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THE RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE IN THE EXTANT WARSAW GHETTO TEXTS

Among the various opinions expressed in the texts rescued from the Warsaw Ghetto it is the diversified views of a religious character that attract special attention¹. They focus on interpretation and evaluation of the world, not on its description. What the authors want, is not so much to perpetuate the characteristics of the reality surrounding them, as to fathom the events taking place before their eyes, to reveal their hidden sense and purpose. Since, however, the mind fails to reveal this, for the ghastliness, cruelty and absurdity of the events are past human understanding, the authors refer to the supernatural sphere. What they want is not to document the events but to show their spiritual dimension, convey the resulting moral lesson and, first and foremost, give proof of faith, for it is faith that provides the fundamental truths about God's attitude to man and God's intentions with regard to His creatures. Thus, the religious discourse goes beyond the observable reality and refers to the meanings and values which transcend it. It is in them that the authors try to find sources which would enable them to understand what is going on in the ghetto.

From this reflection on the religious dimension of Nazi persecution and the Jews' spiritual resistance, let me pass on to an analysis of three types of this discourse: the lamentations of Karol Rotgeber, the martyrdom stories by Rabbi Szymon Huberband and the sermons of Rabbi Klonimus Kelmisz Szapiro.

¹ See the list of sources at the end of the article. The figures in brackets after quotations denote page.

Persecution and prayer

1

From the very first days of the war the outrage against the Jews frequently had the characteristics of a religious persecution. It looked as if the blow was aimed not only at the Jewish race but also at the nation's foundation, its covenant with God. In some of its manifestations, in the symbolism of the slaughterers' conduct, the war against the Jews assumed the form of a war against religion or even a war against God and His chosen nation². A chronicle of these persecutions and a multilayer panoramic picture of the religious life of Jews during the Nazi occupation can be found in the writings of Rabbi Szymon H u b e r b a n d ³.

They contain many descriptions of a systematic destruction of places and objects of religious cult. Again and again we are shown pictures of burning synagogues and desecrated rolls of the *Torah* which fall a prey to flames or, scattered all over the ghetto, soak in rain. Huberband paints many pictures of Jews forced to desecrate their talliths, phylacteries and Holy Books. He also describes other painful chicaneries, e.g. the ban on ritual slaughter, which was binding in the whole of the *General Gouvernement*⁴. Harassed physically and humiliated, the Jews were derided as adherents of Judaism. Huberband's writings contain many accounts of reprisals and tortures which always reached their apogee on Jewish feast days, for the Nazis frequently adapted their calendar of repression and crime to the Jewish liturgical calendar. Emanuel R i n g e l b l u m, the founder of the secret Ghetto Archives, writes:

"*Yom Kippur*, 22 September 1942. A day of selection in "shops". Slaughter of women, children and illegal workers. It was expected that something would happen on *Yom Kippur*; in the first year (1939) the Jewish

² A classic example of this view is G. Steiner's essay *Sezon w piekle (A Season in Hell)*, in: *W z a m k u S i n o b r o d e g o. K i l k a u w a g w k w e s t i i p r z e d e f i n i o w a n i a k u l t u r y*, transl. by O. K u b i Ń s k a, Gdańsk 1993. In Poland the Holocaust has been interpreted in a similar way by P. Ś p i e w a k, *Szoah, drugi upadek (Shoah, the Second Fall)*, "Więź", 1986 No. 7-8.

³ See the list of sources.

⁴ The ban on ritual slaughter (*shekhitah*) was one of the German authorities first legal acts. It was issued on October 26, 1939, that is almost exactly at the same time when military administration came to an end in the Polish territories not incorporated into the Reich and when the *General Gouvernement* was set up. The Jews could only make use of illegal slaughter. Kosher butcher's (*shoykhet*) worked in conspiratorial places (Bródno, Pelcowizna, Otwock) from where the kosher meat was smuggled into the ghetto. The kosher butcher received a fixed remuneration for his work (in 1941 50 zlotys per head), Huberband says that secret slaughter came to an end in the second half of 1941. In view of hunger and the dramatic pauperization of the Jews, there was no demand for meat, see S. H u b e r b a n d, *The Ritual Slaughter of Poultry; The Ritual Slaughter of Cattle; Pious Jews and the Problem of Kosher Meat*, in: *Kiddush Hashem*.

quarter in Warsaw was bombed; in 1940 the ghetto was set up; in 1941 evictions from Sienna Street took place. The harassment of Jews in towns on *Yom Kippur* has become a tradition”⁵.

At the beginning of 1940, the Germans introduced a ban on collective prayers in synagogues and private flats in Warsaw. Adam Czerniakow noted down on January 5, 1940 that he was told “to close all places of worship, synagogues and ritual baths”. (105) The instruction was not fully observed, and illegal houses of worship were set up. The result was that the Chairman of the Jewish Commune was reprimanded by the police authorities. “I was summoned to the Gestapo”, writes Czerniakow on October 30, 1940, “and sternly informed that I, the whole Council, those who got together for prayer and the organizers of these prayers will be held accountable (for disregarding regulations)”. (211). The ban was lifted in the spring of 1941, and a solemn opening of the Main Synagogue in *Thomackie Street* took place in June; another two synagogues, one in *Twarda Street 6* and the other in *Dzielną Street 7*, were opened in the autumn of that year. As early as the end of 1939, the Germans ordered all *mikvahs* to be closed, thus making ritual bath impossible. The Jews bathed in the *Vistula* and if this was possible, went outside Warsaw to *Rembertów*, *Falenica* or *Pruszków*. Pious Jews attended conspiratorial baths under penalty of draconian punishment, including death. *Huberband* writes about four secret ritual baths: in *Grzybowska Street 1 and 14*, *Dzielną Street 38* and *Smocza Street 22* (see 197). He also describes an expedition to a conspiratorial *mikvah* in which he took part in October 1940 (see 199–201)⁶.

Rabbi Szymon Huberband describes the fury with which the Germans treated the adherents of Judaism, who amidst the ghastly persecutions of the first period of the war, complied, as far as this was possible, with religious requirements and observed the ritual prescribed for feast days. The Jews were to be forcibly disinherited of what they regarded as sacred. Feast-day liturgy was divested of all ritual, degraded and transferred into a prohibited, censured zone. It had to be performed in hiding, under threat of terror,

⁵ I am quoting from the Polish edition, *Kronika getta warszawskiego. Wrzesień 1939 — styczeń 1943 (The Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto. September 1939 — January 1943)*, prefaced and ed. by A. Eisenbach, transl. from the Yiddish by A. Rutkowski, ed. T. Berenstein et al., Warszawa 1983, p. 405, for the English edition has an incomplete version of this fragment; examples from 1939, 1940 and 1941, cited by Ringelblum, have been left out in the English edition (see *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, pp. 313–314). Let us add that executions in the ghetto were usually carried out on Friday evening, that is, the beginning of the Sabbath. The great extermination operation started on Wednesday July 22, 1942, the eve of the Ninth Day of the Month of *Av*, a day of fast and mourning commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temple and the expulsion of Jews from Spain. The ghetto rising broke out on the eve of the *Pesah*.

⁶ In August 1941 the Germans allowed these four ritual baths and a fifth one in *Franciszkańska Street 26* to be opened. (see *Huberband*, p. 198).

frequently in a shortened simplified version, without proper utensils, candles and food, very often in solitude, for it was impossible to gather the *minyan* required by law for a religious service.

The terror of the times that followed reminded Huberband of old persecutions of Jews, but, as he says, the activity of the Holy Inquisition was lenient compared with the cruelty of the Germans (see 46). The following is Huberband's comment on the circumstances in which the *Simhath Torah* was observed (3.10.1939):

"We prayed in a dark room without windows. It struck me that we were in a worse situation than the Marranos of Spain". (54)

On "April 24, 1940 (the second day of the *Pesah*, 5700, evening)", Chaim Aron Kaplan noted down similar associations in his diary:

"The synagogues are closed, but in every house there is a little provisional synagogue in which the cantor embellishes prayers with songs. In a way, this brings to mind the times of the Spanish Inquisition and the Marranos"⁷.

The parallel ennobles the wartime experience and at the same time it makes it and the diarist part of the inexorable recurrent scheme of the Jewish nation's history.

Both Huberband and Kaplan show the Jews' heroic endeavours to observe religious rules and holy rites in defiance of all obstacles. Their record of persecutions is testimony to inflexible piety.

2

The Yiddish manuscript found in the second part of Ringelblum's Archives contains the text of a prayer composed by a group of rabbis and religious activists in December 1942. Among them was Rabbi Klonimus Kelmisz Szapiro, whose ghetto writings will be discussed separately. The prayer was composed in the breathing space between extermination operations and the uprising. It was to be said for the Jews taken away from the ghetto during the gigantic operation carried out by the Germans from July to September 1942. The fact that it was composed for a special occasion is emphasized by the initial inscription: "Prayer composed specially for the present moment". (332)

At a time when Jews were faced with extermination, when chaos ruled and the world was disintegrating, the Warsaw rabbis' prayer confirmed the

⁷ I am quoting after the Polish translation *Księga życia. Dziennik z getta warszawskiego (The Book of Life. The Diary from the Warsaw Ghetto)*, translated from Hebrew by A. Rutkowski and A. Wein, "Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego" No. 50 (1964), p. 106, for the English edition does not have a complete version of this fragment; the sentence about the Inquisition and the Marranos has been left out (see the *Warsaw Diary* of Chaim A. Kaplan, p. 140).

Jews' belief in the permanence, continuity and immutability of the Israelites' covenant with God. The disaster that had set in was presented as part of the whole chain of misfortunes that had beset the chosen nation throughout its history. The sufferings the Jews were experiencing were made more bearable by being included in the entire paradigm of sufferings. The wartime situation was presented as a repetition of an eternal pattern. In their prayer the rabbis took over the legacy of the nation's destiny and the legacy of its religious formulas of struggle with fate, formulas worked out by generations.

The rabbis ordered that the prayer should be preceded by the reading of *Psalms 94* and *42*. The two psalms are psalms of lamentation in which an individual or a community afflicted by misfortune complains and calls to God for help. The misfortune is so great and incomprehensible and God seems to be silent and so far away that this becomes a challenge to faith. But despondency is finally overcome by boundless trust in God and faithfulness. The two *Psalms* also lament over the situation, over the ghastliness of persecutions, the futile calls for help and abandonment.

The *Psalms* set the proper background for the words of the prayer which is a reiteration of psalmodic lamentations, a continuation of the Biblical text. The subject of the prayer is the same ("the generation of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob") and so are the entreaties for help, the confidence placed in God and the conviction that the covenant is permanent.

"Ruler of the universe! Lord of the world! Hear our weeping and the sighs of our hearts, look on our suffering and torment, and help us in our great need. We, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are being persecuted, destroyed and driven to the slaughter like lambs. Thy will be done. Good God, shelter us from disaster and annihilate all evil and the enemy's cruelty". (332)

The phrase "we are being persecuted, destroyed and driven to the slaughter like lambs" and its variants appeared in many ghetto texts and after the war became a widely used expression describing the mass extermination of Jews or rather their passivity. This is not the place to analyze the problem and the function performed by the saying "to go like a lamb to the slaughter" in the reminiscences of survivors and in historical publicistic writings. One can only say that the saying has nearly always pejorative undertones. It is used to express a tragic self-accusation when the author identifies himself with the masses driven to the slaughter; it appears in questions raised already during the Holocaust, imparting a rhetorical pathos to them, to become finally a manifestation of a shameful conduct, a disgraceful senseless death.

In the rabbis' prayer the saying about lambs driven to the slaughter refers to the reality of the Warsaw ghetto in 1942. But it also assumes an additional dimension. Placed in the context of a prayer, it makes it possible to present the situation of the nation which was being murdered wholesale in Biblical categories, to speak about this in the language of the prophet Isaiah. It is in the *Book of Isaiah* that we read about Jahve's Servant who, oppressed and afflicted, "is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb ... he was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people was he stricken". (Isaiah, 53, 7-8). The comparison of the death of the Warsaw Jews to the sacrifice of Jahve's Servant, a comparison made through an allusion to the Biblical text (a method frequently used in rabbinical literature), is an heroic attempt to impart sense to the nation's hecatomb and find a place for it in God's plans⁸.

If then the Jews driven to *Umschlagplatz* are presented in the prayer as Jahve's servants suffering in silence, faith in the only God, a just and merciful God, is saved despite the nightmarish reality. For He, only He, had always been the last resort, defence and hope, even when there seemed to be no hope. For only God can save his nation, as he had repeatedly done so. The analogies to the chosen nation's biblical history placed the ghetto situation in the great cycle of disasters and rescue with a view to strengthening hope.

Karol Rotgeber's Lamentations

1

On February 15, 1943, Karol Rotgeber, a 55-year-old dental mechanic employed in a brush making shop, managed to get across, through the ghetto wall, to the Aryan side in Świętojerska Street, near the Krasiński Gardens. He and his wife, who left the ghetto a few days earlier, found shelter in the Praga suburb of Warsaw. This is where Rotgeber kept his diary made up of fifteen compactly written notebooks. He began it on April 2 and brought it up to June 12, 1943. The text has survived. The fate of the author is not known.

⁸ One of the traditional responses of Orthodox Judaism to the Holocaust, a response developed by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Eliezer Berkovitz (*Faith after Auschwitz*, New York 1973) and Ignaz Maybaum (*The Face of God after Auschwitz*, New York 1976) refers to Jahve's Suffering Servant from the *Book of Isaiah*. The suffering of the innocent victims of the Holocaust was not in vain. In this way, which is beyond man's understanding, God maintains the balance of forces in the universe. He redeems sinners, while cherishing innocent victims with affection and rewarding them in future life. He even shares in the sufferings of just men. See *The Jewish philosophical and theological responses to the Holocaust*, in: *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. by I. Gutman, New York 1990.

Compared with other personal notes written in the Warsaw ghetto, Rotgeber's diary is in many respects a unique text. What is the most striking is the author's boundless trust in God, a trust expressed with a force and courage which may shock the present day reader. The diary is a heroic testimony to the faith of a pious Jew standing face to face with extermination. At the opposite pole is the diary of Calel P e r e c h o d n i k⁹, who intransigently tries to find the truth about the Holocaust and his role in it. In conclusion, he rejects God. The religious discourse in the ghetto can be placed between these two extremes, between Rotgeber's fervent prayer of unshaken faith and Perechodnik's blasphemy.

2

Rotgeber dedicates his diary to his 13-year-old son, Paweł, who was marched to *Umschlagplatz* in August 18, 1942 during a round-up in Toebbens's shop. The text opens with an invocation to his beloved only son; this is followed by a concise prologue which summarizes the author's biography up to September 1, 1939. The history of the author's life, told at breathtaking speed, would do credit even to the hero of a thriller. In 1915, Rotgeber left Warsaw for Petrograd. Being unable to return to his native town, which was occupied by the Germans, he moved to Moscow, where he found work in a factory producing soldiers' socks. He was sent to the Far East to search for cotton. He wandered about Siberia, Manchuria and Japan, established contact with Japanese firms, organized transit centres in Irkutsk and Khabarovsk, but did not manage to send off the required raw material. The February Revolution broke out and was soon followed by the Bolshevik Revolution. The country plunged into chaos. Rotgeber managed to get out of Russia in 1919. Through China, Korea, Japan and Hawaii he reached San Francisco. He passed through California, Texas, Colorado, Mexico, Chicago and New York. From there he took a boat to England, and through Ostend and Berlin finally reached Warsaw. This breath-taking life story is a counterpoint to the proper story: the four years spent in Warsaw under German occupation. Two kinds of spatial experience clash with each other. One is the free open area of the globe, an area of his free, unhampered

⁹ This startling text was first published in Polish, the language of the original, by the Jewish Historical Institute and the KARTA publishing house (Warszawa 1993, 2nd ed. 1995). The following foreign editions of P e r e c h o d n i k's book have been brought out: *Suis-je un meurtrier?*, (Editions) Liana Levi, Paris 1995 (the band bears the inscription *La seule confession connue d'un policier juif dans un ghetto, Mémoires 1939-1943*); *Sono un assassino? Autodifesa di un poliziotto ebreo*, Feltrinelli (Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore), Milano 1996; *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish ghetto policeman*, Westview Press, a division of Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1966 (Published in 1996 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Colorado, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, Oxford). German and English editions are being prepared. I thank the KARTA publishing house for the bibliographic information.

wanderings. The other is the closed area of the ghetto, excluded from the world, an area which is gradually and inexorably shrinking to the four walls of his hiding place.

The author assumes various roles, but first and foremost he tells his own story, reveals his private life and his point of view. The notes in his diary tell us what he knew about the situation; they show, for instance, that for a long time he was unaware of the true destiny of the contingents of Jews leaving from *Umschlagplatz* and of their fate. They reveal the frequently trivial realities of everyday life in the ghetto. The picture of his wife's operating chair (she was a dentist) carried from one place in the ghetto to another returns again and again like a scene from a nightmarish grotesque. But the memoirist wants to be also a chronicler bequeathing the history of his nation's martyrdom to posterity. He laments over the fate of his community and at the same time confesses his own grief. In the end he addresses beseeching complaints to God and talks with Him about the fate of the world.

Biblical stylisation, modelled mainly on psalmodic lamentations, alternates with a style of emotional exaltation. Pathos abuts on a language describing everyday realities. Now and again the hieratic style of the Bible gives place to a reporter's notes about the procurement of food, cure of teeth, bribes, smuggling and the situation on the fronts. Anger, indignation, dread and pain, ecstatic joy and horror are expressed by rhetorical questions and apostrophes, exclamations and syntactic inversions. Cursing and swearing the enemy is intertwined with affectionate invocations to the author's near and dear ones. A memoirist's narration is all of a sudden interrupted by a supplication, a complaint, a call for help or revenge, by a confession of faith and an expression of hope. Then, just as suddenly, without notice, the author returns to the interrupted plot, to everyday life in the ghetto, to his register of harassment and persecution, to concrete things and places, to his private life.

Rotgeber tries to stick to chronology and keep his narration in order, but this order is broken by reflective digressions and beseeching lamentations. It turns out that giving account of the ghetto is no longer enough for Rotgeber. The role of a memoirist or a chronicler no longer satisfies him. What he is witnessing cannot be explained in normal categories. This is why the ghetto becomes part of the transcendent reality, which is the real subject of his diary. He divides his attention between history (the extermination of the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto) and eternity (the cosmic struggle of Good against Evil, God's intentions with regard to the people of Israel).

Rotgeber goes beyond the limitations and boundaries of his own experience and takes up the tone of Jeremiah's complaint. Jerusalem over

which Jeremiah lamented was destroyed in 587 B.C. but Jeremiah's voice continued to resound in constantly repeated prayers. Successive generations of Jews used his words to lament over their misfortunes. In describing the ghastliness of the ghetto Rotgeber attunes his voice to Jeremiah's lamentations. In this way the extermination of the Warsaw Jews becomes a link in the chain of holy history, a stage in God's plan which, as Rotgeber believes, leads through catastrophe to Israel's purification, sanctification and final triumph.

3

The prayers in Rotgeber's diary are made up of psalmodic fragments and motifs from *Jeremiah's Lamentations*. It seems that when watching the ghetto burning on the other side of the Vistula, Rotgeber is, like Jeremiah, sitting on the ruins of destroyed Jerusalem. His lamentation over the disaster is expressed in Biblical formulas. The Bible is the groundwork of Rotgeber's lamentations. He is faithful to its poetics and theology¹⁰. He does not try to be original. He is a medium who repeats a pattern, reiterates the liturgy.

The individual links of his lamentation over the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto are at the same time stages in the drama of a believer confronted with the experience of the Holocaust. His prayer to the angry God changes into an act of expiation; he urges God to intervene and asks for His intercession. The complaint changes into an expression of trust and a confession of faith. The dialogue between the Just Man and the Unrighteous Man turns into an ardent apology of God. There follows an apocalyptic vision of the coming of the Messiah.

Rotgeber's lamentations reveal a clash between individuality and universality, between what belongs to history and what is eternal. On the groundwork of Biblical language there appears an original thread, a circumstantial detail which makes eternal prayers topical. Rotgeber enlarges Jeremiah's lament over the destroyed Jerusalem, over the ruined and desecrated Temple by alluding to the realities of occupied Warsaw:

"Thy Houses of Prayer have been destroyed. God's sanctuary has been desecrated, and sacred *Pentateuch* rolls are being used to line wooden walls of stalls in Warsaw bazaars. Every possible foul deed has been committed against us. And Thou, the God of Israel, seest it and art silent?" (124)

Together with accounts of the profanation of *Torah* rolls — which were burned, torn into pieces and used to line shoes or remodel hats — the fragment quoted above shows its double roots. Scraps of the experiences of

¹⁰ My discussion of the theology of lamentation psalms and *Jeremiah's Lamentations* is based mainly on the article *Lamentations, Book of*, in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem 1972 and Father J. S. Adzik's preface to the *Book of Psalms* in C. Miłosz's translation, Paris 1979.

Jews from the Warsaw ghetto intertwine with the eternal pattern of *Jeremiah's Lamentations*. Everyday life invades eternity and solidifies there as an example.

From the balcony of his flat in the ghetto the author observes the blockade of a refugee centre in Franciszkańska Street 20 during the liquidation operation. An account of facts quickly gives way to a beseeching complaint:

“My blood ran cold, but I stood stock–still. I kept watching until the end. A dreadful pain pierced me, my sick heart bled, and I turned my eyes to the heavens, looking for angels who would take care of my helpless brothers. The sky was clear, there was no sound of an approaching storm portending God’s wrath. The God of Israel has turned His eyes away from us. He has forgotten His poor children. The enemy lords it over us and goes unpunished”. (99)

The torment reaches the zenith. The suffering man experiences despair, abandonment, distress. Like the psalmist, Rotgeber begs for rescue, urges God to act. But God keeps silent.

But the complaint does not resound under an empty sky. God replies to the man who has infinite trust in Him. In the drama of despondency and hope, despair and recovery, there comes a time when man must put his faith to the ultimate test and surrender completely to God.

The annihilation of the fighting ghetto is the culmination of evil and a turning point in Rotgeber’s eyes. He looks at the smouldering ruins from a Messianic and not an historical perspective. The fact that the crime has been completed augurs inevitable defeat to its perpetrators. It is in this context that Rotgeber confesses his faith:

“I am not afraid, faith strengthens me ... A week ago I talked with God (you are laughing! It is only with Him that I can still talk). It occurred to me that our sufferings would soon come to an end and punishment will overtake the inhuman oppressors”. (33)

This confession is something more than a mere repetition of a psalm formula (“In God I have put my trust; I will not be afraid what man can do unto me”. Psalm 56, 11). It is an authentic, fully personal reply to the challenge of the Holocaust. In the spring of 1943 Rotgeber meets God in the debris of the Warsaw ghetto, and only God turns out to be a real partner of conversation. In this way the experience of the Holocaust becomes an experience of the *sacrum*.

For Rotgeber faith is the only truth to have survived on the smouldering ruins. Faith is the basis of his hope for liberation from oppression, for

vengeance and the punishment of the criminals, for a better new life, for a revived Israel, more powerful than ever. Faith gives him courage and strength to defy the cruel reality in an imaginary dialogue with the Unrighteous one — a formula characteristic of lamentation psalms — and to defend God against the malefactor's sneering accusations. This defence is based on the doctrine of God's retribution.

The doctrine says that sufferings are a just punishment for sins. The theory of suffering as a valuable and useful experience needed by man is rooted in Biblical wisdom and constitutes the theological core of *Jeremiah's Lamentations*. Its echo resounds in the words of a friend who comforts Job: "happy is the man whom God correcteth; therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty". (Job, 5,17). If God, who never rejects man for ever, allows him to suffer, this means that sin must be the reason. The belief that suffering is a just punishment for sins is the foundation of hope, which overcomes despair. If man accepts suffering humbly and with contrition, if he puts trust in God and calls Him, his call will be answered.

Karol Rotgeber's diary fully reflects this religious attitude. This is how the author consoles his brother during the liquidation operation:

"Be of good cheer, although Israel is suffering painfully, no power in the world, save for Divine power, can destroy it ... We are being punished for our sins, but God in His mercy will ward off complete defeat". (106)

In the light of the doctrine of God's retribution, the Holocaust was a punishment for sins. According to the Orthodox Jews, the Jews had once again broken their covenant with God, and God once again retaliated by inflicting a terrible punishment on them. This view is presented in Orthodox Judaism in three ways. The first accuses the nation generally of faithlessness and sinfulness; the second connects the Holocaust with the wave of Enlightenment reforms (the *Haskalah*) and unorthodox forms of Judaism; the third blames Zionism, a godless plan to revive the state, a plan which rejects the necessity of waiting for the Messianic act of redemption¹¹.

The doctrine of God's retribution on which Rotgeber's theology is based has been determinedly rejected in the Jewish writings of the last twenty years. Rabbi Norman Solomon says that "to explain the Holocaust as God's punishment for the sins of Jews insults the memory of six million martyrs, for among those who perished there must have been many — not to mention little children — who had not sinned to an extent that would have justified the ghastliness and humiliation of that dreadful extermination"¹². The doctrine has also been rejected by Rabbi Byron L. Sher-

¹¹ See the article *Jewish philosophical and theological responses to the Holocaust*, in: *Encyclopedy of the Holocaust*.

win who, however, has added some reservations: "... although it is obvious that the doctrine of God's retribution should not be applied to the Holocaust, it should be remembered that this argument functioned for a long time as a way of explaining the sufferings, and it should not be done away with hastily. Jewish theologians have not yet found another satisfactory explanation. It may still be too early to elaborate it"¹³.

Rotgeber probably shared his hope of Messianic redemption with many deeply believing Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. The vision of the coming of the Messiah, which is to be preceded by catastrophes, disasters, an eruption of evil and destruction, is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. The ghastliness of the Holocaust may therefore have been assimilated, tamed and interpreted as childbirth pangs preceding the coming of the Messiah and the ultimate redemption of Israel. This is how Chaim Aron Kaplan interprets in his diary the state of consciousness of at least some pious Jews in the Warsaw ghetto (118). Apocalyptic moods and Messianic prophesies are repeatedly recalled by Emanuel Ringelblum (117, 153), and one of his closest collaborators, Rabbi Huberband, has devoted a treatise *Signs of the Messiah* to this subject. He has quoted some Kabalistic interpretations of Holy Books which circulated in the ghetto. They prognosticated that the Messiah would come in 5700 or 5701 (1939–1941). (121–125).

Karol Rotgeber outlined an apocalyptic landscape and a vision of the approaching redemption. His unshaken conviction that the Messiah's victory was near made him feel strong and triumphant, for the face of the earth was being renewed in his opinion:

"God alone will be the victor... The fusty fumes of Europe will be dispelled, not a trace of it will remain... my dull eyes have lighted up, my arms have acquired strength and I am raising (them) as Moses, our saint, once did in order to tip the scale towards Yehudah's victory".

In the final reckoning, the fire which Rotgeber mentions so frequently becomes an augury of victory, redemption and triumph. The face of the Messiah arises from the flames engulfing the ghetto, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, one of the greatest pre-war rabbis, also spoke of a purifying fire. Shortly before the outbreak of the war he outlined a vision of the end of times, formulating anew the orthodox theology of suffering. In 1938 he visited the United States and seeing the secularized Jews, he became aware of the approaching apocalypse. He wrote a brochure entitled *Śladami*

¹² N. Solomon, *Czy Shoah wymaga radykalnie nowej teologii? (Does Shoah Require a Radically New Theology?)*, in: *Żydzi i chrześcijaństwo w dialogu*, ed. W. Chrostowski, Warszawa 1992, p. 137.

¹³ Rabin B. L. Sherwin, *Duchowe dziedzictwo Żydów polskich (The Spiritual Heritage of Polish Jews)*, Warszawa 1995, p. 246.

Mesjasza (In the Footsteps of the Messiah) in which he prophesied that the Jews would be exterminated for having diverged from their faith. It is still generally believed in Jewish Orthodox circles that the Holocaust was the realization of this prophecy. Wasserman was killed by the Nazis in Kovno in 1941. According to an account of Rabbi Efraim Oshra, who was rescued from the Kovno ghetto, Wasserman said shortly before he died a martyr's death: "Thou hast destroyed (our bodies) by fire and will reconstruct (them) by fire—the fire that destroys our bodies is the same fire that will reconstruct the Jewish nation"¹⁴.

Rabbi Szymon Huberband's Martyrology

1

Rabbi Szymon Huberband, born at Chęciny near Kielce in 1909, came from a family with rich religious traditions and was brought up in an atmosphere characteristic of Hasidic circles¹⁵. His mother was the daughter of the tzadik of Chęciny, Samuel Lewi Hurwic; Huberband married the daughter of Rabbi Jakub Arie Glazer, a religious judge at Piotrków; his second wife was the daughter of Jakub Zylbersztajn, who was rabbi in the Praga district of Warsaw. Huberband's elder brother ran a *yeshiva* in Warsaw which was founded and supported by Rabbi Klonimus Kelmisz Szapiro, tzadik of Piaseczno. Huberband's spiritual stance and religious education matched his knowledge of science and journalism. He wrote articles on Jewish ethics and laws, was interested in numismatics and the history of medicine, studied old Jewish books and documents in *kehillah* archives. His studies attracted the attention of the well known historian, Majer Bałaban. Thanks to his collaboration with the periodical "Socjaler Medicine", Huberband came to know Emanuel Ringelblum.

¹⁴ For more details about Rabbi Wasserman see Rabbi N. Solomon, *op. cit.*, pp. 138–139. Rabbi Wasserman's words — p. 142. Solomon emphasizes that the sentence "Thou hast brought destruction by fire and will achieve reconstruction by fire" is used in liturgy on the ninth day of the month of Av (anniversary of the destruction of the Temple), and is reminiscent of *Jeremiah's Lamentations* 4,11.

¹⁵ For more information on Szymon Huberband see J. S. Gurock and G. Hausner, preface and introduction to the English edition of Huberband's writings (see the list of sources); T. Kuberczyk, *The Religious Life in the Warsaw Ghetto as Related by Szymon Huberband*, in: *The Holocaust Fifty Years After*, editor D. Grinberg and P. Szapiro, Warsaw (s.a.), pp. 251–259; R. Sakowska, editorial notes to *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Getto Warszawskie lipiec 1942 — styczeń 1943*, ed. R. Sakowska, Warszawa 1980, pp. 255–257. It is surprising that none of Huberband's texts has been translated into Polish (they were written in Yiddish) except for a study which analyzes Hebrew accounts of Slavic countries in the early Middle Ages, which does not refer to the Warsaw ghetto. As far as I know, Huberband's writings are the richest source to Jewish religious life during the occupation, a source which has practically not been used in Polish historiography. (The fact that Polish historians have failed to recognize Huberband is discussed by T. Kuberczyk, *op. cit.*).

The war found him in Piotrków where he had been living with his family since 1928. His first wife, a ten-year-old son and father-in-law were killed by German bombs in September 1939. In 1940 Huberband arrived in Warsaw and took the post of chief of the religious department of the Jewish Social Self-Help organization; he also joined the conspiratorial *Oneg Szabat* group which was compiling underground ghetto archives.

Karol Rotgeber, an ordinary Jew, and Szymon Huberband, a learned rabbi, may have met, for both worked in the *Heeresunterkunftsverwaltung* (brush makers' shop). This was the last ghetto address of both of them. Rotgeber survived the great liquidation operation, crossed over to the Aryan side and found refuge there. His further fate is not known. Huberband was taken from the brush makers' shop to *Umschlagplatz* on August 18, 1942 (Rotgeber's son was taken from Toebbens's shop on the same day). In December 1942 Ringelblum noted down in his list of the losses suffered by the Jewish intelligentsia of Warsaw:

"During the selection the criminals did not look at the documents but at the faces. Huberband's pale, emaciated hollow-cheeked face did not arouse mercy in the SS murderers. Together with other people he was marched straight to a wagon and then to the death camp at Treblinka"¹⁶.

2

Rabbi Huberband helped to create the underground ghetto archives. He contributed a large amount of texts (some forty works, papers and treatises). He started taking notes of a personal character on the eve of the war. His first text covers the period from March to September 1939 and is entitled *The Wartime Experiences of a Jewish Civilian*. It was in Piotrków that he started writing an account of the first months of the war *The Jewish Holidays in the Year 5739 (September 1939–June 1940)* which became a specific chronicle of religious persecution. He left Piotrków in March 1940 and moved to Warsaw. In the ghetto he became one of the closest collaborators of Ringelblum, who took a liking to him and held him in respect, admiring his intellect, openness and ability to co-operate with other people. The meeting with Ringelblum stirred Huberband to take up an activity he has already conducted. It strengthened and consolidated his need to write, enabled him to join a great historical documentary undertaking.

Huberband's religious discourse is based on a two-plane semantic structure. His description of concrete events, people and situations becomes an *exemplum* of religious truths. The historical order reveals the eternal

¹⁶ Quoted after the Polish edition (*Kronika getta warszawskiego*, p. 452) because this fragment has been omitted in the English edition.

order, the secular time emanates the sacred time. A religious discourse of this kind does not depend on the subjects raised; it is simply a way of constructing a text, a way of speaking about the world.

As regards Huberband's texts of an autobiographic character, religious discourse dominates especially in the extensive work *The Jewish Holidays in the Year 5739 (September 1939–June 1940)*. The rhythm of the narration is marked by successive holidays which make up the liturgical year. The framework of the story and its individual stages are subordinated to measures from outside history, from outside temporariness. The first-person narration changes its function, it becomes desindividualized. Private experience represents the drama of the nation chosen by God. The oppression of Jews in Piotrków and later in occupied Warsaw is viewed from the perspective of the fate of the community whose wartime history is based on the history of Biblical Israel.

One of the chapters of the work, *Purim 5700 in Warsaw (March 24, 1940)*, is wholly devoted to the anti-Jewish excesses in the spring of 1940. Let me digress a little, for knowledge of these events is practically null and their historiography is scanty and incomplete¹⁷. In the first period of the occupation, before the establishment of the ghetto, Jews were often attacked in the streets by groups of Polish teenagers. This is testified to by many entries in the diaries of Kaplan and Czerniakow, in the *Chronicle* of Landau and Ringelblum, in particular in the entries from January, February and March 1940. Ringelblum himself was attacked on January 30, 1940. "In the Saxon Gardens", writes Ringelblum, "a band of Polish 14–15 year-old hooligans noticed that I was wearing an arm-band. I escaped by the skin of my teeth". (85) The apogee of these excesses, which turned almost into a regular pogrom, fell during the Easter holidays of 1940. The excesses were provoked in a classic way. A Polish boy stole an apple from a booth in front of the Mirowska covered market and was given rough handling by Jewish tradesmen. A rumour spread that a Christian child had been murdered. An enraged mob launched an attack. The excesses went on

¹⁷ This problem has been presented the most fully by T. Szarota (*Anti-Jewish Pogroms and Incidents in the Occupied Europe*, in: *The Holocaust Fifty Years After*, pp. 109–123), who has placed it against the background of similar incidents in Prague, Paris, Amsterdam, the Hague, Antwerp, Oslo, Copenhagen and also in Lithuania, Latvia, Byelorussia and Ukraine. "All these events had two things in common — on one hand, participation of local Nazis and antisemites and on the other inspirational, approving or at least favourably neutral attitude of the German authorities". (*op. cit.*, p. 110). "Nothing — or very little and, moreover with mistakes — was written" (*op. cit.*, p. 118) in Polish historiography about the Warsaw pogrom. Of the two historical monographs concerning the Warsaw ghetto, that by R. Sakońska, *op. cit.* and that by I. Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939–1943. Ghetto, underground, revolt*, transl. from Hebrew by I. Friedman, Bloomington 1982, only the latter mentions these excesses (pp. 27–29).

from March 22 to 29. Jewish shops were smashed open and plundered, flats were robbed, passers-by wearing arm-bands were beaten, anti-Semitic shouts rang in the streets. There is not a shadow of a doubt that the excesses were instigated by the Germans, who knew they would be to their advantage; the Germans wanted to discredit the Poles, present themselves as heroic defenders of Jews beaten by a Polish mob (the excesses were photographed), and prove that the ghetto had to be set up in order to protect Jews from the anti-Semitic Poles. However, "The Germans could not have organized the bands on their own, someone must have helped them, but who?", asks Tomasz Szarota¹⁸.

Rabbi Huberband intertwines a detailed description of the excesses (his account is sometimes simply journalistic, dramatic, keeping the reader in suspense, especially the scenes of the Jews' resistance and self-defence in Nalewki Street) with a religious discourse, which is all-important. The nightmare of the first months of the war, the series of persecutions and reprisals culminating in the pogrom provide the background for Huberband's description of the holidays which followed. It is not so much the anti-Jewish excesses that are the subject of his narration as the dramatic clash between the forces of evil which attack the *sacrum* and the unshakable piety of the Jews who give heroic proof of their faith. The account of anti-Semitic excesses has been placed within a preconceived interpretative framework. The excesses are a successive link in a chain of events the sense of which far exceeds their value as facts. The story reveals the universal dimension of Jewish experience; it shows a test of faith in face of an aggression against the *sacrum*. The Warsaw anti-Jewish excesses in the spring of 1940 did not include acts of profanation and were not a religious persecution. But included, as they are, in a religious discourse, they acquire a meaning which is missing in other accounts of the same events. Huberband remains faithful to facts, but he relates them in a different way than Emanuel Ringelblum, Chaim Kaplan and Ludwik Landau do.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 119. The author quotes Ludwik Landau's chronicle (*Kronika lat wojny i okupacji*, ed. Z. Landau and J. Tomaszewski, vol. I, Warszawa 1962, p. 369, entry of March 27, 1940) according to whom the pogrom was supported by "the Atak association, which specialized in anti-Semitic activities"; according to "Biuletyn Informacyjny" of March 29, 1940, the excesses may have been organized by Andrzej Świątlicki (involved in an attempt to set up a Polish counterpart of the NSDAP in the autumn of 1939; he was executed in Palmiry in June 1940), Father Stanisław Trzeciak (a leading anti-Semite among the pre-war clergy who was killed by the Germans at the beginning of the Warsaw Rising) and Professor Zygmunt Cybichowski (who, as Szarota points out, may be mistaken for his son Jerzy, who before the war was linked to the Falanga National Radical Camp and probably to Andrzej Świątlicki in March 1940. Jerzy fell as a soldier of the underground in May 1943).

3

In order to find the tradition in which Huberband's religious discourse is rooted and reconstruct the specific pattern of the genre of *martyrologium*, that is, stories about martyrs to faith, we must go back to the beginning of our era. It was then that the extensive, versatile Bible-based Jewish writings of a legal, theological, ethical, philosophical and poetic character, writings representing the oral tradition, began to be systematized and set in order. This enormous body of texts is called *Halakhah* and *Haggadah*.

The word *halakhah* means a way or road. It is used to denote the part of Jewish teachings which deal with the legal aspect of Judaism, with the ritual and norms of conduct in everyday life. The *Mishnah* and *Talmud* belong to halakhic writings. *Haggadah* (from *hagged*, to give instructions) represents that part of the oral tradition which is not of a legal character. It consists of two main groups of writings: legendary-historical materials and ethical-theological literature. *Midrashim* belong to haggadic writings¹⁹.

The *Mishnah* had been edited by the end of the second century of our era. The rabbis of that period, called Tannaites, worked out the fundamental principles of exegesis and applied them in their studies on the *Torah*. Read in accordance with these interpretative rules, the Bible contains a universal model of history and a clue to its understanding. This means that all successive historical events can be viewed as a realization of the Biblical pattern. What happened, what is happening and what will happen can be interpreted in the light of the dialogue between God and man described in the Bible. If the past, present and future are to be understood, they must be placed in the liturgical formula of history²⁰. In other words, the history of the Jews after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans is told according to a certain narrative scheme. The events are told not only because they themselves are important. What is important is not only facts and their documentation. The presented events are not independent, so to say, they are part of a larger whole. They are signs pointing to what is the most important: the Biblical paradigm. They acquire sense only when they are referred to that pattern. They are told to reveal that sense.

The times of the Tannaite rabbis which followed the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the dispersion of Jews witnessed a bloody suppression of the uprising of Bar-Kochba (132-135); they were a period of constant catastrophes. During that period of national defeats, the Jews,

¹⁹ See the article *Literature, Jewish* (the passage concerning the medieval period) in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem 1978.

²⁰ Cf. D. G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse. Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, Cambridge Mass. 1984, p. 25.

seeing their existence endangered, tried to find the reason for the torments they were suffering. The religious persecutions under Hadrian (132–138) made it necessary to explain that series of calamities. The attitude which began to crystallize at that time became the foundation for the whole of later tradition. This classical Jewish explanation of the cause of the catastrophe can be called canonization of memory. The early rabbinic hermeneutics places the nation's sufferings in the Biblical paradigm and makes them part of the liturgy, thus canonizing them in a way. The successive persecutions, from the exodus from Egypt to the present times, become links of the same chain. Thus, the times of the Tannaite rabbis bequeathed to posterity something much more important than a mere chronicle of persecutions. They handed down an entire system of coding events, a way of recording historical reality, of shaping it according to the liturgical order. New dates were added to the calendar, new prayers were included in the canon, and the Jews living in later times could find their archetypes²¹.

It was during the Tannaite period that the genre of martyrs' stories developed in rabbinical writings. The genre is represented by the treatise *Semahot* (i.e. lamentation, wailing) which is made up of eight chapters dealing mainly with laws concerning death and mourning. The most essential trait of this genre is the way of narration. The treatise is a martyrology commemorating the rabbis who died a martyr's death under Hadrian. It relates the story of their achievements and their death. Their biographies were treated like the stories about Biblical patriarchs. What was important was not so much the course of life of a rabbi as its sense conveyed by the story. A concrete deed was turned into a model in the course of narration, into an example of heroic death for the faith, a pattern of how to die. The story was given the form of a hagiographic, not a biographic, narration in which stress was laid on the martyr's innocence and the fact that he sacrificed his life of his own will; the story also conveyed the truth that the death of the just ones was the first symptom of an approaching evil.

Jewish tradition speaks of ten martyrs of the Tannaite period. The best known of them was the great Tannaite scholar, Rabbi Aqiba ben Josef born about A.D. 50 and murdered in 137. Aqiba supported the revolt of Simeon Bar-Kochba whom he recognized as Messiah. The bloody suppression of the revolt was followed by oppression and persecution. Hadrian banned all religious practices and religious instruction. Aqiba was one of those who disobeyed the order. Imprisoned and tortured, he praised God until the end of his life, and God rewarded him by giving him eternal life. In the person

²¹ For the concept of "canonization" of memory; and the development of Jewish response to catastrophe see D. G. Roskies *op. cit.*, Chapter *The Liturgy of Destruction*.

of Rabbi Aqiba the treatise *Semahot* shows the prototype of a martyr who accepts his sufferings and death with love as the highest manifestation of piety and, what is essential for the martyrological tradition, as an heroic act of a public confession of faith²².

The story about the death of Rabbi Aqiba presents a model of what the post-Biblical Jewish tradition defines as *kiddush ha-Shem* (sanctification of [God's] name), a concept denoting religious martyrdom. The final codification of the idea of *kiddush ha-Shem*, an idea which had been developing for centuries, was the work of Maimonides (1136–1204). He held the view that some commandments of the *Torah* could be transgressed, even though the *Torah* provided for the penalty of death, for it is said "Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them". (Lev. 18,5). He shall LIVE and not die. But on no account was it permissible to infringe the ban on idolatry, adultery, incest and bloodshed. In such cases a Jew should be inflexible and rather die, sacrificing his life in defence of the faith and God's commandments. Martyrdom made him a *kadosh* (saint). He was expected to give life in full consciousness and of his own free will, to choose death and reject blasphemy. This was the choice made by Rabbi Aqiba, who was tortured to death, praising God in a fervent confession of faith: *Shema Israel* (Hear, O Israel)²³. These circumstances — death with the prayer "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" were to be later included in the martyrs' canon. Generations of martyrs were to die in this way.

4

Rabbi Szymon Huberband re-formulated the traditional interpretation of *kiddush ha-Shem*. In his flat in Zamenhofa Street 19 in the Warsaw ghetto he wrote a treatise entitled *Kiddush Hashem* which in its construction is

²² For the treatise *Semahot* and the development of the idea of martyrdom in the Tannaite period see D. G. Roskies, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–32, and *The Literature of Destruction. Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. by D. G. Roskies, Philadelphia 1988 (chapt. *Kiddush Hashem/Martyrdom*).

²³ *Shema Israel* is the beginning of the prayer from *Deuteronomy* (6, 4–9); it says that God is one, orders the Jews to love him and obey His commandments. The daily morning and evening prayers begin with *Shema Israel*. *Shema* occupies the central place in Judaism and since there is no official credo in the Mosaic religion, it plays the role of a solemn confession of faith. Its fragments are in the *mezuzah*, which the Jews affix to the door-posts of their homes, and also (together with other verses from the Bible) in the phylacteries, which Jews strap to their forehead and left arm during morning and evening prayers. The first verse of *Shema* "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord" is part of death-bed confession. See Rabbi N. Solomon, *op. cit.*, p. 140; A. Unterman, *Żydzi. Wiara i życie (The Jews. Their Faith and Life)*, Łódź 1989, p. 204. For the concept of *kiddush ha-Shem* see the entries in: *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism*, ed. by G. Wigoder, New York 1989; *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*; Rabbi N. Solomon, *op. cit.* pp. 133–134 and 139–140; *The Literature of Destruction. Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*.

reminiscent of martyrdom stories and which, on the other hand, significantly enlarges the classic definition of this concept.

In the long history of persecutions, martyrdom for faith had always been an act of a conscious free choice. The Holocaust changed this radically. The victims had no choice. The sentence pronounced on them was final and allowed of no appeal. What the victims were guilty of was their mere existence. They were not able, as had been the case previously, to save their lives by changing their religion, paying ransom or running away. The sentence concerned them all as a group and each of them individually. In the long run, all means of defence turned out to be ineffective. Faced with the experience of the Holocaust, Huberband revised the concepts of martyrdom for faith. Invoking the authority of Maimonides and Rabbi Moshe Sofer, he develops their teachings and adapts them to the new circumstances. In his opinion, God's name can be sanctified in three ways: 1) when a Jew, forced to renounce his faith, sacrifices his life in its defence, 2) when a Jew sacrifices his life to save another Jew or a community of Jews, 3) when a Jew dies fighting in defence of other Jews. The author explains that in his treatise he will consider only the second of these three ways. His martyrdom stories will only concern cases of active *kiddush ha-Shem*. He attributes passive *kiddush ha-Shem* to all the other Jewish victims of Nazism:

“All of the tens of thousands of Jews who perished at the hands of the evil ones through slaughter, hanging, shooting, burning, and other violent deaths are martyrs, even if they were not forced to deny the Jewish faith”. (247)

Huberband's treatise *Kiddush Hashem* consists of a theoretical preface and fourteen fairly brief chapters which bear the names of the localities in which the scene of each story is laid (Piotrków, Cracow, Będzin, Międzyrzec, etc.). In this way Huberband produces a specific galaxy of martyrs which is inscribed in the geography of occupied Poland. The individual stories are told concisely, without emotional pathos but in a dignified language. They speak of concrete situations and concrete persons and they date and place the events precisely. But facts constitute only the first layer of each story, a layer which reveals a deeper meaning and points to a higher sense.

The facts which are the subject of the stories form a specific composition, for the author relates them in order to formulate a religious message, to perpetuate the glory of each martyr and, first and foremost, to show the greatness and power of God, visible in their deeds, and convey this to other people. The deeds of individual men are recorded, and successive descriptions are compiled until the whole mosaic shows a universal pattern. In this

way single events are related to a dimension which transcends history, to an order of sacred values, to eternity. They are to be read and understood in these categories.

Each chapter consists of two parts. The first is the story proper, set in the realities of occupied Poland recalling the place and time of each event. The narrator uses two ways of measuring time: the generally applied secular Gregorian calendar and the Jewish liturgical calendar. Everything that is related takes place before, during or after a feast day. Each event is placed within the annual liturgical cycle. The historical time and the sacred time merge, complement each other and form a specific *continuum*. The second part consists of a short phrase which ends each story. It has the schematized form of a liturgical formula and is repeated with but a few modifications: "may their memory be hallowed, and may the Lord avenge their blood"; "May their memory be blessed, and may the Lord avenge their blood"; "They/he died the death of a martyr, may the Lord avenge their/his blood".

Martyrdom stories constructed in this way can be found not only in *Kiddush Hashem* but also in other wexets by Huberband, e.g. *Gallows, The Destruction of Synagogues, Houses of Study, and Cemeteries*. As regards facts, the stories go beyond the walls of the Warsaw ghetto. In *Ghettos and Executions* the martyrdom formula overlaps the questionnaire which members of the *Oneg Szabat* group used in collecting and editing documentary material. This is a detailed account of two executions carried out in the courtyard of the prison in Gęsia Street 24. The first was carried out on November 17, 1941 (8 victims), the second on December 15, 1941 (15 victims in two rounds). The victims were sentenced to death for crossing the boundary of the ghetto. Huberband behaves like a born historian. He cites the facts which he managed to collect, quotes accounts of witnesses and documents. He presents the activity of the Jewish ghetto authorities before the sentence was carried out and a nearly photographic description of the execution itself. Dates, number, surnames, thanks to all this each story assumes a documentary character and reads like an exact record of events. And yet the text keeps to the pattern of martyrdom stories. For instance, the moment of the second execution is defined first in liturgical time and only later in secular time: "On Monday, the first day of the Feast of *Hanukkah* 5702 (15 December, 1941)". (166) Huberband repeatedly calls the condemned men martyrs in the religious sense of the word. He emphasises that they cried out *Shema Israel* during the execution (159, 166–167).

Some scenes and pictures in Huberband's *Kiddush Hashem* present genuine martyrdom. This undoubtedly applies to the scenes in which men die in the burning rolls of *Torah*. One of the chapters of the treatise *Semahot*,

which dates from the second century of our era, tells the story of Rabbi Hanin ben Tardion's death. During the execution he was wrapped up in rolls of *Torah* and set on fire. This is what he said to his heart-broken daughter: "... the *Torah* is fire, and fire cannot consume fire. Behold, the letters are flying into the air, and only the parchment itself is burning"²⁴. Huberband describes three such situations. In Będzin a Jew, Szlezinger, was shot dead in September 1939 when he was taking the *Torah* out of the synagogue; he fell down on the threshold and perished in flames. (252) At the same time the Germans poured petrol over Rabbi Avron Mordke Maroko in Włodawa, set him on fire and threw a roll of *Torah* on him when he started to burn. The author emphasises that "the rabbi and the *Torah* were burned together". (254) Also in September 1939, young Mojsze was mowed down by bullets in Sierpiec when he was trying to save *Torah* rolls from fire. "His body was burnt together with the synagogue and the *Torahs*. May the Lord avenge his blood". (259)

The events described by Huberband are something more than an account of Nazi persecution. They testify to the consummation of the martyrdom formula. While preserving their horrifying concreteness, they are included in the national-religious liturgy of destruction and suffering, a liturgy derived from the Bible and developed through the experience of successive generations.

The Sermons of Rabbi Klonimus Kelmisz Szapiro

1

Yet another form of expression was used in the Warsaw ghetto's religious discourse. It can be seen in the writings of another rabbi active behind the ghetto walls, Klonimus Kelmisz Szapiro, the famous tzadik of Piaseczno who regularly preached sermons to a group of disciples and adherents. The first of these sermons, which have fortunately survived the war, is dated *Rosh Hashanah* 5700 (September 14, 1939), the last one *Sabbath Hazon* 5702 (July 18, 1942). Compiled under the title *Esh Kodesh (The Holy Fire)*, they were put in a hiding place and have survived until this day. They are the only collection of rabbinical homilies from wartime Warsaw and, in fact, as the author of a monograph on Rabbi Szapiro's homilies says, they are a unique example of this type of literature in the whole of Nazi-occupied

²⁴ Quoted after D.G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, p. 31.

Europe²⁵. We shall therefore have to add yet another form, *derash* (sermon), to the forms we have already discussed, that is, prayers, lamentations, stories of martyrdom.

Rabbi Szapiro's homilies form a contrasting background to Huberband's martyrdom stories. Huberband's *Kiddush Hashem* abounds in actual facts and its first layer documents facts, events and personages from the history of the ghetto and the whole of occupied Poland. What strikes one in *Esh Kodesh* is a lack of references to place and time, to political and historical circumstances. The words "Germans" and "Nazis" do not appear in the text. The author does not mention the name of any private or public person. Not a word is said about the work of the Jewish Commune or social organizations in the ghetto. The author makes no mention of any event in the life of the closed district, such as the inflow of refugees, hunger, epidemics, persecution. However, each homily is dated and placed in the Jewish liturgical calendar. This allows us to follow the evolution of the theology presented in *Esh Kodesh* and refer the phases of this evolution to the successive stages in the history of the ghetto. The collection of 85 homilies furnished with exact dates could constitute a very specific "homiletic journal", but the dates are practically the only trace of historical reality in this "journal", which is also devoid of personal experiences. The text itself contains no indication of when and in what conditions it was written. The gruesome experiences of life and death in the Warsaw ghetto which are described by Huberband, Rotgeber and many other authors of those days are missing in *Esh Kodesh*. The collected homilies of the tzadik of Piaseczno are a pure religious discourse.

Esh Kodesh "is not a diary, memoir, or descriptive chronicle of events", says Nehemia Polen. "It is rather a testament of fidelity to *Torah* and tradition, in the face of the enemy's efforts to destroy both. The pattern closely follows the example of talmudic and midrashic literature, where one may find many passages discussing periods of national calamity and persecution, but whose primary concern is to place the events in a comprehensible theological and ethical framework, and to provide models of spiritual resistance, rather than to present a strictly historical chronicle"²⁶.

²⁵ N. Polen, *The Holy Fire. The Teachings of Rabbi Kolonymus Kalman Shapiro, the Rebbe of Warsaw Ghetto*, Northvale, New Jersey 1994, p. 23. This excellent book is the fundamental source of my knowledge of *Esh Kodesh* and its author. Polen frequently quotes extensive fragments from Szapiro's sermons and cites some of them *in extenso*. A brief fragment of *Esh Kodesh* can also be found in D.G. Roskies's anthology *The Literature of Destruction*. In Poland, as far as I know, only P. Śpiewak has written an article about Rabbi Szapiro, *Kaznodzieja getta warszawskiego (The Warsaw Ghetto Preacher)*, "Znak" 1996, No. 3.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

2

In order to describe the shape of this discourse, be it only in a general way, we must first outline the tradition of Jewish homiletic literature and the *derash* genre²⁷.

Homilies, which were delivered in synagogues and prayer houses on Sabbath, other feast days and during various ceremonies, are one of the oldest forms of religious rites in Judaism. For a long time they were preserved only in oral tradition; later, they were written down and this greatly influenced their structure. Jewish homiletics is a genre of ethical literature, the purpose of which is moral and religious education of the national community, both in everyday life and during the times of crises and calamities. A sermon always starts from a fragment of the Bible or Talmudic–Midrashic literature, which the Jews have regarded as sacred from the Middle Ages. Starting from a holy text, the preacher explains it in order to find in it a reply to the questions and challenges of his time. In this way he demonstrates the power and importance of tradition and its key role in comprehending the present day.

The classical type of a homily, shaped in the Middle Ages, consists of two parts, a “great” and “little” sermon; each part is governed by different rules and each has its own characteristic formulas and its own specific artistic value. The “great” sermon covers the entire structure of the homily, which is based on the rhetorical principles recognized at a given time. It pivots round a fragment of the *Torah* or a famous commentary on it that is suitable for a given feast day or occasion. It plays, first and foremost, a didactic, moralistic or ideological function, depending on circumstances or the preacher’s aim. The second part, the “little” sermon (*derash* in Hebrew) is the foundation of the entire structure of the homily. Its purely exegetic character derived from the ancient tradition of the *midrashim* has no counterpart in Christian or Muslim homiletic tradition. The exegetic method used in it does not consist in a simply explanation of a biblical text but in making it open to many interpretations. An immeasurable unimaginable profundity of meanings concealed in the text is revealed to the listener or reader.

The aim of a homily was to demonstrate the great interpretative ability of the preacher and the inexhaustible power of the holy text with its universal norms which applied to the past, present and future, for a homily had to explain history, which confronted successive generations with ever new dilemmas. Calamities and persecution, in particular, frequently made it

²⁷ My explanation is based on three articles from *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem 1978: *Homiletic literature; Preaching; Derash*.

necessary to revise former teaching and renew the interpretation of old texts and canons of faith. A homily was therefore constructed in a way which made it possible to discover ever new bewildering meanings in well known texts and adapt old tradition to new circumstances in a masterly way. A homily had to face burning contemporary problems, interpret the Bible in a creative way and formulate bold replies to contemporary questions in biblical terms. Such was the paramount aim of homilies, and in order to achieve it, use was made of stories, parables, fables, jokes and epigrams. What was particularly important was the interpretative method, which imparted not only exegetic but also artistic values to the homily. By saying completely unexpected, by taking listeners by surprise and playing upon words, the preacher showed that seemingly remote concepts were linked with one another. A good preacher achieved the required effect of taking the listeners by surprise — an effect which had always been highly appreciated in classical Hebrew homiletics — by revealing unexpected connections between the interpreted holy text and the subject of his homily.

3

The homilies written and delivered in the Warsaw ghetto by Rabbi Szapiro fulfil the tasks set Jewish preachers in an exemplary way. But they are also unique, unrivalled, I think.

The collection *Esh Kodesh*, that is, *The Holy Fire*, was created in the heat of the Holocaust. Seen through the prism of these sermons, the ghetto — let us recall that it does not exist in the text as an historical reality, the only signs of its existence being the dates — assumed the shape of a cosmic vortex. History and eternity, God and Satan, good and evil, curses and blessings clash with each other. Just such a terrifying spectacle must have been witnessed by those who listened to Rabbi Szapiro's sermons in the ghetto. The first sermon of the cycle, delivered on *Rosh Hashana* 5700 (September 14–15, 1939), does not even mention the siege of Warsaw, the terrifying air-raids and widespread consternation. Its subject is the all-embracing dread which the preacher sublimates turning the paralysing fear of death into the awe of God's presence.

The sufferings experienced in September 1939 were only a prelude to what was to befall the Jews enclosed in the ghetto. A truly holy dread, *tremendum*, prevailed outside the windows of the Piaseczno tzadik's flat in Dzielna Street 4. Rabbi Szapiro was in the very centre of this experience and tried to fathom and describe it, to find a form that would have expressed it. His sermons had to be up to the challenge of the times. They had, on the one hand, to give a reply to the macabre of the ghetto and the nation's Holocaust, which was becoming increasingly obvious, and on the other hand, to save

the sanctity of the *Torah*, the permanence of the covenant with God and the truth of God's promises. The Warsaw ghetto preacher was confronted with the dilemma of whether the Jewish liturgy of destruction and the rhetoric of suffering, the age-long tradition of facing calamity could cope with the experience then being lived through.

Such perplexities, unprecedented in the tradition of the *derash*, can be found in one of the most moving fragments of *Esh Kodesh*. As a rule, autobiographic fragments, situational references are not included in homilies. This sermon is an exception. As Nehemia Polen says, this is probably the only time in the whole collection of Szapiro's homilies, that the author boldly reveals his feelings, exposing his uncertainty and despondency. There are two reasons for this mood. The first is the realization that language cannot express the enormity of the calamity. The other is the danger of falling into a state of spiritual destruction which would make praying impossible.

In the homily of February 28, 1942 Rabbi Szapiro said:

"We are now all enduring very acute and bitter troubles ... This is all especially true in view of the fact that the troubles have dragged on for so long. Even someone who has previously strengthened himself and other Jews, is now too exhausted to find inner strength; he is tired of attempting to find consolation. Even if he wishes to pull himself together and to say some remarks of consolation and encouragement, he lacks the words, since in the course of the prolonged days of crisis he has already spoken time and again everything he could have possibly said. The words are now stale; they will not have any effect on him or his listeners". (30)

The words fail. The words are stale. Everything has already been said. Is it possible to prepare and deliver sermons in such conditions? The suffering which cannot even be expressed is killing the soul. Exhausted by a suffering which he cannot endure, man is no longer capable of uttering an inspired complaint. The prophet Jeremiah — the preacher recalls the teachings of Talmudic wisemen — wrote his *Lamentations* before the destruction of Jerusalem, in a prophetic vision, and not in the face of a catastrophe. He wrote them as a prophet of destruction, and not as its witness. Is therefore prayer at all possible in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942, considering that prayer should stem from a feeling of joy and holy elation. Is it not soulless to study the *Torah* in such times, asks Rabbi Szapiro in his sermon of March 14, 1942?

"There are times when the individual is astonished at himself. (He thinks:) 'Am I not broken? Am I not always on the verge of tears — and indeed, I do weep from time to time! How then can I study *Torah*? How can

I find the strength to think creatively in *Torah* and Hasidism?' At times the person torments himself by thinking, 'Can it be anything but inner callousness that I am able to pull myself together and study, despite my troubles and those of Israel, which are so numerous?' Then again, he will say to himself, 'Am I not broken? I have so much to make me cry; my whole life is gloomy and dark'. Such a person is perplexed about himself..." (31).

At first Rabbi Szapiro regarded Nazi persecution as a successive link in the chain of national calamities. In a sermon delivered on the feast of *Hanukkah* 5702 (December 15, 1941) he said:

"Why is it that an individual is affected by these current sufferings more than by all the sufferings which have swept over Israel in the past? Why is it that while learning in *Scripture*, *Talmud*, or *Midrash* about the sufferings of Israel from former times to the present, one's faith was not weakened, but now it is weakened? For those people who say that Israel has never experienced sufferings such as these are mistaken. At the time of the destruction of the Temple, and at the fall of Betar, etc., there were (sufferings) such as these". (83)

After the great liquidation operation when more than 300,000 Warsaw Jews were sent to Treblinka, Rabbi Szapiro, who survived, came finally to the conclusion that the Holocaust was something absolutely exceptional. This dramatic evolution in the preacher's attitude is seen in one of the two insertions added in the autumn of 1942 to the already completed *Esh Kodesh* volume. The last sermon of the cycle is from July 18, 1942. Four days later the great liquidation operation began. The preacher lapsed into silence. He interrupted his silence after four months and added the following insertion to the sermon:

"Only until the end of the year 5702 (summer of 1942) was it the case that such sufferings were experienced before. However, as for the monstrous torments, the terrible and freakish deaths which the malevolent, monstrous murderers invented against us, the House of Israel, from the end of 5702 and on — according to my knowledge of rabbinic literature and Jewish history in general, there has never been anything like them. May God have mercy and deliver us from their hands in the twinkling of an eye.

Friday, the day preceding the Sabbath day, 18 *Kislev* 5703 (November 27, 1942). The author"²⁸. (84)

In view of its exceptional character the Holocaust required an exceptional response. What is exceptional about *Esh Kodesh* is that this response was deeply traditional and at the same time radically new. The material which the author introduces into the most classical tradition-sanctioned

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

formulas of the *derash* seems to burst them. Rabbi Szapiro submits the unprecedented incomprehensible experience to a formally and theologically disciplined reflection. He tries to fathom the enormity of the disaster in order not to give in. He takes upon himself the whole weight of the suffering, but does not submit to it. He stands “on the outside” of his own consciousness, so to say, and makes it a subject of his exegesis, on a par with the sacred text.

This is but one, though sufficiently significant example of the method used in *Esh Kodesh*. The preacher complies with the classical rules of the homiletic discourse by evoking surprise, an effect which is necessary if one wants to show old well known texts from a new unexpected perspective. In his sermon of January 17, 1942 he examines suffering as a sacrifice and quotes a fragment from the *Talmud* which describes a musical instrument used in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Hebrew word *magrefah* used in the *Talmud* as the name of the instrument means literally “shovel”. Rashi, one of the greatest Talmudic commentators, combines the two meanings and explains that the bowl which was used to clear the altar of ashes was also used as a musical instrument. Rashi’s interpretation provides the foundation for Szapiro’s exegesis which becomes shockingly literal in the context of the Holocaust realities.

The shovel for taking ashes away from the altar becomes a musical instrument with a thousand tones. Similarly, suffering is purified in the fire of sacrifice and changes into a song of joy. “Rabbi Shapiro suggests in this *derashah*”, says Nehemia Polen, “that the melancholy engendered by death and loss can be transmuted through the fire of the sacrificial altar into the ash of longing, yearning, and ultimately, of joyous song”²⁹.

4

Rabbi Szapiro’s sermons written in unbelievably difficult conditions, are perfect from the exegetic and artistic points of view. The homiletics of the Piaseczno tzadik constituted a spiritual resistance which was perfectly expressed in the classical form of the Hebraic religious discourse. The Warsaw ghetto preacher, like his predecessors centuries before him, tried to find the proper religious language to describe the reality confronting him and looked for the proper conceptual framework to understand the catastrophe he was witnessing. In accordance with the fundamental principle of rabbinic homiletics, he conveyed consolation and hope in his sermons.

In a mystical way, that is a way incomprehensible from the rational point of view, he succeeded in reconciling the Hasidic teaching about the

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

Shehina, that is, God's constant presence in the real world, with what was the greatest challenge to this faith, the experience that God was absent from the ghetto. In the last period of his homiletic work, between February and July 1942, Szapiro formulated the concept of a weeping and suffering God. As Nehemia Polen emphasises, this is one of the most extraordinary and striking ideas in *Esh Kodesh*. God does not reply to the Jews' suffering not because he has abandoned them. God Himself is suffering and his torment is so great that He wants to cry in hiding, in an inner chamber of the heavens. This withdrawal of God augurs an approaching apocalypse, but God does not flee from the world which is on the brink of catastrophe. Thanks to the *Torah* which He bequeathed to man, it is possible to push into that chamber and join God in His grief.

“God, blessed be He, is to be found in His inner chambers weeping, so that one who pushes in and comes close to Him by means of studying *Torah*, weeps together with God, and studies *Torah* with Him. Just this makes the difference: the weeping, the pain which a person undergoes by himself, alone, may have the effect of breaking him, of bringing him down, so that he is incapable of doing anything. But the weeping which the person does together with God — that strengthens him. He weeps — and is strengthened; he is broken — but finds courage to study and teach”. (119)

Rabbi Szapiro was seized in the ghetto during the rising, at the end of April or the beginning of May 1943. Together with the remaining leaders of the Jewish community, such as Emanuel Ringelblum and activists of the Jewish Combat Organization, he was sent to the Trawniki camp in the Lublin region. The fifteen rabbis who were in the camp made a solemn pledge that they would not separate and that none of them, would seek rescue single-handedly. In August 1943 the conspiratorial Jewish National Committee with the help of the Home Army managed to get Ringelblum out the Trawniki camp. Rabbi Szapiro did not agree to escape. Solidarity with his suffering brothers and sisters was more important for him than putting off death for some time. By refusing to run away from the camp the author of *Esh Kodesh* complied with the essence and aim of his teaching. His decision was the supreme confession of faith, it was an act sanctifying God's name, *kiddush ha-Shem*.

(Translated by Janina Dorosz)