“The Work of My Hands is Drowning in the Sea, and You Would Offer Me Song?!”: Orthodox Behavior and Leadership in Warsaw during the Holocaust

Havi Dreifuss

Introduction

The world and religious life of observant Jews during the Holocaust have never stood at the center of Holocaust research, and in spite of decades of intensive study of the subject, there are still fundamental issues that have not been examined in depth. Historians have rarely integrated the religious narrative into the general historical one, whereas works written by ultra-Orthodox authors have principally emphasized personal and religious miracle stories while ignoring other aspects of the religious confrontation with the Holocaust, thus

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** Reuven Ben-Shem, *Yoman*, Yad Vashem Archive, O.33/959, 7 Aug. 1942. The original quotation comes from a *midrash* dealing with the Almighty’s reaction to the angels’ desire to offer praise at the splitting of the Red Sea: ‘At that hour the ministering angels sought to sing before the Holy One, blessed be He. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: The work of My hands is drowning in the sea, and you would offer me song?’, Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 39b (cf. *Megilah* 10a).


2 Ibid. It should be noted that this trend has changed in recent years; see for instance David Zilberklang, ‘Ha-sho’ah be-mahoz lublin’, PhD diss., Jerusalem, 2003; Sarah Bander, *Mul mavet orev: yehudei bialistok ba-milhemet olam ha-shentiyah* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), 29–30, 47–8, 52–3, 96–9. An impressive integration of religious life into the general story appears in the detailed monograph written by Michal Unger on the Lodz ghetto, in which several chapters are devoted to religious life; Michal Unger, *Lodz: akaron ha-geta’ot be-polin* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), 440–69.
effectively filtering out many aspects of the lives of religiously observant Jews during the war.\textsuperscript{3} As a result, the few works that have actually dealt with religious life during the Holocaust have not created an acceptably balanced, broad, and complex examination of the subject.\textsuperscript{4}

An outstanding example of this is provided by the research—or, to be more precise, the very fragmentary research—on Orthodox behavior and leadership during the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{5} A large number of the books about rabbis during the Holocaust have focused on the emotive issue of the rescue of several celebrated individuals, and have principally dealt with the escape of the Gerer Rebbe, the Belzer Rebbe, and the Satmar Rebbe from German-occupied territories.\textsuperscript{6} Although it is impossible to ignore the importance of the actions

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\item See for instance Yehiel Grantstein, \textit{Ha-gevurah ha-aheret: ha-yehudi ha-dati ba-ma'arav gevu-rah uva-meri negez gezerot ha-natsim be-shnot ha-sho'ah} (Jerusalem: Mahon Zeher Naftali, 1988); id., \textit{Mekadshei ha-shem: entsiklopediyah}, 3 vols (Benei Berak: Ganzah Kodussh Ha-shem, 2006); Yehoshua Eibeshitz, \textit{Be-kerovai akadesh: asufah al ma'asei kidush ha-shem umesirot nefesh bimei ha-hurban shel yameinu} (Jerusalem: Ha-mahon L'limod Korot Ha-sho'ah Al Shem Hedva Eibeshitz, 2005).
\item A remarkable example of this is provided by the Orthodox and academic authors who have written about the “role” played by the Zionist leadership in sabotaging attempts to rescue European Jews during the Holocaust. See Moshe Shenfeld, \textit{Serufei ha-kivshanim ma'shamim} (Benei Berak: Hog Bi Tora SH'I Zeiri Agodat Israel B' Eretz Israel, 1975); Shalom Shalmon, \textit{Pishei ha-tsiyonut ba-hashmadat ha-golah}, 4th expanded edn. (Benei Berak: Shalom Shalmon, 1989). See also Hayim Nirel, \textit{Haredim mul sho'ah: ha-ashamot ha-haredim kelapei ha-tsiyonut ba-aharayut la-sho'ah} (Jerusalem: Carmel, 1997); Dina Porat, ‘Amalek’s Accomplices—Blaming Zionism for the Holocaust: Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel during the 1980s’, \textit{Journal of Contemporary History} 27.4 (1992): 695–735.
\item Several definitions of Orthodox society may be found in the scholarly literature. According to Jacob Katz, Orthodox society is a traditional Jewish society that adapts itself to modernity by means of internal variation. A similar definition appears in a work by Eliezer Schweid, who defines it as a movement that prefers the traditional past to the modern present in an intense and sharply-defined manner, in spite of its membership of the very present that it rejects; Schweid, \textit{Bein hurban lishuah} (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuchad, 1994), 9. In the context of this article, in spite of the internal variation within the ultra-Orthodox world, between \textit{Hasidim} and \textit{mitnagedim}, between \textit{Hasidim} and Lithuanians, and so on, I am dealing with non-Zionist Orthodox Jews. See Israel Bartal, ‘True Knowledge and Wisdom: On Orthodox Historiography’, \textit{Studies in Contemporary Jewry} 10 (1994): 178–92; Jacob Katz, ‘Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective’, \textit{Studies in Contemporary Jewry} 2 (1986): 3–17; Ada Rappoport-Albert, ‘Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism’, \textit{History and Theory} 27 (1988): 119–59.
\item Although the dates of their escapes, as also the related circumstances, were completely different, the stories of these rabbis have often been linked together, both by the ultra-Orthodox community and by the wider community. While the ultra-Orthodox world-view has
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