New Perspectives on Kristallnacht
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The study of real-time Orthodox Jewish responses can help to apprehend and comprehend the point of encounter between Nazism and Judaism known as the Kristallnacht. The responses belonged to a sanctified universe whose sacraments were largely obliterated. Textual research cannot retrieve the in-themselves meaning of the responses. But it can position one at the threshold to the sacred realm, from which the responses emerged. It enables one to look in the direction of sanctity’s disappearance, and even apprehend a dimension of its reality. There, one might gaze in the direction of the disappearance, to perhaps catch a glimpse of that lost universe.1

Orthodox reactions began epistemologically, in the sense that thinkers sought to comprehend the event rationally. Orthodox thinkers realized they could not and drew a perimeter around humanly-based understanding. Ultimately, they addressed the disaster in transcendental terms of apocalyptic dualism. In between there was a metahistorical narrative, rooted in biblical scripture and the dialectical relation between God and the history of the people of Israel.2 It raised temporal and spatial events to a spiritual realm, and expressed them in terms of a revelatory, mythic drama advancing toward the metaphysical reality of redemption.

The various streams of Orthodox Jewish responsive thinking coalesced around four themes: The Kristallnacht was without precedent and contrary to
human natural behavior and reason. Given divine providence, understanding was nevertheless possible—but in metahistorical or mythic terms. These explanations centered on the premise that the Jewish people had sinned, and that suffering came from above to address the transgressions. But the uniqueness of the horrors was such, that such a traditional path of explanation did not resolve the religious turmoil brought about by the destruction. Our thinkers turned to radically dualistic apocalyptic considerations—and a quest to identify means to survive and to share in the redemption to follow.

Over the course of the history of the people of Israel, when historical events could not be understood in terms of natural human behavior or reason, the metahistory provided a refuge for traditional religious thought. In turn, this opened a space for Judaism to endure on a spiritual level—and perhaps, given that pious Jews blended physical with spiritual existence, on the physical as well. In modern times, the metahistorical dimension was largely abandoned by Reform and Conservative Judaism—which confined themselves to the data of empirical history and universalistic, humanistic values.

Thus, when Reform Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman of St. Louis preached on the second Sabbath eve (1st November, Torah portion Hayei sarah) following the Kristallnacht assaults “at the special service of prayer for the persecuted people of all groups,” he stated:

If need be, perhaps by the wounds and stripes of Jews in Germany and Austria, the suffering and woes of all men will be healed. . . . The Jews of the past knew how to suffer with dignity. The Jews of the present will know how to suffer with equal dignity.3

By contrast, on the same Sabbath, Rabbi Tobias Geffen of Atlanta, Georgia, thinking metahistorically, sublated the 400 million dollar (one billion Reichsmark) fine imposed on Jews for the destruction, into the scriptural narrative of the 400 shekels which Abraham had to pay for Sarah’s plot when Ephron reneged on his offer to gift it. Hitler, Geffen predicted, would end up like Ephron—a leper, isolated from mankind.4

The Orthodox writers (predominantly rabbis) who responded from across Eastern Europe, the Land of Israel, and the United States included Hasidic, religious nationalist, Da’at torah-based (committed to the revealed scriptural tradition, identified with the Agudat Yisrael world rabbinical organization) streams. But they shared a common frame of reference, crossing sectarian lines. Cohesive patterns may be discerned. 1) The authors did not expect the calamity, especially because it emerged from what they regarded
as an enlightened culture. It was unprecedented and inexplicable in terms of human nature and rationality. However, it did take place in the universe which God created. Accordingly, there had to be an explanation in divinely-rooted, mythic terms, i.e., through metahistorical narrative. 2) Insofar as God's special people, the Jews, were positioned at the sacred *axis mundi* of humankind, they were the primary movers of world events. In the minds of these writers, Jews were not the “objects” of actions taken by other nations. They were the “subjects”—and in this sense not the “victims” but the generators of whatever happened to them. Specifically, the thinkers believed that Jews who assimilated and abandoned *Torah*, were responsible for the Kristallnacht. God intervened in history, and punished Jews (indiscriminately) with Amalek-like human instruments (Amalek was the paradigmatic enemy of the people of Israel), so that His people would return to *Torah*. Once they did, the divinely imposed suffering would end. 3) The developing troubles were breaking all boundaries of earlier agonies, they were so uncontrolled that these thinkers were left to resort to a transcendental, apocalyptic dualistic drama between metaphysical good and evil. By doing so, they could set aside any ambiguities about God’s role in history. They ceded rational or sequential explanation to a drama beyond the grasp of either historical or metahistorical explanation. The apocalyptic battle would end with the onset of redemptive reality. Redemption would balance out the destruction and assure that the universe was indeed ordered under God. Along with this, and in tandem with the transcendental drama, Jews were called upon to act: to conduct themselves benevolently, live and think according to the *Torah*, repent (*Teshuvah*, i.e., the turn back to God through a process of penitence).

**THE THRESHOLD TO HIGHER TRUTHS**

The cruelty of the Kristallnacht, in the face of the enlightenment of modernity, directed the *Admo’r* of Bobov, Poland, Bentsion Halberstam, to reach to the outer border of natural behavior and reason for understanding. He issued a massively distributed statement on January 3, 1939 (100,000 copies were reportedly distributed) that such a torrent of fury, where Jews were expelled from their homes and left with nothing; where righteous fathers and sons, and innocent weanlings were slaughtered, defied comprehension in an era of enlightenment and belief in natural compassion:
We believe in full faith, that the creator Himself, may His name be blessed, has made, does make, and will make all events happen. Further, anything which befalls a nation or individual is a matter of providence. The present generation is proud and boastful of the enlightenment, which has spread its wings across all lands. The enlightenment has refined human nature to be sympathetic and righteous—to have compassion even for animals. Who would believe that humans could become so cruel, and so suddenly? Like ostriches in the wilderness [Lamentations 4:3], they slaughter the righteous, fathers and sons, innocent weanlings. Does this not make us realize that this is not a matter of natural law or judgment?

Halberstam did not offer his thoughts about what lay beyond natural law or judgment and how to access it.

Others did. Elhanan Wasserman (Da’at torah), head of the Baranowicz, Poland yeshivah who was then in Baltimore, wrote that any attempt to understand the events surrounding Kristallnacht could drive one insane. But by looking to Torah, one would understand—and one should not remove one’s “finger” from its text for a moment.

In Palestine, the Chief Rabbi of Petah Tikvah, Reuven Katz (Da’at torah Agudat Yisrael) wrote that no rational explanation was possible as to why and how, in such a cultured era, the greatest tyrant in all the history of Israel could arise. How, in an age of socialism and democracy, could decrees of annihilation be issued? In a world where nations and races were mixed, how could racial madness erupt? Asking “Was all this meaningless? Do not such hard facts make us think? Is the hand from above not hidden in all this?” Katz responded that God had brought a Haman to induce Israel to return to its better self. (Sanhedrin 97b). Redemption would follow. Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv Mosheh Avigdor Amiel (religious nationalist) posited that ongoing hatred towards Jews and the intent to annihilate them went beyond human understanding. Still, it had to be asked. “Why did God do this?” The answer was unavoidably tied to sinning: “If a man sees that powerful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct” (Berakhot 5a).

In Jerusalem, Y. A. Dvorkes (Tseirei Agudat Yisrael—Youth Agudat Yisrael), referring to the current decline of civilization and the awakening of bestial-like inclinations, suggested that factors of punishment and repentance were involved, and that one had to look to higher providence:

Our era is one of decline after generations of civilization. Base human inclinations, those of the beast, have been awakened. Who would
ever have thought . . . ? A great and small era together. . . . Great technology and small ethics. Airplanes, created to join the hearts of neighbors, turning into birds of prey. There are great minds in the generation. But the mind does not overcome the small heart. In this era, we, the small and humble people, “The sheep among the seventy wolves” must set a path for itself between billowing waves of evil. We should know that “Punishment comes into the world only on Israel’s account” (Yebamot 63a) . . . The era is not yet behind us. Higher providence has yet to have the “open for me an opening of repentance no bigger than the eye of a needle and I will widen it into an opening to a hall” (Song of Songs R. Parashah 5 Siman 3). We await the “If the people of Israel would observe two Sabbaths they would be redeemed immediately (Shabbat 118a) from above. Each and every moment of weakness and inattention is grievous."

In America, Rabbi Mordekhai Schwartz of Cleveland iterated the Kristallnacht destruction of synagogues, the burning of Torah scrolls and rabbinic texts; how tens of thousands of Jews were forced into homelessness and imprisoned in concentration camps. How, he asked, was it possible for some Austrian painter and low-ranked soldier, who was jailed in Germany for perverse activities to dissolve the Reichstag, annul state laws, dismiss judges and ministers, kill hundreds of army officers overnight and take over the treasury, all in enlightened Germany? It could all be traceable, only to God: “Knowest thou not, that it is Heaven that has ordained this Roman nation to reign?” (Avodah Zara 18a).

Thus, Orthodox rabbis across the globe arrived independently at the same conclusion: comprehension in human terms was not possible. These thinkers set a boundary around the natural and rational mind, and once they did, they were open to higher, trans-natural understanding. It came from Torah, truths about God’s relationship with His people, and about divine oversight and governance.

METAHISTORICAL DISCLOSURES
Orthodox thinkers held that the people of Israel were a sacred nation; rooted in an a-temporal and a-spatial point at the center of the creative energy of the world, axis mundi. Accordingly, whatever unfolded in world history centered
around them—and their relationship with God. According to the spirit of the covenant, the welfare of the Jews would be assured as long as they adhered to divine commands. Alternatively, sin spelled disaster—and all was under divine control. Across the globe, with rare exceptions (Bentsion Halberstam, and Yaakov Mosheh Harlap, see below) Jewish thinkers held that the Kristallnacht was brought by God in response to Israel’s transgressions. As such, it did not upset Israel’s metahistorical relationship with God. To the contrary, the Kristallnacht confirmed it.

In some instances, the blame was general. The Chief Rabbinate of London composed a prayer for Sunday, November 20, 1938, which included the phrases:

You, the pious God have ordered tyrants to rule over the nation Israel, and have the nation suffer by the rod for its transgression. The people annulled the covenant of Your peace. For each of its sins, the nation is receiving doubly from Your hand. And the heart of the nation is humbled.¹¹

In New York, President Joseph Konvitz and Secretary Yehudah Layb Seltser of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis (Agudat harabbanim) described the Kristallnacht as an attack upon the sanctity of the people of the covenant—killing children and the elderly, leaving them to wander in hunger and cold, destroying synagogues, Batei midrash and Torah scrolls, dragging rabbinic scholars and pious Jews through the streets.¹² On behalf of the Agudat harabbanim, they called for a public fast to help the unfortunate brethren and to repent for sin.

At the same time, we must not show helplessness, or despair. We must be strong and decisive in the critical moment. We have the promise, “And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, to break my covenant with them.” [Leviticus 26:44]. We draw from the ways utilized by our forefathers, “Out of the depths have I called Thee, O Lord.” [Psalms 130:1] “Repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil decree” [“Unetaneh tokef” prayer, Day of Atonement] . . . The Agudat harabbanim has called for a public fast for all America and Canada, for Monday, 28 November 1938. Fellow Jews! Gather in the synagogues, recite Selihot. Pray. The primary purpose of prayer is Teshuvah. Return Israel. To help our unfortunate brethren, we call for doing Teshuvah for sins for which we are responsible. The sanctity of our Sabbath has been weakened. Protect the Sabbath. Our feet
have trampled the sanctity of our synagogues. Keep the sanctity of the synagogues. Marriage and divorce by the ignorant have increased illegitimate children in Israel. Family purity, the basis of our existence, has been ridiculed. Teshuvah for all sins! 

In most instances, assimilants were held culpable. Dvorkes correlated the growth of anti-Semitism with assimilation. When the granting of equal rights evoked anti-Semitism, spiritual leaders sounded the alarm to return to Jewish sources. They were ignored, in the mistaken belief that assimilation was the cure-all. When the eruption of evil did in fact take place, the assimilants were left unprepared. In Vilnius, Hayim Ozer Grodzensky (Daat torah) found a causal connection between assimilation and disaster: the plight of thousands of Jews now stranded on the German-Polish border and threatened by death, was the long-term result of assimilationist Reform in Western Europe. Grodzensky called for Teshuvah—which also implied redemption.

Schwartz in Cleveland and Amiel in Tel Aviv spoke of a “backfire” effect. Jews who abandoned the Mitsvot of Torah (including Sabbath, Kashrut, family purity, Talmud torah) hoped to integrate into non-Jewish culture and join its professions. Integration did not follow; to the contrary, Jews were beaten and forced into concentration camps. It was true that pathological hatred for Jews remained latent among the nations. But absent the misguided attempt to co-opt this animosity through intimacy, the hatred would have remained dormant. Intimacy became a catalyst for its outbreak—and the deeper the intrusion into non-Jewish culture, the harsher the repulsion. In turn, the repulsion was a punishment by God intended to have Jews return to Torah. Schwartz held that if Teshuvah were performed, the suffering would ebb and be followed by redemption. Amiel observed that German-born Reform Judaism, with its assimilationist character and side-effect of conversion to Christianity, failed to bring equal rights as the Reformers assumed. Instead, assimilation brought Hitler’s racial doctrine and the determination to eliminate Jews and Judaism altogether. Eliezer Gershon Fridenzon of Lodz added the element of self-deception. The Kristallnacht was divine punishment for assimilation by Reform Jews, whose immersion into Gentile German culture amounted to a “wild devil’s dance of Jewish denial,” and delusion, that immersion would bring security.

Wasserman constructed the assimilation-disaster relation dialectically. In traditional Orthodox Jewish thought Amalek—the paradigmatic enemy of ancient Israel, who had been destroyed physically with his people in ancient times (Deut. 25:17–19; 1 Sam. 15:3)—had been transformed into a timeless
category of absolute evil. The mythic evil assumed the form of historical personalities, ranging from Haman to Chmielnitzky to Petliura and now to Hitler. In modern times, the essence of Amalek manifest itself in the Berlin Haskalah and loss of Torah within the Jewish people. Currently, the internal Amalek was projecting itself outward, in the external form of Hitler, who punished Israel back to its Torah self. (A cyclical dynamic echoed by Schwartz.) Punishment was measure-for-measure specific: Nazi national-socialism reacted to Jewish nationalism and socialism. The closing of Jewish theaters was a response to Jews’ having attended theaters to the neglect of Torah study. As the universe was ultimately enveloped by Torah, the external served to annul the internal Amalek.¹⁹

The motives behind blaming fellow Jews and focusing on the theme of assimilation were not made explicit. While echoing the ancient prophetic tradition of transmitting God’s messages, denouncing sin and calling for repentance, the rationale behind the rebukes is left to speculation. Was there an ongoing animosity towards assimilants? Was there a fear that, unless an intracovenantal explanation were to be found, the covenant itself would be under threat? Was blaming part of an attempt to find and diagnose a cause so that a remedy could be sought? The undercurrent of expected redemption following Teshuvah (Dvorkes, Katz, Grodzensky, Wasserman, Schwartz) suggests that a remedial intention was behind the accusations.

**APOCALYPTIC DUALISM**

The metahistorically-framed reflections by Orthodox thinkers who gazed beyond empirical history and reason were not a final stage. The increasing horrors tested the underlying logic of metahistory of a one-to-one relationship between transgression and punishment. Metahistory was implicitly fragile: If suffering was God’s response to sin, why did the pious suffer? How could the evil perpetrator be employed by a good God? What was the relationship (causal? coincidental?) between Teshuvah, the ebbing of persecution and redemption? Movement to trans-metahistorical, apocalyptic dualism indicated that the metahistorical narrative was not enough for the faithful.

In Chicago, in the December 1938 edition of Hapardes, Shemuel Aharon Pardes (identified with Da’at torah) described the Kristallnacht as a war of Hitler against Holy Scripture and God:
We lament and sigh over the great, shameful and terrible Shoah which has come upon our brethren in the lands of slaughter, Germany and Austria. . . . The people of Israel have been murdered and slaughtered by Hitler and his fellow killers. The heart rages, with a great and bitter cry over the vengeance and terrible oppression erupting from Sheol. But the cry is choked in our throats, and we have become mute. We can only be deadly silent. How can our lips express our disaster? The acts of their slaughter have traversed all boundaries and shocked all lands. State organs have been on the attack. They conduct pogroms; beat and torture people unto death. They burn synagogues and Torah scrolls, they destroy houses and demolish stores, starve their victims and drive them to insanity and suicide. Then they imposed decrees of annihilation of their wretched victims. 12,000 Jews, Polish subjects, have been expelled from Germany in the darkness of night. And many of them are still on the German-Polish border, naked and with nothing. The evil Hitler taunts and blasphemes Hashem, the God of Israel, and has issued a decree to erase the name of God from the Tanakh. We believe that the war of Hitler against Hashem will bring his fall near.

In Lodz, Eliezer Gershon Fridenzon described the Kristallnacht as a volcanic like eruption of a barbaric, primitive evil—one which had devoured Germany’s culture, science and art. But redemption was imminent, with the extinction of the evil realm. Amalek’s “death’s head” was rising out of its grave to see the light of the world one last time. Amalek mocked and spit at the majestic image of God. Knowing that he was about to lose his battle with God’s light, he convulsed with death throes filled with insanity, theft and sadism. Yaakov Moshe Harlap, Head of the Merkaz Harav Kook in Jerusalem, who echoed Friedenzon’s dualism and the insanity of evil forces at the brink of death, identified the perpetrators as manifestations of the Kabbalist’s realm of negative, other being (Sitra ahra). Sensing the onset of the redemption—to be preceded by the annihilation of evil—the perpetrators sought to destroy the people of Israel through whom redemption would come.

The apocalyptic battle unfolded at the edge of metahistory, where metahistorical narrative yielded to a cosmic struggle between metaphysical entities. The struggle involved the transition from temporality and sequence to eternity. It was also the era of messianic suffering—prior to the birth of the messiah. While the battle was abstract and trans-empirical, Jews did have a role such that the cosmic and metahistorical touched. A life of Torah, benevolence, Teshuvah and prayer were all imperative.
Wasserman spoke of adhering to *Torah* as a way to survive. He identified events surrounding the Kristallnacht as those of the onset of the messiah (*Ikveta dimeshiha*; the footsteps of the messiah), filled with the agonies of the messiah’s birth. Citing “and I will sift the House of Israel among all the nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve” (Amos 9:9) he wrote:

> Jews will be scattered like wheat kernels being sifted. The Hofets Hayim of Blessed memory used to say: In the sieve one kernel falls closer and one further, but none remains in its original place. So it will be with Jews in the era of “footsteps of the messiah.” He reported in the name of R. Abraham ben David of Osquieres *ad Mishnah Eduyot* 8:7 that before the messiah comes, Jewish families will be separated. The parents will be in one land and each of the children in another land, and they will not be able to come together until Elijah will come [Malachi 3:24].

In the past, Wasserman continued, when Jews were being persecuted in one country, there was always a second place to which they could escape. During the Spanish expulsion for example, Turkey and Poland were open for Jews, as was Catholic Holland. During the era of the birth pangs of the messiah, however, they will be pursued everywhere and admitted nowhere. Currently Jews can do nothing to avert the tragedy. But they could survive by adhering to *Torah*, which enabled passage out of time and into eternity: “Thousands of years of Jewish history have demonstrated that with the power of *Torah*, Jews would be able to remain intact through fire and water.”

Fridenzon also spoke of *Torah* study. When the second Temple was destroyed, a yeshiva was built in Yavneh. Now, Amalek was setting synagogues and houses of learning aflame—and the response should be similar—that of cultivating *Torah* education.

The *Admor* of Bobov, Bentsion Halberstam, wrote that with events of *Ikveta dimeshiha* underway it was incumbent upon Jews to act benevolently (*Gemilut hasadim*). Israel’s metahistory was one of the proportional descents and ascents. Now, during the era of *Ikveta dimeshiha*, they were deepest and highest. The ascent would finally be so dramatic as to transcend the descent-ascent pattern altogether. The people of Israel would endure the agony, if they understood the radical change. They also had to act benevolently.

> Take pity on the unfortunate. Support them as much as possible, until the time will come for release from prison (and for redemption). God will recompense the generous of the nation well. . . . The rich should increase their giving, the poor should not lessen acts of
grace (Hesed)—each according to ability. As this was the era of Ikveta dimeshiha, we must make the greatest effort to increase acts of benevolence (Gemilut hasadim), the third of the three pillars of the world.25

Others spoke of Teshuvah. In Lodz, citing “Let the sufferings come, but let me not see them” (Sanhedrin” 98a), B[inyami]n held that the current sufferings were those of Ikveta dimeshiha. Suffering and relief were dialectically interrelated. As the era of Asarah harugei malkhut (the ten rabbis said to have been martyred during Hadrian’s reign) was followed by a period of mending, the Kristallnacht would be followed by messianic redemption. Teshuvah below by the people of Israel must correspond to the salvational mending above.26 Katz identified the bestial behavior aimed at the Jewish people and the descent of the world into a flood of fire as sufferings preceding redemption (Hevlei gevulah). Citing Sanhedrin 97b–98a he explained that because redemption was imminent and the people were unworthy, God had set “a king as cruel as Haman” to force Israel to do Teshuvah and thereby become worthy.27

Lastly, in Brooklyn, NY, the religious nationalist Menahem Risikoff called upon the Levites to convene for a day of prayer and Teshuvah. According to the rabbinic sages, world history would yield to redemption in the year 6000, according to the Hebrew calendar (Sanhedrin 98a). The temporal path to redemption would begin three hundred years before. The current flood of fire, blood, and ruination of Jewish life (during the Hebrew months of Kislev-Tammuz, 1937–38) belonged to the final nine months of intense suffering.

There are eighty-nine days in the months of Ellul, Tishrei and Heshvan leading up to Kislev. Then come nine months from Kislev through Tammuz, ending with the onset of the month of Av. The Ba’al Shem Tov wrote that redemption would come at that onset. . . . He also wrote that the troubles of the two hundred seventy-six days, Kislev through Tammuz, would be so difficult as to be unbearable. The period of Be’ita would end, and with Av, Be’ita would be transformed into Ahishena. [R. Joshua b. Levi: ‘It is written that the messiah will come in his time (Be’ita). It is also written “I the Lord will hasten it. If the people are worthy, I will hasten it (Ahishena). If not, the messiah will come at the end of time (Be’ita). Sanhedrin 98a].28

With Ahishena, Nazism would collapse, and redemption would begin. When the second Temple was set aflame, Risikoff recalled, young priests ascended to the roof and handed its keys to heaven (Taänit 29a). By convening now during the month of Av for a day of prayer filled with mourning and
atonement, attired in white robes and wrapped in \textit{Tefillin}, and imploring God for redemption, the priests of Israel could bridge between disaster and salvation. The keys would be returned to history—for history to blend with redemption.\textsuperscript{29}

REVERBERATIONS
Having found a path of thought to respond to the Kristallnacht, Orthodox Jews now had the wherewithal to respond to the unprecedented events to come. Namely: 1) The epistemological process where a boundary is drawn around naturalistic and rational explanation and opening reflection to metahistorical explanation. 2) The focus on accusing Jewish assimilants for setting off the persecution, under divine \textit{aegis}. 3) Setting limits to metahistorical explanation and yielding to a transcendental battle between good and evil. 4) The need for Jews to participate from below, in tandem with the battle above between evil and good and its conclusion with redemption.

In Simleul-Silvaniei, Transylvania, Shelomoh Zalman Ehrenreich drew a perimeter around attempted explanations of God’s relationship to history in February 1939. He fell silent, and then turned to await future redemption for understanding.\textsuperscript{30} In Bratislava, Shelomoh Zalman Unsdorfer suspended all questions related to God’s intentions with regard to historical events. A leap of faith was required—which could access the apocalyptic drama underway between suffering and redemption.\textsuperscript{31} In Jerusalem, the Gur Hasid Yitshak Meir Levin wrote (on October 29, 1942) that

\begin{quote}
All events, good and bad, can be understood through \textit{Torah} alone. Is there any clearer way (human or natural) to really comprehend all that has happened to us since the day we became a nation and until today? [To grasp our survival] for thousands of years of exilic wandering, despite what the enemy and persecutor who rose up to destroy us sought? Certainly, we suffered as no other. But we have remained standing erect. Meanwhile, how many nations have been lost from the world, with nothing but fragile “historical” vestiges left? We have survived millennia without our own territory, exiled and exiled. Even the most severe tyrant cannot deny the eternity within us; the power of our existence. Is it possible to explain this through any natural calculations or humanistic research?\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}
Also in Jerusalem, in December 1944, Yehezkel Sarna, unable to find an explanation for the calamity based upon Israel’s past, turned to God above. God’s tears over Israel’s plight opened a path of explanation. In the wake of the catastrophe, Simhah Elberg, who escaped to Shanghai from Warsaw, declared that no language existed to articulate the catastrophe. He turned to the Akedah, the virtual sacrifice of Isaac, which he identified as Israel’s timeless, metaphysical essence.

METAHISTORICAL DISCLOSURES
The correlation between assimilation and catastrophe was present, for example, in Unsdorfer’s sermons in Bratislava at the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942. He observed that when Jews did away with traditional garb for modern dress, the enemy forced them to dress with patches of the yellow star; that after Jews joined Christmas celebrations, they were forced to remain inside during the Christmas holiday. In Brooklyn, NY, the Lubavitch Rebbe Yosef Yitshak Schneersohn claimed that assimilationist denials of Jewish election and of divinely chosen prophets set off Nazi measure-for-measure assaults at the end of 1939. Also in New York, Joseph Henkin of the Ezrat torah relief society wrote that Gentiles were, by nature, animals of prey with enmity for Jews. Sooner or later they would have attacked. Assimilation by Jews provoked them—for they interpreted it as an underhanded maneuver to both undermine Christianity and to become rich and politically important.

APOCALYPTIC DUALISM
Examples of apocalyptic visions include those offered by Schneersohn. He described the exile of the people of Israel from their land in 70 AD as divine punishment for sin. Its purpose was to evoke Teshuvah. When Teshuvah did not take place, God radicalized the past choice between suffering and Teshuvah to one between death and life. Those who did Teshuvah would find refuge in the spiritual “camp of Israel” (“Mahaneh Yisrael”) for a rapture-like return to the land for redemption. Those who did not return would be destroyed—along with all humans who had not adhered to the seven Noahide Laws.
In Mexico City and then Brooklyn, NY, beginning in 1948, the Jerusalemite Mordekhai Atiyah identified the Holocaust as a cataclysmic turning point from exile to redemption. With the exile, sacred sparks descended into darkness, where the tension between sacred night and profane, material darkness (Kelippot, or shells) intensified more and more. The sparks were indestructible. When they descended to a point where further descent would have destroyed them, because they were indestructible, redemption became imminent. The explosive violence with which the sparks were liberated from the depths constituted the Holocaust.\(^{39}\)

The earlier imperative of pious conduct in conjunction with the apocalyptic struggle, which was articulated in response to the Kristallnacht found its way through the war. Schneersohn called out for Teshuvah, as did Atiyah—for whom Teshuvah (penitent return) became subsumed into return to the Land of Israel. While not as apocalyptically dramatic, others expected redemption and called for Teshuvah—to participate in and contribute to the higher process. Yehezkel Sarna wrote that the realms of redemption (Geulah), Teshuvah and disaster (Hurban) were displayed across Israel’s metahistorical path of development, and that Geulah was now imminent. It was, however, contingent upon Israel’s Teshuvah below.\(^{40}\) In 1943 Ehrenreich admonished his congregants not to reflect upon whether or how the tragedies were divine judgment, and instead to do Teshuvah as their forefathers had done in Egypt.\(^{41}\)

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The existence of religious responses to the Kristallnacht demonstrated the creative vitality of Orthodox Judaism’s spiritual dimension of a metahistorical narrative that endured incomprehensible historical events, as well as of apocalyptic drama (which had its parallels, in reverse, in Nazism)\(^{42}\) which opened to redemption. The pattern of response to the Kristallnacht: recognition of the unprecedented character of the destruction, the search for higher truth and conviction that it existed; the metahistorical narrative, and the apocalyptic dualism opening to redemption, would reverberate into and through the Holocaust itself. The fact that there was a spiritual, reflective response to the Kristallnacht could well have enabled Orthodox thinkers to continue to respond as the tragedy became increasingly catastrophic. The contemporaneous responses from across the globe also belonged to a cohesive whole—evidencing the strength
and breadth of the unified tradition of Orthodox thought. Ingredients of the responses could be traced to earlier cataclysmic events, but insofar as the Kristallnacht was unique, so were the responses.
Notes


3. Ferdinand M. Isserman, “Assassination—Not the way of Judaism,” sermon delivered at Temple Israel, St. Louis, at the special service of prayer for the persecuted people of all groups. November 18, 1938, 1.


15. Hayim Ozer Grodzensky, “Be’ezrat hashem. 31 May 1959,” Sefer ahiezer, vol. 3 (Vilna: S. P. Grober, 1939), preface. After Germany invaded Poland (September 1, 1939) and Jews sought refuge in Vilnius (Vilnius was returned to independent Lithuania on October 10, 1939), Grodzensky sent an urgent appeal to the United States. It led to an emergency Agudat harabbonim conference and the creation of the Va’ad Hatsalah rescue organization. Editor, “Hakhrazat agudat harabanim in amerika,” Hapardes 14, no. 7 (October 1940): 2.
19. Wasserman, Ma'am.
23. Wasserman, Ma'am.
29. Risikoff, Palgei shemen, 103b–08b, 170b–73b.
33. Yehezkel Sarna, Liteshuvah velitekumah. Devarim sheme' emru bakinus lemasped uteshuvah shehitkayem ba'ir biyeshivat hevron-keneset yisrael beyom 8 Kislev 5705 (Jerusalem: Tuvunah, 1944).
34. Simhah Elberg, Akedas trelinkyah (Shanghai, 1946).
40. Sarna, Liteshuvah.
42. The apocalyptic mindset, transcending empirical and meta-empirical explanations, aligned with Nazi apocalypticism. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler pronounced “By defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord” (Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943], 65). The German historian Helmut Krausnick wrote that while for Christians the Jew was a symbol of evil, and Judaism a rotting remnant which was superseded by true faith and had been destroyed, Nazism performed the hypostatic charge which substituted content for symbol, Jew for Judaism, evil for the symbol of evil. The Jew was evil itself (Helmut Krausnick, “The Persecution of the Jews,” in *Anatomy of the SS State*, ed. Helmut Krausnick, Hans Buchheim, Martin Broszat and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen [London: Collins, 1968], 1–124). The Jew, for Nazism, was the devil incarnate, a satanic force out to rule and destroy the world (Yehudah Bauer, “The Kristallnacht as Turning Point: Jewish Reactions to Nazi Policies,” in *The Origins of the Holocaust*, ed. Michael Marrus [Westport: Meckler, 1989], 553–69).

43. In turn, the vitality of response reflected the strength of faith. Eliezer Schweid of Jerusalem explores this from the perspective of his position as the leading historian of Jewish thought of our era. His observations include the following:

Grappling with the reality of the Holocaust was a factor that turned the faith in divine providence into an absolute need, as if it were the only hope or saving way out for humanity . . . In the face of the Holocaust [believers] were able to enlist the reserves of moral energy that were necessary in order to resist, to survive, and to look forward in hope, solely on the basis of their tottering faith. If they were to give up on it, they would be giving up on the hope of life and on life itself. They refused. The need for faith became for them the source of its validity” (Eliezer Schweid, “Faith Confronting the Experiences of Our Age,” in Eliezer Schweid: *The Responsibility of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes, trans. Leonard Levin [Leiden: Brill, 2013], 81–87).
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Konvitz, Joseph, and Yehudah Layb Seltser. "Letsom, liteshuvah utefillah utsedakah."

*Hapardes* 12, no. 9 (1938): 3.


Pardes, Shelomoh. "Al hurban hamikdash, hurban hatoraḥ, ve’al am hashem ki naflu baherev . . . Ve’anu shoalim ben adam ayyekah?"

*Hapardes* 12, no. 9 (1938): 2–3.


