

Foreword

One morning in 1953 I was sitting in a yeshiva (Talmudic academy) classroom, listening to the teacher, an elderly man with a long white beard, expound a difficult Talmudic discussion. As I lost track of the hair-splitting opinions of the different rabbinic scholars, I furtively opened a book on Polish Jewry that was tucked in my table drawer and that I had borrowed from the public library. Quickly flipping through the pages, I stopped to read that in the summer months of 1942, some two hundred fifty thousand Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto were delivered to the gas chambers in the Treblinka camp, and their remains turned into ashes. I remember sitting on my chair dumbfounded at this horrific event that took place quite recently, only eleven years ago, and that there was no mention at all and no reference to this ghastly deed in the yeshiva courses that I was attending. I wondered why this silence? Why this total educational neglect in a very traditional Jewish school? I also kept thinking what relevance the ancient Talmudic text has to that more recent catastrophe? Back at home, the story of that terrible *churban* (“devastation”)—the term *Holocaust* had not yet come into vogue—was also not discussed, though it was confirmed to have happened; this omission was also experienced by my cousin in Israel, the author of this book.

This deliberate unwillingness to deal with the most shattering event in Jewish history, an event that almost succeeded in obliterating the Jewish people or its most creative part, kept nagging in the back of my mind, and when many years later the Jewish community finally awoke from this long slumber, we all realized we had a tremendous problem on our hands of how to make sense of that watershed event. Laymen and scholars tried to advance answers from their respective disciplines to a host of questions: How was it possible for it to happen? Why did it happen? How did the Jewish community and the civilized world respond to it, and what are the lessons

for the future? All the explanations advanced, and the library is full of them, fall short of providing satisfactory answers to these disturbing questions. But try we must, for once an event of this magnitude happens, defying all imagination and boggling the mind, it can happen again, and we must remain vigilant for signs of such a recurrence. Yet the more I have immersed myself in studying and understanding the Holocaust over several decades of working as an employee of Yad Vashem, and currently in teaching this subject, the more I am resigned to the thought that we will never arrive at a full explanation of how such a horrific event took place on a continent and amid people steeped in the longest tradition of civilized life and religious teachings. We will always remain at a loss, but try we must.

In 1976, while in Philadelphia, I attended a public lecture by Professors Franklin Littell and Yehuda Bauer on the Holocaust, and suddenly something inside me burst forth, and a longtime subconscious urge to come to grips with the Holocaust took hold of me. When I further learned that Littell was giving a post-graduate course on the Holocaust at Temple University in Philadelphia, I decided to stay put and resume my studies on a post-graduate level, with an emphasis on the Shoah. I had earlier graduated from the Hebrew University with a BA degree in economics and political science and had forsaken further studies in these two important subjects. After graduating from Temple in 1982 with a PhD degree in Holocaust Studies, I returned to Israel and was appointed by Yad Vashem to head a department I had never heard about before: the Righteous among the Nations. It dealt with non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from the Nazis. For the next twenty-four years, I was immersed in that uplifting and inspiring work, and was instrumental in adding thousands of names to this unique honor roll presented by the Jewish people and by the State of Israel (Yad Vashem having been established by legislation as a government institution). I was also able to rediscover the French Catholic cleric Father Simon Gallay, who had helped my family to cross over into Switzerland, in September 1943, and he too was honored by Yad Vashem. At the same time, in my thinking and lectures, I tried to keep a balance between the inspiring behavior of the Righteous and the horrific deeds of the perpetrators and the nonchalant attitude of the bystanders, and I am still puzzled and perplexed, and still struggling to find the correct and proper balance between these two extreme types of behavior. Hence, my personal attempt at explaining and interpreting the Shoah is to be taken with some caution.

To properly gauge the nature of the Nazi movement and its leader, Adolf Hitler, one cannot simply regard it as an extreme form of fascism, or the display of brute force for its own sake, with total disregard for those who were not part of the Aryan community. And as far as the Jews are concerned,

one cannot look upon it as just the most extreme manifestation of old-time anti-Semitism, of plain and simple hatred of Jews leading to the attempt to remove them from the face of the globe, if that could be possible. It was in truth more than that.

Anti-Semitism was not only one of several elements of Nazism, but its pivotal core and the epicenter of its worldview—its *Weltanschauung*—that represented a perverted and secular manifestation of an apocalyptic and messianic crusade. By this I mean that traditional forms of religious apocalyptic ideas were transformed, transmuted, and debased into metaphorical models of a secular-religious movement, which strove to establish the ultimate good society, but in a most perverted form. Nazism came forth with an explanation of all the ills afflicting the world; it had the world divided into the Sons of Light (the Aryans) and the Sons of Darkness (the Jews); it adhered to an extreme form of social Darwinism and a fall belief, of original sin—miscegenation, or the mixing of races; it had a semidivine messianic figure in the form of a Führer; a belief that in order to establish a “new heaven and new earth” an apocalyptic struggle had to take place with the satanic force represented by the Jews, and they had to be eliminated—lock, stock, and barrel, and without any regard to compassion (itself a Jewish principle), in order to inaugurate the thousand-year Reich, in itself a quasi-religious vision that would follow the killing of the Antichrist.

Anyone reading Hitler’s words, be it *Mein Kampf*, his speeches, or his Political Testament, cannot walk away without realizing that Hitler was a man consumed with images and metaphors having no correlation with reality but taken from misguided religious teachings, distorted and perverted into a deadly secular messianic ideology. Hitler and a small clique of dedicated followers truly believed that in exterminating the Jews, and by implication undoing the Jewish ethical teachings embedded in the Bible, the world would be a better place to live in: a world based on extreme forms of social Darwinian and racist thinking. Tragically, many, or most, in German society were ready to follow blindly in the footsteps of this false messianic pied piper, to their ultimate doom. Thus, one may come closer to understanding how the Holocaust took place; closer, but not fully.

Now comes the next and equally difficulty problem of how to explain this tragic phenomenon from a Jewish religious perspective. Some have tried, and a host of the most reputable theologians have sincerely struggled to explain God’s permissiveness in allowing such an event to take place; or, in one way or another, to absolve God from any responsibility, and thus to take us back to ground zero. Some suggest that it is an exercise in futility, and it is best to let more time pass before grappling with how God allowed the chosen people to be almost completely destroyed, with a loss of a third

of the most active, energetic, vibrant, and dynamic part. What I therefore propose may not be acceptable to many, but it is my way of making sense of this unprecedented anti-God event, and for this I am indebted a bit to the teaching of Lurianic kabbalah, as described by the foremost expounder of kabbalistic thinking, the late Gershom Scholem.

Isaac Luria (known as the “Holy Ari,” or the Lion), propounded the bold idea of how the world came into being. Basically, he portrayed the preexistent creator God, known as the *ein sof*, the Infinite God, as assuming several forms in the process of creation. This was preceded by a process that Luria termed *tsimtsum*, of self-contraction of God’s presence in order to make room and allow creation to take place. In this empty space, elements of the Godhead were injected in the forms of vessels containing divine sparks. However, these vessels were for some reason not able to contain the sparks, and they shattered, sending the sparks flying in all directions in this primordial setting. This tragic event, so to speak, forced the hand of the Infinite God to the act of creation in order to restore the sparks, now mixed with the shards of the vessels (representing evil), to their original home within the Infinite Godhead. Luria’s model is more intricate and arcane than presented here, and open to several interpretations by his many followers, including Hasidic rebbes. As for me, I beg to borrow from his contraction idea and expand it a bit so as to make some sense of the Holocaust. That is, I propose to view God’s presence in our lives as a constant one, but of different degrees; it has ebbs and flows. It contains both emanations (*atzilut* in kabbalah language) as well as contractions, and this is an ongoing process. That, whenever there is much contraction, then evil has a greater sway—and the Holocaust was such an event, due to a severe contraction, a grievous *tsimtsum* of the divine flow. This left a greater void of the divine presence in the state of affairs of the world. The shards then took on more strength and more destructive capacity, and embedded in Nazism struck back at the sparks, at the teaching of brotherhood and compassion, enunciated in the biblical teachings and an integral part of the Jewish religion and people. Hence the Holocaust.

During the Holocaust, the divine sparks were almost in a total disarray, but then they became manifest and reasserted themselves, though in a reduced form but still very vibrant, in the acts of the Righteous Gentiles, of those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from destruction—so that the biblical ethical teaching, the opposite counterpart of the Nazi social Darwinistic and racial thinking, upheld by the Jews, the principal carriers of the divine sparks, not be completely overwhelmed and obliterated. The defeat of Nazism corresponded to the stoppage of the contraction phase, and to the flow of a new divine manifestation, leading to the creation of the

State of Israel, as the principal carrier of Jewish survival and creativity. But the shards of wickedness have not been completely eliminated, as witnessed by daily events.

I am not sure whether my two explanations—of Nazism and of theodicy (God’s justice)—will prove acceptable to the reader, since, by my own admission, I am not myself fully convinced of their infallible logic. At the same time, perplexed and puzzled as we still are by the Holocaust, we will remain so for a long time to come, and for the moment I feel at peace with these explications. I wish also to add that I have great admiration for my cousin, Rabbi Mordecai Schreiber who, coming from a secular background, and after having sketched a most gloomy picture of the Holocaust, is still able to come up with an uplifting message of hope and religious fortitude. For myself, I am a bit more hesitant and doubtful. While acknowledging the goodly deeds of the Righteous, the rescuers of Jews, close to seventy years after the Holocaust we are still witnessing the struggle between good and evil, between compassion and cruelty, that continues unabated, as evidenced by events in places like Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur, and Syria. But this should not lead us to despair but rather, paradoxically, to a greater need for a continuous emphasis on the deeds of the Righteous of the Holocaust, of people like Raoul Wallenberg, Varian Fry, Jan Karski, and Chiune-Sempo Sugihara, as outlined in this book, who, in their separate ways, defied the Nazi teachings of race superiority and contempt and mistreatment of other ethnic groups, combined with the extermination of the Jews. In saving Jews, they tried in their individual and isolated ways to leave a legacy to future generations of civilized life based on certain ethical standards.

Such was expressed by the Dutch rescuer Johtje Vos to her mother, who one day came to visit her daughter and was stunned to find a Jewish child. The mother said: “You shouldn’t do this, even though I agree with what you’re doing, because your first responsibility is to your own children.” To this Johtje Vos responded: “That’s exactly why I’m doing it!” She added in her testimony, “I thought we were doing the right thing, giving our children the right model to follow.” Or that through the help he received in Auschwitz from Lorenzo Perrone, an Italian civilian construction worker, Holocaust chronicler Primo Levi said, “I managed not to forget that I myself was a man”—this, in spite of Auschwitz and its bosses, the Nazis. For that reason alone, the uplifting message Mordecai Schreiber offers us is a necessary healing message to minds troubled by the enormity of the Holocaust.

Mordecai Paldiel
Fort Lee, New Jersey