

## To Flee Or To Stay?

By: JOE BOBKER

“A *rebbe* who is not willing to descend into hell in order to rescue his followers from destruction, is not a *rebbe*!”

*Rabbi Klonimus Kalman Shapira,  
the Piaseczner Rebbe*

The obvious question is this: Why, in the early to late 1930s, when the circumstances and conditions on the ground were more favorable for the Jews of Europe to move to Palestine, did the majority not go?

This subject always touches raw nerves, and has been complicated for political, religious, and ideological reasons, not to mention several complex psychological factors including guilt, shame, and anger. But when all self-serving defensive layers are peeled away, the historical answer is quite simple.

Having declared that “Berlin is our Jerusalem!” and “France is our Zion,” there was no way that assimilated European Jews who could afford to relocate would move from such comfortable, cultured, cosmopolitan cities as Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Paris, and Vienna to malaria-infested swamps and sand dunes with hostile Arab neighbors.

Meanwhile, Orthodox European Jews, who, by-and-large, had no financial means to go even if they wanted to, were in any event discouraged from leaving by their *rabbanim* for four main reasons: 1) It was not “spiritually” safe to leave established religious environments. 2) Chassidic Jews tended to move *en masse* as a cohesive community, which was an impossibility during those times. (Those Orthodox Jews who did flee and survive, did so as individuals or in small family

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units.) 3) Palestine was under the control of anti-religious Zionist Jews, and moving there would only strengthen them and “their heresy.” 4) Finally, faithful Jews were required to wait patiently in exile until the arrival of the Messiah, when all Jews would be transported to a newly-created Torah-based state in the Holy Land.

The result? The overwhelming number of secular and Orthodox Jews *chose* to stay in Europe. By the time they realized their mistake, it was too late; their communities were about to be transformed into mountains of human misery. When the axe of the executioner fell, all branches of Judaism were cut down.

Rabbi Nisson Wolpin, the long-term editor of *The Jewish Observer*, disagrees. He identifies two obstacles to Orthodox *aliyah* from Europe. One is external (the British made it nearly impossible to get into Palestine), and the other is internal (the Jewish Agency practiced “selective immigration [and] ignored thousands of requests from Agudas Yisrael members in Warsaw, Berlin, Bucharest, Prague, etc.” [because of their animosity towards Orthodox Jews].)

But Rav Wolpin does concede that many Torah Sages in Eastern Europe weighed the (definite) spiritual threats to Orthodox Jews in the *yishuv* against the (potential) physical threats of staying put in Europe. They concluded (incorrectly) that any physical threat to European Jews would also engulf the Jews of Palestine. “In the 1930s,” notes Rav Wolpin, “Poland seemed no less safe than Palestine.”

The enormity of the tragedy for Orthodox Jewry was crystallized in 1954 when Agudas Yisrael held its first post-Holocaust<sup>1</sup> convention

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<sup>1</sup> When the Torah was translated from Hebrew to Greek in antiquity (Septuagint), the word *olah*, “burnt offering,” became *holokautoma* (“entirely burnt”). In the later Latin version (Vulgate) this word was transcribed as *holocaustum*. In our home, the Hitler years were referred to as the *churban*, “A day of [absolute] destruction,” which is how the destruction of the Temples was described. In Hebrew, the expression is *Shoah* (“a devastation of biblical proportions”), which appears over a dozen times in the Bible and is derived from Isaiah 47:11. (*Shoah* may also be related to *lashav*, “in vain”). According to Rabbi Meir Leibush (Malbim), “*shoah*” refers to a sudden darkness for which one cannot prepare (i.e., we never saw it coming). But the problem with this term is

in... Jewish Jerusalem! The Agudah paper, *Dos Yiddishe Vort* (“The Jewish Word”), described it as a “bittersweet” reunion.<sup>2</sup>

The previous convention had been held seventeen years earlier in Austria, in 1937, at a time when a huge cloud of anxiety hung over all European Jewry. Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, the *rosh yeshivah* of Baranowicze, addressed a few hundred distinguished rabbinic personalities and cautioned Torah Jewry against making any major decisions (e.g.: stay or flee) without first seeking rabbinic guidance (*da’as Torah*)<sup>3</sup> regarding how to respond to the looming threat.<sup>4</sup>

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that it’s always linked in the Bible to the destruction of evil or evil people, hardly an appropriate term to describe European Jewry.

<sup>2</sup> *Dos Yiddishe Vort*, Tammuz–Av 1954.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of *da’as Torah* is related to the ancient concept known as *emunas chachamim*, which generically meant that one should always “trust in the judgment of the *talmidei chachamim* [Torah-wise] or *Gedolim*, “great ones” [or *Gedolei Torah* or *Gedolei Yisrael*] of the times.” Their advice was sought (“Ask your elders and they will tell you” [*Devarim* 32:7]) because, after spending decades immersed solely in Torah study, they had “earned” leadership positions that qualified them to render decisions that required a thought process elevated by Divine guidance (*Ru’ach HaKodesh*.) With his typical razor-sharp wit, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar, aware of the fine line between *da’as Torah* and potential deification, would quip, “If you believe every *rebbishe mayseh* you’re a *shoyteh*. If you don’t believe any, you’re an *apikores*!”

<sup>4</sup> In 1924, Rabbi Dovid Borenstein, the third Sochaczew Rebbe, gave a fiery speech at the fourth national convention of Agudas Yisrael in Poland, urging the audience to start making practical plans to move to the Holy Land (“From there will come the everlasting life of Israel”), reminding them that “my grandfather [the Avnei Nezer] ruled that the commandment to settle the land of Israel [still] applies in this day and age.” With a play on words, Rav Borenstein took the Biblical term *agudaso*, “His organization,” and urged the Agudas Yisrael movement to build its base “upon the holy land.” Rav Borenstein dedicated every Shabbos *shalosh seudos drashah* to urging his Chassidim to go to Palestine (especially Tel Aviv because “there were no church bells ringing there as in Poland”). Many tried but didn’t have the funds; those who succeeded survived the Holocaust. In the spring of 1940, Rav Borenstein and his family were offered an exit visa from Poland to Italy (then still a neutral country). He turned it down, explaining that his Chassidim, students, and friends were “also a family” to him. In December 1943, Rav Borenstein became the last Jew to be buried in the Warsaw cemetery.

Rav Wasserman had a firm grasp of the severe threat looming over them, but even he, a Lithuanian Torah genius, brother-in-law of Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky, and spiritual successor to the Chofetz Chaim, could not comprehend that Polish Jewry would cease to exist in just a few short years; nor that the staff, their families, and students of his beloved yeshivah would all be brutally slaughtered; nor that he himself, together with a dozen other top Torah sages,<sup>5</sup> would end in a mass ditch outside Kovno.

In fact, not a single Agudah attendee could foresee that their families and communities would be reduced in the near future to freakish exhibits of mountains of hair, gold teeth, eyeglasses, and shoes.

At the Jerusalem convention, Rabbi Eliezer Silver, a driving force behind the Vaad Hatzalah in the United States, addressed the broken-hearted remnants of the *Knesiyah HaGedolah* and described the rabbis of the previous convention as “numerous Arks of living Torah scrolls ... *geonim* and saints whom we no longer have with us... [however we

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The Germans murdered his family and his children. His closest friend, the Biedrzyce-Koziegłowy Gaon, was also murdered by the Nazis.

<sup>5</sup> Rav Wasserman was captured in July 1941, while giving a *shiur* in the home of Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky, *mashgiach* of Slabodka, and murdered together with Rabbi Yosef Chaim Zaks, *rosh yeshivah* of Ohel Moshe, Slabodka, his son Rabbi Moshe Reiss, Rabbi Ze'ev (“Velvel”) Grodzinsky, son of the *mashgiach* of Slabodka, his brother-in-law Rabbi Shabsai Vernikovsky from the Lomza yeshivah, Rav Shabsai's son (Mordechai), Rabbi Yonah Karpilow, student of the Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yechezkel Berstein, *rosh yeshivah* of Or Yisrael, Slabodka (Rabbi Elazar Menachem Shach's *rebbe* in Vaboinnik), Rabbi Dovid Gader, Rabbi Tzvi Schneider, Rabbi Yaakov Shlomo Gurevitz, and Rabbi Isser Schorr. Two rabbis managed to escape: Rabbi Yisroel Yaakov Lubchansky, *mashgiach* of the Baranowicze yeshivah, and Rabbi Efraim Oshry, author of the five-volume classic *She'eilos U'Teshuvos Mima'amakim*, the most comprehensive collection of Holocaust *responsa* to come out of World War II. The killers didn't take Rav Grodzinsky because he was lying down to rest his ailing foot; they only wanted rabbis who could walk so they could be paraded through the streets at gunpoint. (The circumstances of Rav Wasserman's murder are recorded in Rav Oshry's *Churban Lita; The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*, 1995; see also Rabbi Simcha Wasserman's introduction in *Kovetz Hearos*).

are blessed because] we now have the sanctity of the Holy Land and Jerusalem.”

All present understood the historic reality: that the 600,000 Jews of the Holy Land were spared the Nazi maelstrom while *every single Jewish community* in central and eastern Europe was destroyed. In less than six years, Orthodox European Jewry ceased to exist. There was no significant trace of Torah or Jewish life anywhere on the entire continent. But *not a single* civilian Jew in the Holy Land (nor in the United States of America) was harmed by Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich.

And more: the tiny, poverty-stricken *yishuv* in Israel, with no natural resources and itself under serious existential threat, took in more Jews than the rest of the Jewish world *combined*, including the large (and unthreatened) Jewish community of America.<sup>6</sup>

When details of the devastating extent of what Hitler had wrought began to trickle out, many Orthodox survivors realized that they, and their leaders, had sincerely (and humanly) erred. The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw lay in ashes, the streets of Tel Aviv were bustling; the streets of Sighet were bare, not so the crowded alleys of Jerusalem.

In less than a decade after the Holocaust, dozens of Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian Chassidic *rebbe*, *rabbanim*, and *chareidim*, including, just to name a few, the Courts of Boyen, Bohush, Hosiatin, Karlin, Kherson (whose *rebbe*, Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Rabinowitz, was the first rebbe to settle in Tel Aviv), Kotzk, Lelov, Lublin, Modzhitz, Nadvorna, Ozharov, Radzin, Ruzhin, Sadigura, Slonim, Sochaczew, Strikov, Tchortkov, Vizhnitz, and more, found safety and shelter in Tel Aviv.<sup>7</sup>

In Jerusalem, one could bump into such surviving *Admorim* of Europe as Ger, Sochaczew, Spinka, Amshinov, Biala-Przysucha, Slonim, Rachmistrivka, and others.

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<sup>6</sup> Abraham J. Edelheit, *The Yishuv in the Shadow of the Holocaust*, dissertation, City University of New York, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> With more than 700 Chassidic *shuls* and *shtieblach*, Tel Aviv served as the nerve center of the Chassidic world for nearly half a century, from the rise of Adolf Hitler in the early 1930s to the 1970s. It was comparable in size and quality to any pre-Holocaust European Chassidic stronghold (Tzvi M. Rabinowicz, editor, *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism*, 1996).

“It is a great salvation from the Almighty,” sighed Rabbi Aharon Rokeach, the Belzer Rebbe, after being on the run for four years, “that the Jewish people have a place to go.”<sup>8</sup>

Those who reached the Promised Land ensured the survival of themselves, their families and—something too often forgotten—untold future generations.<sup>9</sup>

### **Halachic Ambiguity**

Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (Chazon Ish) survived the Holocaust by not being there.<sup>10</sup>

In 1933, the year that Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, Rav Karelitz arrived in Bnei Brak, Palestine, after Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky had encouraged him to get more involved in communal affairs.

His *aliyah* also saved several of the Chazon Ish’s relatives who left Europe because of him, including his older brother, Rabbi Meir Karelitz, two nephews (Rabbi Shlomo Shimshon Karelitz from Vilna, Lithuania, and Rabbi Eliezer Alpa from Ulshan, Russia), and Rav Shlomo Shimshon’s parents.

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<sup>8</sup> Before the War started, the Belzer Rebbe had told a Polish family in the process of fleeing to Palestine that they need not leave Europe. Many years later, the *rebbe*, now safe in Palestine, met the head of the same family who had settled in Tzfas, and admitted he had made a mistake (which “pained him”) by not encouraging all his Chassidim to leave Europe earlier. He later confided in others that he wished he had followed the example of the Vilna Gaon, and the Chofetz Chaim who encouraged groups of Jews to leave Europe and move to Palestine a hundred years earlier, thus saving their descendants, and descendants’ descendants.

<sup>9</sup> There were 180,000 Jews in Palestine on the day Hitler became chancellor. By the time the war was over, the number was 600,000. By the end of the century, Israel’s population included over five million Jews.

<sup>10</sup> When he was living in Vilna, Rav Karelitz was approached by a Jew who was considering immigrating to Palestine. Rav Karelitz advised him to stay in Europe because that was where the Chofetz Chaim lived, and where the “*rov minyan* (the ‘higher portions of *klal Yisrael* [i.e., the *yeshivos*]’) were ... and thus *dino k’eretx Yisrael*, it is as if we were in *Eretx Yisrael*.”

Over the next decade, a stunned Rav Karelitz stood by helplessly as his family, friends, teachers, *chavrusa*, and previous communities literally went up in smoke. By 1945, with the near-total destruction of Torah scholarship and leadership in Europe, Rav Karelitz emerged as the universally recognized *posek acharon*, the “final Torah authority,” and spearheaded the Torah revolution in Palestine after World War II (“the War”).<sup>11</sup>

In this capacity he had fielded one particularly agonizing query from European Torah leaders: must I stay or may I flee?

Rav Karelitz consistently avoided a direct answer. Instead, he directed his questioners to an earlier *responsum* from Rabbi Moshe Sofer-Schreiber (Chasam Sofer), the *rosh yeshivah* of Pressburg,<sup>12</sup> Austrian Empire, and the leading halachic authority during the latter half of the eighteenth century.

But Rav Sofer didn’t have a *psak* for this touchy subject, either. He insisted it was a strictly personal dilemma; that each community activist must follow his own conscience.

Why the reluctance to deliver a binding halachic response? Rav Sofer had already personally grappled with this predicament. In 1809, three years after he became chief rabbi, Pressburg was invaded by Napoleon Bonaparte’s army<sup>13</sup> and Rav Sofer fled. Later, in a remorseful memoir, he apologized for leaving his community.

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<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Aharon Suraski, *Chazon Ish: A Biography of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Karelitz*, 1971; Rabbi Shimon Finkelman, *The Chazon Ish: The Life and Ideals of Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz*, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> The two main *yeshivos* at the beginning of the nineteenth century were Rav Chaim’s Volozhin yeshivah in White Russia, and the Chasam Sofer’s yeshivah. After Volozhin was closed, the *yeshivos* of Telz, Grodno, Kamenetz, Baranowicze, and Mir were founded. All of them were patterned on the example of Volozhin, except for their inclusion of *mussar*, which was not part of the Volozhin yeshivah curriculum (Aharon Suraski, *Toldot ha-Hinukh Ha-Torati*, 1967; Samuel K. Mirsky, *Mosdot Torah be-Europa Be-Vinyanam, U-Vechurbanam*, 1956; M. Sofer, *Pressburg Under Siege: Autobiographical Account*, 1991; Yaacov Dovid Shulman, *The Chasam Sofer: The Story of Rabbi Moshe Sofer*, 1992; Zalman F. Ury, *The Mussar Movement*, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> The Jews of Europe, religious and secular, were captivated by this short soldier with a giant ego. Many German Jews changed their name to *Schöntheil*, a translation of “Bonaparte.” Italian Jews named their sons

In this stunning personal admission, the Chasam Sofer described his pain at not staying and sharing in the burden of his people, and confessed that the issue was still (halachically) ambiguous for him.

“I have heard many people here say that with Prague under siege, the situation is as it was sixty years ago, when the illustrious Rabbi Yechezkel [Rabbi Yechezkel Landau of Prague, known as the “*Noda b’Yebudal*”] wanted to leave and the city leaders would not let him. His desire to leave was understandable: one should avoid staying in a place of danger. They were acting in their own interests by not letting him go; they wanted their protector with them, and it is fitting for a Jewish leader to risk his life and throw it away for his people, rather than leaving them in danger and escaping with his own life alone. However, I have seen that many disagree. When the community of Mainz was besieged some years ago, they sent their illustrious sage Rabbi Chaim Hirsch to Frankfurt; the people of the Koblenz community and their rabbi, Rabbi Zisskind Gundersch,

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*Napoleone.* Chassidic folk legend has Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rymanov riding beside the Corsican soldier as he brings down the ghetto walls. (F. Kobler, *Napoleon and the Jews*, 1976; Baruch Mevorach, *Napoleon u’Tekufato*, 1968). Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, great-grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, was convinced that the French emperor was G-d’s vehicle to help the Jews reach their Redemption. Rav Nachman saw the French-Russian conflict as the Torah-prophesied pre-Messianic apocalyptic “War of Gog and Magog,” based on a *gematria* that the Messiah’s arrival would be in 5570 (1810). (Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812, which was close enough!) But Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady (the “*Alter Rebbe*,” author of the *Tanya*, the “bible” of Chabad Chassidism) strongly opposed the French liberator, concerned that France’s emancipation of the Jews would eventually cripple Jewish traditional values (as it did). At Rav Shneur Zalman’s urging, one of his disciples, Rabbi Moshe Meisels of Vilna, who had defected from the misnagdic Gaon of Vilna, became a “translator” in the French High Command but was, in reality, a spy, and kept the Russian generals apprised of French military decisions. The *Alter Rebbe* died in Pyene, Russia, in 1812, while fleeing Napoleon’s advancing *Grande Armée*. After the Russians won, the czar honored Rav Shneur and awarded his descendants the status of “An Honorable Citizen for All Generations.” This honorarium provided safety to the next five generations of Chabad Rebbes as they served the Jews of Russia (A. Marcus, *HaChasiduth*; Hillel Levine, *Should Napoleon Be Victorious: Politics and Spirituality in Early Modern Jewish Messianism*, 2001).

did the same. When Frankfurt was besieged they sent my teacher, the illustrious author of the *Hafla'ab* [Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz], to Henau. After all, why should he be a heavy burden on them when they are in trouble? Wherever he is he will pray and safeguard them and protect and save as much as possible. What good will it do them if he is also suffering? Thus, what emerges from this is that there is a dispute here between the leadership style of the leaders of the Prague community and that of those big communities that I mentioned—and after studying the matter, it seems that *this is an irreconcilable difference of opinions* [my italics].”<sup>14</sup>

A hundred years later, in the early twentieth century, the same moral predicament resurfaced with a vengeance. Hundreds of Torah leaders across the European continent were suddenly faced with a Kishinev pogrom (1903), a Russo-Japanese war (1904), a Bolshevik-Communist revolution (1917), and a Great War (1914) which brought the Jewish world the worst carnage since the Great War of 66–70 CE.

The majority of *yeshivos* in Lithuania shut down.<sup>15</sup> Half of the million Jews in Galicia and Bukovina fled into Bohemia, Hungary, and Austria.

Across Eastern Europe, the rabbinic hierarchy debated Biblical precedent: Hadn't Moses fled Egypt after Dasan and Aviram informed on him?<sup>16</sup> Hadn't Jacob fled from his brother in the face of physical and spiritual danger? Hadn't David fled from King Saul for similar reasons? But what about the saga of Elimelech? Wasn't he punished by G-d for fleeing at a time of trouble,<sup>17</sup> thus causing Israel to despair?<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> M. Sofer, *Chiddushei Chasam Sofer*, on *Chullin* 46a.

<sup>15</sup> One major exception was the yeshivah of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch, the illustrious Telzer Rav and *rosh yeshivah* who decided to stay put and not follow the other *yeshivos* into Russia.

<sup>16</sup> *Shemos* 2:11–14; *Yalkut Shim'oni* 1:167.

<sup>17</sup> Elimelech fled to Moab in the face of a famine with his wife (Naomi); he and his two sons died there (*Ruth* 1:2, 3; 2:1, 3; 4:3, 9). Naomi then returned to Eretz Yehudah with her daughter-in-law (Ruth).

<sup>18</sup> *Midrash Ruth Rabbah* 1:4.

When the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (Sfas Emes) was faced with the same stay-or-flee dilemma before World War I, he gave a very direct response:

“The most natural human response to danger is to attempt to escape, and this is the correct approach from a halachic perspective as well. When we enter this world we are given a lease on life, but we do not own our lives. Every individual, therefore, must relate to his life as if it has been placed in his trust and he is its guardian.”

In Dvinsk, the Jews scrambled to get out as fast as possible, but the resolute Rabbi Meir Simchah (*Or Some'ach*), the undisputed Torah authority of his time, refused to leave, defiantly declaring, “As long as there are nine Jews in Dvinsk, I will complete the *minyan!*”

Meanwhile, in Radin, Poland, Rabbi Tzvi-Hirsch Levinson, *rosh yeshivah* and son-in-law of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (Chafetz Chaim),<sup>19</sup> could not decide. Stay, and fall under German rule? Or flee to Russia? So he turned to the “Goral haGra.”<sup>20</sup> Thus the destiny of the legendary Radin yeshivah was decided lottery-style.

The “winning” verse was: “With my staff I crossed the Jordan, and now I have become two camps.” The yeshivah immediately fled to Minsk, Russia.

During the winter of 1921, fifty students, including Rabbi Aharon Kotler, from Yeshivas Eitz Chaim, a branch of Slabodka in Shtetl, White Russia,<sup>21</sup> fled to Kletzk, Poland. The *rosh yeshivah*, Rabbi Isser

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<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Moses M. Yoschor, *The Chafetz Chaim: The Life and Works of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin*, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> It is unclear why this “lottery” process is named after the Vilna Gaon (haGra), since during his era it had been in use already for a few hundred years. Another anecdote: Rabbi Aharon Kotler was in Shanghai and didn’t know whether to go to Palestine or accept Rabbi Moshe Feinstein’s invitation to the United States, so he opened a *Tanach* and spotted the Torah verse: “And G-d said to Aharon [Kotler], ‘Go to greet Moshe [Feinstein] in the desert [of America]’” (*Shemos* 4:27). Rav Kotler then knew what to do (Rabbi Dov Eliach, *Sefer HaGaon*, 2002; [I assume this anecdote is true despite the fact that this book was “banned” by certain *rabbanim* in Israel. See also Rabbi Alter Pekier, *From Kletzk To Siberia*, Artscroll, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> Lester S. Eckman, “History of Yeshivot in Lithuania and White Russia from their Beginnings until 1945”, 2006.

Zalman Meltzer, stayed behind with the remaining hundred students, among whom was Rabbi Elazar Menachem Man Shach, “the Vaboiniker *masmid*” and future *rosh yeshivah* of Ponovezh, Bnei Brak.

Rav Meltzer, based on a *gemara* (“Torah is a shield against suffering”),<sup>22</sup> was convinced that the presence of a yeshivah and its Torah learning protected the local 15,000 Jews of Slutzk.

But the harsh reality of a merciless Bolshevism soon prevailed. The yeshivah was confiscated, the teaching of Torah outlawed.

In a letter dated December 1922 and addressed to his relative<sup>23</sup> Rabbi Tzvi Pesach Frank, the future chief rabbi of Jerusalem, Rav Meltzer poured out his spiritual quandary: “I am confused... it seems advisable and correct to depart from here, and then it seems that there is no permission to leave here according to [Torah] law.”<sup>24</sup>

Rav Kotler recalls the hesitancy of his father-in-law, Rav Meltzer, in leaving:

“[He] definitely did not want to leave, even though it was already impossible to function... Due to his great compassion for the townspeople who found solace in him amidst their bleak plight, he endangered himself and remained... despite having various opportunities to leave the city. Only after he had spent six weeks in jail [together with Rav Sandomirsky] and been released on bail, with two court cases pending against him for teaching Torah, and was in an extremely dangerous situation, did he ask me to ask the Chafetz Chaim whether he should leave Slutzk.”<sup>25</sup>

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan advised Rav Meltzer not to leave. The *rosh yeshivah* stayed another eighteen months until the circumstances became intolerable. “When the [Communist] decrees worsened and they persecuted the [Torah] scholars more and more... I had to leave that evil place.”

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<sup>22</sup> *Sotah* 21a.

<sup>23</sup> Rav Meltzer’s father-in-law (Rabbi Shraga Feivel Frank, a wealthy fur merchant in Kovno, Lithuania) and Rav Frank’s father (Rabbi Yehuda Leib) were brothers.

<sup>24</sup> Rabbi Asher Bergman, *Path to Greatness: The Life of Maran Harav Elazar Menachem Man Shach*, Volume I: *Vaboinik to Bnei Brak* (1899–1953), 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Yedael Meltzer (Rav Zalman’s grandson), *Hamodia*, December 16, 1981.

In 1925, Rav Meltzer boarded a boat to Palestine,<sup>26</sup> a decision that saved his immediate family from the Holocaust. The Jewish community of Shtetl would later be ravaged by the Nazis and their collaborators. It ceased to exist by the end of 1941. The same bloody fate awaited the Jewish community of Kletzk, including the murder of the yeshivah's *mashgiach*, Rabbi Yaakov Tcherbochovsky, his wife (Devorah, who was Rav Kotler's sister), and their son.

When Rabbi Moshe Feinstein<sup>27</sup> returned to Luban,<sup>28</sup> White Russia (Belarus),<sup>29</sup> he faced a new threat: the zealous members of Yevsektsia, the Jewish section of the Soviet Communist party, who sought the death of Judaism as a religion.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Rav Meltzer's place was taken by Rabbi Yechezkel ("Chatzkel") Abramsky, a brilliant 37-year-old Torah scholar who survived the Holocaust by leaving Europe early (in 1932) for England, where he became one of the most prominent *dayanim* of the postwar era (heading the London Beth Din for seventeen years).

<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Shimon Finkelman and Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *Reb Moshe: The Life and Ideals of HaGaon Rabbi Moshe Feinstein*, 1986.

<sup>28</sup> Because Rav Moshe had fled Luban on a Lag baOmer, he never kept this day as a "pause" in *Sefirah* mourning.

<sup>29</sup> There must have been something special about Belarus. Not only did it produce Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the leading twentieth-century American *posek*, but also three presidents and four prime ministers of Israel, including Menachem Begin, Yitzchak Shamir, Golda Meir, and Ariel Sharon.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Marx, the baptized Jew and prophet of communism, fiercely attacked his former religion. By the 1930s, there was a plethora of anti-Semitic laws: the teaching of Torah was declared a crime, *yeshivos* and *chadarim* became illegal, synagogues were requisitioned and used as socialist meeting clubs, and Josef Stalin found a new hobby: persecuting rabbis. Rabbis had to pay punitive taxes, and false accusations were followed by sham trials. How did the *rabbanim* react? Many simply quit their posts. (Salo W. Baron, *The Russian Jews Under Tsars and Soviets*, 1976). Meanwhile, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber Schneersohn, fifth rabbi of Lubavitch (Rashab), stayed and organized a clandestine network of Jewish educational facilities. The network of Jewish educational institutions that his son, Rav Yosef Yitzchak, the sixth Rebbe of Lubavitch, established during the early Soviet regime was a significant factor in the preservation of Judaism among Soviet Jews. Rav Schneersohn's escape

Rav Feinstein remained. When asked why, the quiet *rav* replied that he was the only practicing rabbi left in town and thus felt a duty to stay. But, like Rav Meltzer, he was unable to sustain his gallant decision. By 1936, the risks could no longer be ignored.

In the following year, the Feinstein family set sail for the safety of New York Harbor. Within five years, the Jews of Luban were no more. Rav Moshe's father-in-law and mother-in-law remained and were murdered by the Nazis. His brother, Rabbi Mordechai Feinstein, the Rav of Shklov, had been sent to his death in Siberia.<sup>31</sup>

In New York, Rav Moshe's mind was still not at ease and he confided to Rav Wasserman that there were people "back home" who were still very angry at him, accusing him of "deserting" them.

Rav Wasserman eased his conscience by quoting the Chofetz Chaim: "No one can be expected to spend his whole life in a place [where] it is forbidden to speak G-d's Name."

## **The Wake-Up Call**

On November 9–10, 1938, Hitler's career thugs unleashed a pogrom that would have made medieval Crusaders or the czars of Russia proud. It became known as the cataclysmic "Night of Broken Glass," or euphemistically, *Kristallnacht* ("Crystal Night"). More Jewish-owned glass was shattered during that one night than the entire annual glass production of Belgium.

Thirty thousand Jewish men between the ages of sixteen and sixty were sent to suffer in Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen. Many didn't return. Instead, their families received tin cans of ashes with a cynical proviso on the outside ("[3.75 marks] Postage Due on Arrival") and a bill for cremation inside.

Those who did return, recalls Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach<sup>32</sup> in a biography of his saintly father, Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Carlebach, "came

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from the Russians in 1927 was aided by Rabbi Mordechai Dubin, head of Agudas Yisrael in Latvia and a senator in the Latvian Parliament. Rav Dubin survived the Holocaust and remained in Russia, only to be killed by the Communists in 1957.

<sup>31</sup> Introduction, *Iggerot Moshe*, Volume 8.

<sup>32</sup> This Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach is not to be confused with his cousin, Rav Shlomo Carlebach, the "singing rabbi."

back maimed, with terror in their eyes.”<sup>33</sup> And yet, after being beaten by marauding mobs, harassed by the Gestapo, and having his beloved Bornplatz Synagogue in Hamburg destroyed, Rav Carlebach decided to stay and rebuild, as did many other Orthodox German *rabbanim* and community leaders.<sup>34</sup>

In the United States, the concerned family of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer, a popular, dignified, and learned rabbi in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, immediately sent him and his family entry permits to America, but the *rav* refused to leave, explaining that it would be wrong to desert his synagogue and friends.<sup>35</sup>

The results? Rav Unsdorfer was later murdered with his wife in Auschwitz, and in March 1942, the majestic Rav Carlebach was murdered in a forest near Riga, Latvia, together with his wife (Charlotte) and three daughters (Ruth, Naomi, and Sara).<sup>36</sup> Ten thousand Jews of

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<sup>33</sup> S. Carlebach, *Ish Yehudi: The Life and Legacy of a Torah Great: Joseph Tzvi Carlebach*, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> In 1939, the Jews of Danzig quickly sold all the antique Judaica in their magnificent 1,600-member Great Synagogue to the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, and used the proceeds to buy passage out of Germany. They were the only Jewish community in Germany to do so.

<sup>35</sup> Rav Unsdorfer stayed but he sent his two older sons, aged nineteen and twenty, to England. His teenage son, Simcha Bunim, survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald, went to England and became the General Secretary of Agudas Yisrael and editor of the religious weekly, *The Jewish Tribune*. In his sensitive memoir, Rav Simcha Bunim recalled his father's thought patterns after *Kristallnacht*, which were similar to those of many German *rabbanim* at the time: “[My father] was an optimist, an unshakable believer in the triumph of human rights and justice. He believed that we were all in G-d's hands and he remained optimistic... By early 1942, the threat of deportation became really serious. Terror and fear descended upon us like a blanket of fog. But father remained hopeful. ‘The Slovakian government is headed by Tiso, a Catholic priest,’ he would argue. ‘He could never allow deportation! No religious man would ever be party to it! The Vatican wouldn't permit it.’ But by April 1942, these hopes were shattered. The mass murder of Slovakian Jewry began at the rate of three thousand per week. Father was still an optimist, but his faith was now tempered by events...” (Rabbi Simcha Bunim Unsdorfer, *The Yellow Star*, 1961).

<sup>36</sup> Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Carlebach's youngest son, Shlomo, survived four years in nine different concentration camps, and ended up in the

his Hamburg community disappeared into the bowels of Auschwitz (Oswiecim) in southern Poland, and Theresienstadt (Terezin), Czechoslovakia.

A year earlier, in September 1941, the Jews of Ponovezh, Lithuania, had been herded into the nearby Pajnoste Forest and murdered *en masse*.

Their *rav*, Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, survived because he was in Palestine, en route to the United States for a fund-raising visit. His wife (Feigie) and children were killed; only one son survived the Holocaust.

At his funeral,<sup>37</sup> his disciple Rabbi Shmuel Rozovsky revealed that

“[Rav Kahaneman’s] soul found no rest. He was frequently bothered and disturbed by the thought: ‘I saved myself but not my ship.’ [But] this is what gave him tremendous strength to create and build, to work day and night, all for one goal: so that instead of having ‘saved myself but not my ship’ he would also save his ship, his generation. He would rebuild the destroyed world of Torah, restoring the crown to its former glory, until it would be as if he had saved the entire ship by extricating it from the stormy ocean waves and bringing it to the safe shores of Zion.”<sup>38</sup>

### What is the *Halachah*?

Must the [rabbinic] captain go down with his sinking [community] ship?<sup>39</sup>

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United States as the *mashgiach ruchani* of Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, Brooklyn. Rav Carlebach’s four older sisters and brothers survived the Holocaust because their parents had sent them, and another sister, to England and Palestine before the War.

<sup>37</sup> Another eulogy pointed out the agonizing dialogue between Noah, who saved himself but not his ship [i.e., his generation], and Moses, who saved himself *and his ship*. Because Noah failed to save his generation, the (negative connotations) of treacherous floodwaters were named for him: “the waters of Noah.” (*Devarim Rabbah* 11:3; *Bereishis Rabbah* 34:4).

<sup>38</sup> Rabbi Shmuel Rozovsky, *Zichron Shmuel*.

<sup>39</sup> In his commentary on *masechet Horayot*, Rabbi Chaim Hirschensohn, whose family had moved to Palestine from Pinsk in the late nineteenth century, and who became the Rav of Hoboken, New Jersey in 1904, discusses the maritime custom of “women and children first” and con-

From all of the above, it seems that there is no answer, just general guidelines. One of the most painful and consequential of all leadership decisions during the Third Reich's *Endlösung der Judenfrage*, was left up to each individual.

In the midst of the inferno, the same question was posed to the *dayan* of Brisk but he could not give an answer. He compared the Hitlerite times to the pre-Creation “chaos” that, he reminded everyone, after thousands of years was still beyond the comprehension of the greatest of rabbis.

And what was the position of Rav Grodzinsky? Rav Grodzinsky had personally been in the same tight spot as the Chasam Sofer. He had fled Vilna during World War I and later described how “personally wounded” he felt when he returned home and was accused of abandoning his community.

Twenty years later, with the outbreak of Nazi hostilities in Poland, the 77-year-old Torah leader stayed in Vilna (he was too sick to travel)<sup>40</sup> but he urged all the *roshei yeshivos*, teachers, and students to get out of Poland as quickly as possible. But he was much more ambivalent towards Poland's community *rabbanim* and, even to those who had already fled to Vilna, Rav Grodzinsky cautiously suggested that perhaps they should return and stay with their communities. Yet he did not pressure anyone, and reiterated the position of the Chasam Sofer: that there exists no absolute *psak*, and that each *rav* had to assess his own circumstances, sense of duty, and risk.

And that is exactly what they did. 170 rabbis and *roshei yeshivos*, and 2,300 fleeing expatriates from the top twenty-three Polish *yeshivos*, arrived in Vilna, including such influential figures as Rabbi Yitzchak Ze'ev (“Velvel”) Soloveitchik from Brisk, Rabbi Aryeh Shapiro and Rabbi Abraham Yaphin from Bialystok, Rabbi Moshe Shatzkes from Lomza, Rabbi Aharon Kotler of Kletzk, Rabbi Eliezer Yehudah Finkel from Mir, Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman of Baranowicze, Rabbi Mendel Zacks from Radin, and Rabbi Shabtai Yogel of Slonim.

Most had left their wives, children and other family members behind because they thought their absence was only for a short time,

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cludes it is in conflict with Jewish law (*chayecha kodmin*), since one's life comes before others.

<sup>40</sup> “The Day Vilna Died,” by Yosef Friedlander, in *Tradition* 37:2, Summer 2003.

and because of the severe weather conditions and malnutrition which made traveling a serious risk. (The winter of 1939–40 was one of the coldest Europe had experienced in the twentieth century.)

Once they were ensconced in Vilna, the fateful debate began, as they reviewed their options with their Lithuanian counterparts, including the yeshivah heads of Ponovezh, Slabodka, and Telz.<sup>41</sup>

With the exception of the Agudas Yisrael convention, this was the largest concentration of the greatest Torah minds in all of Europe, all facing the same question: what to do next?

And they could not agree on a course of action.

Consider: Rav Grodzinsky,<sup>42</sup> supported by his local *Vaad HaYeshivos*<sup>43</sup> and its top rabbis, including Rabbi Nisan Yofe (who was later murdered at Ponar), Rabbi Aharon Berek (who was killed in the Vilna ghetto), Rabbi Chizkiyahu Yosef Mishkovsky (who survived the Holocaust), and the influential Rabbi Joseph Shub, wanted them to “stay put” (*shav ve'al ta'ase*) in Vilna, arguing that in times of uncertainty, one takes no risk.<sup>44</sup> They still remembered World War I when such *yeshivos* as Eitz Chaim, Radin, Mir, and Navahrudak fled to Rus-

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<sup>41</sup> Hillel Seidman, “*Yeshivat Eitz Hayim de-Kletzke*,” Shmuel Mirsky, *Mosdot*; Yoseph David Epstein, *Yeshivat Mir*, Mirsky, *Mosdot; Churban un Rettung: Die Geschichte fun “Vaad Hatzala” in America*, 1957; Yitzhak Arad, *Concentration of Refugees in Vilna on the Eve of the Holocaust*, Yad Vashem Studies 9, 1973; Yehuda Bauer, *Rescue Operations Through Vilna*, Yad Vashem Studies 9, 1973; Baruch Oren, “*MiVilna Derech Yapan el HaOlam HaChofshi* [From Vilna via Japan to the Free World],” in *Yalkut Moreshet*, no. 1, 1969; Efraim Zuroff, *Rescue via the Far East: The Attempt to Save Polish Rabbis*, Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual 1, 1984.

<sup>42</sup> Aharon Suraski, *Achiezer: Kovetz Iggerot shel Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski*, 1970.

<sup>43</sup> “The Committee for the *Yeshivos*” was formed in 1924 in Grodno to service a network of seventy Polish *yeshivos*. It ceased all activities in 1940.

<sup>44</sup> Rav Grodzinsky also wanted them to stay for another reason: since he fully expected the yeshivah students to help rebuild Torah life in Poland after Hitler’s (imminent) defeat, he did not want them dispersed too far away. Rav Grodzinsky was also concerned that the *yishuv* in Palestine could not support so many *yeshivos* all at once and thus many students would “drop out” of *talmud Torah* and look for jobs.

sia, only to return to Poland when hostilities ceased.<sup>45</sup> At a meeting of *roshei yeshivos* to discuss several plans of emigration, Rav Grodzinsky urged the sages “not to panic, that every place is dangerous and that Lithuania might remain calm... being neither black nor red, but pink.”

This fantasy was shattered one bright summer day in June 1940. The safe haven of Vilna, and other cities in Lithuania, suddenly turned into a claustrophobic Soviet bear trap.<sup>46</sup>

The fact is that within their stressful, complicated, and unprecedented situation, nobody in Vilna knew what to do. Some rabbis were saved because they listened to their students; some students died because they listened to their rabbis. Some rabbis died because they took the advice of other rabbis; others lived for the same reason. No one had a road map to safety. Each decision came into being flawed by the very inexplicability and unpredictability of the dangerous times.

Rabbi Shimon Kalish, the Amshinover Rebbe, supported by Rabbi Avraham Dov-Ber Kahane-Shapiro, the highly influential *rav* of Kaunas, disagreed with Rav Grodzinsky; they urged their colleagues and students to get out as fast as possible via the closest exit valve. But the rabbis of Kamenetz thought it best to return to Poland right away and wait out the hostilities. Meanwhile, the student body of Mir wanted to go east to the United States, the Brisker Rav wanted to go to Palestine, while the yeshivah heads of Telz decided to stay because that’s what the previous *rosb yeshivah* (Rabbi Y. Bloch) had done during World War I. (The Telz students were later rounded up and brutally murdered, as was Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch, their *rosb yeshivah*, together with his family.)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Yoel Finkelman, “Haredi Isolation in Changing Environments: A Case Study in Yeshiva Immigration,” *Modern Judaism*, Volume 22, 1, February 2002.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Dworzecki, *Jerusalem of Lithuania in Battle and Destruction*, 1948; Yitzhak Arad, *Jewish Vilna in Struggle and Destruction*, 1976 (in English, *Ghetto in Flames*, 1980).

<sup>47</sup> The *rosb yeshivah*’s brother, Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Bloch, and brother-in-law, Rabbi Chaim Mordechai (“*Mottel*”) Katz, survived the Holocaust because they had left Telz in the autumn of 1940 for the United States on a fund-raising trip. They arrived in the winter of 1941 together with ten Telz students who had trekked through Siberia, Japan, and Austra-

When Rav Shach asked Rav Grodzinsky what to do, he received a cryptic response that Russia should not be left void of Torah scholars (i.e.: hinting that Rav Shach should return to Kletzk; instead, Rav Shach decided to go to Palestine). Rav Kotler wanted to go to Palestine and was adamantly against Orthodox Jews going to the United States. He warned those going east that they would end up in Siberia. Ironically, Rav Kotler ended up surviving the Holocaust by going to America.

At the end of June 1941, the *roshei yeshivah* of Slabodka and their students in the Kovno ghetto were murdered, as was the brilliant Rabbi Yonah Karpilov who had his internal organs ripped out and wrapped around his tallis; the yeshivah's *gabbai*, Reb Gershon, had his throat slit.<sup>48</sup> The *rosh yeshivah*, Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky, continued giving *mussar shiurim* in the ghetto until he was taken to a hospital in July 1944 after a serious beating. He died the following day when the Nazis burnt the ghetto hospital to the ground.<sup>49</sup>

In mid-1941, Rabbi Daniel Movshovitz, the *rosh yeshivah* of the famous Kelm Bais HaTalmud, Lithuania, and brother-in-law of Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler,<sup>50</sup> was murdered together with all the *rabbanim*, teachers, students, and their families in the Grozhebiski fields.<sup>51</sup>

Nechamah Leibah was the oldest daughter of the Alter of Kelm. She couldn't walk. So the daughter of Rabbi Simchah Zissel Ziv, the

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lia, and were unable to return. By then, the Nazis had occupied Lithuania. The two *rabbanim* knew nothing about the fate of their families. Later, Rav Bloch was told that his wife and four children had been murdered. Rav Katz was told of the murder of his wife and ten children. (Rabbi Avraham Shoshana, "The Yeshiva in its Development: Chapters of History and Evaluation" in *Sefer Yovel HaMei'ah shel Yeshivas Telshe*, 1975).

<sup>48</sup> Ephraim Oshry, *The Destruction of Lithuanian Jewry*, 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Rabbi Zechariah Fendel, *From Dusk to Dawn*, 2002.

<sup>50</sup> Rav "Lazer" survived the Holocaust by moving with his father to London for health reasons. He would later become the influential *rosh kollel* of Gateshead, London, and the *mashgiach* of Ponovezh Yeshivah in Bnei Brak, Israel.

<sup>51</sup> Rabbi Shmuel Shechter, *Orchos Chaim LeHaRosh*; E. E. Dessler, *Michtav MeEliyahu* 3.

yeshivah's founder, carried her in a chair to her grave. She was then thrown into a gravel pit to die.<sup>52</sup>

As late as mid-1944, Hungarian Torah sages felt so secure that they were already planning for a postwar “re-generation” of Jewish life in Hungary. But Adolf Eichmann had other plans. At breathtaking speed, the top tier of Hungarian *rabbanim* and their families were methodically shoved onto trains and gassed immediately upon their arrival at the Auschwitz-Birkenau grounds.

***Ich bin nisht besser fun zei—  
“I am not better than they.”***

The idea that major rabbinical figures (Ger,<sup>53</sup> Belz, Satmar, Lubavitch) escaped Hitler's tightening vise, while thousands of their loyal followers were misled into meeting horrible fiery deaths, is an indictment grounded more in anguish and anger than in facts.

The obligation of a trapped Torah leadership during unprecedented times of terror and trauma is a complex issue, and the moral nuances are extraordinarily multifaceted and cannot be generalized. Even when rabbis fled from one place to another there was no guarantee of safety; the executioner usually followed them. (Consider: When the Germans arrived in Zdunska Wola on September 6, 1939, the town's two rabbis, Rabbi Moshe Ber and Rabbi M. Gelbard, escaped. Both were later killed [Rav Ber in the Warsaw ghetto, Rav Gelbard in the Ukraine] in the same year, 1942, as their community was liquidated.)

Scores of Torah leaders flatly rejected opportunities to escape, refusing to leave their families and communities. One need only flip through the dozens of *Yizkor Sefarim* (“Memorial Books”), and shudder at the extensive number of rabbis, *rebbe*s, and *roshei yeshivos* listed among the dead.

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<sup>52</sup> Isaac Lewin, *These Will I Remember!: Biographies of Leaders of Religious Jewry in Europe who Perished During the Years 1939–1945*, Volume 1; Yiddish original: *Eilab Azkerah*, Research Institute of Religious Jewry, 1956.

<sup>53</sup> Gerer Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter's instincts were correct when, on a previous visit to Palestine, he decided to stay. But the *rebbe* returned to Poland after being pressured by his Chassidim, and ended up escaping back to Palestine in 1940. The vast majority of his 200,000 followers were murdered.

Although there are no accurate statistics, the low number of rabbinic survivors suggests that the vast majority agreed with the thought process of Rabbi Yitzchak Menachem Mendel Danziger, the fourth *Admor* of Alexander, Lodz, and leader of the second-largest Chassidic group in Poland.

Rav Danziger was stuck in the Warsaw ghetto and had a chance to flee to Palestine. He approached this sensitive issue by focusing on two parallel statements in the Torah and Talmud (“For they had holy work to do; they carried it on their shoulder... the Ark that carries its bearers”),<sup>54</sup> and concluded that Torah leaders must stay and shoulder the burdens of their communities, which he defined as “holy work,” declaring, “I will not save my life when all the Jews are in danger!”

In 1943, Rav Danziger was murdered with his family in Treblinka.

In Rezekne, Latvia, the Jews asked Rabbi Lubocki and Rabbi Yaphin what to do. The two rabbis said they were staying with the community, but each Jew should follow his own conscience whether to stay or flee.

Both rabbis were murdered together with the Jews who remained.

In September 1939, Rabbi Shimon Kalish, the Amshinover Rebbe, urged his Jewish community of Otwock, a health-spa town south of Warsaw, Poland, to leave before the Germans arrived. After they refused, he no longer felt bound to stay, and, together with his wife and son, managed to escape at the last moment, as did the *Admorim* of Lubavitch (Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn) and Modzhitz (Rabbi Shaul Yediyah Elazar Taub), who were also in Otwock.

By September 1942, the 12,000 Jews of Otwock had disappeared in Treblinka.

When the war broke out, the noble Rabbi Avraham Dov-Ber Kahane-Shapiro, president of the rabbis of Lithuania, was in Switzerland for health reasons. His son, Yerucham Yehudah Leib, a prominent attorney in America, immediately understood the risks involved if his

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<sup>54</sup> *Bamidbar* 7:9; *Sotah* 35a.

father returned to Kovno, and urged him to go straight to Palestine. Instead, Rav Kahane-Shapiro, although a committed Zionist, returned to his hometown, explaining, “The ship’s captain is the last to abandon the burning ship, not the first. In this time of danger, this time of trouble for Israel, my place is with my community.”<sup>55</sup>

He then sat down and began writing halachic guidelines for the soon-to-be thousands of *agunos*, and in February 1943, the ailing chief rabbi of the Kovno ghetto was murdered. His family was executed the following year in the infamous Ninth Fort outside Kovno.

When he first heard that Jews were being gassed in mobile vans and buried in mass graves in Chelmno, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau, chief rabbi of Piotrkow-Trybunalski, Poland, the thirty-seventh descendant of a rabbinical dynasty (with a Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Vienna), urged everybody to flee the ghetto immediately. But he decided to stay, explaining, “A shepherd does not abandon his flock in the face of a pack of wolves. I will not seek to save my own skin and abandon my flock.”

Rav Lau and “his flock” of 24,000 Jews met their deaths in the gas chambers of Treblinka in October 1942. Several of his sons died with him. Rebbetzin Lau was murdered in November 1944. Their youngest son, Yisrael Meir,<sup>56</sup> was liberated from Buchenwald in April 1945 by American forces.

In the spring of 1939, five months before World War II began, Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman was on a fund-raising trip to America. The administration of Yeshivas Torah Vodaath, Brooklyn, urged him to stay. Rabbi Shlomo Hyman, the *rosh yeshivah*, had agreed to step aside for him, while Rabbi Gedalya Schorr was busy procuring the necessary visas to get Rav Wasserman’s students out of Europe.

But Rav Wasserman insisted on going back, explaining, “Would you have me abandon my family and my additional four hundred children [i.e., students]?” During a stopover in London, Rav

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<sup>55</sup> Introduction, *Dvar Avraham*, 3, 1946.

<sup>56</sup> While studying at the Kol Torah Yeshivah in Jerusalem, Yisrael Meir was encouraged by the Gerer Rebbe and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach to enter rabbinics. He later became the poised and articulate Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Israel and the chairman of the Yad Vashem Council, Jerusalem.

Wasserman again rejected pleas from local supporters to stay away from Poland: “A captain does not abandon his ship in a storm. My place is at the yeshivah!”<sup>57</sup>

In 1941, the 67-year-old rabbinic “captain” was murdered by Lithuanian collaborators.

Two years later, amidst rampant starvation, deadly disease, and daily mass deportations to death camps, the Archbishop of Warsaw offered Rabbi Menachem Ziemba, Rabbi Samson Stockhammer, and Rabbi David Shapiro, the three leading rabbis in the Warsaw ghetto, refuge in his palace.

The rabbis discussed the dilemma they suddenly confronted. What, asked Rav Shapiro, would this do to the morale of the Jews in the ghetto?

“I am the youngest among you, and therefore my words are not binding on you. We already know that we cannot help our people, but by staying with them and by not abandoning them, we encourage them and strengthen their hopes, and this is the only encouragement we are able to give the last Jews. I simply do not have the strength to abandon these wretched people. Will we hide from the Almighty? The same G-d who is found there is found here...”<sup>58</sup>

Rav Shapiro’s two colleagues agreed. Rav Ziemba declared that there be no more discussion on this issue.<sup>59</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Rav Ziemba was machine-gunned to death. Rav Stockhammer died in a bomb attack just three days before liberation. Rav Shapiro survived and entered Jewish history as the “last Warsaw rabbi [of World War II].”

In 1942, the chief rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog, was in the United States when he heard that General Erwin Rommel’s *Afrika Korps* were fast advancing towards the Holy Land through North Africa. He immediately went back to lead the *yishuv*.

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<sup>57</sup> Elchonon Wasserman, *Ikvesa DiMeshicha* [The Messiah’s footsteps], (written in the late 1930s); Aharon Suraski, *Rabbi Elchonon: The Life and Ideals of Rabbi Elchonon Bunim Wasserman of Baranovich*, 1982.

<sup>58</sup> New York, *Forward*, March 1, 1947.

<sup>59</sup> Rabbi Y. Pinner, a major leader in Lodz, Poland, rejected a similar proposal from the Bishop of Lodz.

Rabbi Riccardo Pacifici, the chief rabbi of Genoa, Italy, refused an opportunity to flee the city and was later gassed to death in Auschwitz in December 1943.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, Rabbi Simchah Bunim Levin, grandson of Rabbi Chanoch Henoch, the Alexander Rebbe, and close friend of Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter of Ger (Imrei Emes), was offered his freedom from the Warsaw ghetto. He refused, unless the Imrei Emes's granddaughter and her child would be released with him.

His offer was rejected. He was murdered in Treblinka.

The young Rabbi Shmuel Shlomo Leiner, a scion of the Radziner Chassidic dynasty, was offered safe passage to Warsaw, but, displaying extraordinary courage, he stayed behind in Wlodawa to help his fellow Jews. Recognizing that his presence lifted the morale of their prey, the Gestapo demanded that Rav Leiner surrender or the ghetto's inhabitants would be slaughtered.

Rav Leiner calmly said goodbye to his wife and walked out to the enemy. He was then brutally beaten and sent to be gassed at Sobibor in May 1942.

Rabbi Moshe ("Moshenyu") Friedman, the Boyaner Rebbe of Cracow and president of the imposing Chachmei ("The Wise Men of") Lublin Yeshivah, refused a South American passport and stayed behind in the Tarnow ghetto in southern Poland.

By September 1943, the entire ghetto was officially declared *Judenrein*. The 62-year-old Boyaner Rebbe died with his people.

Rabbi Charles W. Steckel, chief rabbi of Osijek, Slavonija, received a two-word cable from Dr. Simon Ungar, the town's retired chief rabbi, that simply said, "*B'rach lecha!* (Flee at once!)." Rav Steckel, who survived the Holocaust, immediately urged Croatian Jews to flee to Italy or Hungary. In December 1940, he was offered an escape route but refused, twice. "It was my moral duty to be with my congregation," he explained humbly.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Alexander Stille, *Benevolence and Betrayal*, 1992.

<sup>61</sup> C. W. Steckel, *Destruction and Survival*, 1973.

At the end of 1939, Rabbi Shimon Rozowski, the Rav of Eishyshok, Lithuania, had his family from Palestine visiting him. His son (Uri) and daughter-in-law (Fania) begged him to return with them. He refused, explaining, “A shepherd must remain with his flock. They need me more than ever.”

Dozens of Chassidic *rebbe*s responded as if in unison.

One month before Hitler showed up, the English and Italian supporters of Rabbi Shlomo Chanoch Rabinowitz, the Radomsker Rebbe and brilliant creator of the “Keser Torah” yeshivah network throughout Poland, begged him to leave and sent him a ticket to fly to Italy from Lodz. The *rebbe* refused to board the plane, explaining, “How could I leave the Jews?”

The 60-year-old *rebbe* was murdered with his family three years later, in 1942, in the Warsaw ghetto.

The Brezener Rebbe, Rabbi Nachum Yehoshua Pechenik, refused an offer to escape from Dombowitz. The Chassidim of the Grodzisker Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael Shapiro, arranged false papers for him to leave the Warsaw ghetto, but he refused. Rabbi Yitzchak Yeshayahu Halberstam, Czechower Rebbe, did the same.

Rabbi Yechezkel Halstock, the Ostrowiecer Rebbe, refused an offer from a priest to be taken out of the Sandomierz ghetto. He insisted he would not abandon his community to save himself. Rav Halstock was later murdered by the Gestapo.

The *Admorim* of Zabner, Lisk, Zvolin, Karlin, Turzysk, and Grodzisk-Mazowiecki, all had opportunities to leave but refused.

When the following were given a chance to flee, here’s what they said: The Trisker Rebbe: “I want to be part of the fate of Polish Jewry.” Rabbi Baruch Safran, the Komarno Rebbe from eastern Galicia: “All the Jews are in trouble. Heaven forbid that any individual would say, ‘I will save my own life.’ I am with them in their suffering. So long as one Jew remains in the ghetto, I will stay with him.” Rabbi Eliyahu Lifshitz: “*Ich bin nisht besser fun zey*—I’m not better than they.” The Rav of Grójec (in Yiddish, Griza), Poland: “I am not permitted to leave my flock in time of distress!” Rabbi Chaim<sup>l</sup>, the last rabbi of Shidlovtzeh, insisted on staying with his community as they were marched to their death in Treblinka: “I went at the head

of my congregation in life, I will also go with them on the last journey.” When Rabbi Yeshayah Englard of Sosnowiec was tipped off by the Zagłębie *Judenrat* to escape a pending *Aktion*, he refused: “I will not leave them [his fellow Jews in the Zagłębie ghetto]. I will only be freed with everybody!”<sup>62</sup>

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Eisenberg of Lask, and Rabbi Yechezkel, the Rav of Ostrowiec, refused offers of freedom. So did Rabbi David Faygenbaum, descendant of Rabbi Yaakov Emden, who stayed behind in Pruzana, Lithuania. In January 1943 he became its last rabbi when he, his wife, and two sons met their Maker at Auschwitz.

Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum, the influential promoter of *kiddush bachaim* as the proper course of *kiddush Hashem*, flatly rejected safe passage out of Poland to stay with his people. He was murdered in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942. Refusing offers to leave were Rabbi Eliezer Halperin of Korets, Rabbi Kalmish Finkler of Radoszyce, and Rabbi Avraham David of Damits.

When the Germans arrived in Lublin, Poland, the family of Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Twersky, brother-in-law of the Novominsker Rebbe, made frantic efforts to get him out of Europe. In London, his son, Rav Avraham Yitzchak, arranged \$3,000 in order to bribe a Gestapo general. Rabbi Menachem Tzvi Eichenstein, his son-in-law in St. Louis, arranged a visa to the United States.

Rav Twersky wrote back to his son in London, “What is the captain’s duty when his ship capsizes? Should he desert the boat? I live in the midst of my people, and I cannot desert them.”

The 66-year-old Rav Twersky was murdered in 1942 together with his wife and daughter in the Kemnita Forest outside of Lublin.

Galician Rabbi Mordechai Rottenberg, chief rabbi of Antwerp, Belgium, and a member of the Mo’etzes Gedolei haTorah, was sent to the Vittel *Camp d’Internement* in France.

His charismatic daughter (Recha) and industrialist son-in-law (Yitzchak Sternbuch), renowned for their rescue activism, arranged for her father to flee to Switzerland. He refused to leave the other

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<sup>62</sup> Mazya, *Re'im ba-Sa'ar*; Memorial book of Zagłębie, *Pinkas Zagłębie*, Tel Aviv, 1972, edited by J. Rapaport, Zagłębie Society in Melbourne, Australia.

Jewish prisoners behind and, together with his wife (Devora), was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944.

Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, dean of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin (which never reopened after *Kristallnacht*), voluntarily joined the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto despite being a Lithuanian national and therefore permitted to leave Poland.

When hostilities began on September 1, 1939, Hungarian Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandl was studying old Hebrew manuscripts at the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, London. Yet he immediately volunteered to return to Slovakia as an agent of World Agudas Yisrael, and there he plunged into rescue activities.

Rav Weissmandl survived the Holocaust, but his wife and small children were murdered in Auschwitz in 1944.

When Adolf Eichmann<sup>63</sup> arrived in Budapest in March 1944 to deliver a quick death blow to the Jewish communities of Greater Hungary, Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Weiss, the second Spinka Rebbe, received an immigration permit for Palestine through neighboring Romania.

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<sup>63</sup> By March 1944, Eichmann had assembled the most efficient Jew-killing team of the Holocaust. From Slovakia and Greece came Dieter Wisliceny; from France and Bulgaria came Theodor Dannecker; from Paris came Alois Brunner; from Vienna came Hermann Krume; from Bergen-Belsen came Siegfried Seidl. These were experienced and savage bloodhounds of European Jews. Their instructions were simple: kill the Jews of Hungary, quickly. When Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz, complained to Eichmann that he could not “process” such large numbers of Jews properly, Eichmann ordered him to forget about selections and just gas everybody who stepped off the train. (Randolph L. Braham, *The Destruction of Hungarian Jewry, Volume I*, 1963, *The Holocaust in Hungary: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography, 1984–2000*; Robert Major, “The Holocaust in Hungary,” in *Jewish Currents*, December 1965). Only ten percent of the 800,000 Hungarian Jews loaded onto cattle car train carriages to Poland survived the War. Until then, Treblinka held the murder record (900,000 Jews killed in seventeen months) with Belzec coming in second (600,000 Jews killed in ten months). In 1943, Hitler had closed Treblinka and Belzec. Out of compassion? No. There were no more Polish Jews to kill.

The 69-year-old sage refused to leave and was murdered in 1944 in Auschwitz together with thirty-one members of his family.

Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rav, had two opportunities to flee, in 1941 and 1942, but he stayed. “Fortunate is he,” he explained, “who has the privilege to take part in rescue activity in such a time of trouble.”

The Satmar Rav eventually got out on the “Kastner train” in December 1944.

When his followers in Tiberias, Palestine, gave him an escape route, Rabbi Shlomo David Yehoshua Weinberg, the Rebbe of Slonim, politely demurred. “I may have made a mistake in staying here, but what can I do? Small children are depending on me!”<sup>64</sup>

With his family already murdered, Rav Weinberg was marched to the edge of a mass pit in November 1943 and shot.

Rabbi Klonimus Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczner Rebbe, a dynamic Chassidic leader of Polish Jewry, *rosh yeshivah* of an elite institution (Da’as Moshe) in Warsaw, and author of a remarkable series of Holocaust sermons (*Aish Kodesh*, “Holy Fire”), courteously spurned efforts by his Mizrachi friends to get him out of Warsaw to Vilna, explaining, “I do not intend to abandon the front and I cannot leave Polish Jewry!”

After his only son, daughter-in-law, and aunt were killed by Stuka dive bombers in a bombing raid, and his mother had died, Rav Shapira sighed, “I have already been personally beaten in this war.” He then spent the rest of his short life helping other Jews.

The 54-year-old holy man was murdered in the Trawniki labor camp in early 1943, having earlier defined the meaning of leadership: “A *rebbe* who is not willing to descend into hell in order to rescue his followers from destruction, is not a *rebbe*!”

## **The Bitter Criticism**

Rebbetzin Esther Farbstein, the refined great-granddaughter of the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter, was born after the War and raised in Jerusalem in a Holocaust-conscious home.

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<sup>64</sup> Berezovsky, *Zichron Kadosh*.

Farbstein wrote a master's thesis at Hebrew University on the rescue of Chassidic *rebbe*s during the Holocaust, and later published the classic two-volume *B'seter Ra'am*,<sup>65</sup> *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership during the Holocaust*, in which she only touches on the uncomfortable issue of whether to stay or to flee, and chooses not to make any judgment calls.

But others did. In his seminal study on the Holocaust,<sup>66</sup> Dr. Mendel Piekarz describes how, in May 1944, on the steps of the Auschwitz crematorium, Rebbetzin Eva Halberstam of Kosice, the widow of Rabbi Avraham Shalom Halberstam, the famous “miracle rabbi of Stropkov” who was murdered in 1940, bitterly criticizes the rabbis who fled their families and communities.

Her last (Yiddish) comments were recorded by Leyb Langfus, a wretched member of the *Sonderkommando*,<sup>67</sup> and found in 1952. In 1954, Rebbetzin Halberstam's heart-breaking lament was published in *Bleter far Geschichte*, a scholarly periodical in Warsaw.

“I am witnessing the end of Hungarian Jewry. The [Hungarian] government enabled large parts of the communities to escape. The Jews asked the Chassidic rabbis what to do and they always calmed them down. The Belzer Rebbe said that in Hungary we would get away with mere anxiety. Now the bitter moment has come when Jews can no longer save themselves. Indeed the Heavens have hidden [the truth] from them. But they themselves escaped at the very

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<sup>65</sup> The title was inspired by *Tehillim* 81:8.

<sup>66</sup> Piekarz never addresses the issue as to whether one should or shouldn't flee but merely passes judgment on those who did. The Midrash that Rav Teichtal cites, that rabbinic leadership should not abandon their communities, is the only Talmudic source that directly discusses the issue. (Mendel Piekarz, *Hasidut Polin-Bein Shtei ha'Milhamot u-be-Gezerot 1940–1945*, Volume 5 [*The Hasidic leadership: Authority and faith in zedekim as reflected in the Hasidic literature*], 1999). In 1967, on the eve of the Six-Day War, Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, who had been with the Mir Yeshivah for forty years, from Poland to Jerusalem, also quoted this Midrash as he condemned yeshivah students (whom he considered “Torah leaders”) for fleeing Israel because of the potential of hostilities.

<sup>67</sup> The *Sonderkommando* Jews were those who disposed of the corpses. Since these Jews saw and overheard things that were damaging to the Nazi cause, they were murdered at regular intervals. Only a handful out of several thousand survived and testified after liberation against their former “employers.”

last moment to the Land of Israel. They have saved themselves but have abandoned the people like lambs to slaughter! Master of the Universe! In my last minutes of life I beseech you, forgive them for the great desecration of the Divine Name [*chillul Hashem*].”<sup>68</sup>

A historically important contribution is provided by Rabbi Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal of Piestany, a respected *av beis din*, popular *rosh yeshivah*, skillful author of responsa (*Mishna Sachiv*), and one of the pre-eminent rabbis in prewar Hungary.

In March 1942, when the brutal deportation of Slovakian Jews began, Rav Teichtal hid in the attic of his synagogue and in October began writing a diary.<sup>69</sup> He was unaware of the full extent of the genocide or that he himself would soon become another “death statistic” at the Trawniki death camp near Lublin.

In a rare insight, stunningly unsparing in its criticism, Rav Teichtal, who had once supported the anti-Zionism of Rabbi Chaim Elazar Shapira of Munkacz<sup>70</sup> and then, courtesy of Hitler, changed his mind, accuses the leading Hungarian, Romanian and Slovakian rabbis

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<sup>68</sup> Esther Farbstein and others (for example, Rabbi Natan Ortner, a Belzer Chassid) call Piekarz’s claim historically “dubious and unreliable,” and suggests that he is simply out to “take a [malicious] swipe at the Chassidic leadership.” This may or may not be true; however, over the years, I have personally heard (and read) the same grievance from embittered Orthodox survivors and family members in Sydney-Melbourne, Australia, Israel, and the United States.

<sup>69</sup> The diary was discovered after the war and, in 2000, the English version was published as *Eim HaBanim Semeichah* [The mother of children is happy]: On *Eretz Yisrael*, redemption, and unity (Pesach Schindler, *Tikkun as Response to Tragedy*; “Eim HaBanim Semeichah of Rabbi Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal—Budapest 1943,” in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, Number 4, 1989.

<sup>70</sup> Rav Teichtal explains the *Admor* of Munkacz’s position: “The Minchas Elazar opposed resettling and rebuilding the Land [and] based his entire opposition on the idea that salvation must happen with miracles and wonders. In his opinion, anyone who tries to [bring salvation naturally] denies the redemption which will occur miraculously.” But Rav Teichtal was convinced that if his spiritual mentor had lived to witness and experience the crematoria, “he too would acknowledge that we should leave the countries of the Diaspora and go to *Eretz Yisrael*, which has been awarded to us by the world powers, and not wait for the Messiah’s call.”

of soothing their frightened communities by telling them that, because of the *z'chus* (“merit”) of their anti-Zionism, G-d would reward them and protect them from the Germans. Rav Teichtal is worth quoting at length:

“A large portion of our Israelite [European Jewish] brethren who were killed would have been saved if they had already been in *Eretz Yisrael*. And now, who will accept the responsibility for the pure blood which has been spilled in our time? Similarly, all those who deterred the Israelites from going to *Eretz Yisrael* and participating with those building [the land] cannot purify themselves and say: ‘Our hands have not shed this blood.’

“Those [anti-Zionists] who have a predisposition on this matter [fleeing to Palestine] will not see the truth and will not concede to our words. All of the evidence in the world will not affect them, for they are smitten with blindness, and their inner biases cause them to deny even things which are as clear as day. Who amongst us is greater than the [twelve] spies [*meraglim*]? The Torah testifies that they were distinguished, righteous individuals. Nonetheless, since they were influenced by their desire for authority, they rejected the desirable Land, and led others astray, causing this bitter exile... [These] spies were prejudiced by hidden motives. The same holds true in our times, even among rabbis, *rebbe*s, and Chassidim. This one has a good rabbinical position; this one is an established *Admor*, and this one has a profitable business or factory, or a prestigious job which provides great satisfaction. They are afraid that their status will decline if they go to *Eretz Yisrael*. People of this sort are influenced by their deep-rooted, selfish motives to such an extent that they themselves do not realize that their prejudice speaks on their behalf. People of this sort will not be convinced to accept the truth, even if they are shown thousands of proofs from the Torah... The holy kabbalist [Rabbi Eliyahu of Greidetz] who resembles an angel of the Lord of Hosts states explicitly that the reason there are *tzadikim* who oppose [*aliyah*] is because the *kelipot* [evil forces] have become strong within them. It entices them to nullify this great matter for which the Holy One Blessed Be He constantly longs. He longs for us to return to our forefathers’ inheritance, for every Jew has an obligation to strive to return to our Holy Land, as I will prove unequivocally from the words of our Sages [Rav Teichtal then quotes a variety of Torah and Talmudic sources who urge emigration to Is-

*rael because this]* can bring the final Redemption closer, speedily in our days.”<sup>71</sup>

In an amazing *mea culpa*, Rav Teichtal...

“confesses my sin. I, too, despised the rebuilding of the Land, because I heard unqualified statements made by many Orthodox Jews, which became firmly implanted in my heart. I did not concern myself with this matter at all, because I was preoccupied with learning, teaching, and writing volumes on the Talmud and its commentaries, as well as responses to questions regarding the word of Hashem. I only delved into this *halachah* after we suffered afflictions in this bitter exile. Hashem enlightened me, and I saw that I and all those who opposed this movement were mistaken. I admit and say, ‘That which I previously told you was mistaken,’ just like Rava and other great Talmudic Sages did.”<sup>72</sup>

When he no longer felt safe in the attic, Rav Teichtal tried to escape to Bratislava with part of his family but was caught in January 1945.

Thrown onto a train bound for a death camp, the 60-year-old rabbi was tortured and beaten to death by some Lithuanian passengers while the Nazis looked the other way. His family continued on and were all murdered at their destinations.

Ninety days later Hitler committed suicide and Germany surrendered.

## Conclusion

The fact is this: not a single Jew knew whether his decision, made with the best of intent, would save a life or hasten a death. One Jew’s survival often depended on another Jew’s death, what Professor Lawrence L. Langer, one of the foremost scholars of the Holocaust, calls the “choiceless choice.”<sup>73</sup>

Thousands of good, sensible, mature Jewish leaders made catastrophic personal decisions only because they were human.<sup>74</sup> It was

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<sup>71</sup> Y. S. Teichtal, *Eim HaBanim Semeichah*.

<sup>72</sup> *Shabbos* 63b.

<sup>73</sup> L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 1995.

<sup>74</sup> The chief rabbi of Osijek, capital of Slavonija, survived the War, and in a blunt reminiscence, sighed, “The rabbis who survived were simply fortunate, not clever.”

impossible to think wisely or act sensibly when entire populations were infected with Satan's motto from *Paradise Lost*, "Evil, be thou my good!"

The very torture and murder of 6,000,000 Jews, including the *crème de la crème* of Orthodox European society and a staggering Who's Who of Torah giants, proved that rabbinic decisions in the midst of mayhem, murder, and immorality can never be perfect.<sup>75</sup>

The most distinguished of Torah leaders were fallible, with human strengths and human weaknesses. How could it be otherwise? Prophecy had ceased to exist. There are no crystal balls in Judaism. There were no fail-safe solutions, no reliable road maps, nor any precedents to resist state-supported factories of genocide. From within the European inferno none could foresee the future, nor is there anything in Torah or Chassidic doctrine to suggest they could.

Advice was only as good as knowledge of the situation which changed by the hour. In other words: harsh reality, not wise *rabbanim*, ruled.

Consider: Initially, several major *rabbanim* (e.g., Rabbi Yehoshua Moshe Aharonson in the Kunin camp and Rabbi Avraham Dov-Ber Kahane-Shapiro in the Kovno ghetto) assumed that taking work pa-

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<sup>75</sup> In the 1950s, a group of Orthodox Holocaust survivors in Israel and New York formed "The Institute for Research of the Problems of Ultra-Orthodox Jews." Their aim was to publish a Hebrew-language memorial (*Eleh Ezkerah*, "These I Will Remember") containing the biographies of leading rabbis who were murdered in the Holocaust *al Kiddush Hashem*. The ambitious program stretched to seven volumes, with a total of 368 biographies consisting of three pages each, describing the life and death of a Torah martyr. But after the first edition the editors soon ran into a problem. Instead of coming across as a testimony of heroic spiritual resistance, the sheer volume and heart-breaking intricate details were spiritually numbing and disorienting. The bestiality committed against the wisest of all Jews was especially confusing and challenging to the faith of the young. The concern was apparent: flipping through so many unbearable photos and gruesome facts of saintly Torah pietists and their families humiliated, tortured, and cruelly murdered, might be seen as an indictment of a failed *da'as Torah*. Instead of giving *chizuk* to the emotionally bruised survivors and inspiration to future generations, it had the opposite effect: it spiritually anesthetized readers who were frightened and stunned by the consequences of the decisions of so many sages of Israel. No more editions were printed.

pers from the SS ensured a few more days of survival, and thus encouraged it. As it turned out, these Jews were immediately deported and murdered; in contrast, the Jews who refused the permits and either hid in cellars or fought back in forests had a greater chance of survival.

As soon as they became aware of the Nazi deception, both *rabbanim* quickly changed their minds.

One day Rabbi Deutsch, Rav of Sushak, gave a list of Jewish names to an Italian commander, deceived into thinking it was for humanitarian reasons. Instead, the Jews were handed over to Ustashi thugs and murdered in cold-blood. The rabbi, shocked at the betrayal, plunged into depression and was admitted to a mental institution in Nucera Inferiore, Italy. He never recovered.

In this foul world of Luciferian undertaking, all decisions, rabbinic or not, had no basis in a world where the irrational became rational, the absurd, logical, the abnormal, normal. In their struggle to survive, not even the wisest of the wise knew what was the right course of action.

Consider: Chaim Nachum Shapiro, the son of the esteemed Rabbi Avraham Dov Shapiro of Kovno, the last chief rabbi of Lithuania, boarded a train with his family convinced he had bought their safety to Switzerland. The train instead took them to the infamous Ninth Fort where they were all murdered in December 1943.

Meanwhile, the remarkable Rabbi Landau, Rav of Veretski and *dayan* in Nitra, Slovakia, ran a successful lumber business and used it to hide hundreds of Jewish refugees from Poland and Slovakia. When it came to his own family's safety, Rav Landau considered all the options and decided to send his children to Hungary where he was convinced it was safer. The result? Rav Landau, his wife and son, who stayed behind, survived the Holocaust. The children they sent to Hungary ended up in the furnaces of Auschwitz.

Czortkow was an exquisitely charming Western Ukrainian town in a deep valley with rivers, surrounded by greenery and snowcapped mountains in winter. The famous Ruzhin dynasty was founded there by Rabbi David Moshe Friedman, and the community was known for its religious supremacy and its learned and erudite Talmud scholars.

On July 6, 1941, the Germans invaded the town and decisions had to be made. The elders of the community met and reconfirmed their strong belief in the coming of the Messiah. They decided it was

too risky to join the retreating Soviets going east and that they would be safer by staying. The majority stayed with them.

Fast-forward two years: only 100 out of the 10,000 Jews of Czortkow survived. The rest met their brutal end in anonymous graves in the “black forests” or in the ovens at Belzec. But the majority of the several hundred Jews that went east with the Soviets survived.

And so we are left with a one-word answer...

### ***Bashert***

My parents, Reb Yechezkel ben Arye, זצ"ל, and Yehudis bas Chaya Sarah, *Ad Meah v'Esrim*, from Ostrolenka and Shmigrut, Poland, who between them lost over 130 family members, simply shrugged off their horrifying experiences of deportations, hunger, death camps, Siberian gulags.

G-d had His reasons, they sighed, and there was not much they could do about it except continue their lives as Torah Jews.

Being raised in this home atmosphere, I heard the refrain “If it’s *bashert*, it’s *bashert!*” (i.e., “It’s all predestined [fated] anyway!”) from dozens of Holocaust survivors who echo a 200-year-old quote from Rabbi Menachem Nachum Twersky, the Rebbe of Chernobyl and disciple of the Baal Shem Tov: “*Alz is Gott*—All is G-d.”

As Rabbi Dr. Ezekiel Lewin, chief rabbi of Lvov and the distinguished younger brother of Agudas Yisrael leader Rabbi Aaron Lewin of Rzeszow, Poland, put it: “We are all now in “G-d’s hands.” He died with his congregants.<sup>76</sup>

*Bashert* was the theological branch that my parents and many survivors clung to. It was the only “rational” Orthodox response to the “irrationality” of it all, a way to stay sane in an insane world.

All was filed under *emunah* (“faith”), the *ein lecha bo elah bidusho* approach, stapled to the history-is-no-mystery belief system, in that eternal gentile hatred (R’ Shimon ben Yochai’s *Eisav sonei Yaakov*, “Esau hates Jacob”) has been, and will always be, around.

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<sup>76</sup> Judith Leventhal and Yitta Halberstam, *Small Miracles of the Holocaust: Extraordinary Coincidences of Faith, Hope, and Survival*, 2008.

Does *bashert* work in strange ways? You decide. Rabbi Dienemann was one of the German Jews thrown into Buchenwald during *Kristallnacht*. After his wife (Mally) succeeded in procuring his release, the couple immediately fled to the safety of Palestine in March 1939. But upon arrival, the 63-year-old Rav Dienemann died. Was it *bashert* that Rav Dienemann live just long enough to die in Israel rather than Germany?

Rabbi Yosef Perlov of Novominsk was a courageous 30-year-old Jew who even managed to don *tefillin* in Auschwitz and survive the Holocaust... but not his fate. On April 15, 1945, just a few hours after he was liberated from Bergen-Belsen by the British Second Army, Rav Perlov died of starvation. Was it *bashert* that Rav Perlov live just long enough to be freed before dying?

Rabbi Friedberger smuggled a group of Jewish children, including his only son (Reuben) to Palestine via Budapest in the winter of 1943. Reuben was then killed in the Sinai desert fighting for Israel. Was it *bashert* that Reuben Friedberger be spared the Holocaust in order to die fighting for the Jewish nation?

And what about the tragic chain of events for Rabbi Elazar Rosenfeld, son-in-law of the saintly Rabbi Chaim Halberstam of Sanz?

In August 1936, Rav Rosenfeld fulfilled a life-long dream and went on *aliyah* to Palestine. He opened a small *beis midrash* near Meah She'arim, Jerusalem, and spent his days blissfully learning Torah. His timing was perfect. He left a full three years before Adolf Hitler began his rape of Poland. His move to Zion saved his life.

Or did it? A few years later, his family (three sons and five daughters) insisted he return to Poland so they could look after him in his old age, wishing to fulfill the mitzvah of *kibbud av*. Unable to say no to his children, the 77-year-old *Admor* of Oshpitzin reluctantly returned to Galicia in 1939. Three years later, on August 3, 1942, he was murdered in the barbaric Chrzanow ghetto.

Stricken with guilt, the survivors of his family decided that it was not they who brought their holy father out of the safety of the Holy Land into hostile Hitler territory. They were convinced it was Divine Providence (*bashert*). Why? So, they reasoned, the family could suffer, together.

Finally, consider the tragic causation in the heartbreaking saga of Rabbi Mordechai Birnbaum-Rosen, the Manistriche Rebbe, the 58-year-old *av beis din* of Vienna, Austria.

Rav Rosen had managed to get exit visas to the United States. When he found out that the train taking him to the Italian port left on a Shabbos in August, 1939, he decided not to board, despite the fact that he had just *paskened* the opposite for other Jews, that Jewish law obligated them to flee even on a Shabbos.

He decided to buy a ticket and, together with his wife, wait for the next boat (in November) because its train connection and departure date were on weekdays. The decision proved disastrous. The War began the next month and by September 10 the Gestapo was escorting the Manistriche Rebbe onto a different train with a different destination. In Buchenwald he was beaten to death upon arrival. His family received a letter that offered his ashes in return for money and postage.

When his *rebbetzin* received word of her husband's death, although packed and ready to board the weekday train to safety with her son (Aryeh Leib), she decided to postpone her departure to sit *shivah*. The Germans had other plans. Before the week was up, she and her bar mitzvah boy found themselves at the Ninth Fort near Kovno, where they were murdered.

When Rabbi Aharon Rokeach, the Belzer Rebbe, was asked to pray for Divine intervention to halt the Holocaust, he refused, explaining that whatever was happening was G-d's decree "[i.e., *basbert*] and nothing can be done [by us]."<sup>77</sup>

Earlier, in 1933, when he was asked to curse Adolf Hitler, the Chofetz Chaim is purported to have refused because he couldn't interfere: "If it's G-d's Will, G-d will!"

Meanwhile, Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum,<sup>78</sup> the heroic Holocaust archivist who died in the Warsaw ghetto, confides in his diary how the pious Jews waited for a miracle to save them (despite several Torah admonitions not to rely on miracles;<sup>79</sup> or, as that old Yiddish proverb goes, "Call on G-d—but row away from the rocks!").

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<sup>77</sup> Moshe Yechezkel, *The Rescue of the Belzer Rebbe From the Valley of Death*.

<sup>78</sup> Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*, 2007.

<sup>79</sup> *Shabbos* 32a; *Zohar, Bereishis* 113a–b.

But this proved to be fatal. Thousands of Jews and their leaders, taught that Judaic misfortune is their destiny (“For Your sake we are slaughtered everyday”),<sup>80</sup> simply waited in their apartments and homes for their executioners to arrive.

All roads of faith thus lead us to the rabbinic concept of *meichin mit-zadei gaver*, literally, “[G-d] guides him there.” Where? To his destiny.

Most Orthodox Jews simply call it *Basbert!* 

*This article is excerpted from Joe Bobker’s “The Rabbis and the Holocaust,” to be published by Gefen Books in the summer of 2010.*

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<sup>80</sup> *Psalms* 44:23.