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## THE HOLOCAUST AND NEW HASIDIC TALES

One of the most important contributions of the hasidic movement was its literature, particularly the tales and anecdotes. The main themes of hasidic tales are love of humanity, optimism and a boundless belief in God and the goodness of mankind. The typical hasidic tale is characterized by a unique blend of folkish elements and sophisticated wit.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, it emerged as a prominent literary genre able to stimulate and inspire many distinguished men of letters such as Franz Kafka, I.L. Peretz, Martin Buber and S.Y. Agnon, and countless others less well known who have also found in the hasidic tales a traditional and a thematic content which suited their particular philosophy, world outlook and temperament.<sup>2</sup>

During the Holocaust, when European Jews were systematically destroyed and the cultural achievements of Western civilization were fragmented, hasidism continued to create its magnificent tales in ghettos, hiding places, and camps. Though the mechanized destruction of human lives took an unprecedented dimension, hasidism did not lose its values or its belief in humanity. In fact, it seems that the very nature of the hasidic tale made it a most appropriate literary form through which to come to terms with the Holocaust and its aftermath. The overwhelming number of dead, the anonymity of the victims, the scope of the destruction seemed to leave other genres of the literary tradition of Europe at a loss for words.

The Jewish poet, on the other hand, beginning in biblical times, was better prepared to deal with tragedies that affect the lives of millions of anonymous victims. Traditionally, the biblical poet/prophet gave voice

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to the sufferings of an entire people in the face of calamity. Thus, the Scroll of Lamentations is the cry in unison for a desolate city, a nation, a motherland laid to waste, as well as a plea for redemption. In the Bible, time loses its everyday chronological significance. It is moments in the history of a people, rather than the experience of an individual (no matter how exalted) that are the subject matter of the biblical poet. Aesthetic and artistic forms exist to express the people's collective consciousness.

The hasidic tale draws from both European literary tradition and from a variety of Jewish sources—Bible, Midrash, Kabbalah, and others. Central to many hasidic tales is the singular, almost mythological charismatic personality of the *tsaddik*, the saint. Unlike the Greek or Christian hero, the *tsaddik* possesses a larger-than-life personality and mystical powers which enable him to transcend the historical reality of his surroundings. He can endow the pain and the suffering of his hasidim (as individuals or as a multitude) with personal hope, with national and universal meaning. The *tsaddik* struggles to remain optimistic even in the valley of death. His concept of eternal time enables him to surmount the brutal reality of his temporal surroundings. He is determined to believe that evil is transient and good must ultimately triumph. Faith becomes an optimistic link, providing the structural continuity between past and future, while endowing the wretchedness of the present with dignity. Thus the Rebbe's faith and tradition provide him with historical and normative links with the pre-Holocaust and the post-Holocaust world.

The anonymous, ordinary hasid, whose only distinction is his unlimited faith in his *tsaddik*, also finds it easier because of that faith to come to terms with the Holocaust. He is sure that his *tsaddik's* supernatural powers can carry him over the abyss. He believes that a blessing uttered in the distant past promises survival, that because of the *tsaddik's* blessing, even the Auschwitz number 145053 tattooed on his forearm may assume a mystical message of life. A naked lad in Mauthausen is saved from freezing in the sub-zero Austrian weather when he remembers his beloved *tsaddik's* melody.

The optimistic power vested in the hasid and the hasidic tale defies the burning furnaces and glowing chimneys of the concentration camp universe.

Despite the bleak reality of his surroundings, the hasidic storyteller has unlimited options open to him, including sources based in folklore and humor. Hasidism imposes no restrictions on its storytellers. For a creative mind within a religious movement, this is an extraordinary and very welcome freedom, almost without parallel in the literature of other religious movements. Because of its "holiness," the hasidic tale enjoys a unique status, a concept discussed at length by Yoseph Dan of the Hebrew University in his book *The Hasidic Tale*. The tale is the agent entrusted with the mission of spreading the movement's ideas; it instructs,

without any restrictions on structure, protagonist or content. Because of its mission, the tale must never become the exclusive domain of the few or the initiated, as happens in other groups and cultures where storytelling is central. Such unlimited literary freedom was instrumental in the flourishing of hasidic literature and gave rise to many outstanding creative personalities.

This supreme, unquestioned literary freedom of the hasidic tale enables and encourages the teller to probe dangerous, problematic, and otherwise forbidden topics. The hasidic tale created during the Holocaust enjoys the same freedom. It can and does discuss any topic without restrictions and restraint. It provides a platform for the airing of conscious and subconscious issues, for theological, historical and social issues that would otherwise be taboo.

The tale describes the intricate, complicated relations between man and man, man and God, victim and executioner, Jew and non-Jew. Man, at the lowest ebb of his humanity, is not denied his human image; there are still sparks of redemption and restoration. The mystical cosmic concept of the restoration of the "broken vessels," the hope that the cosmos can be restored to its original pure state, persists even in the concentration-camp universe. Despite the scope of human destruction, the hasidic tale believes that there is a way out of the inferno, not just a way into it. The normal and physical struggle against evil provides man with a normative and historical link with a pre-Holocaust past and a post-Holocaust future.

Collecting and presenting these tales is an original and exciting undertaking. More than 89 of them are included in my book *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* published last October by Oxford University Press. Two of them appear below. These tales are based primarily on interviews and oral histories that I have conducted during the past seven years with the help and enthusiasm of my Brooklyn College students.<sup>3</sup> Checking the historical accuracy of these tales was a tedious but necessary process.<sup>4</sup>

However, some tales, because of their very nature, cannot be authenticated; tales about dreams or the perception by an individual or a particular reality. To a young woman in a sealed cattle car somewhere on the tracks between Auschwitz and Stuthof, a white line in the sky seen through a crack in the wall becomes to her a white lifeline, a message of hope and survival, a source of strength—a miracle.

These unverified tales also have value as documents, for they help us to understand the inner spiritual world of the Holocaust victim. They reveal and illustrate what Victor Frankl has identified as that special human capacity to preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom under the most difficult physical condition and stress. For the person of hasidic background, it might have been the *tsaddik's* blessing, the *tsaddik's* melody,

the *tsaddik's* goblet, or man's capacity for love and faith that affirmed his faith. Each person in the camps drew on the resources of his or her innermost spiritual world, which, in combination with fate, became the key to survival.

These tales, with or without historical footnoting, are documents of primary importance. They offer a glimpse into man's spiritual struggle for his survival. But it is important to remember that these are only the tales of the survivors. It is possible that thousands, tens of thousands, millions of innocent victims who did not survive had the same dreams, the same boundless faith and the same will to live. We will never know what tales they have taken with them. All that we can do is talk to the living and salvage remnants of the spiritual activity that sustained them.

This collection of hasidic tales is not a mystification of the Holocaust, nor is it a negation of the value of armed resistance and the physical struggle for one's life or death with honor. It is simply an attempt to bring to light yet another, unexplored aspect of the Holocaust. The tales become a link, a historical continuum between the spiritual world of the period before the Holocaust and the rebirth afterward.

Some of the unique features of hasidic tales of the Holocaust are represented in the two tales reprinted here. "Circumcision" is a story told by the "rebbe" to one of his hasidim about his own experiences in the Janowska Road camp.<sup>5</sup> However, unlike many other pre-Holocaust hasidic Tales, the protagonist of this story is a woman. Her merit is not due to the fact that she is related to a prominent hasidic personality, but rather to her own deep faith and conviction.

"Number 145053" is a story of a hasid about his rebbe.<sup>6</sup> The power of a blessing uttered by a rebbe in the distant past assumes a special meaning in the concentration camp universe. In a strange way, even the Auschwitz tattoo becomes a promise of life to the hasid.

The hasidic tale of the Holocaust is rooted in the Auschwitz reality, yet it soars to heaven and higher. It can carry the faithful above pits filled with bodies. Despite Auschwitz, the tale still expressed belief that man is good and capable of improvement; it can restore order to a chaotic world and offer unlimited freedom to the creative mind attempting to come to terms with the Holocaust. Its rich Jewish heritage and European tradition make it a unique genre of modern literature.

In listening to hasidic tales of the Holocaust, in writing and in reading them, one hears echoes of the words of Bertolt Brecht: "The imagination is the only truth."

#### Circumcision

"I will tell you another story," said Rabbi Israel Spira to his student Baruch Baer Singer, "a story that took place in the Janowskia Road Camp. Janowska was

one of those camps about which, if one is to recall the events that took place during one year, one can fill the pages with tales of heroism, suffering and death. Not one book, but ten volumes. And even then, it would just be a drop in the ocean.

“Many have asked me to publish the stories of Janowska in a book. I told them I am not writing new books. It would be sufficient if we read and studied the existing books. But this particular story is a duty to record. It is a mitzvah to tell it, for it is a tale about the devotion and sacrifice of a daughter of Israel.

“One morning in Janowska, I was standing and sawing wood with another *katzetnik* (camp inmate). To humiliate us as much as possible, I was given as a partner a very short man. As you see, thank God, I am not among the short ones. It made the wood sawing both a difficult task and a laughable sight. With each pull of the saw my partner would stretch out and stand on the tips of his toes, and I would bend down till my aching, swollen feet were bleeding. And the Germans stood by and watched our misery and suffering with delight.

“One morning, on *Hoshana Rabbah*, as we were sawing wood, the wind carried in our direction piercing, tormented cries such as I had never heard before, even in the Janowska hell. The desperate clamor was coming closer and closer as if the weeping was filling up the entire universe and drowning it with painful tears.

“It is a children’s *aktion*, little angels from the entire vicinity of Drohobycz, Borislov, Lvov, Stryj, Stanislav, and others were brought here to meet their maker,” said a *katzetnik* who passed by, pushing a wheelbarrow, without even glancing in our direction. I thought the cries would shake the world’s foundation. We continued sawing the wood as our eyes became heavier and heavier with tears.

“Suddenly, just next to us, I heard the voice of a woman. ‘Jews, have mercy upon me and give me a knife.’ In front of us was standing a woman, pale as a sheet. Only her eyes were burning with a strange fire, I thought that she wanted to commit suicide. I looked around, and since I saw no Germans in sight, I said to her, ‘Why are you in such a rush to get to the World of Truth? We will get there sooner or later. What difference can one day make?’

“‘Dog, what did you say to the woman?’ A tall young German who appeared from nowhere demanded an answer, while swinging his rubber truncheon above my head. ‘The woman asked for a knife. I explained to her that we Jews are not permitted to take our lives. For our lives are entrusted in the hands of God.’ I hastily added, ‘And I hope that you, too, will spare our lives.’ The German did not respond to my words. He turned to the woman and demanded an explanation from her. She answered curtly, ‘I asked for a knife.’

“As she was talking, she kept examining the German with her feverish eyes. Suddenly her eyes stopped wandering. Her gaze was fixed on the top pocket of the German’s uniform. The shape of a knife was clearly visible through the pocket. ‘Give me that pocket knife!’ she ordered the German in a commanding voice. The German, taken by surprise, handed the knife to the woman.

“She bent down and picked up something. Only then did I notice a bundle of rags on the ground near the sawdust. She unwrapped the bundle. Amidst the rags on a snow-white pillow was a newborn babe, asleep. With a steady hand she opened the pocket knife and circumcised the baby. In a clear, intense voice she recited the blessing of the circumcision, ‘Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us by thy commandments and hast commanded us to perform the circumcision.’

“She straightened her back, looked up to the heavens, and said, ‘God of the Universe, you have given me a healthy child. I am returning to you a wholesome, kosher Jew.’ She walked over to the German, gave him back his blood-stained knife, and handed him her baby on his snow-white pillow.

“Amidst a veil of tears, I said to myself then that this mother’s circumcision will probably shake the foundations of heaven and earth. Next to Abraham on mount Moriah, where can you find a greater act of faith than this Jewish mother’s?”

The rabbi looked at his student with tear-filled eyes and said, “Since liberation, each time I am honored at a circumcision to be a *Sandak* (godfather), it is my custom to tell this particular story.”

Number 145053

Samuel Rothkopf was born in Lubraniec, Poland, a town with a huge flour-milling industry where his father was a successful grain dealer and a devout Sochaczewer Hasid. His mother, a pious woman, was busy raising her nine children, spending much of her time with her eighth child, Samuel, a sickly boy who suffered from an incurable coughing illness. The local doctors, unable to help the child, warned the parents of their son’s grave condition and his probable death. But the parents did not despair and traveled with the child from doctor to doctor.

One day when little Samuel had a severe coughing attack, his father decided to take the child to the famed Sochaczewer Rebbe, Rabbi Samuel (1856-1926). Early the following morning, the hasid himself polished the carriage and harnessed the horses as befitted such an important journey. Little Samuel, all bundled up, was brought out to the carriage by his mother while eight siblings stood around and watched in awe.

After a long, tiring ride, they arrived at the Sochaczewer Rebbe’s house. The Rebbe welcomed them with a big “*Shalom aleichem*,” a welcome befitting a devout Hasid and a relation of the famed Rabbi Israel Joshua Trunk (1820-1893).

While stroking his full beard, the Sochaczewer Rebbe looked at the child with gentle, reassuring eyes. He went to a huge bookcase, took a small package of herbs out of a drawer, put a teaspoon of the herbs into a glass, filled it with hot, steaming water from the samovar, mixed it well, and gave it to young Samuel to drink. “Drink, my child, and you will recover,” the rabbi told him in a voice in which mingled strength and gentleness. It was a drink that tasted like very bitter tea, but the rebbe commanded Samuel to drink it nevertheless.

Reluctantly, little Samuel finished the bitter tea to the very last drop, while the rabbi watched in silence. “Your son will recover,” he said to the father. “He will live and survive grave and difficult times.” When they were about to depart and Samuel was already seated in the carriage, the rabbi stood framed in the doorway, and stroking his long, white flowing beard, once more repeated his blessing, “Your son will recover and survive dark and difficult times.”

The year was 1920. A few days later the cough mysteriously stopped, and the pale six-year-old Samuel started to blossom into a healthy, vigorous child.

Years passed. Samuel, the delight of his parents, attended the yeshiva of Rabbi Kowalski (1862-1925), the Mizrahi leader and a member of the Polish Senate. Later, Samuel was drafted into the Polish Army and distinguished himself as a marksman. It was quite an achievement for a Jewish boy.

During World War II, Samuel was taken prisoner with other soldiers, but managed to jump from a moving train, and afterwards joined the Polish underground. During one of their attacks on a German unit, Samuel was captured and taken to Posen. There, in camp, he was reunited with one of his brothers and a nephew, only to watch them hang a few days later for smuggling a piece of bread inside.

On September 1, 1943, just a few days before *Rosh Hashanah*, Samuel found

himself on a train with a death convoy from Lodz to Auschwitz. More fortunate than others, he passed his first selection by the notorious Dr. Joseph Mengele, who declared him a "healthy-looking Jew." Later that afternoon, when the tattoo was burned into his flesh, he glanced at his arm and instantly knew that he would survive. His number was 145053. The sum was eighteen, the numerical value of the letter *chai*, spelling the promised message of life, the fulfillment of the Sochaczewer Rabbi's blessing.

## NOTES

1. The first collection of Hasidic Tales, *Shivhei-ha Besht (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov)*, consisting of anecdotes about the life of the founder, was published in 1814. A year later, *Sippurei Maasiyyot*, by Rabbi Nachman of Braslav (1772-1811), the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, was published posthumously. These stories, which first appeared in a bilingual edition of Yiddish and Hebrew, are among the classic masterpieces of hasidic literature. Their allegorical themes are a continuing source of inspiration and scholarly research. These first collections were followed by an outpouring of anthologies of hasidic tales, most of them focusing on the lives of the early masters and their devoted hasidim. Since most of the tales were written in Yiddish (which was a vernacular) as opposed to Hebrew (the language of scholarship), they attracted many women to Hasidism and made hasidic tales "best sellers" of their time. Other collections of hasidic tales include: Menachem Mendel Bodek, *Mifalot ha-Zaddikim* (1856), Michael Levi Rodkinson, *Siftei Zaddikim* (1876); *Niflaot ha-Hozeh* (1911); *Sefer Baal Shem Tov* (1937); Shlomo Yossef Zevin, *Sippurei Hasidim al ha-Torah* (1969), to mention a few.
2. Peretz imposed on the hasidic folktales and material that he collected his own aesthetic imprint. He discovered in the tales an expression of moral beauty and grandeur, and a deep mystical truth in the lives of the poor and the simple. Like Peretz, Buber, one of the pioneers in bringing hasidic literature to the world at large, was deeply moved by the religious message of Hasidism, and he considered it his duty to convey that message to the world. His fascination with hasidic literature was to last a lifetime. In 1906, Buber attempted to translate the tales of Rabbi Nachman into German, but later decided to retell them in German in a free adaptation; in 1908, he translated the *Legends of the Baal Shem Tov*. He also engaged in a collaboration with S. Y. Agnon, who came from a hasidic home in Galicia. Agnon's father was a follower of the Chortkover Rebbe. Much of Agnon's work is an artistic attempt to recapture the waning tradition of pious Jews and the love and life of hasidim.
3. Brooklyn College was the ideal place for such a project. The Borough of Brooklyn has the largest concentration of hasidic Holocaust survivors anywhere in the world. This is strongly reflected in the student population of my classes. The students in the courses on Hasidism and the Holocaust are primarily children of Holocaust survivors, or survivors themselves. Many are from hasidic families with strong ties to most of the outstanding hasidic rebbes, and the various hasidic communities. Only in America, and perhaps only in Brooklyn College, can one find college students from such a background. The students' own interviews with their parents, relatives, friends and neighbors and the contacts they established for me were my primary sources in America, Israel and Europe. After the students established my "credentials" I faced no difficulties within the hasidic community. For a woman, that was an important breakthrough which opened many closed doors and filled many hearts with faith and suffering.
4. This process is described in the introduction of my book
5. Based on a conversation of the Grand Rabbi of Bluzhov with Baruch Singer, January 3, 1975.
6. Based on an interview by Baruch H. Hilsenrath with Samuel Rothkopf, May 1978.