**The End of Jewish History:**

**The Holocaust as a Radical Turning Point in Jewish Identity**

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**Table of Contents**

[**Preface**](#Preface)

[**I. Introduction**](#Introduction)p. 10

1.1. [An Unsolved Problem](#unsolvedproblem) p. 10

[1.2. The Structure of the Book](#Structure) p. 27

[**2. History and Historical Memory**](#History_and_Historical_Memory)p. 40

2.1. [The Holocaust – Between History and Mythology](#History_and_founding_event) p. 41

2.2. [The Holocaust - A Moment of Change in Human History](#Holocaust_a_ounding_Event) p. 49

2.3. [The Vanished Jewish World](#Vanished_Jewish_World) p. 57

[**3. The Challenge of History and Traditional Jewish Theodicy**](#challenge_of_history) p. 82

3.1[. An Unrealistic Paradigm](#Unrealistic_paradigm) p. 82

3.2. [Theodicy is Impossible](#Theodicy_is_Impossible) p. 88

3.3. [Theodicies of Retribution: Humans are Punished for their Sins](#Theodicy_of_retribution) p. 89

3.4. [Suffering is Redemptive](#Suffering_is_Redemptive) p. 92

3.5. [Suffering is a Test](#Suffering_Test) p. 94

3.6. [Suffering is the Birth Pangs of the Messiah](#Suffering_Birth_Pangs) p. 94

3.7. ['The Eclipse of God' Theodicy](#Eclipse_of_God) p. 98

3.8. [Theodicies of Freedom](#Theodicies_of_Freedom) p. 102

3.9. [Paradoxical Theodicy](#Paradoxical_Theodicy) p. 103

**[4. Jewish Fundamentalism explains the Holocaust](#Fundamentalism_explains_the_Holocaust)** [p. 104](#Fundamentalism_explains_the_Holocaust)

4.1. [Holocaust Theodicy of Retribution](#Holocaut_Theodicy_of_Retribution) p. 104

4.2. [Holocaust Theodicy of Repentance and Redemption](#Holocaust_Theodicy_Repentance) p. 113

4.3. [The Holocaust is a Call to Immigrate to Zion](#Immigration_to_Zion_call) p.122

4.4. [The Holocaust Theodicy of Holy Sorrows](#Holocaust_Theodicy_of_Holy_Sorrows) p. 125

4.5. [Negation of this World Holocaust Theodicy](#Negation_of_this_world_Holocaust_theodic) p. 130

4.6. [A Mystical Negation of the Holocaust Theodicy](#Mystical_Negation_of_the_Holocaust) p. 136

4.7. [There is No Problem – the Holocaust is Explained Away](#No_poroblem) p. 143

**5. [Theodicy of](#Hester_Panim) *[Hester Panim](#Hester_Panim)* [– Temporary Concealment of God's Presence](#Hester_Panim)** p. 148

[6.1. Soloveitchik's Theodicy of Hester Panim – God has Returned.](#Soloveitchik) p. 148

6.2[. Eliezer Berkovits - 'With God in Hell' Theodicy](#Berkovits) p. 151

**6.** [**Buber's Philosophy Bypasses the Holocaust**](#Buber)p. 156

[5.1. The Problem of Man does not include the Problem of Post-Holocaust Man](#Porblem_of_Man) p.156

[5.2. Buber's Dialogical Ontology and the Problem of Radical Evil](#Dialogical_philosophy) p. 157

**7. [Jewish Liberalism Confronts the Holocaust](#Liberalism)** p. 163

[7.1. Leo Baeck - Suffering is a Moral Challenge](#Baeck) p. 163

[7.2. Ignaz Maybaum - 'Progress through Destruction' Theodicy](#Maybaum) p. 170

**8.** [**Postmodern Critical Humanism and Theology.**](#Critical_Humanism)p. 176

[8.1. Eugene B. Borowitz – the](#Borowitz) *[Zimzum](#Borowitz)* [of the Idea of a Human Being](#Borowitz) p. 176

[8.2. Irving Greenberg - Post-Holocaust Critical Humanism](#Greenberg) p. 184

[**9. An Orphaned World**](#Void_Theology)p. 190

9.1. [Desolated Heavens – Katzenelson's Despair Theology](#Katzenelson_Desolated_Heavens) p. 191

[9.2. Wiesel's Theology of Orphanhood](#Wiesel) p. 218

[9.3. Richard Rubenstein – Life without God](#Rubenstein) p. 223

**10.** [**I am a Jew – I am a Victim**](#Jew_victim)p. 236

10.1. [The Victim Refuses to be a Victim](#Victim_refuse) p. 239

10.2. [George Steiner - To be a Jew is to be Alone](#Steiner) p. 261

10.5. [Jean Amery - Jewish Loneliness and Radical Humanism](#Jean_Amery) p. 297

10.6. [The Shame of the Victim - Primo Levi](#Primo_Levi) p. 341

**11.** **[Emil Fackenheim: The Holocaust as a Turning Point in Jewish Identity](#Phakenheim)** p. 357

11.1. [The Holocaust Challenge](#Holocaust_Challenge) p. 357

11.2. [Four Principle Questions](#Four_Questions) p. 359

11.3. [Between Traditionalism and Radicalism](#Between_Tradiionalism_radicalism) p. 362

11.4. [Is the Holocaust Unique?](#unique) p. 373

11.5. [Does the Holocaust have a Particular Meaning for Jews?](#Special_meaning_for_Jews) p. 391

11.6. [The Beginning of a New Era?](#new_era) P. 399

11.7. [The Challenge of the Holocaust to the Judeo-Christian Civilization](#Challenge_to_Judeo_Christian_civilizatio) p. 402

11.8. [The Challenge of the Holocaust to Jewish Continuation](#Challenge_to_Jewish_continuation) p. 405

11.9. [Tradition and Moments of Radical Change in Jewish History](#Tradition_and_radical_moments_of_change) p. 408

11.10. The [God Who Did Not Save Commands Still](#Commanding_and_saving_god) p. 415

11.11. [The 614th Commandment](#Auschwitz_commandment) p. 420

11.12. [Fackenheim's Second Stage Philosophy -- A Critical Discussion](#Fackenheim_Critical_Discussion) p. 434

**12. [Rupture and Tikkun - A Third Stage in Fackenheim's Holocaust Philosophy](#Ruptur_Tikkun)** p. 446

12.1. [The Jewish Denial of the Significance of History](#Spinoza_and_Rosenzweig) p. 446

12.2. [The Affirmation of History: Hegelianism, Judaism, and Postmodernity](#History_matters) p. 457

12.3. [Lurianic Symbolism and the Holocaust](#Lurianism) p. 467

12.4. [Resisting the Irresistible](#resisting_the_irresistable) p. 477

12.5. [The Meaning of Jewish Resistance](#Meaning_of_resistance) p. 480

12.6. [The Possibility of Redemption after Auschwitz](#Redemption_after_Auschwitz) p. 484

12.7. [To Mend the Entire World -- Hermeneutics, History, and Tikkun](#Hermeneutics_and_Tikkun) p. 487

12.8. [To be a Jew after the Holocaust -- A New Perspective](#Jew_after_Holocaust_new_perspective) p. 500

12.9. [The State of Israel and the Fragmentary Tikkun of Jewish-Gentile   
 Relationships](#State_of_Israel) p. 504

12.10. [Are We a Holy Remnant?](#Holy_remnant) P. 507

12.11. [The Tikkun and the Language of Tradition - A Critical Discussion](#Tikkun_Critical_discussion) p. 513

12.12. [Tikkun, Secularism, and Zionism](#Tikkun_secularism_Zionism) p. 515

12.13. [Fackenheim's Philosophy – Last Words](#Fackenheim_Last_Words) p. 517

**13.** [**The Holocaust in the Israeli Mind**](#Israel_consciousness) p. 521

13.1. [Culture of Memory](#Culture_Memory_definition) p. 521

13.2. [Destruction and Resurrection in the Israeli Mind](#Destruction_Resurrection) p. 526

13.3. [We are Different](#We_are_different). P. 533

13.4. [The Threat of a Second Auschwitz](#Threat_Second_Auschwitz) p. 538

13.5. [The Holocaust Memory as a Source of Moral Orientation](#Moral_Orientation) p. 544

13.6. [Commemoration and Education](#commemoration) p. 552

13. 7. [Two Agents of Commemoration](#Agents_of_Commemoration)p. 559

**14.** **[Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Commemoration Day)](#Yom_HaShoah)** p. 576

14.1. [The Jewish Calendar is Opened Up](#Opened_up) P. 576

14.2. [Old Holidays and New Holidays](#Old_New_Holidays) p. 577

14.3. [Culture Creates a Cosmos](#Culture_cosmos) p. 581

14.4. [Structuring a Holiday](#Structuring_Holiday) p. 584

14.5. [What Yom Hashoah Conveys](#What_Yom_Hashoah_tells) p. 589

14.6. [The Choreography of Yom Hashoah Ceremony](#Ceremony_Choreography) p. 595

14.7. [The Meaning of Yom Hashoah – Concluding Words](#Yom_Hashoah_conclusions) p. 607

15. [**The Journey to the Lands of Memory**](#Journies_Lands_Memories) p. 610

16. **[Pola – The Unending Return into a Lost World: One Personal Story](#Pola)** [p. 621](#Pola)

17. [**Bibliography**](#bibliography) p. 631

**18.** [**Index**](#index) p. 660

**P****reface**

The horrors of World War Two and the Holocaust of the Jewish population center that lies at its core happened over seventy years ago, yet they still grasp our soul and do not give us rest. They challenge the imagination, feelings, and thoughts of every person who is conscious of human history. The events of the twentieth century mandate soul searching and an in-depth study of the civilization that caused rivers of blood to flow, oceans of hatred, and industrial murder systems.

Holocaust discourse deals with difficult questions regarding the nature of the society that gave birth to Auschwitz and other mass killing sites. At the same time, it addresses the character of post-Auschwitz society. What is the mindset of a society that looks back and sees a death system, of which they are its victims?

For the Jews, study of the Holocaust is an in-depth exploration of their most intimate identity. They stand at the forefront of efforts to rebuild the destroyed Jewish world. For the Jews, the past is an ever-present memory. This book aims to follow the footsteps of the Holocaust memory and to explore the presence of the Holocaust in the Jewish mind, including the many ways it influenced the Jewish worldview, Jewish self-perception and Jewish relations with their non-Jewish neighbors.

The bookshelf dedicated to Holocaust study is overloaded with research books, interpretations, and belletristic criticism and literature. This book offers a roadmap of Jewish Holocaust philosophy. There is no one definite answer to the piercing questions raised by the Jewish past. The book opens a panorama of responses. A few are in opposition to one each other, while others develop a dialectical way of thinking.

The book concludes with a study of the Israeli culture of memory, questions about the inter-generational transference of Holocaust memory, Holocaust school curricula, the Holocaust Commemoration Day (Yom Hashoah) and student trips to Poland. The pedagogical work on the Holocaust is vast, yet much of it lacks a philosophical perspective. There is a great need for critical discussion of Holocaust education. I hope that the book will help educators, teachers, youth movement counselors, social leaders, and community activists in their complex work.

For me, as for many, the bequeathal of Holocaust memory is an intimate family matter, which adds another circle of identity and life meaning. My late parents, Zvi Shner and Sara Neshamit-Shner, were among the founders of the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz (*Kibbutz Lohamei HaGetaot*) and the Ghetto Fighters' House Holocaust and Heroism Museum, which is a simultaneously a testimony center, historical museum, archive, research center, and education institute. Its goal is the conservation of Holocaust memory and its transmission to the following generations. Since its founding, a tradition of public commemoration events was gradually institutionalized at the Ghetto Fighters' House, and this later became the basis for the State of Israel's official Holocaust commemoration events.

The cornerstone ceremony of the Ghetto Fighters House (GFH), which its founders first envisioned while still in Poland in 1946, took place on April 18, 1949. The museum opened its doors, in a modest form, in April 1950. In the following years, it became a thriving meeting place for survivors, scholars, and educators from all over the world.

In 1984, the kibbutz community published, together with the Ghetto Fighters' House, four volumes of testimonies (“*Dapei Edut”*), which tell the life stories of 96 founding members of the kibbutz. These individuals were the only survivors of their families, their communities, and the political movements in which they were involved before the war. In unimaginable ways, they survived the war and eventually found their way one by one, to the kibbutz. Thirty-five years passed from the time they gathered in the western Galilee to build their new home until they found the spiritual strength to look into the abysses of their memories and tell their stories. These four volumes are the Jewish scriptures of the twentieth century, and they are a source of inspiration to the writing of this book.

My parents' home was a modest and intimate gathering place for the monks of the commemoration work, survivors, underground comrades and partisans, writers, scholars and educators who saw the Holocaust memory as their life mission. At first, they lived in a small and simple wooden kibbutz house, then a typical kibbutz family apartment of 44 square meters. This contained their whole world, past, present and future, heart, feelings, and courage, cultural richness and social vision. This was the house the Shner family built in the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz, next to the Ghetto Fighters' House, Holocaust and Heroism Museum. There, the tapestry of historical memory and Holocaust education was woven. Zvi Shner was the founding scientific director of the GFH for 34 years. He was a philosopher and public figure, small in physical stature yet large in spirit. With stubbornness and modesty, he led this educational and cultural enterprise, together with colleagues, partners, and friends from all segments of Israeli society: cities and villages, secular and religious people from all affiliations, Jews and non-Jews, Israelis and colleagues from abroad.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Sara Neshamit-Shner, Zvi Shner's life partner, was a member of the Zionist movement in Lithuania and Poland before the war, a partisan in the Byelorussian forest during the war, and a comrade in the underground Zionist organization "Escape" (*HaBricha*) after the war. In 1945-1946 she was among the founders of the Coordination for Saving Jewish Children (*The Coordinatzia*) in Lodz, Poland, which worked to bring back Jewish children from their hiding places and the false identities they took during wartime. In Israel, she was a school teacher, a writer, and a Holocaust scholar, part of the Ghetto Fighters House's leadership. In 1958, she published the first book for youth about the Holocaust, "The Children of Mapu Street".[[2]](#footnote-2)

Zvi and Sara Shner, together with a circle of partners in this sacred work, created and shaped a culture of historical memory, humanism, commitment to the life of the Jewish people, and to the cultivation of a society of knowledge, solidarity, and peace, devoid of any trace of religious messianism. This book is dedicated to them and to their partners in this grand educational mission, which they carried out as a universal mission and a national task.

**I. I****ntroduction:**

**1.1.** **An Unsolved Problem**

In the bright sky of our times, shines the black sun of historical memory that cannot be forgotten. The memory of the historical events called "the Holocaust" darkens our days and torments us with nightmares. The twentieth century witnessed the mass murder of millions of Jews and other populations, the destruction of hundreds of Jewish communities, and the devastation of large parts of Nazi-occupied Europe. Its bloody past did not end there. The devastating results of the genocide continue to be part of our troubling history and in our consciousness, always present in our memory. Even after a genocide ends, it remains active in the memory of its victims, and probably also in the memory of its perpetrators. We ask, where is the Holocaust in our consciousness? How does it affect our identity? How does influence our worldview?

More than seventy years later, the Holocaust is still an unsolved problem for humanity. After an ocean of historiographical work, we are still trying to explain the causes and the origins of the hell of Nazi Europe. History studies still look for an explanation for and meaning to the deepest and broadest manifestation of human evil, which caused endless suffering and the destruction of millions of people. What can we learn from the events of World War Two, including the Holocaust of the Jewish people, about the essence, structure, and values of Western civilization that led to destruction and bloodshed on such an immense scale, enabled the mass murder of the Jews and other groups, and invented Auschwitz? What does the knowledge of Auschwitz do to contemporary society, our culture, our self-understanding as human beings, our future perspective on human society?

After Auschwitz, the basic humanity of people becomes questionable. "*Is this a Man*?" asks the Jewish-Italian author, Primo Levi. He, along with his readers, asks: who carried out such atrocities against other human beings? What type of person tormented others in such a way, caused others to be victims of policies of terror and gradually led them to their annihilation? On the other side, who are the people, asks Levi, that became dehumanized, humiliated, oppressed, terrorized, and slaughtered? Who were those people, who were trapped by such radical evil, and who responded in countless acts of struggle and resistance?

These questions do not relate only to the past, but also to our identity today. We ask not only what the Holocaust was, but also what it is today, within our souls. As a singular event, with no precedence or similarities in history, we are only now beginning to grasp the impact the Holocaust has had on humanity and our concept of Western civilization altogether. What is the character of a civilization that could give birth to Auschwitz?What is the effect of Auschwitz (as a symbol of the entire death machine of Nazi Germany) on our society, our culture, our soul, and our future?

These questions are especially bitter to philosophers who want to understand their place as Jews in the post-Holocaust world, without denying its implications for any person in any society. A great abyss lurks under the feet of every Jewish person. We may assume that the destruction of the centers of Jewish life in Europe, the loss of one third of the Jewish people, and the threat that hung above the heads of Jews all over the world, continue to have a mark on the way Jews see themselves, live, and act.

To sharpen the moral conflict arising from Holocaust discourse, the litigates confront a distinction between a universal understanding of the Holocaust, which bears meaning for all people, and a particularistic understanding of the Holocaust, which has a special meaning to the Jews and other groups who were victims of the Germans’ lethal policies. Sometimes, one reading of the event tries to overcome another.

The universal interpretation of the Holocaust focuses on the historical process, whose final stage was the death camps. Such an exploration must define the universal lessons about the collapse of democratic societies in times of social crisis, the emerging of spirits of fascism, the rise of regimes of terror and oppression, the development and dissemination of xenophobia and racist ideologies, the creation of a culture of hatred, systematic terror, and finally the execution of a genocide. From the study of German society, which failed to maintain its democratic way of life in the face of social and economic crises in the 1920s and 1930s and surrendered to non-democratic forces, one can learn about elements of strength and weakness in contemporary societies. From the accumulated knowledge of fascist movements in twentieth-century Europe and the development of totalitarian regimes, destructive to their own people and their neighbors, one can develop a careful, attentive, critical observation of current expressions of admiration towards any power agency and symbols of power, the state, the military, political populist groups, and clerical establishments.

The concrete historical knowledge of anti-Semitism in general and Nazi anti-Semitism in particular points to ideologies of racism, a social climate of xenophobia, hatred towards ethnic and religious minorities, and ideologies that deny human dignity and human rights, and therefore deny the very legitimacy of Jews and other targeted groups. The images of mass murder bring forward the urgent need to learn the historical phenomenon of the genocide, its ideology, and mechanisms, which are returning in our days to the historical arena in various parts of the world. History teaches us an excruciating lesson about the ability of people to inflict pain and destruction on others. History teaches us, if it can teach us anything at all, that we must be on guard.

In schools' educational programs, and in students' trips to Holocaust sites in Europe, people deal extensively with the universal perspective of the German "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem", its roots, and its implementation. It brings to the surface the universal lesson of the Holocaust and its relevance to our current reality. These policies of Holocaust education arise from the common conviction that we should give youth, community leaders, politicians, military officers, police officers and, in fact, any citizen the tools to identify expressions of racism and xenophobia, and help them to develop caution regarding the dangers of unrestricted political power, nationalism, and militarism. Everyone who cares about the humane character and democratic values of their society and wishes to prevent future Holocausts must be aware of such historical developments. Every history-conscious individual needs sensitive social sensors and must be alert to the presence of historical phenomena that endanger our society. As Antoine De Saint-Exupéry said in "The Little Prince", there are "baobab trees" that we should uproot when they are tiny, because if we ignore them, they can destroy our world.

Because of the huge number of images and stories of radical evil and mass destruction, we have to be cautious about employing this moral lesson. It is not obvious that the grandchildren of the victims will focus their studies on the historical and cultural DNA of the executioners in order not to become perpetrators themselves. Why should the grandchildren of the victims of Nazism learn in detail about the sociology and psychology of the murderers of their people? It is a grand philosophical "split", which reminds us of the Stockholm Syndrome, in which the victim identifies with his or her victimizer.

In addition, it relies on an unproven assumption that discussing "the bad" encourages "the good" in us. We want to believe that images of evil encourage the good in people. Allegedly, when we learn about the horrors of World War Two and the "Final Solution" we will decide to stand against the return of this spirit of evil in our own society. But then again, somewhere in our consciousness, a troubling thought emerges. After more than seventy years of historical study and Holocaust education programs, we are still unsure about this. People are familiar with the images of the Holocaust, and yet it is not clear whether it makes our world resistant to its return. We struggle with the question of whether images of evil generate in our minds the will to do good and fight evil.

The "democratic person" accepts the assumption that democratic education and the cultivation of the idea of human dignity demand having an historical perspective on the twentieth century. Yet, a thought comes to mind that a universal discourse on the Holocaust, or a cold and distant scientific study of Holocaust events, carries within it an element of repression of the world of the victims, and an escape from the horrors still present in the victims' memories.

It is a tricky situation. The universal discourse on the Holocaust seems more convenient for us in a post-Holocaust world. Sometimes it is easier to discuss oppressors and bystanders and draw clear-cut universal conclusions about good and evil in human society. It is easier to confront the historical villains, as this fosters our own self-esteem: we are not like them, and we will educate our children not to be like them. This educational stand turns, in an ironic way, Nazism and its main figures into pedagogical hits in moral education programs, which use them to explain, in an easy and digestible way, why we should be good, and how not to become a Nazi. It is easy to use adjectives associated with Nazism. The Holocaust lexicon is used quite often to mark certain people or deeds as "evil". "Racism" is everything that we oppose in society. Using this type of language to describe the Holocaust helps us to explain our world in a comparatively simple way, and to divide it between extremes of good (us) and bad (them).

Emotionally, it is much harder, frightening, and depressing to be empathic to the inner world of parents, grandparents, and other relatives, to learn their stories, to search for an explanation, to be their disciples, successors, and sometimes their critics. It is difficult to be with the survivors, in their oceans of pains, fears, failures, shame. But anyone who wants to understand the Holocaust must have the courage to be there with them. The reality of the victims, not the perpetrators, is the reality of the Holocaust. Any discussion of the Holocaust from a universal perspective only is sophisticated escapism, repression, or evasion of the real horrors of recent history.

The idea that leads this direction of thought is that acts of mass murder are primarily the moral problem of the murderers' people and collaborators. The Germans, Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians, Romanians, all those who are the murderers and their aides, the bystanders and the indifferent, have to take upon themselves the responsibility of their national heritage. It is also the moral task of the people associated with the Church, who did too little to save the Jews, and the academics who were silent when their Jewish colleagues and students were expelled from the universities. They all have to reflect on their moral failure and ask themselves what their role was in the murder of their Jewish neighbors. The assumption that everyone is a potential Nazi or a bystander, and therefore all of us are entitled to self-criticism about widespread indifference to human suffering, is a distortion of the historical reality and an escape from empathy for the world of the victims and their heirs. It is also an escape from the responsibilities that arise from the past. If everyone is a potential murderer or bystander, then all the moral distinctions between good people and evil ones become a wager; no one takes responsibility for the dark chapters of our past.

Even if we agree that any democratic education, in its broad cultural and philosophical sense, needs an historical perspective, and a moral understanding of genocide in general and the Holocaust in particular, the Holocaust is still primarily a major event in Jewish history. The victims' accounts are piercing. They have to deal with the images of destruction with intimacy, not in generalization encompassing all of humanity. They must face the fact that they were the objects of murderous hatred, their helplessness, the indifference of others, and their doomed struggle. They remember the shame, humiliation, degradation, and fear of death. In the words of Eli Wiesel who, as a survivor of the death camps has the right to say the most piercing words and ask the most painful questions:

*What was there about the Jew that he could be reduced so quickly, so easily to the status of a victim? I have read all the answers, all the explanations. They are all inadequate. It is difficult to imagine the silent processions marching toward the pits. And the crowds that let themselves be duped. And the condemned who, inside the sealed wagons and sometimes in the ramps at Birkenau, continued not to see. I understand neither the killers nor the victims.*[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Holocaust happened to the Jews. Jews were – without ignoring the suffering of other groups – the main target of Nazi ideology, terror policies, and death operations. The scenes of destruction, the images of humiliated and tortured Jews, the mass murder and threat of total annihilation of the Jewish people are a major element of the Jewish experience that will endure for many years to come. This experience seeks its place in Jewish historical consciousness and in Jewish reflective identity.

Without denying the universal implications of the Holocaust and the suffering of other victimized populations, for Jews, the problem has a different urgency. The Jews were the ultimate victims of Nazi Germany, the target of ideological hatred and policies of total destruction. The memory of the Holocaust mandates an in-depth observation of the Jews' most intimate selves. Jewish philosophy faces a principal question: what does it mean to be a Jew after this chapter in history? Every Jew who is conscious of current history has to struggle with urgent questions: how is it possible for a Jew to be a Jew and to raise children as Jews after Auschwitz put a death sentence over the head of every Jew on earth?After the Holocaust, the very idea of being a Jew carries with it the mark of death. Why not run away from it?

Observant Jews were commanded by Jewish tradition to keep their faith that the Messiah will eventually come. They were left with the troubling question of why the Messiah did not come yet. Traditional theodicy helped the Jews to answer this question and face the harsh historical reality,[[4]](#footnote-4) but the question remained. An ineradicable crack appeared in the world of faith.

The helplessness of the Jews during the Holocaust is always present at the back of the Jews' minds. The rich efforts to address this predicament only give evidence of its presence. A wide array of theodicies was created in order to make the Holocaust more understandable and therefore less threatening to the continuation of the Jewish people. Fundamentalists "explain away" the Holocaust as being an integral part of Providence, part of God's plan. More modernized thinkers try to find new avenues to the meaning of history.

The Holocaust is the starting point for a new formulation of Judaism and Jewish existence. Gradually, we understand that Jewish identity is profoundly different after the Holocaust. The Jews have to rebuild the entirety of the Jewish world. Nazi Germany destroyed a vast, rich, dynamic, and diverse world of Jewish life. Thousands of Jewish communities, each with its own history and vital life, have been demolished. The post-war political circumstances in the Arab countries continued the destruction of the Jewish world, as communities some 2600 years old were eliminated in just a few years. The demography and geography of the Jewish world totally changed. The main Jewish languages of Yiddish, Ladino and Judeo-Arabic became a vague memory of the destroyed Jewish civilizations on several continents.

Old languages and cultural milieus have been destroyed. The experience of destruction, abandonment, and insecurity remain, burned into the soul. For the Jews, the past is still present. It is part of their identity, both as a collective and as individuals who confront pieces of family stories, whose paths lead from the here-and-now to the lost Jewish "continents" of there-and-then.

Jewish philosophy tries to face this particularistic understanding of the Holocaust. "Why us?" Why were the Jews the main target of Nazism? After the implementation of the Final Solution of the Jewish Problem, "every Jew in the concreteness of his own life knows himself to be a survivor".[[5]](#footnote-5) What mark does this leave? What is the place of Holocaust memory in the making of Jews' consciousness as individuals and as a people? Jewish tradition is based on a collective narrative, the basis of Jewish theology, and it is sensitive to the historical drama. Does the Holocaust leave its mark on a distinctly Jewish historical paradigm or an ahistorical paradigm? Does the Holocaust change the Jewish narrative?

The memory of the Holocaust confronts the Jew with images of weakness, humiliation, social decay, and moral collapse, which happen in any society subject to radical oppression. The Holocaust itself is not a source of strength, nor the basis for moral education. In spite of the expectations of politicians and educators, such as those who accompany their students on the commemorative study trips to the death sites in Europe, it is doubtful whether these images can produce deep and sustainable Jewish pride. Perhaps it can only produce painful empathy, humility, anger, and astonishment about the expressions of sheer cruelty and unperceivable moral degradation, and extroverted spontaneous expressions of nationalism, such as raising Israeli flags, singing the Israeli anthem, and shouting curses at the Poles.

Moreover, it is possible that the memory of the Holocaust has the potential to lead to Jewish self-destruction or despair at the very possibility of a future Jewish existence. The Holocaust, which put into question the very existence of Jewish life, is a trauma shared by all conscious Jews. Irving Greenberg, a leader of Jewish Holocaust commemoration, claims that the Holocaust, as a shared trauma, brought into question the fundamental existence of Jews and of Judaism as a viable culture.[[6]](#footnote-6) This claim mandates the rethinking of Jewish identity and the understanding of the place of Holocaust memory in it. The Jewish philosopher is asked about the meaning of post-Holocaust Jewish existence. The idea of Jewish continuity is challenged. What is the meaning of raising one's children as Jews after the death sentence that hung over the head of every Jew? Why does one not leave the "Jewish drama" behind? Life continues, but under the surface the memory of the Holocaust lurks and works as a decaying force. Any post-Holocaust Jewish philosophy must answer how a nation can build its future on top of a layer of destruction.

Holocaust philosophers are divided over the question of the changes in post-Holocaust Jewish identity. We can identify those who try to foster the continuation of Jewish consciousness and to protect it from the threat of a catastrophic reality. In contrast, some Jewish philosophers see the Holocaust as a radical turning point in Jewish identity. For them, post-Holocaust Jewish identity carries a very different meaning. All agree that the Holocaust presents the greatest challenge to Jewish identity in recent history. All the roads from the Jewish past and the roads toward the Jewish future intersect in the issue of the Holocaust. All the questions of faith, ethics, Jewish continuity, and the rebuilding of Jewish life draw their answers from the memory of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust created a new lexicon. Holocaust discourse accumulates new ideas, phrases, and terminology. The words point to a reality beyond the grasp of the human mind and beyond the capacity of our language. The new language of the Holocaust contains names of places that freeze the blood: Auschwitz, Treblinka, Theresienstadt, Ponar, Babi-Yar, and many more that now have a dark shadow hovering above them forever. Some names of people entered the pantheon as representatives of absolute evil. Others became symbols of courage and good, such as Anne Frank, Janusz Korczak, and Irena Sandler. New historical ideas and phrases entered our language as well, like Race Laws, ghetto, deportation, Judenrat, selection, concentration camp, Musselman, capo, crematoria, partisan warfare, etc.

Historians and philosophers of the Holocaust need new ways or models of thinking. The common distinctions in the historiosophical discourse between the particular, the unique, and the universal lose their validity when applied to the Holocaust. As the story of one arch murderer has a universal lesson, so too the story of one victim and his or her pain and nightmares carries a universal lesson. The universal is the attempt to find universal meaning in particular events and in personal stories. The Holocaust, as a historical drama, has created new modes of historiography. There is tension between, on the one hand, scientific, objective, and critical historiography that seeks to make generalizations and conceptualizations, and, on the other hand, the reality of history, which only personal testimony can touch. This calls into question the validity and authenticity of scientific historiography after the Holocaust, since, *a priori*, it cannot grasp its objects.

Labelling the Holocaust as a singular, unprecedented event, or else rejecting this labelling, both have implications. These will be discussed extensively later in relation to the understanding of the Holocaust and its implications for our current reality. The grand lexicon that the Holocaust created is widely used in everyday discourse, far beyond concrete references to specific events related to the Holocaust. The language of the Holocaust has penetrated many areas of life that have no direct connection or relevance to Holocaust memory. Metaphors and concepts taken from the history of the Holocaust are used analogically or allegorically in areas and issues that have no essential link to the Holocaust. Holocaust terms became metaphors that are projected, sometimes carelessly and sometimes maliciously, on more recent occurrences. Such discourse makes the reference to the Holocaust shallow, and to a large extent, denies its uniqueness. If any illegitimate discrimination is "racism” and any evil person is a "Nazi", if any girl in distress who writes a diary is Anne Frank, then nothing has any special meaning and the Holocaust ceases to be a Holocaust.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Multiple and diverse philosophers have tried to answer the difficult questions that the Holocaust discourse raises. We can assume that this subject will continue to engage those who deal with the meaning of humanity in general and Jewish life in particular for many years to come.

At the basis of this Holocaust philosophy stands the effort to contain and digest this historical memory within known historiographical, cultural, theological, and philosophical paradigms. Sometimes, such a process of interpretation demands new paradigms. Sometimes, one has to restructure old paradigms to contain a new reality. The Jewish theologian or philosopher uses traditional templates of theodicy to restore Jewish trust in Providence and God's justice. However, when we try to use this paradigmatic theodicy to explain and dismantle the explosiveness of Holocaust memory, we learn that it fails to do so. The "vessels" break. They cannot contain the enormity of the grief of these events. They remain without a complete explanation and with no sufficient interpretation.

Without organizing principles, the world can fall into nihilistic chaos with no Good and Evil, Right and Wrong, Judgement and Compassion, Justice and Mercy. A world of no moral order is a despairing world. The heavens become – as expressed in Yitzhak Katzenelson's poetry – deceitful and lying. Human existence in the face of evil and pain becomes absurd.

Jewish thinkers were mobilized to deal with the problems of evil and human suffering, individually and collectively, in an effort to dam the threating wave of nihilism. Jewish theological discourse tried diligently to find an explanation that would validate monotheism even after the Holocaust. Traditional literature that "justifies the judgment" was enlisted as a means of reconciling the absurdity of the continuity of Jewish existence. Particularly conspicuous was ultra-orthodox theodicy. This approach attempted, even during the Holocaust, to settle theological problems using Midrashic tools of exegesis and allegory in order to keep the Holocaust within the framework of the rabbinic Jewish narrative or otherwise explain it away as a "no problem" problem. The magnitude of the threat to faith was in direct proportion to the theological effort of dispelling the threat and explaining the Holocaust through the pre-existing tools provided by tradition.

As we follow these efforts, we realize the incapacity of traditional theodicy in all its forms, starting with the "crime and punishment" theodicy through the Eclipse of God theodicy. They fail to give adequate theological answers to the Holocaust, and raise severe doubts regarding all the known traditional Jewish paradigms. Post-Holocaust Jewish tradition is in danger of collapse into the theological black hole of the Holocaust.

Theology and philosophy, in all their facets, had to admit that it is impossible to reconcile the idea of Providence, a just world order, or a universal rational morality with the realities of history. The world lost its certainty. The cosmos lost its order. It has an obviously inexplicable element in its being. The world returned to its primordial state of chaos. Here is the challenge, formulated by Emil Fackenheim: where can people find an Archimedean stand from which to mend this world? Without such a stable place to stand, and with no possibility for *Tikkun Olam*, the world will perish in despair, and Hitler will win a posthumous victory.

The answer to this predicament is, according to Emil Fackenheim, the stories of anti-Nazi resistance. Those who resisted the Germans did not defeat the Germans militarily, but they defied the Germans morally and proved that there is still hope to mend this world. They provide post-Holocaust humanity with the ground on which to build a new cosmic order. In every sphere of history, wherever and whenever an act of resistance has been enacted, beyond our understanding, it is attributed the meaning of a starting point for a new beginning, a cornerstone of a new world.

Fackenheim, along with other modern Jewish philosophers, sees the Holocaust as a radical turning point in Jewish existence and hence in Jewish thought. His extensive philosophy of the Holocaust advances through several stages. He began with a conservative commitment to Jewish tradition immediately after the war. This was followed by his philosophy of “the 614th commandment”, proposed in the late 1960s. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, his philosophy matured to the concept of “*Tikkun*”. In his last book, “To Mend the World” (1982), the rare acts of resistance to Nazi oppression serve as the only ground for a post-Holocaust mended world.

Some philosophers and public leaders choose to overlook the anomaly of the Holocaust and the scandalous dimensions of the calamity suffered by the Jewish people in the twentieth century. They deny the Holocaust as a reason for a dramatic change in Jewish self-understanding. Other thinkers contended that the traditional tools of Jewish consciousness are insufficient for understanding the horrors of the Holocaust reality. The "vessels" were broken.

Auschwitz was seen as the end of Jewish history by Jean Amery, a survivor of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Amery was a European intellectual of Jewish descent, born and educated in Austria, who became homeless in the war. He said, "Nothing will ever be the way it once was."[[8]](#footnote-8) Maybe something completely different would start, hopefully a more humane humanity. Amery represents the experience of the intellectual who had no connection to the Jewish past or culture, yet because he was a Jew, he was persecuted by a European society that wanted him dead. This is a total solitude predicated on the collective Holocaust memory.

Philosophers such as Yitzhak Katzenelson, Elie Wiesel, Emil Fackenheim, Richard Rubenstein, Irving Greenberg, George Steiner, and Jean Amery, claim that after the Holocaust Jewish identity has undergone a profound change. Each of these post-Holocaust Jewish philosophers describes this fundamental change in different terms.

When one reads publications of Holocaust education programs, one can get the impression that the Holocaust is an asset to moral education, as it offers stories of human heroism and righteousness and a clear distinction between good and evil. However, I claim in this book that unfortunately this approach does not make us stronger, even if it shows us what can happen to humanity when we leave our humanistic values behind. The Holocaust is first and foremost a despairing story about the total failure of humanity.

The Holocaust is not only the story of the oppressors, those who committed the crimes, or those who collaborated with the policy of murder. Nor is it only the story of the liberators or the rebels and fighters, or only the story of the “righteous among the nations” who risked their lives to help a vulnerable human being. This is too easy. It is a picture that is too brightly colored. The Holocaust is primarily the story of the victims, Jews and non-Jews, their fears, their isolation and loneliness, their agony and their anonymous deaths. To understand the real meaning of the Holocaust is to enter the kingdom of terror from the perspective of its victims, to be, for a few minutes, in their place. It is difficult, it is frightening, and it is full of despair.

The Germans and their allies perpetrated the Holocaust. However, from the victims' side, it is an intensely personal experience and memory. It is an abyss of pains and demons, whose lair lies under the surface of their lives, with which they pretend to go on. Individuals carry their own stories of loss, longing, and despair in their souls. Some spoke about it, wrote about it, or created art that made their inner Holocaust visible. Many more remained silent, but the blackness of memories worked unseen, and influence our reality in unpredictable ways.

We tend to speak of "the Holocaust" as a single defined reality, but each person has his or her own experience. There are millions of “personal Holocausts". The experience of one ghetto dweller was different from another person in the same ghetto, and from the experience of a dweller of another ghetto. Moreover, the ghetto experience was very different from the concentration camp experience, or being in hiding, or in a partisan unit, or a Soviet labor camp, or a child in a kinder-transport to the UK, or someone who fled Europe at the last possible moment, never to see his or her family again, surviving with unrecognized loneliness.

Many survivors told their own Holocaust stories, but felt that they were still locked in a cage of hidden memories, which their testimonies cannot express. They lack the words to describe their inner troubled world. Others felt that it is an impossible task, and remained silent. We may speak about an "invisible Holocaust", which is truly the most authentic one.*[[9]](#footnote-9)*

Yet, the Holocaust is a public experience, as well. It influences the historical course of the State of Israel. Israel was the haven for the largest number of Holocaust survivors. The survivors participated in the building of their new home state. They became a significant part of the Israeli society, and they brought their memories of the Holocaust with them. Spoken or hushed, their past became a founding element of Israeli consciousness. Philosophers, writers, artists, psychologists – all try to grasp the presence of the Holocaust in the Israeli identity.

Israeli Jewry gradually became the largest Jewish community world. The destruction of the former Jewish worlds became part of the memories of its "birth" and "childhood". Survivors such as Yitzhak Zuckerman, Abba Kovner, Zvi Shner, and others, strove to create an Israeli culture of memory. The radical Jewish experiences of the twentieth century changed "Jewish time". After two thousand years, the Jewish calendar got a new "holiday": *Yom Hashoah* (Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day). It can be said that this tradition began as early as April 1946, within the rubbles of destroyed Warsaw, when the first monument to commemorate the Warsaw Jewish Ghetto Uprising was erected by a group of survivors, led by Yitzhak (Antek) Zuckerman. It continued in Israel on April 18, 1949, when the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz and its museum were founded. Gradually, this became the accepted Holocaust commemoration day in Israel and most Jewish communities around the world. Eventually it was acknowledged by many non-Jewish communities and institutions around the world. Recently it was adopted also by the UN general assembly (May 2012).

A culture of memory was developed around Yom Hashoah, including formal state rituals along with informal traditions. The choreography of the day is still open and changing every year. In recent years, as the first generation of Holocaust survivors is gradually passing away, we witness a growing search for alternative ways of commemoration, less formal and more intimate.

The Ministry of Education mandates a Holocaust studies curriculum from preschool and through the 12 years of schooling. In the last twenty years, a major aspect of Holocaust studies has been the trip of Israeli high school students to Poland, especially to the sites where the murderous "Final Solution" took place. The curriculum and the trips to the Holocaust sites stir an ongoing and stormy pedagogical discourse.

The culture of commemoration challenges historians, teachers, youth counselors, parents and public leaders with difficult questions about educational activities associated with the Holocaust memory. Allegedly, the Holocaust offers a clear and unambivalent goal that has clear evil on the one side and clear good on the other. However, it actually poses a complex pedagogical and ethical challenge. The educational field is full of wrong turns, mistakes, and doubts about the teaching of the Holocaust and transmitting its memory. Many of the student trips to Holocaust sites have no sound philosophical explanation or pedagogical rationale about the impact on the identity of the participating students. Educators and public leaders planned Holocaust commemoration events before they figured out the essence of such ceremonies, and with no clear idea of what content they want to pass to their audience. The structuring of the culture of commemoration demands the understanding of the spiritual challenge that the Holocaust puts before us.

The State of Israel saw itself as the formal heir of the murdered Jews and as the representative of the Jewish people. As such, the Holocaust became an integral part of its public identity. The Jewish state saw it as its duty to bring the Nazi criminals to justice. It also accepted monetary compensation from the German Federal Republic in the name of the Holocaust survivors.

Teaching about the Holocaust presents a strategic challenge for the victimized population. The meanings drawn from the recent past overshadow the connection to the Judaism of antiquity. Jewish history, which echoes in the mind of the Jew, has no continual historical succession from antiquity until recent times. The average Jew has no access to old sources of inspiration and centers of Jewish life, in which Jewish culture was lived and cultivated. The Holocaust is a new crossroads of orientation in the world, a historical founding event that shapes Jewish time, a new point of reference to questions of life and identity.

From the Holocaust, a new historical count begins. It is a watershed event, from which Jews observe their pre-Holocaust past and post-Holocaust present. Every historically conscious Jew understands his or her being in reference to this frightening crest-line, which is always present in the back of his or her mind. The testimonies of the survivors became founding stories in the collective consciousness of Jews, maybe the new scriptures, which redefine what is above and what is below, what is good and what is evil, with what one identifies and with what one disassociates. When Abba Kovner, a leading figure in the Israeli culture of commemoration and Holocaust discourse, published his “*Megillot Ha-Edut”* (Scrolls of Testimony) in the format of the Talmud, he illustrates his idea that the Holocaust survivors' testimonies are the Talmud of the twentieth century, from which we learn the structure of the world.[[10]](#footnote-10)

What this new Talmud is teaching us? First, it reveals a great void and unimaginable loss. For every Jewish person, the Holocaust represents the experience of being orphaned. The continent from which the Jewish ships sailed to new worlds no longer exists. There is no old Jewish world to return to or draw inspiration from. The entire Jewish world of the beginning of the twentieth century has vanished. The Jew has been left on the shore of a new historical reality and must find new spiritual anchors for Jewish life. In the lives of Jews, there are the shadows and disappearing vague memories of parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and communities lost in a historical tsunami. Their loss demands an explanation and meaning. Jews in Israel and around the world face a long process of healing and mending, acknowledging the destruction and wondering about its implications.

After the liberation of Warsaw, Yitzhak (Antek) Zuckerman and his comrades who survived the war erected a memorial monument on the site of the destroyed ghetto. It is shaped like a lid of a sewage tunnel, through which the surviving underground fighters escaped from the burning ghetto. On the round lid, Zukerman put a bronze Hebrew letter Beth, the first letter of the first word in the Hebrew Bible, *Bereshit* (Genesis). This implies that Jews have to restart their life from the very beginning, as everything has been lost. The spoken words and unspoken thoughts in the world of Jews and all humanity are all directed to this event, a dark time in human history. The Holocaust is simultaneously an ending point and a beginning point. In the Holocaust, all the lines of Jewish history end. From this point, all the new and uncertain paths of Jewish continuity begin. There, Jewish history ended, and there, a new Genesis starts to unfold.

**1.2.** **The Structure of the Book**

An extensive historiography deals with the World War Two and the Holocaust of the Jewish people. It strives to describe the factual historical events and to draw, as far as possible, an objective picture of the events along with scientific criteria of historical research. **This book goes beyond the work of the historian, as it tries to offer a road map of the post-Holocaust responses in the fields of philosophy, theology, education, and public culture.** It does not deal with the question of what the Holocaust was, but what the Holocaust is for those who study it or carry its memory in their minds.

**The second chapter**, "History and the Historical", defines the philosophical, philosophy of history, and theological fields of the Holocaust discourse. It establishes a conceptual infrastructure for this study in defining the connection between historical events and collective memory, myths, and narratives. The principal questions in this chapter are how a historical event is remembered, how it is transformed into a collective narrative, and how the collective narrative becomes the way that the public interprets the event and understands its place in a historical context. The discussion explores these questions first from a universal perspective, and then focuses on the Jewish historical perspective. It clarifies the relations between Jewish history and Jewish traditions.

The last part of this chapter, the only historiographical one in this study, draws the outlines of the historical picture of the Jewish destruction in the twentieth century. It aims to supply the reader with an actual picture of the destruction of many Jewish communities in the twentieth century, including the those in the Arabic world. It gives an overview of the weight of the Jewish historical memory and the challenge that Jewish thinkers face.

**The third chapter**, "The Challenge of History and Traditional Jewish Theodicy" establishes the theoretical ground for the traditional Jewish understanding of history. Theodicy, the way religious thought reconciles the image of a supreme and just Lord of the world with human painful realities, is a key element in this study. The chapter draws a roadmap of the various traditional forms of theodicy, through which monotheistic thought explains away the incompatibility between Divine Providence and history. Among traditional Jewish theodicies, we consider the concepts of sin and punishment, world-to-come retributions, test of faith, redemptive suffering, tribulations of love, the birth pangs of Messiah, the eclipse of God, self-contraction of God from mundane reality, and a paradoxical theodicy, which denies the very legitimacy of such a question.

**The fourth chapter**, "Jewish Fundamentalism explains the Holocaust", examines the traditionalists' claim that the Holocaust is an integral part of the generations-old paradigm of "Jewish sacred history". It explains the threat that Holocaust memory poses to traditional Jewish identity, and the ways theodicies were employed to eliminate this threat. The bigger the threat is, the larger the mobilization of traditionalists to bridge the gap between the paradigm of God's justice and the events of modern history. The ultra-orthodox thinkers represented in this chapter claim that, in principle, nothing new has happened. The Holocaust is a returning phenomenon, well known from Jewish history. Tradition can contain the horrors of the Holocaust and give it meaning.

Even during the years of the Holocaust, Jewish orthodoxy was already trying to resolve this theological problem with phrases and ideas borrowed from Jewish theodicy literature. The king's road is the explanation of the Holocaust as a divine punishment for the sins of the modernized Jews. Secularization, scientific education, enlightenment, the adoption of non-Jewish ways of life, assimilation, and finally, Zionism were among the awful crimes that caused God’s wrathful response. As ultra-Orthodoxy sees it, one can deduce, from the enormity of the punishment, the severity of the Jews’ alleged crimes.

Theodicy is the theological toolbox to explain away the dissonance that the apparently unjust history created. In addition to the sin-punishment explanation, one can find other explanations anchored in traditional Jewish texts. For example, some say the Holocaust was the highest test of faith, a call for repentance, or the "birth pangs" of the Messiah. It is claimed that suffering purifies and sanctifies the Jews. Finally, there is the paradoxical theodicy that denies the legitimacy of the effort to reconcile the Holocaust with Divine justice

**The** **fifth chapter** discusses the neo-orthodoxy theodicy of *Hester Panim* – a Hebrew phrase meaning the temporary concealment of God's presence. Unlike fundamentalist explanations, followers of this philosophical trend could not bear the idea that the Holocaust was a divine punishment. God cannot be responsible for such a historical catastrophe. God could not be perceived as a judge who sentenced so many millions to death. Their principal answer is that God is no longer responsible for all the catastrophes of history, because He left history in the hands of humans.

This type of thought attempts to hold the stick at both ends by employing the Biblical model of *Hester Panim*, the concealment of God's presence. According to this paradigm, the Holocaust was the result of a time when God withdrew His presence from the world. The Holocaust was the result of this absence. God was absent from the historical arena, and thus He cannot be held responsible for the horrors inflicted on the Jews. God was not there to protect His people. In the words of Rabbi Yosef Dov Ha-Levi Soloveychik, the Holocaust was a night six years long. We do not know, said Soloveychik why the world experienced such moral darkness, but we know -- and this is the most important thing -- that God has returned. After the night came the historical dawn. God returned to knock on the doors of Israel.[[11]](#footnote-11) Eliezer Berkowitz also adopted the idea of *Hester Panim*, but from an individualistic perspective rather than a national perspective. The concealment of the presence of God is what grants people their freedom and essentially their humanity. Freedom entails a heavy historical cost, as it allows for human evil.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**The** **sixth chapter**, "Buber's Philosophy Bypasses the Holocaust", deals with the insufficient way that a leading Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, discussed the Holocaust. Excessive I-It relations is a major idea in Buber's postmodern thought, used to explain the faults of the modern industrial era. The Holocaust falls into this paradigmatic thinking. Buber was not moved by the Holocaust to rewrite his philosophical anthropology.

**The** **seventh chapter**, "Jewish Liberalism and the Holocaust Discourse", and the **eighth chapter**, "Critical Humanism and critical Theology - Postmodern Holocaust Philosophy", present the answers of liberal and postmodern thinkers – to the extent that these definitions make sense – to the challenge of the Holocaust. These philosophical interpretations go beyond the Jewish narrative theology, while they try to keep a framework of commitment to Jewish tradition.

Two leaders of liberal Judaism, Rabbi Leo Baeck and Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum, gave up the idea of Divine Providence altogether. History is not God's drama, but the human drama and only humans are responsible for its atrocities. God and His teachings have the role of spiritual guidance for people. Suffering is not a punishment nor the result of God's decisions, but it is a challenge to the spirit of humanity and faith in the human being created in the divine image.

Baeck, a leader of the German Jews before and during World War Two, reformulated a tradition that suffering leads people towards sanctification. The cause of such suffering is not the main issue, but rather the way people respond to their suffering and give it meaning. Maybaum, another liberal rabbi from the same time, went to great lengths in his efforts to give meaning to the Holocaust. He said the Jews are the victims of the European crucifixion and that Auschwitz is the Golgotha of the twentieth century. The sacrifice of the Jews moved humanity forward and took them out of the darkness of Medieval times.

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz and Rabbi Irving (Itz) Greenberg further contributed to the idea of theodicy as a formulation of critical humanism. The lessons they drew from the Holocaust were not doubt in God’s dominion over history, an idea that modernized Jews had abandoned long before, but rather doubt in humans’ ability to guide history to its redemption. Borowitz claims that only the reestablishment of the covenant between humanity and the God of Justice – a modest covenant, aware of its limitations – can help people to return to their mission of rebuilding a humane world.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The **ninth chapter**, "An Orphaned World", portrays the idea that we live in a Godless world. This goes beyond traditional formulas of Jewish identity and discusses the Holocaust as the cause of a dramatic breakage in the Jewish narrative. The enormity of the events cannot be contained within a theistic paradigm. The writings of Yitzhak Katzenelson, Eli Wiesel, and Richard Rubenstein structure, each in his own way, a revisionist stand concerning Jewish identity and define a deep change in the way Jews see themselves in the world.

Yitzhak Katzenelson was not an observant Jew, but his personality and his writings were infused with a profound identification with Jewish tradition and concern for the fate of the Jewish people. Tradition, which he sees as a totality of belief in a world of justice, now seems a bitter illusion; a prolonged, pointless deception. Katzenelson does not appeal to God, but to heavens, the source of Good and Evil in Jewish culture, the source of all promises and the target of all prayers. Heaven, which had been the source of traditional faith and guidance, is now empty and indifferent to the suffering of people, an impassive locus of deceit.

The Holocaust altered not only the present and the future but also the Jewish past, from which tradition drew its validity. The Holocaust transformed the Jewish past, as recounted in the Jewish narrative, into something alien, a long-playing lie. Katzenelson was not a theologian; the vacant heaven he describes is primarily an expression of his internal experience of despair and death that filled him. Katzenelson's "Song of the Murdered Jewish people" and Wiesel's “Night” are evidence of the possibility of a collapse of the Jewish world under the weight of its tragedy. Perhaps the nihilism, cynicism, and practical materialism that partially characterize the fabric of Israeli life are a belated expression of despair at the state of truth and justice in the world.

As Eli Wiesel, a survivor of the concentration camps and death marches, and one of the most important witnesses for the Jewish people after the Holocaust, said:

*[…] to some of us, the Holocaust seemed like a new Sinai – a Sinai of darkness; whose concealed moral teaching we are still trying to reveal… this school of thought - one to which I belong – relates to the Holocaust a mystical dimension that is beyond the power of language or imagination.* [[14]](#footnote-14)

In Jewish tradition, Sinai is the mythic representation of the start of a new tradition – something created out of nothing. Wiesel, well aware of the connotation, experiences the Holocaust as a new "genesis event", the content and message of which is still unclear. The Holocaust may give birth to a new Jewish identity, which we still have to discover.

Wiesel's position on the issue of belief after the Holocaust is fed by a sense that all the structures of the meaning of Western civilization in general, particularly those of the Jewish people, were laid waste in the Holocaust. The Holocaust is a metaphysical void, an absolute absence of meaning, a black hole in human history.

*In truth, Auschwitz signifies not only the failure of two thousand years of Christian civilization but also the defeat of the intellect that wants to find meaning – with a capital M – in history. What Auschwitz embodied has none. The executioner killed for nothing, the victim died for nothing. No God ordered the one to prepare the stake, nor the other to mount it. During the Middle Ages, the Jews, when they chose death, were convinced that by their sacrifice they were glorifying and sanctifying God's name. At Auschwitz, the sacrifices were offered without a point, without faith, without divine inspiration. If the suffering of one human being has any meaning, that of six million has none. Numbers have their own importance; they prove, according to Piotr Rawicz, that God has gone mad.[[15]](#footnote-15)*

In the Holocaust, all the meaning structures of Western civilization were destroyed, including those of the Jewish people. The Holocaust is a metaphysical void, an absolute absence of meaning.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Richard Rubinstein gives Wiesel's metaphysical void a theological formulation and a historical explanation. He concludes that the Judeo-Christian myth of an all-good and omnipotent God, involved in history in general and Jewish history in particular, is no longer viable. More than that, any narrative that gives meaning to mass murder is an overly-dangerous game. It might give religious justifications to more genocidal acts. Jews and Christians alike have to give up Divine Providence, as the world is in the hands of humanity.

Many tried to stop the collapse of Jewish metaphysics. Theodicy was drafted to regain Jewish faith in the world of justice. But the penetrating historical images pushed philosophers to formulate new structures of meaning. Meanwhile, the Jews were busy with the diligent work of building a new home state, hoping that the intensive labor would be an anchor of sanity and the beginning of a process of healing. However, the memory of the dreadful past remained and made its imprint on the Jews' relations with their past, their culture, their language, their non-Jewish neighbors, and their social and political activities.

A major issue in Jewish identity for many generations is discussed in the **tenth chapter**, "To be a Jew means to be a Victim – Jewish Victimhood and the Holocaust". Here the book discusses the question of how the Holocaust brought the Jewish "victim consciousness" to a historical crossroad.

One known historical road lead to a Jewish tradition of martyrdom known as *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying God’s name). The idea of being a victim is a key element in historical Jewish identity. In many places where people followed rabbinic tradition, Jews cherished the idea that being a victim, in various ways, was an integral part of Jewish identity. Those who embrace this idea in the twentieth century tend to integrate the Holocaust into this paradigm.

A second road, less known, leads to struggle and rebellion against this traditional Jewish state of mind. The actual struggle was seen as being against the German terror and annihilation. It is also an inner struggle against the Jewish image of the holy victim, which is deeply burned into the soul of the Jews. A line of historical interpretation and self-identification connects the old mind of a victim and the decision to rebel against life in exile and build a sovereign state.

Being a victim, and the loneliness that surrounds it, is a central motif in the writings of George Steiner, Jean Amery, and Primo Levi. Loneliness is a major topic in the philosophy of George Steiner, a global Jewish intellectual and a world-known literary scholar. Loneliness is seen as part of the Jews’ destiny and linked to their the mission in the world. For Steiner, it would be a sad miracle if, after the Holocaust, Jewish vitality would be concentrated in the building of a national state, armed to the teeth. To be a Jew means to be homeless, an eternal guest, a person of the spirit and an radical advocate of ethics who fights for the improvement of society, even at the cost of endless persecutions.

In contrast, Jean Amery refuses to see heroism in the suffering of the victim. Loneliness is the main category he uses to identify himself, but this loneliness is a curse, not a merit. The first moment of his identification with the Jewish people was also his bitter disillusionment regarding his sense of belonging to European society. It represents the moment he understood that he could not provide any positive content to his Jewish identification. Jewish history and Jewish culture had no presence in his early years, and therefore they could not have an authentic presence in his adult life. Nonetheless, he was persecuted and tortured because he was identified by the general society as a Jew. An elemental force pushed his Jewish identity upon him. He had to surrender to this historical verdict. He experiences his Jewish identity as extreme loneliness. Amery, the homeless intellectual and Auschwitz survivor, observes the Jewish experience from the outside. He has no home in Europe, which sought his death. He could not join Israel, which would be for him a self-deceit and an inauthentic existence, a promised land he cannot reach.

Primo Levi, a member of the Jewish community of Turin, Italy, and an Auschwitz survivor, deals with the struggle of the prisoner for life in the dreadful days of the camp and the agony of the return to life after the war. For Levi, prisoners remain locked within their loneliness even after the objective liberation. They remain chained to the feelings of shame they carry within, the moments of humiliation and moral decay. The liberated camp prisoners are trapped by an inability to draw pride and self-esteem from their experiences. The shame, which is present in the mind of the survivor, and maybe in the minds of his family members, and which continues to accompany him or her years after the liberation, is a major topic of Levi’s writings.

The **eleventh chapter**, "Emil Fackenheim: The Holocaust as a Turning Point in Jewish Identity", follows Fackenheim's substantial Holocaust discourse and deals with the Holocaust as a radical turning point in Jewish history. For years, Fackenheim saw the Holocaust as a historical disaster that Jewish tradition could eventually digest. In 1967, he reached the conclusion that the Holocaust was a radical event that surpasses human language and comprehensibility. Until then , he expressed agony over the Holocaust, but did not see it as a philosophical problem. The definitive change in his mind happened just before the outbreak of the Six Day War between Israel and Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. He formulated an idea about a commanding voice coming out from Auschwitz, commanding the Jewish person not to succumb to the multi-faceted despair that arises from the reality of the Holocaust, and threatens the ability of the Jewish people to return to life.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The **twelfth chapter**, "Rupture and Tikkun", continues the study of Fackenheim's Holocaust philosophy. In later texts, Fackenheim abandons the apologetic model, which preserves the line of Jewish continuity in spite of the destruction; instead, he speaks about a total rupture. Jewish trust in *Tikkun Olam*, the mending of the world, and in the power of reason has collapsed. The Holocaust left the Jewish people in a state of shock and spiritual chaos. History can no longer be evaded. It must change the way Jews understand their identity.

Fackenheim finds a possibility of mending the broken world in ideas he borrows from the Lurianic system of Jewish mysticism from the sixteenth century. God cannot save the world from its destruction alone, and the first responsibility for the act of salvation lies with humans. People, through acts of *Tikkun*, can start the process of redemption. It was virtually impossible to resist Nazi terror and yet, there were instances of resistance. The stories of absurd struggle against the Nazis have a theological meaning – they are the acts that make human recovery after the war possible.

The place of the Holocaust in Israeli public discourse is dealt with in the **thirteenth chapter**, "The Holocaust in the Israeli Mind". The presence of the Holocaust is not sought in institutional, political, legal, journalistic, or pedagogical contexts. It is examined at various levels, firstly through the study of a unique document of "*Siach Lochamim*"[[18]](#footnote-18) (1967) and the broad discourse that was generated around it. Conversations with young Israelis, just after the Six Day War, reveal that the Holocaust was present in their thoughts, fears, cultural horizons, and moral struggles.

The Israeli and Jewish culture of memory started to take shape before the end of World War Two. Already during the years of war, Mordechai Shenhabi raised the idea of building in the Land of Israel a memorial site to the Jewish victims. This idea became a reality with the establishment of the Yad Vashem institute in Jerusalem in 1953.

Previously, an idea to build a testimonial center, historical archive, and research center had been expressed in 1946 in Lodz, Poland, by those who became the founders of the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz. On April 18, 1949, the kibbutz members began their kibbutz life in the western Galilee in Israel. On that date, the establishment of the Ghetto Fighters House was declared and the first public event in commemoration of the Holocaust took place. Along with the establishment of other institutes in Kibbutz Yad Mordechai and Kibbutz Tel Yitzhak, and the national memorial center Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Israeli culture of memory took shape: museums, research centers, public events, documentation projects, the publication of Holocaust-related books, meeting with diverse groups from all over Israel and beyond, school curriculum, books publications – all deserve an extensive cultural and historical research.

What will be the map of this commemoration culture? In Jerusalem, the State of Israel established Yad Vashem in 1953, which enjoys the state's support, and gradually demanded the role of leading of the portrayal of Holocaust memory. Along its side, struggling for survival, are a few peripheral institutions, some of them even older than Yad Vashem, which also demand their right to exist.

All these research and education institutes struggle with fundamental cultural and educational questions about Holocaust memory and its meaning. These questions are discussed through the reflections of two leaders of the first generation of Holocaust scholars, Abba Kovner and Zvi Shner.

The **fourteenth chapter** discusses at length one aspect of the Holocaust culture of commemoration, the challenge of public commemoration culture, and the place of Yom Hashoah, the Israeli Holocaust Commemoration Day, in the Jewish calendar.

Traditional holidays have substantial content and format in multiple layers of Biblical and Jewish texts. How can a new holiday be structured? Who can decide to add a Holocaust commemoration day to the Jewish calendar, which had been fixed for nearly two thousand years? When will it be celebrated? Where? Who will define its ceremonial content and what story it should tell? Who will lead the event? What will be the written, musical and the performing art texts that will be used in this public event?

The **fifteenth chapter** “The Journey to the Lands of Memory” deals with a specific aspect of Holocaust education in Israel: student trips to Poland. In recent decades, the Israeli culture of memory and Holocaust education have been carried on the back of student trips to the countries where the Holocaust occurred. These trips, during which they travel to the sites of Holocaust memory, are an intensive experience for participants. The content of these trips, their historical horizons, educational goals, and meaning became the issues of a wide and heated public discourse. Besides troubling logistical issues, philosophical questions arise regarding our understanding of the Holocaust. What are the goals of the trips? What questions are its basis? What impressions will students bring home? Where should the students be taken: first to the sites of the killing, and only afterwards, if time permits, to places of Jewish life? Alternatively, maybe the trips should follow the footsteps of Jewish community life, which flourished on the European soil for hundreds and thousands of years before, they vanished? Concentration camps are a monument to the cursed spirit of the murderers, and they teach about the world of its creators. It teaches very little about the worlds of its victims. As far as the children of the victims are concerned, along with their grandchildren, and other people who were not there but identify with the fate of the victims and see their stories as part of their own identity, Auschwitz is the story of the end of the Jewish world. Only the imagination remains. The school trips takes young Jews on an expedition to worlds that once existed, but are no more.

The story of one individual, Pola Reuveni, is the main theme of the final **sixteenth chapter** of the book. It addresses the question of who is a Holocaust survivor and what stands at the core of one's identity as a survivor. The possible answers have historical, psychological, sociological, and economic aspects. Our journey into the realm of Holocaust consciousness ends with the controversial possibility that the Holocaust is not only part of the identity of those who were actually there, under Nazi occupation. It is also the awareness of loss, orphanhood, longing, despair, and fear, which nest in the mind of Jews wherever they lived in those days, and wherever they are now. One personal story of a Jewish girl whose family left Europe just before the war exemplifies this reality, which is the inheritance of many Jews.

This book draws a road map of the field of memory, life-meaning, and identity of survivors and their descendants. It does not deal with the historical events per se, but with its implications. It is not a psychology book. Such radical events have serious implications for its survivors, through the first, second, and probably also third generations. The Holocaust, like other cases of genocide, left behind a population suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. Numerous studies have dealt with the psychological realities of Holocaust survivors. This book does not aim to add to this rich corpus of scientific knowledge. What this book aims to do is to explore the language, religious expressions, and philosophical ideas that are being used to deal with Holocaust memory and to try to give it some meaning. It asks what is the vocabulary, lexicon, and philosophical arsenal of ideas that people use to explain an event that is still influencing and will continue to influence the history of Western civilization and the Jewish people for many years to come.

The book does not have claim to cover all the manifestations of Holocaust philosophy, Holocaust education, and the culture of commemoration. The Holocaust is still active in the minds of Jews and all humanity. Every day, we hear new responses and interpretations, as its memory does not leave us at rest. The Holocaust is now part of our identity, our language, our moral horizons. The scope of the Holocaust discourse is under constant change and revision. This book offers a limited road map as seen from one corner of the world. It starts with the educational project of one community and ends with a personal story of one woman, who cannot be called a Holocaust survivor, although the Holocaust has always been part of her identity. The other chapters cover a panorama of philosophers, writers, public leaders, and educators. Some of them are internationally known and some more esoteric. Readers are invited to add others to this puzzle of commentaries, philosophies, literary responses, educational perspectives, and personal testimonies.

1. Dror, 1984, 1398-1419. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dror, 1984, 157-173. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wiesel, 1978, 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Theodicy, in this book, is not simply a form of theology that tries to explain human suffering in a God-guided world. It refers to any philosophical, literary, or artistic expression that attempts to bridge the gap between the expectation for an ordered and explainable world and the painful and chaotic historical reality of humanity. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Katz, 1983, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Greenberg, 1977, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rosenfeld, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Amery, 1984, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Roth, 1986, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kovner, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Soloveitchik, 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Berkowitz, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Borowitz, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wiesel, 1970, 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Wiesel, 1982, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Wiesel, 1972, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Fackenheim, 1967b. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Shapira (editor) 1968. In English, *The Seventh Day*, edited by H. Near, 1971. Siach Lochamim, Soldiers Conversations, a collection of conversations with young Israelis who shared their feelings and thoughts as soldiers in the Six Day War of June 1967, achieved a canonical status in Israeli society. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)