

The Meaning of Kiddush Hashem during the Holocaust in Ultra-Orthodox Writing

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Abba Chanan says: “Who is like You, O Strong One, God?” (Ps. 89:9)—Who is like You, strong and firm, for You hear the insult and blasphemy of the evil, yet remain silent? In the academy of Rabbi Yishmael it was taught: “Who is like You among the mighty ones [*eilim*], God?” (Exod. 15:11)—Who is like You among the silent ones [*ilmim*]?

<p><i>Tzvi Kulitz</i></p> <p>never dreamed that the death of people, even of enemies—even such enemies—could cause me such great pleasure. Foolish humanists may say what they choose. Vengeance was and always will be the last means of waging just battles and the greatest spiritual release of the oppressed. I had never until now understood the precise meaning of the expression in the Talmud which states that vengeance is sacred because it is mentioned between two of God’s names: A God of vengeance is the Lord. I understand it now. I know now, moreover, why my heart is so overjoyed at remembering that for thousands of years we have been calling our Lord a God of vengeance: A God of vengeance is our Lord! We have had only a few opportunities to witness true vengeance. When we did, however, it was so good, so worthwhile, I felt such profound happiness, so terribly fortunate—that for a moment it seemed an entirely new life was springing up in me.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">צבי קוליץ</p> <p>זה היה רגע גדול בחיי, טלטלה של צחוק אחזתני. מעולם לא הייתי מעלה על דעתי שמוות של אנשים, אפילו של אויבים ואפילו של אויבים כאלה, יוכל לשמח אותי כדי כך. הומניסטים מטופשים יכולים לומר כרצונם; נקמה היתה, ותהיה תמיד, אמצעי הלחימה האחרון והסיפוק הנפשי הגדול ביותר של המדוכאים. עד היום לא הבנתי אל-נכון את המאמר התלמודי ולפיו יש בנקמה קדושה, מפני שהיא מוזכרת בין שני שמות הא-ל: 'גדולה נקמה שניתנה בין שתי אותיות, שנאמר: 'א-ל נקמות א-דוני!' תהילים צ"ד, א) '(ברכות לג ע"א; סנהדרין צב ע"א. (עכשיו אני מבין זאת, עכשיו אני חש זאת, ועכשיו אני יודע מדוע עולץ לבי כשאני נזכר שכבר אלפי שנים אנחנו קוראים לא-לוהינו א-לוהי הנקמה - 'א-ל נקמות א-דוני'!</p>
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The German Amalek deprived its victims even of the option of saving their lives by selling their souls. Thus, these victims were denied all the exalted experiences known to the saintly martyrs of our people in former generations, martyrs who offered up their mortal lives on the altar of *Kiddush Ha-Shem*, while their spirits soared aloft, their hearts aflame with divine love. Along with the terrible pain that gnaws at our heart because of the power of the terrible disaster of the Holocaust and the crushing and cruel tortures endured by its victims, we also feel, this time, a stinging insult. The honor of Israel was trampled in the dust; the Name of God and the name of Israel were both desecrated together, in the most terrifying and horrible way, by this Amalek, the persecutor of our times.¹

Therefore, one cannot trust even the best gentile [...] a gentile is a gentile [...] said one of the leaders of the Hasidim: “the nicest gentile hates Jews with absolute hatred,” and if a gentile walks in the street, sees a Jew arriving, and does not take a stone to throw at the Jew’s head, this fact does not prove that the gentile likes the Jew. He hates him, but the gentile is too lazy to pick up the stone.²

The more we delve into the size and scope of the Holocaust, the more clearly we see the horrifying extent of the humiliating compliance demonstrated by the masses of European Jews toward their executioners, and the naive willingness of the victims to march directly to their killing stations. No justification or credible excuses can be found for the way in which the very Jews themselves who were being annihilated embraced such shameful docility, scurrying like terrified rabbits to obey without question every murderous order that the Nazi oppressors issued in order to destroy them. In no other people on earth do we see this phenomenon of total complicity in the face of extermination; the Jewish victims did not even bother to strike back in order to kill some of the best of the Nazi soldiers and make their murderers pay for their barbarity with their own blood³.

In the destruction of the temple our nation was destroyed too. But there, the fight and heroism had been in our side too. Tens of thousands of casualties also fell from our enemies. Then they were not defiled in death, slaughtered like mosquitoes without any resistance.⁴

¹ *Itzhak Glikman, Sefer Shoah Utkumah, (New York: Private), 54.*

² *Zeev Kibel, Hasneh Eynenu Ukal Vol. 1 (Bnei-Brak: Private), 45.*

³ *Friedman, 'AlMa Asa Hashem Kacha, 593—4.*

⁴ *Yehezkel Sarna, Litshuva Ulitkuma (Jerusalem: Private, 1948), 7.*

They forced [the Jews] to take out the Torah and the many [religious] books from the synagogues. [...] The Germans [sic] tried to force rabbi Lifshitz to light the fire, but the rabbi adamantly refused to carry out their command. The proud behavior of the rabbi shocked the Germans. [...] They set fire to the holy books to make fun of the Jewish God. [...] They switch the hats of the Rabbi and his wife. On the head of the Rabbi – the wife's hat and on the hat of the wife – the rabbinical hat. With teary eyes and hearts shocked, the rabbi and his wife were forced to watch the *Chillul Hashem* [desecration of the name of God].⁵

The performance would always end with a third act, and its humiliation would be more painful than blows. In this act, all 200 of the young Jewish men would be made to stand together, and forced to move back and forth, swaying as Jews do in the throes of pious prayer. The German sadist would from time to time call a stop to these counterfeit prayerful movements, silence the forced murmuring, and explain to the audience, convulsed as they were with laughter, about the fanaticism of this [Jewish] race, how uncontrollably eager they are to pray to such a God, and with what barbaric physical gestures.⁶

During the month of Tamuz [around July] we already knew that the thousand Jews that were expelled from our city in the month of Nissan [around April] were sent to death. [...] many came to us [the rabbis] with the [Halakhic] question if they are allowed to convert [to Christianity] since the priests still accepted Jews for conversion. Women came and asked if they are allowed to go with gentiles who wish to take them and save them. We saw clearly, that we deal with questions [under the category] of *ye'hareg v'al ya'avur* [Let him be killed rather than transgress]. [...] and for now [after the Holocaust] the silence [around these questions/answers] is better.⁷

Frumah could save her two toddler daughters by giving them to the Gentiles, however, [she] did not do it, because of the fear, perhaps God forbid, the girls will settle down in the Christian faith, heaven

⁵ Yehoshuah Eybeschitz, "Hasefer Betkufat Ha-Shoah," *Chagim* 2 (1971): 1.

⁶ M. Chehanover, "Keitsad Hushpalnu Ve'Eich Amadnu," *Yalkut Moreshet* 21 (1976): 154—5.

⁷ Yaakov Avigdor, *Shut Abir Yaakov* Vol. 1, 11—2.

forbid [literally: God will save us], and in this way the whole family would be destroyed, May God avenge their blood.⁸

A Christian benefactor had offered to help [a young Jewish woman] to conceal herself among the Gentiles; but, she asked, should she accept this offer to save herself from death and from descending into netherworld [*Sheol*], just when she was in her prime, full of life and of the desire to live? [...] Ms. Steinbach tells that every joyful Sabbath had now turned into a day of mourning for her, so great was the bitterness in her soul and the aching in her heart for this unhappy young woman, seeking escape from death and from the straits of *Sheol*. All night long she tossed and turned, sleep evading her eyes, as she thought of the fate of all the pious daughters of Israel, and about the dangers lying in wait for them among the Gentiles. Then, just at the dawn watch, when the strands of slumber finally closed her eyelids, Ms. Steinbach was visited in her dreams by her brother, Rabbi R. Meir Steinbach, who had himself died a holy death as a martyr, in *Kiddush Hashem*. Her brother came to her, his face radiant with heavenly light that dazzled her eyes, and said to her: “Know, sister, that none of the angelic Seraphim above, and none of the heavenly chariots or holy creatures on high, can ever enter into even a fraction of half of the blessedness of those who give their lives to sanctify the Holy Name.” When the young woman came to her the next day, to hear her advice on the question she had asked, Ms. Steinbach told her of everything she had heard and seen in that dream. The young woman, hearing this, embraced her, sobbing deeply, and said, “Rivkah, my dear, I will never abandon my brothers and sisters who remain in the Ghetto; I will not leave! No, I will not go!”⁹

There were thirty young men, students at the Krakow Yeshiva who, when they received the order to work in German factories making implements of murder, refused. They would not comply with this order, not wanting to aid and abet the criminals, or participate in the readying of weapons for the killing of whole peoples. Thirty weaklings they were; thirty pale, thin and stooped *yeshiva-buchers*; morally, however, they stood tall. Thirty human shadows rebelled in the name of the Torah against the might of the idolatrous Nazi war machine. For a full year, they continued, day and night, in their study of Torah. They knew what lay in store for them; but they had settled their accounts with the world, and with life. As they sat and studied, they dealt only with the purity of the soul. [...] One day, the impure Nazis discovered them, and they were imprisoned. Impervious to their surroundings, the

⁸ Yehosuah Eybeschutz, *Ha'ishah Basboa'h* Vol. 2, (Jerusalem: Zachor Press, 1987), 70.

⁹ Ephraim Oshry, “Korot ‘Beit Yaakov’ Begeto Varsha,” *Beit Yaakov* 13 (1960): 7.

thirty young men continued their studies even in the Nazi prison. They refused to be redeemed by impure food, surviving only on water and moldy bread. Finally, they were condemned to death. Their last request was to be allowed to share a final meal. They sat together, dressed in the white *Kittle* [a coat Ultra-Orthodox wear for Yom Kippur and also they are buried in this cloth] and wrapped in their prayer shawls. When the meal was finished, they went out dancing, as comrades, their arms around each other's shoulders. Embracing thus, they began the sacred dance. A dark terror descended upon their Nazi guards. The officer in charge of the execution squad cried, "You have defeated us! We have power over your bodies, but we have no power over your souls!"¹⁰

I have said here more directly than before that whatever happens to the Jews happens to all mankind. People thought they could kill Jews and remain alive, and they were wrong. When they kill Jews, they kill themselves. And that is what they have done: They have killed themselves.¹¹

These days the tendency is to say no OF God, rather than TO God. The catch phrase is God is dead. Surrounded as we are by destruction, it is close to fact to say MAN is dead. It's not God's job but man's to keep mankind alive.¹²

Even perhaps to settle far away from all human contact, in some distant colony, among trees and rocks, to weep there for the immensity of the shattering of myself and of all my family and people. Always, I loved humans and human companionship, but today I am finished with it [...] Whoever did not live in Europe during the last six years, can never imagine what disgraceful creatures' human beings actually are.¹³

¹⁰ *HaPardes: A Rabbinic Collection (1945)*, 14. There are numerous stories on the clash between Jews who kept their Jewish honor and the Germans. See, Eybeschutz, *Mishchu Yedeichem*, 38—40.

¹¹ Lily Edelman, "A Conversation with Elie Wiesel," in *Responses to Elie Wiesel* (ed. Harry James Cargas; New York: Persea Books, 1978), 13.

¹² Barry Hyams, "Witness and Messenger (An Interview)," in *Elie Wiesel Conversations* (ed. Robert Franciosi; Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 14.

¹³ *The Rebe from Blazov*. Yisra'el Shapira, *Sefer Shufra De-Yisra'el al Ha-Torah* (New York: Private, 2001), 74.

The most frightening aspect of our present world is not the horrors in themselves, the atrocities, the technological exterminations, but the one fact at the very root of it all: the fading away of any human criterion.¹⁴

To live in a world where there is nothing anymore, where the executioner acts as god, as judge – many wanted no part of it. It was its own heart the world incinerated at Auschwitz.¹⁵

¹⁴ Erich Kahler, *The Tower and the Abyss: An Inquiry Into the Transformation of the Individual* (New Jersey: New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 224.

¹⁵ Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time*, 190.