

Blessed Be the Surgeon? The Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Emuna u-mada' Controversy and its Legacy

ZBYNĚK TARANT*

This article aims to reconstruct and contextualize the dispute, sparked by the last Rebbe of the Lubavitcher dynasty, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, concerning the alleged Divine role in the horrors of the Shoah. His comments published in the 1970s as an appendix to a collection of responsa, titled *Emuna u-mada' (Faith and Science)* drew criticism from secular scholars and politicians, such as Haika Grossman or Yehuda Bauer,¹ who even considered suing the Lubavitcher Rebbe for having justified the Holocaust.² This article analyzes the entire debate by using original Hebrew sources. Using these sources, the article explores the roots and causes of this intellectual controversy that took the form of responsa, essays, newspaper articles and op-eds, as well as private and open letters mainly in the 1980s, yet some of its echoes resonated well into the late 2000s. The Rebbe's words are analyzed in their original context and the ensuing controversy is explored with a focus on the incompatible patterns of reasoning that stood at the core of the controversy and further hinder the dialogue. By exploring the legacy and afterlife of this controversy, the article also shows how even the work of one of the most admired rabbis of our era is prone to silent revision and rewriting after his death – a process

* The author dedicates this article to the memory of his father Zdeněk Tarant (3. 5. 1953 – 23. 5. 2021), astronomer and lifelong popularizer of science, who died of Covid-19 during the editing stage of this text.

- 1 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2001, 186-212.
- 2 Dina Porat, "Amalek's Accomplices' Blaming Zionism for the Holocaust: Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel during the 1980s", *Journal of Contemporary History* 27/4, 1992, 695-729: 728.



that may sentence some thoughts into the dustbin of “apocryphes”. Closer inspection of the debate and its “second life” reveals not only the conflicting paradigms between traditional Jewish theodicy on the one hand and secular ethics on the other, but also the differences between hagiographic Ḥaṣīdic narration and scientific positivism.

Menachem Mendel Schneerson: The last “Rebbe”

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994, also spelled “Schneersohn”),³ referred to by his followers simply as “the Rebbe”, was the seventh and last successor in one of the most influential rabbinic families of our time. During his tenure, he managed to transform the small Ḥaṣīdic group Ḥabad (also spelled Chabad) into a globalized, transnational religious movement with thousands of community centers all around the world; a Ḥaṣīdic movement that does not shy from using modern technologies and the practices of corporate marketing. For his achievements, he was posthumously awarded a Congressional Gold Medal “in recognition of his outstanding and enduring contributions toward world education, morality, and acts of charity”.⁴ Since 1978, his birthday (18 April) is commemorated as “Education Day”⁵ and further as “National Sharing and Education Day” in the USA.⁶ The late Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Jonathan Sacks, wrote that: “... if the Nazis searched out every Jew in hate, the Rebbe wished to search out every Jew in love.”⁷ Even after his death, the globalized Ḥaṣīdic movement has continued to grow in size and influence. Already during his lifetime, a minority of Ḥabad followers called for the Rebbe to be proclaimed as the Messiah – a bid that later led to bitter schisms within the movement.⁸

3 Possibly the most reliable biographical data on Schneerson are available in Menachem Friedman – Samuel Heilman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2012.

4 “H.R.4497 – To Award a Congressional Gold Medal to Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson” [online], <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/4497>>, [4 June 2021].

5 “Public Law 95-261-APR. 17, 1978” [online], in: *United States Statutes at Large* 92, 1978, <<https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc86677/m1/254/>>, [4 June 2021], 200.

6 Donald J. Trump, “Proclamation on Education and Sharing Day, U.S.A., 2020” [online], <<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-education-sharing-day-u-s-2020/>>, 3 April 2020 [4 June 2021].

7 Josef Telushkin, *The Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History*, New York: HarperCollins 2014, 13.

8 Rachel Elijor, “The Lubavitch Messianic Resurgence: The Historical and Mystical Background 1939-1996”, in: Peter Schäfer – Mark Cohen (eds.), *Toward the*

Menachem Mendel escaped the Nazi occupation. In 1940, he and his wife managed to flee from Paris, just three days before the arrival of German troops. They spent an uncertain year in Vichy-controlled Nice before being able to leave for Portugal, from where they departed to the US aboard the vessel *Serpa Pinto* in 1941. While they managed to escape and even save some of the precious writings of their Ḥasidic movement, the Holocaust⁹ took a heavy toll both on their families and Ḥabad followers, rendering the movement almost extinct. Schneerson himself lost multiple relatives in the Shoah, including his grandmother, Zelda Rachel-Yanovski, and a number of cousins. His younger, disabled brother Dov Ber Schneerson was shot to death in Dnepropetrovsk in 1941. His wife, the rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson, also lost her younger sister Sheina, who perished in Treblinka together with her husband in 1942.¹⁰ The sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, was rescued from occupied Poland in 1940 only after frenzied efforts by his followers, who managed to persuade Roosevelt's administration to directly intervene with the German authorities to secure his release.¹¹

At their new address in Brooklyn, Yosef Yitzhak and Menachem Mendel launched a missionary branch called *Maḥane Yisra'el*, today known as the Ḥabad's social service organization. Menachem Mendel served as its executive director. During WWII, the organization called for acts of repentance (*teshuvah*) in response to the horrors in Europe, which they saw as the labor pains of the Messiah (*hevlei moshiah*).¹² Despite the Rebbe's later teaching that Divine ways cannot be understood, *Maḥane Yisra'el* under his leadership claimed to be in possession of an esoteric knowledge according to which the Shoah was the last and only chance for the Jews to respond to the Divine call for *teshuvah* after all previous calls had failed. While the body of the Jewry was being slaughtered in Europe,

Millenium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco, Leiden: Brill 1998, 383-408.

9 The words "Holocaust" and "Shoah" are used interchangeably in this article. Both are written capitalized according to current custom to distinguish the Nazi Holocaust from older uses of this term ("nuclear holocaust" etc.). Some exceptions to these rules are noted in the text. For more about the etymology and appropriateness of "Holocaust" and "Shoah", see Dalia Ofer, "Linguistic Conceptualization of the Holocaust in Palestine and Israel, 1942-1953", *Journal of Contemporary History* 31/3, 1996, 567-595; John Petrie, "The Secular Word HOLOCAUST: Scholarly Myths, History, and 20th Century Meanings", *Journal of Genocide Research* 2/1, 2000, 31-64.

10 J. Telushkin, *The Rebbe...*, 469.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Gershon Greenberg, "Menachem Mendel Schneerson's Response to the Holocaust", *Modern Judaism* 34, 2013, 86-122: 86-87.

they claimed, its soul was being lost in America to assimilation.¹³ Seeing itself as the lighthouse of *teshuva*, the movement aimed to ease the *hevlei moshiah* and draw the messianic age closer by means of an internal mission among Jews. A special Torah scroll was to be prepared for the Messiah, and a series of prayers and recitations were to be organized in America and the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine to prepare for the coming of the messianic age. The movement also challenged Christian missionaries, provided religious texts and ritual items to young assimilated Jews, and tried to motivate them to daily observance.¹⁴

Emuna u-mada' – Faith and Science

Schneerson never published a comprehensive rabbinical study or book about the Shoah that would match anything in the scope and extent of the works of North American “Holocaust theologians” such as Richard Rubenstein or Emil Fackenheim. In the rare and isolated remarks that are recorded from the 1950s and 1960s, Rebbe often rejected theological explanations for the Shoah, claiming that it could be understood only with the coming of the Messianic age,¹⁵ and instead called for the rebuilding of Jewish life in the United States.¹⁶ The Ḥabad rabbi Chaim Miller argues that “over the years of his leadership, the Rebbe had responded privately to various individuals, who had asked his views on theodicy and the Holocaust, but he had rarely spoken about it in public”.¹⁷ The fragmentary nature of his writings about the subject is further supported by his associates’ hagiographic anecdotes about the lengths that their Rebbe was willing to go just to avoid “unhappy topics”.¹⁸

Possibly the most disputed recording of the Rebbe’s thoughts about the theological ramifications of the Shoah, which stands at the center of the intellectual controversy, was published as an attachment to a thin collection of letters called *Faith and Science (Emuna u-mada')*. The practice of publishing thematic collections of non-halakhic responsa,¹⁹ titled *Igrot Kodesh*, was nothing new for Ḥabad at the time – the practice can be traced

13 David Bial – David Assaf – Benjamin Brown et al., *Hassidism: A New History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2017, 660.

14 G. Greenberg, “Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s Response...”, 86-87.

15 M. Friedman – S. Heilman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife...*, 146-147.

16 G. Greenberg, “Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s Response...”, 94-95.

17 Chaim Miller, *Turning Judaism Outward: A Biography of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe*, Brooklyn: Kol Menachem 2014, 392.

18 J. Telushkin, *The Rebbe...*, 113.

19 *Responsum* (pl. *responsa*) is a written reply by a rabbi or Talmudic scholar in a matter of Jewish faith or law.

back to the sixth Rebbe. This particular book was originally published in 1977²⁰ and then republished in 1980s in Hebrew by the Maḥon Lubavitch Publishing House in Kfar Ḥabad, Israel. The publishing house was established by a prominent Ḥabad Rabbi BenZion Shemtov as part of a cooperative aimed at employing Russian-Jewish immigrants to Israel. It is not certain, who exactly decided to append the traditional collection of responsa with a compilation of talks, posed as “interview”, or why. Rabbi BenZion Shemtov died in 1975²¹ during the book’s editing process. The interview, which discusses the Shoah as a specific epistemological problem, asking the basic question of how we can judge G-d when we lack the necessary tools, knowledge and moral strength to do so, may have been added after BenZion’s death. According to the book’s Introduction, the text was translated and compiled from some of the Rebbe’s older talks (*siḥot*).²² This particular appendix was written and labeled in the book as the “free adaptation” (*ibud ḥofshi*) of two older talks – “delivered during Simḥat Tora 5731 [23rd October 1970] and 11th Nisan 5733 [13th April 1973]”.²³ It comprises nine out of the one hundred and fifty pages of the book. The decision to present these talks as “interviews” is slightly enigmatic, but it can be argued that the editors aimed at using the virtual character of “interviewer” to provide context or connect isolated thoughts together. This significantly contributes to tendencies to question the very authenticity of the text and its inclusion into the core canon of the Rebbe’s writings, discussed below in this article. Due to these tendencies to question the book’s authenticity or its very existence, let it be noted that the following are my translations of the second Hebrew edition of the book, which is held in the Israel National Library’s collections.

The title of the entire volume may suggest a dialogue between religion and science, but the responsa are worded as apologetics rather than a dialogue *per se*. Schneerson’s opinions about science are based in creationism, which does not prevent him from using formally scientific language to reject conclusions of secular science.²⁴ He distinguishes two epistemo-

20 Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Emuna u-mada’*, Kfar Ḥabad: Maḥon Lubavitsch 1977; D. Porat, “Amalek’s Accomplices’...”, 698 and 725, refers to a 1972 publication with a similar name, which, however, does not contain the appendix that is analyzed in this article.

21 “Rabbi BenZion Shemtov, 73, Activist in the Hasidic Sect” [online], *The New York Times*, <<https://www.nytimes.com/1975/06/16/archives/rabbi-benzion-shemtov-73-activist-in-the-hasidic-sect.html>>, 16 June 1975, 30 [4 June 2021].

22 Menachem M. Schneerson, *Emuna u-mada’*, Kfar Ḥabad: Maḥon Lubavitsch ²1980, 12-13.

23 *Ibid.*, 115.

24 See also Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menachem Mendel Schneerson*, New York: Columbia University Press

logical levels – description (*te'ur*) and explanation (*be'ur*). He also claims that science can describe how the world works, yet it cannot explain exactly why it works the way it does.²⁵ Material being is concerned with function, but only spiritual being seeks meaning and purpose. Scientific conclusions in subjects such as geology or nuclear physics are dismissed as mere “theories” based on “weak extrapolations” and “excessively short observations”,²⁶ “... many of which do not match one another”.²⁷ When the Torah says that the world was created six thousand years ago (5,727 years at the time of the book’s first publication), then it is to be taken literally, not as a metaphor. And if there are things such as dinosaur bones, oil or coal, which seem to be far older according to scientific analyses, it is in the powers of the omnipotent Creator to make them appear that way.²⁸

The Divine surgeon as an epistemological analogy

The interview attached to *Emuna u-mada'* attempts to uphold the core position that the Holocaust cannot be explained until the coming of the Messianic age. It uses scientific parables and poses the issue of theodicy as a problem of epistemology, building upon the reference to the *Book of Job*²⁹ that man is too small and weak to understand Divine logic and purpose: “Should the Divine logic be at the level of His creation, or just limited by a single percent, you would not know Him as the Judge of the Earth.”³⁰ Schneerson stresses that “no evil comes from above”,³¹ i.e. from G-d. Faithful to the topic of *Emuna u-mada'*, which are encounters between religion and science, the Rebbe tries to explain the epistemological problem by means of a scientific analogy turned into a Ḥaṣidic parable:

Imagine a man who finds himself in a hospital and enters the operating theatre. In front of him, a horrible scene plays out: a naked man lies on the operating table. There are ten masked people around him, their faces covered, knives in their hands, attempting to cut off one of his limbs. If that “guest” of ours had no knowledge of medicine or anything related to it, he would indeed be certain that he was witnessing some sort of cannibalistic ritual... He would surely cry out and try to get help in order to “rescue” the “victim” from the hands of these criminals. And all this because he does not

2009, 2, 302 and 327.

25 M. M. Schneerson, *Emuna u-mada'* ..., 21980, 7.

26 *Ibid.*, 92.

27 *Ibid.*, 93.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Job* 38,1-41: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding.”

30 M. M. Schneerson, *Emuna u-mada'* ..., 21980, 115.

31 *Ibid.*, 116.

understand medicine at all and does not know the patient's state of health in the past, present and future.³²

Schneerson stresses that he does not see the Shoah as “revenge” (*nekamah*), but more as a “disciplinary penalty” or “warning slap” from G-d. The Shoah is explained as an act of collective rectification, in which the Divine surgeon decided to cut out (or “slap”) the religious Jews (i.e. “the face of Jewry”) for the misconduct of some unspecified “hand of Jewry”. Rebbe’s metaphor builds upon the teaching of his predecessor, Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson:

... [A] man, who is punished for the deeds he has committed, suffers a slap on his cheek, although the act he committed was done by his hand. And it was in no way meant as revenge, but to make him correct his actions. And to ensure that the punishment leads to a correction of that man’s behavior, it is given to his face – which is the most important part of a man – and thus also to the people of Israel, together with a severe punishment in terms of numbers (6,000,000 victims), but also seven times over, when it struck the population that represented the face of the generation.³³

The point of controversy is obvious – reading the Rebbe’s thoughts literally would mean that Hitler was just a mere Divine instrument. And while “revenge” (*nekamah*) is rejected, the word “punishment” (*onesh*) is explicitly mentioned in the Hebrew text both as a verb and noun. Moreover, Schneerson never explains why exactly the Jews had to be “punished” by suffering six million deaths, including those of more than a million children. Only anecdotal hints are given in this particular text and point to a lack of observance, yet only the Divine surgeon himself understands the reason for the “operation”.

If we accept the claim that G-d slaps the “face” for the misdemeanors of the “hand”, whatever they were, and that the “face” of the Jewry are the righteous Jews (*zadikim* or *tzadikim*), we then have to ask why these pious Jews were prevented from pursuing their righteous lives and fulfilling the Divine commandments – the very misdemeanor for which the entirety of the People of Israel were allegedly disciplined in the first place. Let us reiterate that the Holocaust was not just suffering, but an act of collective physical destruction. Here, the Rebbe’s logic seeks escape in the duality of flesh and soul. Like other Ḥasidic movements, Ḥabad believes in the Kabbalistic concept of the reincarnation of souls (*gilgul*). Two kinds of souls are believed to exist – the finite “animal” soul and the spiritual, infinite or “divine” soul. While the first is given to all living things and is limited to a single lifetime in the physical world, the latter resides only in

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 118.

a human being, more specifically a Jew, is connected to the Divine, and, as such, can live separately from the body and achieve up to five levels of esoteric elevation: *Nefesh*, *Ruah*, *Neshama*, *Haya* and *Yehida*. Unlike the physical soul, which always remains at the level of “animal”, *Nefesh*, the divine soul cannot be destroyed by physical means. According to the same belief, the spiritual souls migrate from one body to another until they manage to complete all of the Divine commandments (*mišvot* or *mitzvot*), which are a condition for achieving rectification (*tikkun nefesh*).³⁴

Some, like the souls of righteous persons or Ḥassidic spiritual leaders (*zaddikim*), manage to achieve their rectification in a single incarnation, while others need multiple human lives to finish their quest of mending the world and themselves in the process. In light of this belief, the Shoah is seen as a destruction merely of bodies, but there is hope that the innocent Jewish souls will either directly achieve their rectification by means of martyrdom (*kiddush ha-shem*) or continue their quest in future reincarnations. In light of this teaching, physical destruction is not an obstruction, but a mere temporary delay.³⁵ To quote Rebbe’s words: “There is also a possibility that the physical Catastrophe could be spiritually beneficial, because the body and the spirit are not necessarily the same.”³⁶

The fact that pious Jews were murdered, which must have prevented them from fulfilling their *mišvot*, is further explained by a reference (albeit surprising) to *pikuaḥ nefesh* – a special occasion in which a *mišva* can be postponed in order to save a life, or in this case, a soul. Schneerson lists multiple examples in which, for instance, Shabbat can be desecrated for the higher good of saving a life and applies them to souls in general.³⁷ He argues that by having their bodies killed, the souls were not prevented from achieving *tikkun nefesh*. Their *mišvot* were only “postponed” according to the requirements of *pikuaḥ nefesh*. Only G-d knows what the higher reasons for such a “postponement” were or why it was not possible to achieve rectification at the given time and place despite their sincere effort. Sacrificing one’s own soul opens a straight path to *Yehida*, yet Schneerson explores the opposite scenario, in which G-d may refuse to accept such a sacrifice in order to allow the soul to finish its predestined role in the physical world. The Rebbe uses a reference to the legend about Joseph Karo, whose wish to sacrifice his own life for the name of G-d in the

34 Nissan Dovid Dubov, “Reincarnation” [online], <https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/361889/jewish/Reincarnation.htm>, [4 June 2021].

35 M. M. Schneerson, *Emuna u-mada’* ..., ²1980, 117-118.

36 *Ibid.*, 116.

37 *Ibid.*, 120.

spirit of Schlomo Molkho³⁸ was not given fruition “so that he could finish his work” on *Schullhan Arukh*.³⁹ For the Rebbe, this is additional proof that *tikkun nefesh* cannot be achieved without effort on the part of the soul on the one hand and Divine consent on the other.

Who asks the question?

Critics may insist by asking in an epicurean fashion why G-d, who is omnipotent and painstaking enough to make dinosaur bones look older than they actually are, is unable to perform a life-saving surgery without causing pain or loss? And if this is the case, then what does it say about His omnipotence, omnipresence or justice? The epistemological argument of a stranger at the operating theatre stands firm, resulting in a tautology – we cannot understand G-d because we cannot understand G-d. A religious person may cry out to G-d just like a patient cries out during a painful procedure, but thanks to his religious convictions, he knows that the procedure is for his wellbeing.

And even cries about the past, calling “Ha-Shem revenge our blood”, or the complaint “How can this be?” etc. do not cast doubt on one’s own faith, because together with this cry comes knowledge as well – that the “surgery” and cutting away of tumors from the body of the nation was to save the soul of the nation, just like the doctor cuts poisonous cancer from the patient in order to save his life.⁴⁰

If the Shoah was just a part of G-d’s scheme, which mere humans cannot fully comprehend, does it mean that pious Jews cannot ask G-d to keep His part of the covenant brokered at Sinai? Here, Schneerson teaches his followers to look at the bigger picture. His theodicy focuses mainly on collective redemption, even when it comes at the price of individual suffering. The surgery, however painful, was meant to be a life-saving one for the collective of the world’s Jewry. He describes the catastrophe of the Shoah as a cataclysmic event, which preceded the rejuvenation of Jewish life: “We have seen that especially after the *Hurban* [destruction] of the first Temple, especially then, after an entire generation was destroyed, the faith had grown and led to an increase in Torah studies – studies, which were made a reality by the ‘sages of Yavne’.”⁴¹

38 For more about the legend, see Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature: The Jewish Center of Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, trans. Bernard Martin, New York: KTav Publishing House 1974, 35.

39 M. M. Schneerson, *Emuna u-mada’* ..., ²1980, 118.

40 *Ibid.*, 121.

41 *Ibid.*, 124.

Any concern about the quality of Divine justice may be raised only by a religious person. The Rebbe sees no spirituality outside religion, so a non-religious person has no business in asking “spiritual” questions.

The believer in just one world – the physical one, who does not know about the spiritual one, is surely full of “objections” about the horrible “surgery” of six million Jews. Maybe if – perish the thought – he does not recognize the existence of the spiritual world outside physical substance to which he directs his complaints, then what business does he have shouting about the lack of justice, righteousness and ethics, all of which are purely spiritual ideas?⁴²

And if somebody insists on asking these questions, then such a person cannot be viewed as non-religious, but only as a person of weak faith. The Rebbe argues that those who “wobble by Auschwitz as an argument not to keep *mizvot*”⁴³ must have been non-religious in the first place. Those whose faith is strong enough cannot be shaken, not even by the extremity of the Nazi Holocaust. On the other hand, a person who promises not to keep *mizvot* due to the Shoah “does it because he does not want to [keep *mizvot*]” in the first place.⁴⁴ “... [W]hen we look for a second straight into the truth’s face, we find that he does not keep the Torah and *mizvot* not because of the Shoah, but because he does not want to.”⁴⁵ Complaints “coming from personal grief” are dismissed as they “do not bear a piece of truth and they are not able to shake the veracity of faith in Divine justice.”⁴⁶

A definitive answer to the Shoah must not be expected from G-d, but must come from within the people’s hearts. Before questioning G-d, a religious person should first admit his own faults. Only that is the proper way of discussing Divine providence. The interview offers only one proper question for G-d regarding the Shoah, which begins by the admittance of one’s own sins: “Truly have we sinned and become wicked, but there is no limit to Your mercy, so why then, have you chosen the difficult path? Maybe such a cry would not contradict the great faith in our hearts.”⁴⁷ In a fashion similar to Emil Ludwig Fackenheim’s “614th Commandment” that “Jews are not supposed to give Hitler a posthumous victory”,⁴⁸ Rebbe preached clinging to life, focusing on the living and on

42 *Ibid.*, 117.

43 *Ibid.*, 123. The Hebrew text uses the verb *menafnefem*, which literally means “waving” or “wiggling”.

44 *Ibid.*, 122.

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*, 124.

47 *Ibid.*, 122.

48 Emil L. Fackenheim, *God’s Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*, New York: Harper Torchbooks 1970, 84.

the continuation and preservation of the tradition. Unlike Fackenheim, however, he felt that keeping the Jewish tradition must come from within, for the sake of the tradition itself, simply because it is a Divine commandment and returning to it is an act of *teshuva*, confirming that the *tikkun* by means of the Nazi scalpel has taught us some lesson after all. On the other hand, keeping Jewish tradition “in essence to spite Hitler ... will not guarantee Jewish survival or a healthy Jewish psyche.”⁴⁹

Dispute with Haika Grossman

Schneerson’s statements, which were published at the end of a thin inconspicuous pamphlet, would likely have fallen into obscurity if they had not been brought into the spotlight by prominent secular critics, most notably Haika Grossman, who was a Member of the Knesset (MK) for the Mapam party at the time and veteran of the Bialystok Ghetto Uprising. Her polemic, published in Mapam’s newspaper *Al ha-Mishmar* on 22 August 1980, reacts to the second edition of *Emuna u-mada*, and could be used as a textbook case for the conflict of paradigms in contemporary Judaism. Grossman speaks from the perspective of a former anti-Nazi resistance fighter. Her criticism comes from the mouth of a secular, socialist politician, who may not be fully versed in the intricate methodology of Ḥasidic exegesis, but feels that Schneerson’s thoughts are not compatible with her basic ethical values and personal experience.

Interestingly, Grossman refuses to use the term “Shoah” out of concern that it should refer only to “natural catastrophes, like earthquakes, which cannot be controlled, not Nazi murders”.⁵⁰ A large portion of her article consists of extensive quotes from *Emuna u-mada*, namely the paragraph about the surgeon and stranger at the operation theatre, which is quoted in full. Astonished, Grossman asks whether Schneerson really intended to call Hitler a Divine tool? If that is the case, she continues, does it mean that “all of us who have rebelled against the fate appointed to us by Hitler’s ‘final solution’ were just troublemakers? Do I have to ask for forgiveness of the SS-men, whose khaki uniforms and heavy boots were just a disguise?”⁵¹ Not impressed by Kabbalistic explanations, the Knesset member asks her readers to compare Rebbe’s words with a passage from *Mein Kampf*, in which Hitler calls himself a Divine instrument: “Eternal Nature inexorably avenges the infringement of her commands. Hence

49 J. Telushkin, *The Rebbe...*, 116.

50 Haika Grossman, “Ha-Rabbi me-Lubavitsch we-ha-Shoah”, *Al ha-Mishmar*, 22 August 1980, 3.

51 *Ibid.*

today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.”⁵² Grossman’s criticism is of course a part of the wider polemic of the socialist movement vis-à-vis ultra-orthodoxy. She had in fact previously engaged herself in multiple similar disputes, most notorious of which was the case of Neturei Karta’s pamphlet *Holocaust Victims Accuse*, in which rabbi Moshe Schonfeld blamed Zionism for the horrors of the Holocaust.⁵³ But in the case of *Emuna u-mada’* the Knesset Member also feels the urge to warn the many non-Ḥasidic and non-religious Jews who look to Schneerson for spiritual advice and inspiration: “The thought that similar words can be said and written by a person who is considered to be a spiritual leader of today’s Jewry is frightening.”⁵⁴

Using the citations from *Emuna u-Mada’* as an example of the “Ḥaredi dilemma of how to ‘justify’ the extermination of Jews, who were ‘punished’”, Grossman asks the Rebbe to explain the inconsistency between a “slap on the precious cheek” and the “removal of a poisoned limb”, which she sees as a challenge to Ḥabad members as well. In order to believe that the Shoah was a *tikkun* (rectification), one would have to find a way to explain how the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent religious Jews, including nearly all Ḥabad members, could rectify the world.

Removal of poisoned limbs, like women and children (not all of which kept the Shabbat, of course – just your normal sinful people of Israel) – that is life. We could put up with it. But ‘the Ḥaredi Jewry’ and the ‘choicest’?⁵⁵ Heaven forbid! That is way too much. What else must be said? ... If a non-Jew wrote such words, we would have shaken the heavens and earth, and for good reason. But this is the Lubavitcher Rebbe saying these words and who would dare doubt his love for [the people of] Israel?⁵⁶

52 *Ibid.* Hitler’s original quote appears in Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Boston: The Riverside Press 1943, 65.

53 D. Porat, “Amalek’s Accomplices’...”, 698. For the original publication, see Moshe Schonfeld, *The Holocaust Victims Accuse*, New York: Neturei Karta of U.S.A. 1977. For additional material on Grossman’s polemics vis-à-vis the ultra-orthodoxy, see “Tik ha-Yaḥas beyn ha-Dat ve-ha-Shoa”, Arkhiyon ishi – Ḥaika Grossman – hitkatvut-tikshoret 1969-1993, Giv’at Haviva, Yad Ya’ari: Hashomer Hatzair Institute for Research and Documentation, (5) 8.69-95.

54 H. Grossman, “Ha-Rabbi me-Lubavitsch...”, 3.

55 “*shamna ve-salta*”, lit. “oil and fine flour” (see *Leviticus* 2,2).

56 H. Grossman, “Ha-Rabbi me-Lubavitsch...”, 3.

Responses to criticism

Grossman's polemical piece was re-published in the subsequent months in diverse socialist and Yiddish-language outlets around the world, such as *Morning Freiheit* (New York),⁵⁷ *Undzer Weg* (Toronto)⁵⁸ or *Fraye Shtime* (Buenos Aires).⁵⁹ It triggered numerous responses, private and open letters that poured in to MK Grossman's office during the following months and years. Many of the critical responses, however, tended to miss the point of the entire debate, such as the peculiar open letter titled "Lest you deny what you see by your own eyes", published by the ultra-orthodox newspaper *ha-Maḥane ha-ḥaredi*. The open letter, written by a female author and signed by "S. Hedwa", argued that the Shoah is just as historical an event as the revelation at Sinai, so questioning the Rebbe's interpretation of the Shoah means denial of the historicity of the Torah and in effect amounts to Holocaust denial.⁶⁰

Schneerson himself responded six days after the publication of Grossman's original piece in 'Al *ha-Mishmar* by means of a private letter,⁶¹ later published in the eleventh volume of his collected talks and sermons (*Likkutei siḥot*). The response expressed astonishment that Grossman voiced her criticism publicly in the form of an opinion piece for a nation-wide newspaper and that she had not first attempted to have her questions answered privately.⁶² He also felt sorry for what he saw as Grossman's failure to understand his point. Referring to the complicated genesis of the text, he claims that the "interview" published in *Emuna u-mada* and cited by Grossman was "a vague interpretation of his talk. An interpretation, which does not always manage to grasp the fine ideas and expressions etc., although the core meaning is generally preserved correctly".⁶³ Let it be noted that any misinterpretations must have been of a minor nature. Grossman was reacting to what was already the second edition of *Emuna u-Mada*. In fact, she found it hard to believe the authen-

57 Chaim Suller, "Lubavitch Leader Says Holocaust – God's Will", *Morning Freiheit*, 24 May 1981, 1.

58 Haika Grossman, "Der Lubavitcher Rabi un di Shoa", *Undzer veg* 71, June 1981, 6.

59 Haika Grossman, "Der Lubavitcher Rabi un di Shoa", *Fraie Shtime* 73, June 1981, 6.

60 Hedwa S[egal], "Pen tiḥpor be-dvarim asher ra'u eynkha", *Ha-Maḥane ha-Ḥaredi* 234, 22 May 1985 (2 Sivan 5745). The author may have been Hedwa Segal, wife of the Habad rabbi Chaim Shalom Segal from Afula (born 1951), yet further confirmation is necessary.

61 "Menahem Mendel Schneerson's letter to Haika Grossman, 28 August 1980", Arkhiyon ishi – Haika Grossman – hitkatvut-tikshoret 1969-1993, Giv'at Haviva, Yad Ya'ari: Hashomer Hatzar Institute for Research and Documentation, (5) 8.69-95.

62 Menachem M. Schneerson, *Likkutei Siḥot al Parashiyot ha-Shavua, Hagim u-Mo'adim* XXI, Brooklyn: Otzar He-Hasidim ⁵2005, 397.

63 *Ibid.*

ticity of the publication, and so contacted the publishing house in Kfar Ḥabad directly. In response to her query, the publisher promptly delivered a fresh copy of the publication to her Knesset office by special courier.⁶⁴ She thus had an authentic copy of the book directly from the publisher. A copy of the relevant chapter is filed in her personal archive.⁶⁵ It is highly unlikely that the Rebbe would allow a book of severe misinterpretations of his teachings to be published by a prominent Ḥabad publisher, based in the Ḥabad's spiritual center in Israel, "with the Ḥabad's imprimatur"⁶⁶ and then re-published again without changes in a second edition some four years later. Schneerson hesitantly admitted that these quotations were generally valid, but he felt disappointed by "the interpretation she [Grossman] made in her article". He regrets being accused "for the first time [in his life]" of having an insensitive attitude towards "a topic that touches the heart of every Jew".⁶⁷

He attempted to dispel the accusations of having justified Hitler by reminding his critic the blessings uttered in memory of the victims and curses attached to villains and perpetrators. "When reminding Hitler and his collaborators, we add 'let their names be erased'."⁶⁸ Yet, he defended his position that Hitler was indeed a Divine instrument and that there must have been a Divine purpose behind the Shoah. "It is nothing new for a religious person, ... who believes with absolute faith that He is the ruler of all creation, even in the times of the Shoah."⁶⁹ Even those "who proclaimed themselves non-believers started to demand, protest etc. whether it would not be possible for the judge of the earth to interfere into the Shoah!"⁷⁰ In other words, even the "so-called non-believers" actually confirm the existence of an omnipotent Divine hand by calling for its intervention.

Schneerson stuck to his surgical analogy while rejecting the criticism that he had written about the Shoah as punishment: "I have never heard anyone talking about surgery as a matter of punishment for the patient ... when a surgery is performed on somebody, it is first and foremost done for his benefit."⁷¹ As for the role of Hitler as a Divine instrument, Schneerson argued that he was not the first one to use this metaphor, citing prophet

64 H. Grossman, "Ha-Rabbi me-Lubavitsch...".

65 "Clipping from Rebbe Schneerson's *Emuna u-mada*", Arkhiyon ishi – Ḥaika Grossman – hitkatvut-tikshoret 1969-1993, Giv'at Haviva, Yad Ya'ari: Hashomer Hatzair Institute for Research and Documentation, (5) 8.69-95.

66 Y. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust...*, 198.

67 M. M. Schneerson, *Likkutei Siḥot...*, 397.

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*

71 *Ibid.*

Jeremiah, who used it in reference to the destruction of Solomon's Temple by Nebuchadnezzar. The Rebbe wondered why it was even necessary to answer this in his analogy. "It is not the scalpel (*izmel*)⁷² that performs the surgery."⁷³ It is G-d performing the surgery, using the villain as His scalpel. Unlike the ancient prophets, the Rebbe's letter explains that this "surgery" is not meant as a punishment, but rather a form of rectification (*tikkun*). Here, he again touches on the most confusing and contradictory portion of his teaching. His argument that the "surgery" was not meant to be a "punishment" somewhat contradicts his references to a "warning slap" or "correcting of behavior" that he made in *Emuna u-mada*. While Schneerson attempted to tackle this issue in *Emuna u-Mada* by combined references to reincarnation of souls (*gilgul ha-neshamot*) and *pikuah nefesh*, he did not provide an additional explanation in his letter to Haika Grossman that would hopefully allow the reader to elucidate his line of thought and resolve this key issue in the entire controversy.

This was attempted by rabbi Shalom Dov Wolpo, a prominent national-religious political activist and one of the first Habad rabbis to call Lubavitcher Rebbe the Messiah. In his response to Grossman, published in March 1981 by the religious labour newspaper *She'arim*,⁷⁴ Dov Wolpo did not question the authenticity of the Rebbe's talk, which he seemed to be taking for granted. In fact, he weighed in by providing additional quotes about sin and punishment from the Hebrew Bible and further argues: "Hundreds of billions [sic] of people have died since the creation of the world and nobody lives forever."⁷⁵ Dov Wolpo feels "shaken" by Grossman's reading of Rebbe's vision of Hitler as a Divine tool, not because such an idea would be unacceptable, but "just like the Member of Knesset, so does the gentile not understand" that God uses the gentile as a "rod of His anger".⁷⁶ "Neither the gentile, nor the unbelievers from our midst are willing to believe that the Holy, blessed be His name, sends the gentile to punish His people ..." And despite the fact that "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord"⁷⁷ and "that there is a Divine purpose behind the acts", the gentile is punished because, by committing the act, he "confirmed his malice."⁷⁸

72 A surgical knife used by a *mohel* for circumcision.

73 *Ibid.*

74 The newspaper was the mouthpiece of Po'alei Agudat Yisra'el.

75 Shalom Dov Wolpo, "Prikat 'ol be-ḥasut kdoshei Auschwitz", *She'arim*, 6 March 1981, 6.

76 Cf. *Isaiah* 10:5: "Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger; the staff in their hands is My wrath."

77 Cf. *Proverbs* 21:1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will."

78 S. Dov Wolpo, "Prikat 'ol be-ḥasut...", 6.

As for the description of the “choicest Jews” as “poisonous limbs”, Wolpo dismisses Grossman’s reading altogether as an “error” by a non-religious person and claims that the Rebbe’s metaphor was meant to allow “the thinking man” to understand the inferiority of flesh to the soul “just like the body is superior to the limb being cut by a surgeon” and that to every “punishment delivered upon a Jew by the Holy One, blessed be His name, there is an inner good in the form of elevation of the spirit over the foundations of the flesh”.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, Dov Wolpo defends Schneerson by re-interpreting his ideas, which may yield counterproductive results. By insisting on the issue of sin and punishment, Dov Wolpo undermines the Rebbe’s objection that he had not meant the “surgery” as “punishment”. The Rebbe also did not say that the heavenly surgeon cuts bodies from spirits like poisoned limbs. Reading his statements this way would only support secular criticism, because it would mean that two different, isolated parables in the Rebbe’s talk could in fact be connected and, from this connection, conclusions can be made.

It can be argued that Schneerson simply failed to realize why doctors cut limbs and tumors from the body and why such an analogy could be seen as offensive vis-à-vis the victims of the Holocaust. The problem may also be that in the Ḥasidic parables, contrary to the Aristotelian system of logic, the fact that $A = B$ and $B = C$ does not automatically mean that $C = A$. This was the line of argument by MK Moshe Unna. In a personal letter to Grossman from 1st October 1980, Unna, who at the time represented the National Religious Party (*Mafdal*), admitted to having “a very unfavorable opinion about Lubavitcher Rebbe”. Despite dismissing the Rebbe’s words as “inhumane”, he explained to his Knesset colleague that Midrashic parables are not always meant to be extrapolated, interconnected or generalized. “I can imagine that the Rebbe had not realized the maliciousness and absurdity in the second part of his talk,” he wrote.⁸⁰

Schneerson was also not the first one to use the parable of the Divine surgeon. The idea previously appeared in the writings of Efraim Sokolover⁸¹ and Tzvi Yehuda Kook. The latter wrote that the victims had undergone “heavenly surgery at the hands of the destroyers”, which was necessary for the rebirth of Jewish life.⁸² Such ideas are neither limited to the orthodox

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ “MK Moshe Unna’s letter to MK Haika Grossman 1 October 1980”, Arkhivyon ishi – Haika Grossman – hitkatvut-tikshoret 1969-1993, Giv’at Haviva, Yad Ya’ari: Hashomer Hatzair Institute for Research and Documentation, (5) 8.69-95.

⁸¹ Gershon Greenberg, “Ultra-Orthodox Reflections on the Shoah: 1945 to the Present”, in: Konrad Kwiet – Jürgen Matthäus (eds.), *Contemporary Responses to the Holocaust*, Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group 2004, 87-122: 115.

⁸² Eric J. Sundquist, *Writing in Witness: A Holocaust Reader*, New York: SUNY Press 2018, 308.

or Ḥasīdic streams of Judaism. The reform rabbi Ignaz Maybaum drew exactly the same parallel in 1949 and then multiple times in his sermons during the 1960s.⁸³ In Maybaum's progressivist worldview, the Shoah was a case of *Hurban* – a destructive yet also formative epoch-making event, which in its consequences leads to the evolution of the Jewish religion. In 1963, Maybaum wrote: “The churban is an operation in which God, like a surgeon, cuts out a past [sic] from the body of mankind and allows a new span of life to begin in revived health.”⁸⁴ Unlike some orthodox thinkers, Maybaum did not claim that the Holocaust occurred because of the sins of the Jewish people themselves, but rather because of the sins of other nations. Using a reference to Isaiah's suffering servant, he argued that the Jews were scapegoated.⁸⁵ He invoked Christological interpretations of Isaiah's suffering servant⁸⁶ to fire back at Christianity, claiming that unlike the G-d of the Torah, who rejected human sacrifices in the Tanakhic story about the binding of Isaac, Christians can learn lessons and become purified from their sins only by witnessing and repeating the horrors of scapegoating.⁸⁷ Maybaum's rendition of the Shoah as a life-saving operation is strikingly similar to Schneerson's, especially when he talks about the progress and revival of Jewish life, although it is different in its conclusions. While Schneerson saw the “operation” as an opportunity for *teshuvah* by returning to traditional Jewish life, Maybaum preached radical progress. In 1964, he wrote: “God, acting as a surgeon in world history, has cut away from us a secular history which connected German Jews with German history, East European Jews with Polish, Lithuanian and Russian history, Sephardi Jews with Islamic history. The gentile Middle Ages were cut away from our Jewish life.”⁸⁸

83 Ignaz Maybaum, *The Jewish Mission*, London: James Clarke and Co. 1949. See also Zbyněk Tarant, *Diaspora paměti: Židovská paměť a reflexe holocaustu v Izraeli a Spojených státech*, Plzeň: Západočeská univerzita v Plzni 2013, 200-209.

84 Ignaz Maybaum, *The Face of God after Auschwitz*, Amsterdam: Polak and Van Gennepe 1965, 61.

85 *Ibid.*, 67.

86 Cf. *Iz* 52,15: “So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.”

87 I. Maybaum, *The Face of God...*, 36.

88 *Ibid.*, 52.

Uncomfortable legacy

It has been documented that towards the end of his life, the Rebbe revised some of his tough opinions. It could even be argued that the first revision came already in his response to Haïka Grossman, when he disavowed the allegedly “inaccurate” translations in *Emuna u-mada’*. While he maintained his central position that Holocaust cannot be understood until the coming of the Messianic age, he harshly criticized others for talking about the Shoah in terms of sin and punishment.⁸⁹ In his December 1990 speech, he criticized the Lithuanian rabbi Elazar Schach, his long-time intellectual opponent, for his statements that the Shoah was a Divine punishment.⁹⁰ This speech may well be his most comprehensive public commentary on Holocaust theodicy since the talks that served as a basis for *Emuna u-mada’*.⁹¹ “All who perished in the Holocaust – man, woman and child – were holy and pure. They died solely because they were Jews. Each and every one was a righteous martyr,” the Rebbe said in response to the assertion that the victims were punished for their sins. “Any attempt to cast blame, for whatever reason, upon those who perished is shocking.”⁹² In a January 1991 speech delivered during a Hasidic gathering (*hitwa’adut*)⁹³ and later published as part of a *Torat Menahem* collection, he said: “The extermination of six million Jews, performed with the utmost cruelty ..., cannot be seen as punishment for sins, because not even Satan himself could find a list of sins that would justify such a horrible punishment.”⁹⁴ In the same speech, he cites rabbinical sources, which claim that G-d had abandoned “punishment by extermination” at least since 1492.

89 G. Greenberg, “Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s Response...”, 86-87.

90 Full transcript of Elazar Schach’s statements was published by the orthodox newspaper *Yated Ne’man* on 28 January 1991 along with Schneerson’s response. See D. Porat, “Amalek’s Accomplices’...”, 728.

91 Chaim Miller considers this even *the* most comprehensive public speech by the Rebbe on the subject of Holocaust theodicy. Ch. Miller, *Turning Judaism Outward...*, 392-394.

92 “Lubavitcher Rebbe Rejects Assertion That Holocaust Was Divine Punishment”, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* 68/244, 31 December 1990, 4.

93 *Hitwa’adut* (also spelled *hitwaadus*) or in Yiddish *farbrengen* is “an informal, inspirational Hasidic gathering where words of Torah are shared and melodies are sung over refreshments and spirits.” Cf. Menachem Posner, “What to Expect at a Farbrengen” [online], <https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3006466/jewish/What-to-Expect-at-a-Farbrengen.htm>, [4 June 2021].

94 Menachem Mendel Schneerson, “Me-sihot she parashat va-yechi (ve-‘asara ba-tvet yehafech le-simcha) 5751” [online], in: *Torat menahem* (Hitwaaduyot 5751), <https://he.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3195396>, [4 June 2021], 112-126: 120.

In line with the Ḥaṣīdic tradition, Schneerson's teaching stressed the need to focus on the positive aspects of human experience, living a meaningful life in line with the Divine commandments (*miẓvot*) and preparing for the coming of the Messianic age. However, the claim that "in his writings and discussions on the subject, the Rebbe rejected all theological explanations for the Holocaust" as the Ḥabad.org website currently claims in its rendition of the Rebbe's biography, is too broad and inaccurate.⁹⁵ It would be more accurate to say that the Shoah never became the main subject of his teachings and that only reluctant isolated remarks about it are randomly scattered throughout his extensive writings, letters and interviews. In a similar vein, Gershon Greenberg claims: "For the Rebbe, beginning in 1951, the Holocaust was one of many concerns; indeed most of his statements about it came only as reactions to others ([Elie] Wiesel, [Haika] Grossman, and [rabbi Elazar] Shakh)."⁹⁶ The many contradictions and loose ends seem to support the theory that Schneerson never aspired to come up with a comprehensive Holocaust theology in the first place.

Menachem Mendel Schneerson died in 1994 without naming a successor. With the passage of time, Ḥabad's attitude vis-à-vis the Shoah and its victims has evolved into a more sophisticated approach, which embraces Holocaust commemoration as a motivation for rebuilding and direct missionary expansion. In the spirit of this more sophisticated approach to Holocaust memory, Ḥabad tends to juxtapose destruction with rejuvenation by deliberately choosing local Holocaust anniversaries for opening new community centers or dedicating Torah scrolls to fulfill its core belief that repentance (*teshuva*) is the ultimate answer to the Shoah. While the language of sin and punishment has been toned down significantly, the echoes of the original Maḥane Yisra'el ideology, mentioned at the beginning of this article, can still be felt in these activities. Since the late 2010s, pairs of Ḥabad emissaries (*schluḥim*) can increasingly be seen performing their mission at public commemorative events in countries like Germany⁹⁷ and Poland.⁹⁸ Since at least 2011, they have offered phylacteries (*tefilin*)

95 "1939-45: The Rebbe on the Holocaust and Rebuilding" [online], <https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/62160/jewish/1939-45-The-Rebbe-on-the-Holocaust-Rebuilding.htm>, [4 June 2021].

96 G. Greenberg, "Menachem Mendel Schneerson's Response...", 860.

97 "Chabad of Berlin Publishes German Prayerbook, Marks Holocaust Remembrance Day" [online], <<http://lubavitch.com/news/article/2073887/Chabad-of-Berlin-Publishes-German-Prayerbook-Marks-Holocaust-Remembrance-Day.html>>, 24 April 2017 [4 June 2021].

98 Baila Olidort, "Auschwitz, The Polin Museum, The Chabad Tent" [online], <<http://lubavitch.com/news/article/2081863/Auschwitz-The-Polin-Museum-The-Ḥabad-Tent.html>>, 22 July 2018 [4 June 2021].

to the participants of the annual March of the Living at the site of the Auschwitz I concentration camp (see Fig. 1 and 2).⁹⁹



Fig. 1 and 2. Ḥabad emissaries (*schluḥim*) offer phylacterias (*tefilin*) to March of the Living participants at the site of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz I. Photographed by the author, 1 May 2011.

However, the movement seems split over the later Rebbe's thoughts about the Holocaust, which constitute a somewhat uncomfortable legacy of their revered spiritual leader. On the one hand, one can find quotations of the surgical parable repeated verbatim in online articles, such as in the 2004 piece on the right-wing Ḥabad-affiliated website Chabad online.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, the book *Emuna u-mada'* has a rather "apocryphal" status in other parts of the transnational movement. The book does not appear in lists of the Rebbe's writings in popular online biographies. Some libraries run by Ḥabad may hold it in their collections, while others do not, showing that the text is not unequivocally included into the core canon of his writing. Its accuracy or authenticity continues to be questioned, like in the Ḥabad rabbi Eliezer Shemtov's response to criticism raised by the secular Holocaust scholar, Yehuda Bauer.¹⁰¹

In his popular biography of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, published in 2014,¹⁰² rabbi Joseph B. Telushkin cherry-picks statements in which the

⁹⁹ Personal observations by the author at the annual March of the Living at the Auschwitz I campsite, Oświęcim, Poland, 2008, 2010, 2011 and 2012.

¹⁰⁰ "Ve eyfo haya elokim?" [online], <<https://col.org.il/news/4595>>, 19 April 2004 [4 June 2021].

¹⁰¹ Eliezer Shemtov, "How the Rebbe Understood the Holocaust" [online], *Ha-Aretz*, <<https://www.haaretz.com/1.4824764>>, 8 June 2007 [4 June 2021].

¹⁰² J. Telushkin, *The Rebbe...*

Rebbe criticized the notion that the Holocaust was a punishment for alleged sins. Telushkin mentions the Rebbe's disagreement with the leader of Lithuanian Jewry, rabbi Elazar Schach, over this issue, yet he skips the entire controversy surrounding *Emuna u-mada'* and the dispute with Haika Grossman. The controversy is also strangely absent from Chaim Miller's biography of the Rebbe, while Schneerson's exchange with Elazar Schach is quoted there extensively.¹⁰³ Similar tendencies can be seen on the Habad's websites in the English language, which also carefully pick and choose remarks from the end of the Rebbe's life, in which he rejected the idea of Divine punishment in its entirety, while skipping, avoiding or denying his older comments about "punishment", a "warning slap" and "the Shoah as *tikkun*".

In response to a question regarding the issue of suffering as Divine punishment, the Chief editor of the Habad.org website, Rabbi Tzvi Freeman, wrote: "I know that there are those here who would read this as – G-d forbid – a punishment. But the Rebbe regarded that as an intolerable affront not only to the Jewish people, but to their G-d. As the Rebbe once put it, 'It is impossible that the Holocaust was a punishment for sins.'" Freeman continues by paraphrasing the Rebbe's 1991 speech: "Even the Accusing Angel himself could never find sufficient sins in that generation to justify the extermination of six million holy martyrs with such unspeakable cruelty."¹⁰⁴ A more nuanced position was at the time of this article's publication held by *Habadpedia* – an online Hebrew-language Wiki dedicated to the history and teachings of the Habad. Its Hebrew entry "Shoah" quotes the surgical parable, but it makes sure to distinguish it from the issue of sin and punishment. The next section of the entry further reads: "While some have tried to portray the Shoah as a punishment by the Creator for undesirable behavior, the Rebbe has firmly rejected such an attitude. He has said that the Shoah should neither be seen as a punishment nor a *tikkun*, and that its cause is unknown."¹⁰⁵

Conclusions

The drawback of any Holocaust theology is that once we start considering the mere possibility that the meaningless massacre of innocent millions may have had some kind of Divine purpose, we are at risk of justifying or

103 Ch. Miller, *Turning Judaism Outward...*

104 Tzvi Freeman, "Was the Holocaust a Punishment from G-d?" [online], <https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/404608/jewish/Was-the-Holocaust-a-Punishment.htm>, [4 June 2021].

105 "Ha-Sho'a" [online], in: *Chabadpedia*, <<http://chabadpedia.co.il/index.php>>, [4 June 2021].

exonerating the perpetrators, not to mention downplaying rescue and resistance efforts. The American Modern Orthodox Rabbi Ismar Schorsch compared Auschwitz to a “theological black hole, so dense that it fails to emit even a single ray of light.”¹⁰⁶ Yehuda Bauer, himself a fierce critic of Holocaust theology, called the entire endeavor to explain the Divine role in the Holocaust “an intellectual dead end”.¹⁰⁷ The Rebbe’s contemporary and reform rabbi Emil L. Fackenheim rejected the term “Holocaust theology” altogether, arguing that there is no such thing as Holocaust theology; there is only theology threatened by the Holocaust.¹⁰⁸

It can be argued that the main problem of theological responses to the Shoah is not the theology or theodicy *per se*, but the extremity of the Shoah. As Emil L. Fackenheim puts it: “The rabbis confronted Titus and Hadrian. They were spared the necessity to confront Hitler”.¹⁰⁹ Yehuda Bauer went as far as to accuse Schneerson of having “justified” the Shoah,¹¹⁰ but the Rebbe’s writings are just another example of an extreme response to an extreme phenomenon. They show that even one of the greatest rabbinical minds of the 20th century was unable to find its way out of this “theological black hole”. Paradoxically, these opinions validate the Rebbe’s original claim that the Divine role in the Shoah cannot be understood. Holocaust theology, if we admit that there is such a thing in the first place, experimented with various combinations of theodicy and anti-theodicy to find new answers, be they the works by Emil L. Fackenheim, who focused on the post-Holocaust rebuilding of Jewish life by calling the Jews to participate in mending of the world (*tikkun olam*) and thus avoid giving Hitler post-humous victory, or the thoughts of Eliezer Berkowitz, who combined the parable about the hiding of the Divine face (*hester panim*)¹¹¹ with heavenly recompense for the victims as well as the promise of rebirth in the Promised land for the survivors.¹¹² Epicurean or outright anti-theodical responses, arguing with the Divine judge while not denying His existence, such as in the works of Elie Wiesel¹¹³ or Richard L. Rubenstein,¹¹⁴

106 Ismar Schorsch, “The Holocaust and Jewish Survival”, *Midstream* 27/1, 1987, 38-42: 40.

107 Y. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust...*, 209.

108 Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought*, New York: Schocken Book 1982, 11.

109 E. L. Fackenheim, *God’s Presence in History...*, 31.

110 Yehuda Bauer, “God as Surgeon” [online], *Ha-Aretz*, <<https://www.haaretz.com/1.4823447>>, 1 June 2007 [4 June 2021].

111 Cf. *Jz.* 45,15: “Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself [hebr. *el mistater*], O God of Israel, the Saviour.”

112 Eliezer Berkowitz, *Faith after Holocaust*, New York: Ktav Publishing House 1973.

113 Elie Wiesel, *Night*, New York: Hill and Young 2006.

114 Richard Lowel Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merill Company 1966.

have also gained some popularity. Later popular ideas, such as the concept of a “voluntary covenant” by Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, offered a complex synthesis, calling the Jews to preserve the tradition for its own good, even if their faith in Divine justice was shaken by the terrible events.¹¹⁵

The Ḥabad’s tendency to deny the authenticity of the Rebbe’s older thoughts about the Shoah could be interpreted as an attempt at historical revisionism from a positivist standpoint, but it also points to the personal spiritual development and intellectual growth of the Rebbe as well as the fluidity of the seemingly “rigid” Ḥasidic movement. It turns out that even the words of the revered spiritual leader are prone to reinterpretation under changing circumstances. Or, on the other hand, older writings and talks can be compiled into a form that resembles an interview, even though such an interview never took place. One may ask rhetorically how much of today’s image of the Rebbe is really the work of the Rebbe himself and how much of it is just a hagiographic projection, i.e. a kind of “collective Rebbe” construed by both the movement’s contemporary followers and spiritual leaders, be it consciously or not.¹¹⁶ Ḥasidism sees a different approach and purpose to historiography, in which historical narratives about the deeds and miracles of the spiritual leaders (*zaddikim*) are meant to spiritually inspire disciples and teach them the Torah, not to provide historical accuracy. It does not say what kind of person the Rebbe was exactly, but rather what kind of people his followers want to become. The way Ḥabad writes its own history is thus closer to traditional Ḥasidic tales, popularized by Martin Buber’s collection, rather than anything from modern historiography, and it must be approached and read by secular historians in this way.

Ḥabad’s current message is that the martyrdom of the Holocaust victims was not in vain, as there is a Divine plan for all of them; a plan which we weak humans cannot yet comprehend, but which will be revealed to us with the inevitable coming of the Messianic age. In the meantime, every Jewish soul must prepare for the Messiah by taking her own part in mending the world. In line with this message, today’s followers of Ḥabad admire their Rebbe, who they believe spoke against the tendency to explain the Holocaust in terms of sin and punishment. As a result, such a belief tells more about the contemporary Ḥabad than about the Rebbe himself.

115 Irving Greenberg, “Voluntary Covenant”, in: id. (ed.), *Perspectives*, New York: National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership 1982, 27-44.

116 For more about the issue of Ḥasidic hagiography vs. history, see Ada Rapoport-Albert, “Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism”, *History and Theory* 27/4, 1988, 119-159.

SUMMARY

Blessed Be the Surgeon? The Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Emuna u-mada' Controversy and its Legacy

This article analyzes the intellectual controversy sparked by the remarks of the last Rebbe of the Lubavitcher dynasty, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), concerning the alleged Divine role in the horrors of the Shoah in the 1970s. The ensuing dispute took place in the form of essays, newspaper articles and op-eds, as well as private and open letters, and its echoes have occasionally resonated well into the 2000s. Closer inspection of the controversy, offered in this article, reveals not only the conflicting paradigms between traditional Jewish theodicy on the one hand and secular ethics on the other, but also the differences between Hasidic hagiographic narration and scientific positivism. This article analyzes the entire debate by using original Hebrew sources, some of which have never been published in English. The Rebbe's controversial words are analyzed in their full, original context, and the ensuing controversy is explored with a focus on the incompatible patterns of reasoning that may have hindered the dialogue. By further exploring the legacy of this controversy, the article also serves as a case study on how apocrypha are construed in contemporary religious movements.

Keywords: Habad; Schneerson, Menachem Mendel (1902-1994); Grossman, Haika (1919-1996); theodicy; Holocaust memory; Hasidism; *pikuaḥ nefesh*; *gilgul neshamot*

Department of Middle Eastern Studies
Faculty of Philosophy and Arts
University of West Bohemia in Pilsen
Sedláčková 15
301 00 Plzeň
Czech Republic

ZBYNĚK TARANT
ztarant@kbs.zcu.cz