BOOK REVIEWS

Kiddush HaShem: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life in Poland during the Holocaust, by Shimon Huberband, David E. Fishman, trans., and edited by Jeffrey S. Gurock & Robert S. Hirt (N.Y., 1987), 474 pp.

Reviewed by
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On August 18, 1942, midway point in the first mass deportations of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto, Nazi SS guards "selected" Rabbi Shimon Huberband, his wife, and 1,670 other brush factory workers for the 100-kilometer journey northeast by rail to the gas chambers of Treblinka. The entire transport met its ghastly end not long thereafter.

Left behind, in addition to shattered dreams and illusions, was a precious legacy. The 33-year-old religious scholar, whom chronicler Emmanuel Ringelblum subsequently praised as a rare "gentle soul" and an able historian, had defied starvation, typhus, and the German fixation on total secrecy to collect documents about religious life in occupied Poland for Ringelblum's *Oneg Shabbos* project. Testimony, sketches, Huberband's own memoir and scholarly studies found their way into these archives. Ultimately, a segment of Huberband's handwritten manuscripts was retrieved from its burial place in 1946, deciphered, and translated into Hebrew by Joseph Kermish and Nachman Blumenthal of Yad Vashem. The 1969 Hebrew-language edition, *Kiddush HaShem,* long recognized as a classic of Holocaust literature, has now reached a far-wider audience with an English edition that marks volume one of Yeshiva University's Heritage of Modern European Jewry Series.

Utilizing David Fishman's translation of the original Yiddish, along with valuable notes from the Hebrew volume, editors Jeffrey Gurock and Robert Hirt have organized these papers into four areas: autobiographical materials; daily life and death in the Warsaw ghetto; Jewish religious life in Nazi-occupied Europe; and the destruction of East European Jewry. Gideon Hausner's preface broaches the subject of *kiddush ha-Shem* in conflict with Third Reich evil, while an essay by Blumenthal and Kermish from the 1969 book provides useful biographical information.

The Jews of occupied Poland, we read, had difficulty in grasping the nature of their plight. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau of Piotrkow refused to hide Torah scrolls in September 1939, certain that the victorious Germans would not harm a synagogue or *beit midrash;* his counterpart in Zgierz averred, concurrently, that these "bearers of culture" would "certainly not mistreat innocent people" (p. 301). More than two years later, Huberband himself noted that, for a few pennies, people were purchasing *tefillin* and holy books that "will be worth colossal sums after the war" (pp. 214, 216).

With the screw-press of destiny inexorably tightening about them, however, some victims begin to sense the special nature of this tragedy. An author who asks his Creator, at the war's inception, if "such a beautiful world will actually be destroyed" (p. 7) silently sobs in a labor camp on Pesah 1941: "Lord Almighty, why do we deserve this?" (p. 83). Already on the eve of Yom

Kippur 1940, Jews immersing themselves in an outlawed *mikveh* realize that their situation is much worse than that endured by forefathers in Spain 400 years earlier. Those who seek signs for the Messiah's imminent coming during 1939–1941 are confounded by reality. "In the most horrible time of our people," pens Huberband in lieu of an introduction to some tales of individual grief, the entire community's sorrow is so harrowing that "on the day of reckoning every fact will cry out: 'I accuse! I demand revenge!'" (p. 260). Past descriptions of Jewish catastrophe, whether in Lamentations, the Talmud, or various subsequent classics, "pale in comparison" to what we have undergone, he concluded in April 1942 (p. 267).

Particularly indispensable is the account here of destroyed synagogues and of unremitting assaults against religiously distinguishable Jews. Important, too, are the author's personal experiences in the Dynasy and Kampinos forced-labor sites, and a lengthy report about the execution, on November 17, 1941, of the first eight Jews caught buying food in Warsaw's "Aryan" quarter. The reader shares Huberband's anguish when "the evil ones" diabolically see to it that, in various communities, the descendants of Mordechai are hanged instead of Haman to mark Purim 1941.

A noteworthy objectivity marks Huberband's reportage. Instances of vicious Polish antisemitism abound, but local priests and peasants who heeded the cry of conscience also merit his attention. Corrupt Judenrat members and Jewish policemen do not avoid censure, nor do extortionists and informers who place co-religionists in constant jeopardy. Elegantly dressed Jewish women, indifferent to countless naked children, and Gerer hasidic youth who abandon civil behavior also receive their due.

Remarkably, an unquenchable spirit, buoyed by religious promptings, asserts itself in the face of mounting barbarism. One day before the German *blitzkrieg* erupts against Poland, Lipna's assimilated Jews send the Piotrkow *kehillah* two crates of ritual objects for safekeeping. Secular Bundists risk their lives to protect Torah scrolls from flame. Shofars are stealthily blown on Rosh ha-Shanah; *hoshanot* incredibly appear for Sukkot; Talmud and prayer groups meet clandestinely. Women maintain laws of ritual purity; pious elders refuse to remove their beards; Jews pay enormous sums to ransom fellow Jews; children smuggle food past ghetto barriers; rabbis resolve specific halakhic queries arising from wartime.

Heroic endurance of this nature vindicates Rabbi Yitshak Nissenboim's novel injunction, delivered in his Warsaw Ghetto sermons, that *kiddush ha-hayyim* be Jewry's proper response to the demonic plan of systematic annihilation. *Kiddush haShem,* an ideology stressing the apotheosis of martyrdom, had been a constant of Jewish life since the spiritual confrontation with pagan Hellenism, and especially during the Christian Middle Ages. Yet with the Third Reich demanding the Jew's very body, declared Nissenboim, the sanctification of life itself became the paramount *mitsvah* for God's Chosen People. The enormous will to outlive the killers (*iberleybn* in Yiddish), often adhering to basic Jewish values, sustained many in their resistance *de profundis.* In this regard, Huberband's descriptions join such primary sources as Kalonymos Shapiro's *Esh Kodesh,* Yissachar Teichtal's *Em ha-Banim Semeha,* Ephraim Oshry's *Mi-Ma'amakim,* Moshe Flinker's diary, the diaries of the Auschwitz-Birkenau *Sonderkommando,* and Zvi Meisel's *Mekaddeshei haShem* in helping to illuminate the reasons why Jews failed to succumb completely to Nazi attempts at dehumanization prior to murder.[1]

Curiously, this Orthodox rabbi is all but silent about theological issues arising from the Holocaust. After his first wife and son are killed by German bombard-

ment in September 1939, Huberband comforts himself with the traditional prayer (Job 1:21); the downpour of rain which attends the cries of Pabianice's children and adults during the 1942 deportation suggests, in the author's mind, the tears of God and His angels (p. 332). No grappling can be found in these writings with the dilemma of God's presence/absence in the face of radical evil, with possible reasons for this calamity, with any prospect of Divine intervention. Given the author's historical talents, one would surely have profited from an analysis of these awesome years within the broader framework of four millennia. For these and related matters, 6others, writing then and later, must be our guides on the elusive path to meaning.

Perhaps Huberband's ultimate contribution lies, indeed, in his self-effacing, sober manner. The facts he registered, despite the greatest of odds, for the sake of future generations provide invaluable information on certain aspects of the Holocaust. Beyond this, the writer and his fellow Jews take their martyred leave as a vanished but not ultimately vanquished people. All, therefore, who cherish individual freedom will recognize Huberband's lasting achievement: *Kiddush HaShem* is an eloquent testimony to the only possible counterweight to nihilism and destruction—the fortitude and dignity of man.

NOTE

1. This significant aspect of Jewish behavior during the Holocaust deserves individual analysis. The interested reader might begin with the articles by S. Esh and M. Dworecki, in Y. Gutman and L. Rothkirchen, eds., *The Catastrophe of European Jewry: Antecedents-History-Reflections* (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 346–399; Mordechai Eliav, *Ani Ma'amin* (Jerusalem, 1965); Lucy Dawidowicz's *War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* (N.Y., 1975), part 2; Isaiah Trunk, *Jewish Responses to Nazi Persecution* (N.Y., 1979); Yehoshua Eibschitz, *Bi-Kedushah u-vi-Gevurah* (Tel Aviv, 1976); Terence des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (N.Y., 1976). Pioneers in this vein were survivors Moshe Prager and Simcha Unsdorfer, who published accounts after the war of religious resistance. The more recent work of Eliezer Berkovits and Pesach Schindler also deserves mention. Examination of Holocaust classics devoted to this broad field has just begun, but a promising start is Nehemia Polen's incisive analysis, "Divine Weeping: Rabbi Kalonymos Shapiro's Theology of Catastrophe in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Modern Judaism,* 7 (October 1987), 253–269.

REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE

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