

A Righteous Judgment on a Righteous People: Rav Yitzhak Hutner's Implicit Theology of the Holocaust

By: LAWRENCE J. KAPLAN

If one is not simply to throw up one's hand in defeat, despair, or resignation and claim that God's ways are unknowable, Orthodox Haredi thought regarding the Holocaust that, at the same time, is responsive to modern sensibilities must accomplish two apparently contradictory tasks.

First, inasmuch as it is Haredi thought, it must affirm that the Holocaust was God's righteous judgment on His people. But second, inasmuch as it is responsive to modern sensibilities, it cannot simply claim, as does much Haredi Holocaust theodicy, that this judgment was God's righteous judgment inflicted on a sinful people for its sins, whether the general sin of non-observance and religious laxity or ideologically motivated rebellions against the tradition: Haskalah, religious Reform, liberalism, secularism, socialism, Zionism—or what have you.¹ Rather, paradoxically, it must

¹ The literature on this subject is vast. See the recent anthology, *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*, edited by Steven Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, Oxford and New York, 2007, in particular Part I, "Ultra-Orthodox Responses during and following the War," with an Introduction by Greenberg, and the extremely comprehensive bibliography at the end of the part. Note especially the articles of Greenberg and Eliezer Schweid listed there. Also note the very searching and thorough article of Avinoam Ro-

Lawrence J. Kaplan received his BA from Yeshiva College, his MA and PhD from Harvard University, and his rabbinical ordination from Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. He has taught at McGill University since 1972, and is currently Professor of Rabbinics and Jewish Philosophy in its Department of Jewish Studies. In the spring of 2004 he held a Harry Starr Fellowship at the Center for Jewish Studies of Harvard.

affirm that the people who underwent this righteous judgment was itself a righteous people. The Holocaust thus turns out to be God's righteous judgment on His righteous people. It is in this way, I believe, that one can understand, for example, Rav Ovadya Yosef's well known controversial remarks on the subject.² Rav Yosef argued that while the victims of the Holocaust were themselves sinless (that is, they were righteous), through their suffering they

senak, "Faith, Crisis, and Silence in Jewish Thought after the Holocaust and in the Teaching of Andre Neher," *Andre Neher and Jewish Thought in Post-Holocaust France*, ed. Yehoyada Amir (Jerusalem, 2005; Hebrew), pp. 153–192. Perhaps the two outstanding Haredi leaders who have argued that the Holocaust was God's righteous judgment inflicted on a sinful people for its ideologically motivated rebellions against the tradition, were Rav Joel (Yoilish) Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe, and Rav Eliezer Menachem Shach, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ponevezh, the former emphasizing the "sin" of Zionism, the latter the "sin" of Haskalah. There is already an extensive secondary literature on the Satmar Rebbe. See, for example, Norman Lamm, "The Ideology of the Neturei Karta: According to the Satmarer Version," *Tradition* 12:2 (1971): 38–53, [reprinted in *Seventy Faces*, Vol. 2 (Hoboken, 2002), pp.183–197]; Alan Nadler, "Politics and Piety: The Case of the Satmar Rebbe," *Judaism* 31:2 (Spring, 1982): 135–152; Zvi Jonathan Kaplan, "Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, Zionism, and Hungarian Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism* 24:2 (May, 2004): 165–178; and David Sorotzkin, "Building the Earthly and Destroying the Heavenly: The Satmar Rebbe and the Radical Orthodox School of Thought," *The Land of Israel in Twentieth Century Jewish Thought*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem, 2004; Hebrew), pp. 133–167. Regarding the thought of Rav Schach, see the important and path breaking article of Benjamin Brown, "Ha-Rav Schach: Ha'aratzat ha-Ruah, Bikkoret Le'umit, ve-ha-Hakhra'ot ha-Politiyyot be-Medinat Yisrael," *Dat u-Le'umiyyut*, ed. Neri Horowitz (Tel-Aviv, 2002), pp. 278–342; and the brief but thoughtful remarks of Rav Shagar in the article cited in note 11. For an incisive analysis of the spectrum of Haredi theological responses to the Holocaust from a more sociological point of view, see Menachem Freidman, "'Al Meh Asah Ha-Shem Kakhah?": Hitmoddedut ha-Hareidim 'im ha-Shoah," *Ha-Shoah be-Historiyyah ha-Yehudit: Historiographiyyah, Toda'ah, ve-Parshanut*, ed. Dan Michman (Jerusalem, 2005), pp. 579–607.

² See Adam Baruch, "Interview with Rav Ovadya Yosef," *Ma'ariv, Musaf Shabbat*, (2, 8, 2000), p. 4.

were atoning for sins committed in previous *gilgulim* (that is, God's judgment on them was also righteous).³

This paper will examine Ma'amar 4 of *Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh Ha-Shanah*⁴ by Rav Yitzhak Hutner, Zt"l, perhaps the foremost Haredi theologian of the second half of the twentieth century. I will pass over his controversial essay, "Holocaust—A Study of the Term and the Epoch It's Meant to Describe."⁵ First, I have already written an extended critique of this essay, "Rabbi Isaac Hutner's Daas Torah Perspective on the Holocaust: A Critical Analysis,"⁶ and have said all I have to say. Second, in the essay Rav Hutner, despite carefully leaving himself enough room for plausible deniability, basically puts forth a rather conventional variant of standard pre-modern Haredi thinking on the subject of the Holocaust, viewing it as God's righteous judgment inflicted on a sinful people for its sins, in particular the sin of Zionism. The essay, thus—aside from its many questionable historical claims, which I discussed in my critique—does not strike me as particularly significant or original from a theological point of view. That essay's explicit, more public and polemical, and, ultimately, rather conventional theology regarding the Holocaust needs to be contrasted with Rav Hutner's implicit, more private and non-polemical theology on the subject, to be found, in my view, in Ma'amar 4 of *Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh Ha-Shanah*—as noted above, the focus of my concern. And this implicit, private, and non-polemical theology is indeed highly original, sophisticated, and responsive to modern sensibilities, viewing the Holocaust as God's righteous judgment on His righteous people, a judgment, moreover, inflicted on it precisely because it is a righteous people. To be sure, this essay, devoted to the interrelated

³ Interestingly enough, in an address delivered in 1991 during the first Gulf War, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, referring specifically to the victims of the Holocaust, cites a view of the Mittlerer Rebbe that, with the Ari's revelation of the teachings of the Kabbalah, such atonement is no longer called for. See "Vayechi" 10th of Teves," in *Sichos in English*, Vol. 47 (Teves-Nissan, 5751), p. 63, note 111.

⁴ Published by Gur Aryeh Institute, Second Edition, New York, 1986, pp. 47–57.

⁵ *Jewish Observer* (October, 1977): 3–9.

⁶ *Tradition* 18:3 (Fall, 1980): 235–248.

themes of the Excellency of Jacob (*Geon Yaakov*) and God's judgment, makes no mention of the Holocaust. But, as I will argue, in light of a number of innovative and striking interpretive moves the essay makes and particularly in light of its radical, almost shocking, conclusion, it is reasonable to assume that this essay constitutes Rav Hutner's most considered, daring, and deeply thought theological response to the Holocaust. For only a theme of the magnitude of the Holocaust can, in my view, account for the exceptionally radical and paradoxical nature of the conclusions reached.

This essay is the last of a series of essays collectively entitled *Kuntrus ha-Hesed*. Rav Hutner begins the essay by noting that every festival reveals a particular quality of Israel's chosenness and its relationship to God. For example, Pesach reveals the particular quality of "Ga'al Yisrael," God as the redeemer of Israel, Yom Kippur the particular quality of "Maḥalan le-Shivtei Yeshurun," of God Who forgives Israel's sins, etc. What, then, is the particular quality of Israel's chosenness and its relationship to God revealed by Rosh ha-Shanah? He answers that since Psalm 47 was chosen as the special psalm for this day, the particular quality of Israel's chosenness and its relationship to God revealed by Rosh ha-Shanah is the Excellency of Jacob, *Geon Yaakov*. "Yivḥar lanu et naḥalatenu, et Geon Yaakov asher ahev, Selah," "He will choose us for His heritage, the Excellency of Jacob which He loves, *Selah*" (Ps. 47:5). But what exactly is meant by *Geon Yaakov*, the Excellency of Jacob? And how is it connected to Rosh ha-Shanah? These are the questions that Rav Hutner endeavors to answer in this essay.

Most of the essay is devoted to offering one approach to these questions. I will try to sum it up as compactly as possible.

Rav Hutner begins by citing the statement in *Bavli Pesachim* (118a): "In [Psalm 136], the Great *Hallel*, *Hallel ha-Gadol*, the phrase 'Ki le'olam ḥasdo' is repeated 26 times, corresponding to the 26 generations before the Torah was given when God sustained the world through His *Hesed*." Rav Hutner argues that obviously one cannot say that once the Torah was given God's *Hesed* was somehow diminished and lessened. To the contrary, it was intensified and deepened. Before the Torah was given the *Hesed* of God, through which He sustained the world, was *Hesed Hinam*, *Hesed Vittur*, sheer undeserved grace. God's *Hesed* sustained all 26 genera-

tions though they were unworthy, undeserving. But with the revelation of the Torah, He revealed a new type of *Hesed*, *Hesed Mishpat*, *Hesed* based on divine judgment. God gave the Jewish people the opportunity to earn His *Hesed* through observing His Law. Of course, the converse of this is that if they will not observe the Law, God will punish them. “Rak etkhem yadati mi-kol mishpehot ha-adamah, al ken efkod ‘aleikhem et kol ‘avonoteikhem,” “You alone have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your sins” (Amos 3:2). But the primary goal is to allow Israel the opportunity to earn God’s *Hesed*, to deserve it as a matter of justice, not as undeserved boon. Here Maimonides’ categories of charity come to mind. Or to take a more colloquial example: Give a man a fish and he’ll eat for a day, teach him to fish and he’ll eat for life.

But Israel can earn God’s *Hesed*, can deserve it as a matter of justice, only if the people as a whole observe the Torah in its entirety, all 613 commandments. For this to be possible, most of Israel has to be dwelling in its land, there has to be a Temple standing, there has to be a united monarchy, there have to be prophets and priests, and the like. There was only one period in history when all these conditions obtained: the glorious period of the united monarchy under King Solomon. And this, Rav Hutner concludes, is what is meant by *Geon Yaakov*, namely, the glorious period when the *Hesed* whereby God sustains Israel is *Hesed Mishpat*.

I should mention that Rav Hutner returns to and develops this distinction between *Hesed Vittur* and *Hesed Mishpat* in many other of his essays, and it is an integral part of his overarching and fundamental distinction between Torah and Nature, a distinction that pervades all his thought.⁷ Be that as it may, the connection with

⁷ This is not the place for a full analysis. But briefly we may note the presence in Rav Hutner’s writings of the following set of matching opposed pairs: Holy vs. Profane; [The Wisdom of the] Torah vs. [The Wisdom of] Nature; Israel vs. Greece; the Ten Commandments vs. the Ten Sayings; Sabbath vs. the Six Days of Creation; the Portion of God vs. the Work of God’s Hands; Freedom vs. Necessity; Inwardness vs. Externality; the Renewal of the World vs. the Preservation the World; the Purpose of the World vs. the Structure the World; the 613 Commandments vs. the Seven Noahide Commandments; the Sinaitic Covenant vs. the Noahide Cove-

Rosh ha-Shanah should be clear. On the one hand, Rosh ha-Shanah is *Yom ha-Din*, the Day of Judgment. On the other hand, it is the Day of Creation, and “Olam *hesed yibaneh*” “the world was created through *Hesed*” (Ps.89: 3). *Geon Yaakov*, whereby Israel is sustained by God’s *Hesed Mishpat*, perfectly synthesizes these two aspects of the day. In this sense, this essay is a fitting culmination for *Kuntrus Ha-Hesed*.

My readers, by now, must no doubt be wondering what in the world this has to do with the Holocaust. But if they will bear with me for a little while longer, all—I hope—will become clear.

The analysis of *Geon Yaakov* described above takes up the first two sections of the essay. And were it to end there, the essay, as I just said, would serve as a fitting culmination for *Kuntrus Ha-Hesed*. But—to our surprise—the essay does not end there. In the third and concluding section Rav Hutner begins again, and at first it is not clear where he is heading. He notes that the principle set forth in

nant; the Sign of Circumcision vs. the Sign of the Rainbow; *Hesed Mishpat* vs. *Hesed Vittur*; Kingship (*Melukah*) vs. Rulership (*Memshalah*); the Number of Generations vs. the Number of Years; a Linear, Progressive, Future-Oriented Conception of Time vs. the Cyclical Rhythms of Nature; Creative Knowledge vs. Descriptive Knowledge; Eternity vs. Time. Generally, we may say that the sharp contrast Rav Hutner draws between Torah and Nature derives from the Maharal (though, unlike the Maharal, Rav Hutner does not make use of the category of “the *nivdal*”), and should be contrasted with the view of the Rambam that “the Law, although it is not natural, enters into what is natural” (*Guide* 2:40). However, Rav Hutner’s drawing of this contrast between Torah and Nature in terms of Freedom vs. Necessity and Inwardness vs. Externality certainly calls to mind the famous Kantian distinction between the moral and the natural realms. Finally, his emphasis on the Linear, Progressive, Future-Oriented Conception of Time found in the Torah as opposed to the emphasis on the Cyclical Rhythms of Nature (supposedly) found in the teachings of the Greeks calls to mind well known (if highly controversial) studies of several modern historians of religion. [See now Shmuel Wygoda, “Be-Havlei ha-Zeman’: Ha-Adam ve-ha-Zeman be-Haguto shel Ha-Rav Yitzhak Hutner,” *Be-Darkei Shalom: Iyyunim be-Hagut Yehudit*, eds. B. Ish-Shalom and A. Berenholz (Jerusalem, 2007), pp. 399–427. Wygoda elaborates upon and analyzes a number of the matching opposed pairs that I have just listed here.]

the verse, “Rak etkhem yadati mi-kol mishpehot ha-adamah, al ken efkod ‘aleikhem et kol ‘avonoteikhem,” has nothing to do with that set forth in the verse “U-sevivav nis‘arah me’od,” “And in His surroundings it storms mightily” (Ps. 50:3), from which latter verse the Sages derive the principle that God deals stringently with the righteous even to a hair’s breadth, “kehut ha-se‘arah” (*Bava Kamma* 50a). For while the first verse refers to God’s election and governance of Israel as a whole, the second verse, on the understanding of the Sages, refers to God’s special mode of dealing with righteous. But in light of the above, Rav Hutner goes on to say, he has uncovered a new depth in the principle of God’s dealing stringently with the righteous.

Rav Hutner cites the famous Gemara in *Menahot* 29b where Moses sees the flesh of Rabbi Akiva being weighed out at the market stalls and exclaims, “Zo Torah, ve-zo sekharah!” “Is this Torah, and is this its reward?” To which God replies, “Shetok. Kakh ‘alah be-mahshavah lefanai;” “Be silent. Thus it arose in My thought.”

Rav Hutner refers to the view of the Gaon of Vilna linking the phrase “Kakh ‘alah be-mahshavah lefanai” to the phrase of Rashi commenting on Gen.1:1, “Bi-tehilah ‘alah be-mahshavah livroto be-Middat ha-Din, ve-ra’ah she-ein [ha-’olam] mitkayyem, hikdim middat rahamim ve-shittfah le-middat ha-din;” “It arose in [God’s] thought to create it [the world] according to the Attribute of Justice, but He saw that the world would not be able to endure, so He gave precedence to the Attribute of Mercy and [then] joined it to the Attribute of Justice” Thus, according to the Gaon, when God says regarding the death of R. Akiva, “Kakh ‘alah be-mahshavah lefanai,” He means that R. Akiva is being judged by the standard of the *Middat ha-Din* of the world “[asher] ‘alah be-mahshavah livroto,” a strict *Middat ha-Din* un-tempered by *Middat ha-Rahamim*.⁸ It follows from the view of the Gaon, Rav Hutner maintains, that even though our world is one where there is a blend

⁸ This interpretation of the Gaon is also cited several times in the writings of Rav Dessler. See *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu*, Vol. 3, eds. Aryeh Carmel and Hayyim Friedlander (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 54 and 244. Rav Dessler, however, takes this interpretation of the Gaon in a different direction than does Rav Hutner. This, however, is not the place to compare their views.

of *Din* and *Rahamim*, there remains a residue of the world of pure—I would almost say, fierce—*Din*, and the righteous are judged by the standard of that world. And their being judged by that standard is an *'aliyah* for them, it is a testimony to their greatness and righteousness that they are being judged by such a standard.

Rav Hutner goes on to explain why, on the one hand, the world would not have been able to endure had it been created according to the Attribute of Justice alone, un-tempered by the Attribute of Mercy, while on the other hand, the righteous are judged by the standard of that unalloyed Attribute of Justice. He notes that our world can endure only on the basis of *Avodah*, service of God, which *Avodah*, in turn, is possible only if man has *Behirah*, free choice. However, were all people to be judged on the basis of the unalloyed Attribute of Justice, such a judgment would negate free choice, which, in turn, would do away with the very *Avodah* that makes it possible for the world to endure. With regard to the righteous, however, true they live in the world of strict *Din*, which negates their free choice, but their very living in that world of strict *Din* is owing to their prior service of God based on free choice itself. We have here a concept, found as well in other places in Rav Hutner's writings, of the self-liquidating nature of free choice, a type of self-liquidation that paradoxically testifies to the very power and grandeur of free choice itself.⁹

⁹ See *Pahad Yitzhak, Iggerot u-Ketavim* (Jerusalem, 1981), Letter 42 (pp. 70–71). “The profound uniqueness of the very form of man is to be found in the power of choice embedded in this form. Now God has promised in His Torah that in the end of days this special unique quality (*segulah*) of choice will be abolished. (See the Commentary of the Ramban on Deut. 30:6 with reference to the circumcision of the foreskin of the heart.) But certainly the intention here is not to assert that through the circumcision of the foreskin of the heart the very form of man will be abolished. For the removal of choice which comes as a result of the powerful exercise of choice serves only to reveal this special unique quality of choice, even though in practice the exercise of the power of choice has been abolished. To the contrary, then, this removal of choice appears as the high point of the exalted nature of choice.” Cf. Ma'amar 29 of *Pahad Yitzhak: Purim* (New York, 1986), pp. 79–80. In the recently published volume,

At this point, Rav Hutner proceeds to draw all the pieces together. He cites the view of Rabbenu Tam, brought in *Tosafot Rosh ha-Shanah* 27a, concerning the debate whether the world was created in Tishrei or Nissan. Rabbenu Tam seeks there to harmonize the apparently conflicting views, and suggests that God first decided to create the world in Tishrei, but only actually created it in Nissan. The conclusion drawn by several “Ba`alei ruah ha-kodesh,” Rav Hutner goes on to say, is that Rosh ha-Shanah as a *Yom ha-Din*, a Day of Judgment, refers to the *Din* of the world “asher alah be-mahshavah,” that is—this is my addition—a *Din* un-tempered by *Rahamim*.

He then goes on to say and I quote:

And therefore on the day when we recite *malkhuyot*, the kingship of the King of *Mishpat*, *Dina de-Malkhuta Dina*, there shines forth God’s governance by the standard of dealing stringently *ke-hut ha-se’arah*, that applies uniquely to the Jewish people viewed as (*bivhinat*) “Ve-‘amekh kulam tzadikkim,” “And Thy people are entirely righteous” (Isa.60:21). And then there appears the Excellency of Jacob, for through its service of God it brings into existence the world [of strict *Din*] that was unable to endure in the order of creation....

Note that while before Rav Hutner stated that God’s governance by the standard of dealing stringently “*ke-hut ha-se’arah*” applies not to Israel as a whole, but only to the righteous, now he states that at times it applies to the people of Israel as a whole viewed as “Ve-‘amekh kulam tzadikkim.” And this too is an expression of *Geon Yaakov*.

It need not be said that this claim, in light of Rav Hutner’s own premises, is extremely problematic. For does not Rav Hutner at the beginning of this concluding section explicitly distinguish between God’s election and governance of Israel as a whole, as set forth in

Ma’amarei Pahad Yitzhak: Sukkot, New York, 2004, this theme of the self-liquidating nature of free choice is to be found in a number of essays. See Ma’amar 45, p.124 (in connection with “tzaddik ve-ra lo”); Ma’amar 65, pp. 174–175; and Ma’amar 128, pp. 318–319 (in connection with the end of days). Similarly, it is to be found in the introduction to the *Meshekh Hokhmah* on *Shemot* in connection with the prophecy of Moses.

the verse, “Rak etkhem yadati mi-kol mishpehot ha-adamah, al ken efkod ‘aleihem et kol ‘avonoteikhem,” and God’s special mode of dealing stringently with the righteous even to a hair’s breadth, “kehut ha-se‘arah,” as set forth in the verse “U-sevivav nis‘arah me’od”? Moreover, as applied to the people of Israel as a whole, how is it possible to maintain that they live in the world of strict *Din*, which negates their free choice, as a result of their prior service of God based on free choice itself?

But let us postpone for the moment any attempt to answer these objections and proceed directly to Rav Hutner’s conclusion.

From the above it emerges that there are two revelations of the rank of *Geon Yaakov*: 1) In the state of the world of *Tikkun*, when Solomon is sitting on the Throne of the Lord; and 2) In the state of the world of *Tobu*, when the flesh of R. Akiva is being weighed on the scales. And both of these two lights appear together on Rosh ha-Shanah.

I confess that when I first read this, it struck me like a blow to the gut. Can one imagine a greater, a more stunning and shocking paradox? *Geon Yaakov* reveals itself equally in the greatest glory of Israel and in its greatest tragedy. For in both Israel is being judged by the standard of justice: In the state of the world of *Tikkun*, when Solomon is sitting on the Throne of the Lord, by the standard of *Hesed-Mishpat*, that is, *Din* tempered with *Rahamim*; and in the state of the world of *Tobu*, when the flesh of R. Akiva is being weighed out at the market stalls, by *Din* unaccompanied by *Hesed*. In truth, it is clear from all that Rav Hutner says that the *Geon Yaakov* of the world of *Tobu*, of the flesh of R. Akiva being weighed out at the market stalls, is far greater than the *Geon Yaakov* of the world of *Tikkun*, when Solomon is sitting on the Throne of the Lord. For the world of pure *Din*, “she-‘alah be-mahshavah,” is higher than the actual created world of *Din* tempered by *Rahamim*. We have moved here in this second—and higher—meaning of *Geon Yaakov* very far from any notion of *Hesed*.

But we must remember that Rav Hutner says that the *Geon Yaakov* of the state of the world of *Tobu*, when the flesh of R. Akiva is being weighed out at the market stalls, applies to the Jewish people as a whole viewed as “Ve-‘amekh kulam tzadikkim.” There

are times when God judges and governs the people of Israel as a whole as a completely righteous people, by the standard of strict *Din*, and consequently deals stringently with them “ke-ḥut ha-se‘arah.”

So I would ask: Where do we find in recent history a world of *Tohu* where the flesh of the people of Israel as a whole was being weighed out at the market stalls? I cannot believe that Rav Hutner did not have the Holocaust in mind here.¹⁰ And the clear conclusion therefore is that the Holocaust testifies to Israel’s Excellency, to its greatness and righteousness, to *Geon Yaakov*, much more so than the glory of the period when Solomon sat on his throne. For in the world of *Tohu* that was the Holocaust, God judged the people of Israel as a completely righteous people by the standard of strict *Din*, justice, un-tempered by *Rahamim*, mercy.

Of course, Rav Hutner is not the first to apply the phrase “Kakh ‘alah be-maḥshavah lefanai” to the Holocaust. But it is generally used in that context to mean that the Holocaust was an unfathomable divine decree.¹¹ Not so for Rav Hutner. For him, as we have seen, the phrase “Kakh ‘alah be-maḥshavah lefanai” refers to

¹⁰ Of course, given the internal and classical nature of the volumes of *Pahad Yitzhak*, Rav Hutner never refers to contemporary events in any of the *Ma’amarim* found therein.

¹¹ See, for example, the 1991 address of the Lubavitcher Rebbe (above, note 3), p. 62. “One desecrates the honor of the martyrs, who perished ‘*al Kid-dush HaShem*, by justifying the Holocaust as if it were punishment for their sins. Heaven forbid that one should utter such words. Undesirable events sometimes occur, not as punishment for sins, but because of an unfathomable Divine decree, a dictate which transcends any and all explanation. Thus our Sages relate that when Moshe protested the cruel death suffered by Rabbi Akiva, G-d answered, ‘Be silent. Thus it arose in My thought.’” This address of the Rebbe was in response to an earlier address by Rav Schach where the latter suggested that the Holocaust was God’s punishment of the Jewish people for their adoption of European culture in the modern era, as a result of the malign influence of the Haskalah. See *Yated Ne’eman*, Special Supplement, *Parshat Ve-Yehi*, 1991. For a perceptive analysis of this exchange in the course of a general examination of traditional doctrines regarding divine retribution in light of the Holocaust, see Ha-Rav Shagar, “Torat ha-Gemul be-Mivhan Ha-Shoah,” in *Kelim Shevurim*, ed. Udiyyah Tzurieli (Efrat, 2003), pp. 131–134.

an *‘aliyah* in thought, and, if I have read him rightly, in assuming that it should be applied to the Holocaust, its use in that connection would mean *not* that the Holocaust was an unfathomable divine decree, but rather—to reiterate—that the Holocaust constitutes the highest testimony possible to *Geon Yaakov*, which turns out to be the most paradoxical indication possible of Israel’s chosenness and its relationship to God. I, for one, can imagine no stronger and no more troubling expression of the concept of the numinous, and it is not surprising that in dealing, if only implicitly, with a subject so daunting, a subject of such magnitude, that Rav Hutner was driven to such extreme, daring, breathtaking, and, at the same time, problematic conclusions.¹²

Assuming my reading is correct, we can now return to the objections I raised before. But, first, let me pose a new question. What might it mean to say that the Holocaust represents a world of strict *Din* that negates the free choice of the people of Israel? I would suggest that, as is well known, precisely the Holocaust as the ultimate example of ideologically motivated, exterminationist, racial anti-Semitism, in which the Nazis singled out Jews for murder and destruction solely on the basis of their race, did not, unlike earlier religiously motivated anti-Semitic persecutions, allow for any Jewish

¹² Note, however, the Rebbe of Piacezna, Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Esh Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1960), “Derashah le-Parshat Va-Era,” 5702, pp. 146–147 [= *Sacred Fire: Torah from the Years of Fury, 1939–42*, trans. J. Hershey Worch, ed. Deborah Miller (Northvale, N.J., 2000), “Sermon for Parshat Va-Era,” Jan. 17, 1942, p. 263]. “And when many Jews, as a result of God’s will, are no longer to be found, *for thus it arose in His thought, may He be blessed, that they should ascend as a sacrifice unto Him, may He be blessed* [emphasis mine: L.K.], only then do we see how great is our plight.... To begin with, when they were still with us... though we rejoiced greatly and took great pleasure in their presence, nevertheless, we did not know how to sufficiently appreciate that which we possessed; we had no idea of how good things were when they were still with us. And it is only now that they are missing, heaven forbid, that we see how very much we miss them, and the heart yearns and is grieved, and its sole comfort is in God’s words to Moshe: ‘Be silent. Thus it arose in My thought.’” As the date indicates, the sermon from which this passage is taken is one of the last that Rav Shapira delivered in the Warsaw Ghetto.

individual or group to save his life or to save their lives by means of any apostasy or renunciation of Judaism.

This, in turn, may help enable us to answer the objections I raised earlier, but looked at now specifically in the context of the Holocaust. That is, what could it possibly mean in the context of the Holocaust for Rav Hutner to maintain that the Jewish people as a whole were viewed as a completely righteous people and consequently were judged on the basis of strict *Din*; and, further, what could it mean for him to say that they lived in the world of strict *Din*, represented by the Holocaust, as a result of their prior service of God based on free choice itself? I would further suggest that when he refers here to the Jewish people as a whole viewed as “Ve-‘amekh kulam tzadikkim,” Rav Hutner primarily has in mind the Orthodox communities of Eastern and Central Europe who were murdered in the Holocaust. These communities, despite all of the manifold social, cultural, ideological, economic, and political temptations of the modern era, despite the more open and alluring surrounding societies beckoning from without, exercised *their free choice* under the radically new and difficult conditions of modernity and remained staunchly loyal to the Jewish tradition, to Torah and Mitzvot. Indeed, it may not be too much to say of these communities, with all their flaws and weaknesses, “Ve-‘amekh kulam tzadikkim.” Therefore, to return to the final question, even if in the Holocaust they had no choice but to remain Jews and die as Jews, their doing so is accounted to them as if it were the result of their previous free choice and consequently as the highest form of martyrdom.

I realize full well that the above is exceptionally speculative, not to mention highly problematic. But let us not forget that the objections I raised earlier, namely: 1) what does it mean to speak about the people of Israel as a whole as a completely righteous people; and 2) how is it possible to maintain that the people of Israel as a whole can live in the world of strict *Din*, which negates their free choice, as a result of their prior service of God based on free choice itself—that these objections arise from the very terms of Rav Hutner’s analysis, regardless of whether not one believes, as I do, that he had the Holocaust in mind. At least, if one assumes that, indeed, he did have it in mind, it becomes possible to make some historical and

theological sense out of a claim that otherwise is not only provocative and problematic, but almost incomprehensible.

I should also note that this essay is one of a handful of essays in *Paḥad Yitzḥak* where Rav Hutner uses explicitly kabbalistic terminology.¹³ I would further note that Rav Hutner's contrast here between the state of the world of *Tikkun* and the state of the world of *Tohu*, and the superiority of the latter state over the former calls to mind the famous essay, "Souls of Chaos" by Rav Kook, who, as is well known, influenced Rav Hutner greatly.¹⁴ Finally, the essay's structure, with its two beginnings, that is, with Rav Hutner's starting all over again in the essay's third and final section after he had apparently concluded his line of argument, is highly untypical of the essays found in *Paḥad Yitzḥak*, which generally move forward more linearly and straightforwardly to resolving the questions raised in the opening paragraphs only in the concluding ones. Thus, the essay's language, its terminology, its structure, and its possible sources of influence, aside from the extremely radical theological theses it puts forward, all indicate that something unusual is going on, that some extraordinary pressure is being exerted on the essay. I think it is reasonable to suggest that it is precisely Rav Hutner's attempt to deal obliquely with the Holocaust in this essay that is responsible for its radical theological theses, for its unusual terminological and linguistic features, and for the stresses and strains reflected in its organization.

To conclude, let me reiterate for yet a third time Rav Hutner's main contention, assuming I have understood him correctly. The Holocaust testifies to Israel's Excellency, to its greatness and righteousness, to *Geon Yaakov*, much more so than the glory of the period when Solomon sat on his throne. For in the world of *Tohu*

¹³ One other place in the *Paḥad Yitzḥak* series where Rav Hutner uses kabbalistic terminology is Ma'amar 5 of *Paḥad Yitzḥak: Yom ha-Kippurim* (New York, 1975), p. 75, where he refers to the higher and lower forms of unifying the Divine (*yihudab ila'ab* and *yihubdab tata'ab*).

¹⁴ "Neshamot shel 'Olam ha-Tohu," *Orot* (Jerusalem, 1963), pp. 121–122 [= "Souls of Chaos," *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, Translation and Introduction by Ben Zion Bokser (New York, 1978), 256–258.] This is not the place to compare these two essays.

that was the Holocaust, God judged the people of Israel as a completely righteous people by the standard of strict *Din*, justice, untempered by *Rahamim*, mercy. Thus, the Holocaust constitutes the highest testimony possible to *Geon Yaakov*, which turns out to be the most paradoxical indication possible of Israel's chosenness and its relationship to God. Confronted with such a contention, however, this reader at least can only fall silent.¹⁵ ❧

I would like to thank Dr. Benjamin Brown for his helpful comments.

¹⁵ After this article was completed and in press, Professor Gershon Greenberg was kind enough to send me a draft of his forthcoming article, "Keneset Yisrael Slobodka: Suffering-Love Through the Holocaust." In the article Greenberg argues that "A definable school of thought emerged in the course of the Holocaust among those who shared the ethos of Natan Tsevi Finkel's Slobodka yeshiva, concerning *mesirut nefesh al kiddush Hashem*. It was articulated in terms of different dialectical relationships between suffering and love; it included the ingredients of *Devekut*, *Bitahon*, *Din* and *Rahamim (Hesed)*; and it frequently invoked Rabbi Akiva's death. The stream of thought held through the decades following the catastrophe." Drawing upon my article, Greenberg shows that Rav Hutner's thought in Ma'amar 4 of *Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh Ha-Shanah* fits very well into this school of thought. In particular, he notes that certain striking parallels exist between Rav Hutner's thought and that of Rav Hayim Elazary. Obviously, the matter requires further analysis. My preliminary impression is that, without denying the parallels, Rav Hutner's thought is more dialectical, paradoxical, and theologically daring than that of Rav Elazary, not to mention the other thinkers discussed in Greenberg's article. In any event, the fact that Rav Hutner's thought, as developed in Ma'amar 4, fits in so well with this school of thought, whose writings explicitly attempt to grapple with the religious meaning of the Holocaust, as well as the fact that Professor Greenberg, whose knowledge of Haredi thought regarding the Holocaust is unparalleled, accepted without demur—indeed, as a *davar pashut*—my thesis that though this Ma'amar makes no mention of the Holocaust Rav Hutner almost certainly had it in mind may serve as strong supports for that thesis.