervasive response of the religious community to the various crises that beset them. For example, in regards to the question of armed resistance most of the evidence pointed toward a low level of organized religious participation, and a conclusion was able to be reached. In the case of trying to provide a general picture of ‘the level of religious observance in the face of Nazi oppression, no such consensus was forthcoming. I recorded instances of both types of reactions: the intense personal sacrifices made by some individuals in the performance of religious duties on the one hand, and the erosion (or corruption) of religious life for many on the other hand. In a sense this polarization of responses continues on within the ranks of the post-Holocaust survivors, although not necessarily for the same reasons.³⁵ For some survivors the Holocaust only served to bolster their religious faith, while for others the Holocaust proved decisively, once and for all, the complete meaninglessness of all religious practice.

The concept of spiritual resistance – even at the point of death was another issue examined by this paper. While much writing was devoted to the religious conception of the optimal manner of dying proud, erect, and showing no signs of inner submission or loss of faith to the enemy – it is again impossible to place this phenomenon inside of a

numerical context. To put the question bluntly: How many religious Jews went to their deaths with their spirits remaining unbroken? When one thinks of the many deaths caused by the random, brutal, sudden acts of Nazi barbarism, or of the agonizing, dehumanizing way that life was squeezed out of the concentration camp inmates, or of a man being forced to watch the execution of his loved ones, powerless to do anything about it, it seems almost impossible to speculate on a high percentage of people dying with their spirit, their religion and their faith still intact. Yet, as noted earlier, it was during some of the darkest moments of the Nazi reign of terror that the Jews became inspired to transcend the inhuman world created by their persecutors.

The last area this paper touched upon was the role that the Halakha played during the Holocaust. In the examination of a number of actual cases, the Halakha proved to be strong enough to provide constancy for a people caught up in a society run amok, yet it also proved itself to be sufficiently flexible in not imposing extra burdens on an already crushed people.

Scholars have often attributed the two thousand year survival of the Jewish people to the Torah, hence the oft-repeated statement that 'the Torah has kept the Jews more than the Jews have kept the Torah.' Yet in the wake of the Holocaust, especially after reflecting upon the intense fidelity expressed by many of the Jews of Europe to the Torah under the most extreme conditions and the fate that most of these people suffered despite their devotion, one is greatly tempted to reverse this quotation to read:

“The Jews have kept the Torah more than the Torah has kept the Jews.”

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Footnotes

1. Joseph Walk, in an article entitled *The Religious Leadership During The Holocaust* to be found in *Patterns of Jewish Leadership, 1933 – 1945*.
2. Quoted from Reuben Ainsztein's *Jewish Resistance in Nazi Occupied Eastern Europe*, pp. 579 – 580.
3. Quoted from p. 75 of Katz's work.
4. Walk, *op. cit.*, p. 384.\
5. Quoted from p. 287 of Gutman's work.
6. Ainsztein, *op. cit.*, p. XVIII.
7. Y. Gottfarstein in an article entitled *Kiddush Hashem in the Holocaust Period* to be found in *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust*, pp. 473-474.
8. Strange as it may seem, some members on the fringe of today's right wing Haredi Orthodox community do not subscribe to this line of thinking. They refuse to recognize the significance of Yom Hashoah, claiming that, among other drawbacks, it only seeks to glorify those who died while resisting the Germans in an active manner. (See *The Jewish Observer*, May, 1979, p 33, in which one writer claims that the idea of armed resistance is based upon "a medieval pagan idea borrowed by modern romanticism"). Yet anyone who attends a Yom Hashoah memorial service today knows that this is simply not the case. Furthermore, as stated in the above excerpt, Jewish religious leaders looked favorably upon acts of physical resistance.

Another odd development has occurred in some parts of the Chasidic community. As shown earlier, the response of many Chasidic leaders to the terrible persecution that surrounded them was to claim that they were already in the "Messianic Era," or that a miracle was sure to rescue them and the like. Yet, after the Holocaust, when the land of Israel was declared a free and independent state, some Chasidic leaders refused to give this development any recognition, and one even went as far as to claim that it was all the "work of Satan." While their attitudes may be based on various religious underpinnings, the irony of this 'ant-reality' stance is quite evident.
9. Quoted by Ainsztein, *op. cit.*, p. 901, note 16.
10. *Ibid*, p. 560.
11. Emmanuel Ringelblum, in *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, edited by Jacob Sloan, p. 125.

12. Terence Des Pres, in *The Survivor*, p. 4.
13. Quoted in *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust*, p. 60.
14. Entitled *Kiddush Hashem* (pub. 1969)
15. Huberband in *Kiddush Hashem*, p. 80 (See (p. 88) where Huberband writes about the Nazi edict forbidding the wearing of beards. While for most of the members of the religious community this proved to be extremely traumatic, for some it was an opportunity to abandon an unwanted burden without risking social ostracism.)
16. *Ibid.*
17. Isaiah Trunk, in *Jewish Responses to Nazi Persecution*, p.25
18. P. 378 (in *Patterns of Religious Leadership*).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 382.
20. Ainsztein, *op. cit.*, p. 560.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 558.
22. *Ibid.* p. 853, f.n.7
23. Gottfarstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 474-475.
24. Walk, *op. cit.*, p. 389 – 390
25. *Ibid.* p. 390
26. Irving J. Rosenbaum in *The Holocaust and Halakha*, p. 166, f.n.4.
27. Sanhedrin 74b (It should be pointed out here, that even during a time of religious persecution it was still permitted to violate laws of the Torah in order to save one's life (to cook on the Sabbath for example) as long as these actions were not done at the behest of the enemy.)
28. See M. Eliav's *Ani Ma'amin-Edoyot al Hayehen Ve-Emunatan shel Anshe' Emunah bi-Ymel ha-Shoa*, quoted in Walk's article, p. 384, f.n.28.
29. *Lehem Mishna* to Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodai Ha Torah*, Ch. 5 (This source was provided to me by Rabbi M. Hochman).
30. Quoted by Rosenbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

31. Rabbi Ephraim Oshry in *She'elot Ve'Teshuvot Mi-Ma'amakim*, quoted by Rosenbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
32. Rosenbaum, *op. cit.*, 35-40.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
34. To put it into technical terms, he is not responsible for the sin of murder or idolatry, but he is considered guilty of not performing the Mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of God's name. (For the act of adultery, however, even under duress, he is held culpable.)
35. What I mean here is simply this: Many individuals, understandably, did not have the moral fiber to withstand the Nazi persecutions, and thus their religious life began to crumble. Others, however, let their religious life slip away not out of moral weakness, but out of philosophical choice. It is the latter group which constitutes a large part of the post-Holocaust survivor community.