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Variations in Religious Thought During the Holocaust: Consideration of God in the Kovno Ghetto Through the Writings of an Elite Orthodox leader, Rabbi Oshry, and the Oral Testimonies of Ordinary Jews, Judith Meisel and Sidney Shachnow

Introduction

On July 7, 1941, an unnamed German military commander demanded to meet with Gestapo-selected Jewish leaders in Kaunas.¹ His purpose was to convince them to facilitate an orderly transfer of all Jews into the designated Kovno ghetto across the River Vilija (Neris) in Slobodka.² As a means to persuade the leaders, he stated that the wanton violence in the city, as carried out by Lithuanians in which thousands of Jews were attacked, arrested, and murdered, would stop.³ As a ruse, he claimed that Lithuanians were insisting that Jews move into the ghetto because they refused to live together with them in the city.⁴ In fact, the general's proffered proposal reflected German policy to swiftly roundup and concentrate Jews. In early August 1941, drafts of German provisional directives of the *Reichskommissariat Ostland* detailed the creation of ghettos in the East, as such, in Lithuania, "Jews must be concentrated in towns or in sections of large towns in which the population is predominately Jewish. Ghettos are to be established... In order to close the ghetto hermetically from without, an auxiliary police force can be established from among the local population."⁵ On August 15, 1941, with participation of Lithuanians, over 29,000 Jews were

¹ A. Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust, the Kovno Ghetto Diary*, trans. J. Michalowicz, London 1991, p. 10.

² Ibidem, p. 10.

³ Ibidem, pp. 8-10; A. Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust*, trans. V. Arbas and E. Tuskenis, Vilnius 2012, p. 176; Y. Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, Lincoln and Jerusalem 2009, p. 92.

⁴ A. Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust...*, p. 10.

⁵ Y. Arad, *Holocaust...*, p. 111.

sealed in the Kovno ghetto.⁶ However, while the Germans restricted every aspect of Jewish life, relegating Jews to a subhuman existence, they initially allowed the practice of religion inside the ghetto with the exception of banning religious (kosher) slaughter.⁷

On August 15, 1941, at age 27, Rabbi Oshry (1914-2003) was imprisoned with his wife and children in the Kovno ghetto where, as a well-respected Orthodox rabbi, he taught classes and provided lectures for yeshiva students. He was also a respected *posek* (legal scholar) who was renowned for his discussions of *Halakha* (Jewish law) and Talmudic passages with revered Jewish scholars such as Rabbi Hayim Ozer Grozenski and the Chief Rabbi of Kaunas, Rabbi Avraham Duber Shapiro.⁸ As Chief Rabbi Shapiro's health declined in the ghetto, he referred questions to Rabbi Oshry of *Halakha* from ghetto residents determined to maintain observant practice. In the ghetto, the Germans appointed Rabbi Oshry as custodian of German-confiscated Jewish artifacts and books to organize for future museum exhibitions of the "extinct Jewish race." As custodian, he had access to texts of interpretations of *Halakha* that informed his *responsa* (questions and answers of Jewish law).⁹ Rabbi Oshry claimed that he wrote his *responsa* on scraps of paper in the ghetto that he buried in containers which he retrieved after the war to then edit and publish.¹⁰

In his post-war publications, Rabbi Oshry glorified the observant in the Kovno ghetto. He described devout Jews as remarkable in the midst of the destruction and death, "...still Kovno's Jews continued to go to houses of worship to study and to pray, to recite Psalms, and to pour out our hearts to the world's Creator. This recharged our energies, enabling us to continue living until the One Above would take pity on Jewry and rescue us from our horrifying situation."¹¹ As an elite Orthodox leader, in his post-war writings, he cast the Holocaust in the Orthodox context as a

⁶ Nuremberg Trial Transcript, Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Volume I, Chapter XII, The Persecution of the Jews, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/chap_12.asp (accessed July 2, 2024); *Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto*, ed. D. Klein, Washington, D.C. 1999, p. 32.

⁷ Y. Arad, *Holocaust...*, p. 112: Arad quotes from the "brown file" of Alfred Rosenberg: "Jewish religious ritual will be permitted only within the bounds of the ghetto. [Ritual] slaughter will be forbidden."

⁸ A. Goldberg, *Oshry, Ephraim* (2010), trans. D. Strauss, [in:] "YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe", https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Oshry_Ephraim (captured June 3, 2024), no page number.

⁹ A. Males, *Passing for Christian During the Holocaust: A New Look at Rabbi Ephraim Oshry's Responsa*, "A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought", 46, no 3, 2013, p. 61; A. Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust...*, p. 368: Rabbi Oshry was also in charge of the *Mikva* (Jewish ritual bath house) and the lice disinfectant center in the ghetto.

¹⁰ A. Goldberg, *Oshry, Ephraim...*; M. Tarshansky, *The Writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry of the Kovno Ghetto: Orthodox Historiography?*, "Yad Vashem Studies", 47, no 1, 2019, pp. 67-70.

¹¹ E. Oshry, *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*, trans. Y. Leiman, Brooklyn 1995, p. 85.

trial to reaffirm the faith of the observant in the power of God.¹² As many Orthodox Jews were murdered, Rabbi Oshry portrayed them as martyrs whose deaths “sanctified God’s name.”¹³ At the base of his writings is an Orthodox tenet as explained by Richard Rubenstein, “Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in the historical drama.”¹⁴ Rubenstein’s point clarifies that if God did not rescue Jews from their degradation and annihilation in the ghetto, it was because it was not in His plan. God as all powerful in the midst of the Holocaust relegates the Holocaust to the status of as yet another test of the faithful as planned by God.

Moreover, Kimmy Caplan explains the sharp divide between the purposes of Orthodox and academic historiography. In the former, the foundation is religious teaching, such as that exemplified by Rabbi Oshry’s writings, which reaffirms that God is all powerful, as His master plan determines that which takes place on earth.¹⁵ Caplan details that Orthodox historiography considers academic history of the Holocaust as inconsequential when it contradicts faith.¹⁶ Actual events are unimportant if they do not fit the religious Orthodox narrative. Moshe Tarshansky connects this point to the writings of Rabbi Oshry as he identifies his disinterest in academic historical accuracy.¹⁷ In particular, he clarifies factual discrepancies in Rabbi Oshry’s purportedly eyewitness accounts, as in his depiction of the arrests of Rabbi Wasserman and a group of rabbis as they prayed together in the Kovno ghetto.¹⁸ Tarshansky identifies different versions of the arrest to illustrate that Rabbi Oshry’s purpose in his writings was to promote and sustain Orthodox faith which was not concerned with factual evidence.

¹² B. Lang, *Reasoning the Holocaust: On God and Evil in Jewish Thought*, “Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought”, 50, no. 1, 2017, p. 41: Lang explains, “...given God’s omnipotence and beneficence, whatever occurs in human history reflects divine intention and is thus justified”; D. Deutsch, Session 7, Part 3: *The Rabbinical Responses to the Holocaust*, lecture, University of Haifa, August 24, 2022: Deutsch explains formal rabbinical writing patterns as including the Holocaust as a continuation in Jewish History as well as glorification of followers as opposed to addressing the horrors of the Holocaust. Deutsch also raises the issue in formal rabbinical writing of focusing on the good with no attention to the complexity, but rather on harmony.

¹³ M. Tarshansky, *The Writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry...*, p. 83.

¹⁴ R. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, New York 1966, p. 153.

¹⁵ K. Caplan, *Have “Many Lies Accumulated in History Books?”: The Holocaust in Ashkenazi Haredi Historical Consciousness in Israel*, “Yad Vashem Studies”, 29, no 4, 2001, p. 4.

¹⁶ K. Caplan, *Have “Many Lies Accumulated...”*, p. 1.

¹⁷ M. Tarshansky, *The Writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry...*, pp. 69-71.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 82-84.

In contrast, the oral testimonies of Meisel and Shachnow identify that they questioned their faith in God's power as they could not reconcile life in the ghetto to God's will.¹⁹ Instead, they questioned that if God was all-powerful, why did He allow the degradation and murder of innocent Jews? While in their oral testimonies Meisel and Shachnow do not deny God's existence, they reveal doubt in their faith through their questioning. Meisel was 13 years old when she and her family were imprisoned in the ghetto.²⁰ She explains that she was aware that *responsa* from rabbis had freed observant Jews from certain obligations of *Halakha*, thus creating ways to survive the Holocaust while maintaining faith. However, she began to question God's power and purpose as she came to believe that Judaism would be destroyed by Hitler's plan to annihilate the Jews, although she believed that Jews would survive.²¹ Like Meisel, Shachnow questioned the power of God, as he explains that after moving into the ghetto, as a 7 year old child, he no longer had a formal religious life.²² However, he details that although he was no longer formally observant, he created a personal relationship with God to Whom he spoke to directly as he questioned His failure to create miracles to save the Jews. Shachnow states that although he continued to talk to God, God never responded.²³

To identify variations in religious perspectives as affected by the Holocaust, this article will contrast the post-war writings of Rabbi Oshry, an elite Jewish leader, with the post-war oral testimonies of Meisel and Shachnow, two ordinary Jews. To do so, it will address the following questions: 1) What purpose did Rabbi Oshry's post-war glorifications of observant Jews in the Kovno ghetto serve? 2) As ordinary Jews, what were Meisel's and Shachnow's relationships to God during their imprisonment in the Kovno ghetto and after their liberation, as expressed in their oral testimonies? 3) What can be identified about religious belief during the Holocaust from the perspectives of Rabbi Oshry, Meisel, and Shachnow?

¹⁹ J. Meisel, Interview 5916, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, August 21, 1995; S. Shachnow, Interview 52911, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, November 26, 2013; B. Lang, *Reasoning the Holocaust...*, p. 36.

²⁰ J. Meisel, Interview 5916..., seg. 143, tape 5, mins. 21.

²¹ Ibidem, seg. 49, tape 2, mins. 18-19.

²² S. Shachnow, Interview 52911..., seg. 57, tape 1, mins. 56-57.

²³ Ibidem, seg. 57, tape 1, mins. 56-57.

Understudied in the Literature

The scholarship of Michael Grodin, et al., illustrates Deutch's argument that the perspectives of Orthodox religious elite, as to religious belief in the ghetto, overshadow possible variations. Grodin, et al., define Rabbi Oshry's book, *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*, as a personal, eyewitness account, as they explain in the following, "Rabbi Ephraim Oshry [...] provides a vivid, personal account of Jewish life in Kovno before, during, and after the German invasion in his memoir *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*."²⁴ The authors do not identify Rabbi Oshry's writings as ideologically based Orthodox historiography. Instead, they categorize *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry* as a memoir, a genre outside the realm of Orthodox historiography. As such, it has no more purpose than to reflect a personal perspective with no identified audience. Moreover, the authors accept Rabbi Oshry's interpretation of observance during the Holocaust as glorified, "Despite being a special target of persecution and destruction by the Nazis and their collaborators, in Kovno, as in many other cities throughout Eastern Europe, Jewish religious life remained prominent throughout the ghetto years. Indeed, continued clandestine existence of religious life in the ghettos stood as a profound center of resistance for the Jewish community."²⁵ While the authors consider Oshry's writing as a memoir and not as teachings to reaffirm faith in God's power in post-war Orthodox Jews, they understand and reflect his message, for as researchers, they qualify religious observance during the Holocaust as heroic, as "profound resistance."

While Akiva Males, too, equates religious observance during the Holocaust with "heroism" in his research, he also provides robust inquiry into Rabbi Oshry's *responsa*. He identifies that over time Rabbi Oshry extensively revised his writings.²⁶ Males concludes that the revisions in fact provide for more fully developed *responsa*.²⁷ He explains the necessity for revisions not in relationship to factual accuracy, but in terms of the horrific circumstances in which Rabbi Oshry claimed to have documented his *responsa* in the midst of ghetto life.²⁸ In safer circumstances and after the passage of significant time, Rabbi Oshry carefully considered and edited his work to write

²⁴ M. Grodin, et al., *Rabbinic Responsa and Spiritual Resistance during the Holocaust: The Life for Life Problem*, "Modern Judaism", 39, no 3, 2019, p. 299.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ A. Males, *Passing for Christian...*, pp. 71-72.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 72.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 73.

more fully elaborated *responsa*. Males research is concerned with understanding Rabbi Oshry's changes to his *responsa* in relationship to *Halakha*. However, as stated above, Males, too, as a researcher, glorifies Rabbi Oshry's writings as he quotes his obituary in the New York Times, "[...] he saw the persistence of Jewish life as the highest kind of resistance against the Nazis."²⁹ Males' conclusion, while affirming his recognition of the value of the work of Rabbi Oshry, in fact is yet another example of a researcher portraying the glorification of observance in the ghetto as heroic. As such, his work overshadows questions of doubt and hence variations in religious belief, giving prominence instead to perspectives of an elite, such as Rabbi Oshry, whose purpose was to reaffirm faith in the power of God in the post-war Orthodox.

To this point, Deutch argues that inquiry into the questioning of God by ordinary Jews in the ghetto as expressed in oral testimonies is critically understudied.³⁰ He explains that the thoughts and beliefs revealed in oral testimonies clash with recitations of religious faith as described by elite religious figures, such as Rabbi Oshry. While both address the power of God in relationship to the Holocaust, one presents fault lines of doubt while the other, in contrast, maintains a unified, community front of faith in God's power. He explains that the teachings of Orthodox elites who write about the Holocaust, like Rabbi Oshry, equate *Halakhic* observance with glorified courage in the midst of destruction and death. While God may have seemed to be absent, God's will was present. Deutch explains that this perspective has elevated observant Jews during the Holocaust such that, "Many researchers tend to view *Halakhic* observance among believers in the camps as a form of heroism [...]"³¹ Deutch argues that this common perception does not invite inquiry or doubt of ordinary Jews. He clarifies that it is through the analysis of oral testimonies of ordinary Jews that one can ascertain variations in religious belief. Oral testimonies exist outside any framework of formal religious practice and are personal. As such, their analysis can reveal questioning and confusion of religious beliefs.

Shaul shares Deutch's conclusion that analysis of oral testimonies of non-elite Jews, in relationship to religious belief, is understudied in the historiography. However, her research takes

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 74.

³⁰ D. Deutsch, Session 1, Part A: *Basic topics in modern Jewish Studies: Traditional values and new ideologies*, lecture, University of Haifa, July 13, 2022.

³¹ D. Deutsch, *Religious and Halakhic Observance in View of Deconstruction Processes in the Holocaust*, trans. N. Greenwood, "Yad Vashem", 35, no 2, 2007, p. 106.

a different approach in two regards.³² First, whereas Deutsch's subjects are defined as ordinary Jews, Shaul's are defined more narrowly as Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox Jewish survivors. Second, she identifies in her participants a "public" and a "private" voice.³³ She explains that most often the public voices of the survivors in her study explain observance during the Holocaust of *Halakha* as heroic which maintains a public, homogenous perspective as purported in the ultra-Orthodox leadership. In contrast, she identifies that her subjects' "private voices" reveal personal perspectives and interpretations that include "doubt, fear, and anger." While the participants in the studies by Deutch and Shaul differ in their degree of religious observance, they share their questioning and uncertainty as to the power of God in relationship to the Holocaust and as such reflect variations in religious thought.³⁴

However, Noah Shenker questions the reliability of remembered facts as recorded in oral testimonies and interviews.³⁵ He challenges the methodology as he explains that time and experience influence memory such that he considers it unreliable. James Young addresses this issue, as he explains that, in terms of diaries and memoirs, the pursuit of factual veracity of individuals is misguided as, "[...] when we turn to literary testimony of the Holocaust, we do so for *knowledge* – not evidence – of events. Instead of looking for evidence of experiences, the reader might concede that narrative testimony documents not the experiences it relates, but rather the conceptual presuppositions through which the narrator has apprehended experience."³⁶ Young identifies understanding the value of what an individual believed to be *true* as opposed to searching for factual evidence, for the value of individual testimony rests in understanding what was *true* for the individual. Likewise, the research of Deutch and Shaul identifies ordinary Jews religious thought as individuals' *truths*. As such, their scholarship is not focused upon memory as legitimized by factual recall, but rather on their subjects' religious beliefs as psychologically complex *truths* in the sense as what was *true* for the individual.³⁷ Their research and analysis identifies doubts and questioning in the oral testimonies of individuals as personal *truths*, which

³² M. Shaul, *Testimonies of Ultra-Orthodox Holocaust Survivors – Between "Public Memory" and "Private Memory"*, trans. N. Greenwood, "Yad Vashem Studies", 35, no 2, 2007, p. 7.

³³ Ibidem, pp. 6-8.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 6.

³⁵ N. Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*, Bloomington 2015, p. 192.

³⁶ J. Young, *Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs*, "New Literary History", 18, no 2, 1987, https://www.jstor.org/stable/468737?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#reference_tab_contents, (accessed July 19, 2024), p. 420.

³⁷ M. Shaul, *Testimonies of Ultra-Orthodox...*, pp. 26, 29.

they identify as understudied and obscured by researchers who embrace the perspectives of elites, such as Rabbi Oshry, whose ideological motivation for his publications was to reaffirm faith in the power of God.

Religious Thought in the Orthodox Published Writings of Rabbi Oshry

Rabbi Oshry wrote extensively about religious beliefs and practices in relationship to the Holocaust. His work includes twenty-four articles titled, *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*, which describe life in the Kovno ghetto and were first published in 1946. From 1959 to 1978, he published over a hundred *responsa* that were eventually included in a five-volume set titled *Sheelot Uteshuvot Mima'amakim (Responsa from the Depths)*.³⁸ For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on a selection of his published Orthodox historiography, Chapter 18 and Chapter 19, in the English translation of *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*.³⁹ These chapters are representative of Rabbi Oshry's glorification of religious faith in observant Jews in the Kovno ghetto for a post-war audience.

Caplan identifies two primary purposes of the religious historiography of the Orthodox.⁴⁰ First, that God has a master plan and controls all aspects of life on earth. Second, it presents its own explanation of history outside of academic veracity to maintain a clear and structured past, present, and future in relationship to faith in an all-powerful God.⁴¹ Caplan argues that the religious historiography of the Orthodox highlights glorification of those who remained observant during the Holocaust which necessarily ignores academic scholarship that does not align with its purpose.⁴² It is a selective historiography with a particular intent that is concerned with actual events only when they align with Orthodox perspectives.

Tarshansky, too, identifies that Rabbi Oshry's published works reveal his disinterest in academic accuracy.⁴³ As mentioned previously, he explains factual discrepancies in Rabbi Oshry's purportedly eyewitness account of the arrests of Rabbi Wasserman and a group of rabbis as they

³⁸ M. Tarshansky, *The Writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry...*, pp. 60-61: Akiva Males identifies that some of Rabbi Oshry's *responsa* was published in 1949.

³⁹ E. Oshry, *Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry...*, pp. 82-91.

⁴⁰ K. Caplan, *Have "Many Lies Accumulated..."*, p. 4; D. Deutsch, *Session 7, Part 3: Rabbinical Responses*.

⁴¹ K. Caplan, *Have "Many Lies Accumulated..."*, p. 4.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁴³ M. Tarshansky, *The Writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry...*, pp. 69-71.

prayed together in the Kovno ghetto.⁴⁴ In the version that was published in *Der Morgen Zhurnal* in 1946, Rabbi Oshry quotes Rabbi Wasserman's last words to the other rabbis as they were led away: "In the heavens, it appears that they deem us to be righteous and we must atone with our bodies for the Jewish people. Therefore, we must repent in this place... We must immediately repent to God... We will go to our deaths with innocent souls and let no evil thoughts enter our minds, which would render the offering unfit, the martyring of Jews to sanctify God's name."⁴⁵ Tarshansky contends that Rabbi Oshry was in fact not a witness to the arrest and speech of Rabbi Wasserman. Instead, he concludes that his rendition is an invented myth with the purpose of strengthening faith.⁴⁶ Tarshansky explains that Rabbi Oshry utilized Rabbi Wasserman's arrest and created his subsequent speech to glorify religious observance in the seeming absence of God.⁴⁷ Its purpose is to provide an example of piety through an educational narrative that reaffirms belief in God's will.

Moreover, Tarshansky cautions academic historians as to Rabbi Oshry's aura of authenticity.⁴⁸ He explains that some historians have not made the distinction that Orthodox historiographical writings are ideologically based and hence they are not reliable as academic sources.⁴⁹ As an example, he references that Leyb Gorfinkel, a member of the Kovno ghetto's Elder Council, included Rabbi Oshry's work as one of three important books written about "the destruction of Jewish Kovno."⁵⁰ Gorfinkel considered it an important academic source, whereas Tarshansky argues that its actual value lies in understanding the educational purpose it served to reaffirm post-war Orthodox faith.⁵¹

Deutsch, too, identifies the value of understanding the purpose of Orthodox historiography as a manufactured collective understanding that glorified religious faith during the Holocaust.⁵² While the authenticity of Rabbi Oshry's *responsa* in the ghetto has been questioned, some believing that after the war he himself posed the questions and then answered them, what is

⁴⁴ Ibidem, pp. 82-84.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 83: as quoted by Tarshansky.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 82.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 87.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p.102.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 64.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 63.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 102.

⁵² D. Deutsch, Session 7, Part 3: *The Rabbinical Responses...*

important in analysis is why he shaped his perspective, as it identifies his purpose.⁵³ In a *responsa*, Rabbi Oshry explains a question of *Halakha* that he represented as having been asked in the ghetto by Reb Avrohom Yosef. When Reb Yosef came to the following blessing during morning prayers, “Blessed are You, L-or our G-d [...] who has not made me a slave,”⁵⁴ he posed the following questions, “How can I recite the blessing of a free man? How can a hungry slave, repeatedly abused and demeaned, praise His Creator by uttering, ‘Who has not made me a slave?’”⁵⁵ Rabbi Oshry’s *responsa* stated, “On the contrary, despite our physical captivity, we are more obligated than ever to recite the blessing, to demonstrate to our enemies that even if physically we were slaves, as a people we remained spiritually free.”⁵⁶ Rabbi Oshry’s response provides certainty of God’s power which functions to inspire faith in God in the post-war observant. Analysis of Rabbi Oshry’s *responsa* identifies that he shifted the focus from Reb Yosef’s questioning of God to glorifying persistence in faith. The value of his *responsa* for inquiry lies in the identification of his replacement of individual doubt in God’s power with a collective Orthodox belief in God.

Rabbi Oshry’s Purpose: To Reaffirm Faith in an All-powerful God

Tarshansky identifies that Rabbi Oshry’s postwar published writings have a determined ideological purpose.⁵⁷ Rabbi Oshry confirms this point as he explains that it was his duty to preserve and strengthen the faith of the Orthodox in God’s will.⁵⁸ Tarshansky explains that Rabbi Oshry shaped his writings to this purpose by including relevant facts with creative license.⁵⁹ He wrote stories underpinned by religious ideology that were true to his purpose, but not strictly to the actuality of events. Moreover, Akiva Males identifies that Rabbi Oshry’s writings underwent a series of revisions over time for republication. He identifies, for example, that his answer in his *responsa* to a question about a fraudulent passport was originally two paragraphs in the 1949 published version. In the 1979 edition, his answer had expanded to thirteen pages which included elements that conflicted with his prior response.⁶⁰ While in depth analysis of the two versions of

⁵³ M. Tarshansky, *The Writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry...*, p. 95.

⁵⁴ E. Oshry, *Responsa from the Holocaust*, ChabadORG, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/275039/jewish/Responsa-From-the-Holocaust.htm (accessed July 13, 2024), no page number.

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ M. Tarshansky, *The Writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry...*, p. 59.

⁵⁸ E. Oshry, *Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry...*, p. 85.

⁵⁹ M. Tarshansky, *The Writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry...*, pp. 70-71.

⁶⁰ A. Males, *Passing for Christian...*, pp. 71-72.

the *responsa* are beyond the scope of this article, what is important to understand is that Rabbi Oshry was concerned with the Orthodox teachings of his *responsa*. It was not his purpose to maintain fidelity to his original version.

One challenge that Rabbi Oshry faced to fulfill his duty of Orthodox teaching was how to place the extreme suffering of Jews during the Holocaust in a continuum of Jewish religious history. He confronted this challenge by his glorification of faith in the midst of degradation, as previously referenced, “Even during the bitter and dark ghetto years, when murder was the order of the day, when the majority of Torah leaders and the yeshiva students were martyred, when death threatened every Jew every minute – still Kovno’s Jews continued to go to houses of worship to study and pray [...]”⁶¹ Rabbi Oshry portrays observant Jews’ religious practices as those expected in the face of yet another “terrible persecution.” As observant Jews had done in the past, so they will do in the future: they will study and pray. In his praise of study and prayer, Rabbi Oshry not only created a “clear and structured” history not to be challenged by questions of God’s will or “God’s seeming absence in the midst of the destruction of the Jews,” but he presented the actions of the faithful that had and always will sustain their belief in the power of God.⁶²

Rabbi Oshry glorified faith in God’s will in the ghetto in much of his published work. In one, he explains reactions to a *responsa* in which he had absolved observant Jews from the obligation to wear *tefillin* only in daylight. Because many ghetto inhabitants went to and returned from work in the dark, he ruled that they were permitted to put on their *tefillin* in the dark and pray.⁶³ Rabbi Oshry describes how some observant Jews dismissed his lenient *responsa*, as one man put on his *tefillin* at his forced labor site, and prayed in daylight. Once he had finished, he passed his *tefillin* to others.⁶⁴ Rabbi Oshry states that the men who prayed in daylight, “fulfilled the law stringently.”⁶⁵ Out of their reverence for God, they followed His laws which reflected their devote faith. Rabbi Oshry’s rendering creates an inspiring story, for in the face of annihilation, Jews persisted in strict observance despite the fact that Rabbi Oshry’s *responsa* had freed them from the obligation.

⁶¹ E. Oshry, *Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry...*, p. 85.

⁶² M. Shaul, *Testimonies of Ultra-Orthodox Holocaust Survivors...*, p. 25; D. Deutsch, Session 7, Part 3: *Rabbinical Responses...*

⁶³ E. Oshry, *Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry...*, p. 90.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

While Rabbi Oshry's writings contain a number of stories that praise observant religious beliefs and practices of ghetto inhabitants, it is unclear, as mentioned previously, as to when exactly he wrote his *responsa* with the possibility that he did not write them during the Holocaust, but afterwards.⁶⁶ Tarshansky contends that based on the variation in explanations that Rabbi Oshry himself provides cast doubt as to when they were written.⁶⁷ Rabbi Oshry initially explained that he wrote his *responsa* on pieces of wrapping paper that had so deteriorated after the war that they could not be photocopied, so there was no evidence of their existence.⁶⁸ He then provided several differing versions before arriving at the explanation that he wrote his *responsa* on pieces of cement bags.⁶⁹ Tarshansky questions this explanation as he explains that it appears to have been "borrowed" from stories of inmates in forced-labor camps, as it mirrored their explanations and circumstances.⁷⁰

Moreover, Tarshansky also raises the issue of who in fact asked the questions that Rabbi Oshry responded to. Here too, his scholarship raises the possibility that Rabbi Oshry himself asked questions to enable him to provide *responsa* on specific topics.⁷¹ Tarshansky's findings support that the primary purpose of Rabbi Oshry's writings was to preserve faith in God as all-powerful for post-war Orthodox Jews. The doubt as to when Rabbi Oshry wrote much of his *responsa* combined with his ideological agenda, present him as a man with influence beyond the ordinary with license to shape events to his purpose. As such, there arises the need to identify the voices of ordinary Jews who also survived, but who questioned God and religion in relationship to their suffering in the Holocaust.

Religious Thought as Revealed in Oral Testimonies and Interviews

Deutsch explains that oral testimonies, such as those of Meisel and Shachnow, which were not revised through editing, in contrast to Rabbi Oshry's Orthodox publications, provide unrehearsed thoughts and explanations of their religious beliefs.⁷² Moreover, Shaul identifies that this spontaneous quality diminishes the power of public religious agendas and often provides

⁶⁶ M. Tarshansky, *The Writings of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry...*, p. 95.

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰ Ibidem.

⁷¹ Ibidem, p. 67

⁷² D. Deutsch, *Religious and Halakhic Observance...*, p. 139.

emotional and psychological information not recorded elsewhere.⁷³ Nevertheless, as previously referenced, Shenker identifies the challenges inherent in the reliability of memory in oral testimonies.⁷⁴ Issues of veracity and accuracy emerge in terms of the value of the methodology. The complexity of memory combined with trauma clarifies Shenker's critique as salient. However, Shaul identifies the value of oral testimonies, as she defines two types of memory, the public and the private. She argues that the private memory of survivors reveals truths not reliant on factual evidence, but on the complexity of the survivor's psychological interpretations.⁷⁵ As Taylor clarifies, what is important is what the witness believes to be *true*.

Shaul identifies oral testimony as a means to access ordinary survivors' perceptions which emerge in spite of their public memory explanations. She explains that in their private memory, witnesses provide an authenticity that can defy a public memory of community religious beliefs such as those promulgated by elite Orthodox Jews.⁷⁶ She states that "Deep memory [private memory] draws out other episodes that ruin the convenience of the public memory."⁷⁷ Oral testimonies allow witnesses to reveal traumas that are often eclipsed in public memory.⁷⁸ As the power of public memory is diminished, oral testimonies reveal the complexity and diversity in religious thought that Deutsch identifies, and which Shaul explains reveal "pangs of conscious and guilt" which in turn can reveal anger, fear, and doubt.⁷⁹

Deutsch's scholarship adds the important dimension that religious beliefs of ordinary Jews transformed as conditions changed within their experiences of the Holocaust. The oral testimonies of witnesses reveal a questioning of God with individual repurposing of their religious beliefs and practices as their circumstances altered.⁸⁰ Deutsch presents an example of a survivor who

⁷³ M. Shaul, *Testimonies of Ultra-Orthodox Holocaust Survivors...*, pp. 27, 29; A. Schein, *Everyone Can Hold a Pen: The Documentation Project in the DP Camps in Germany*, [in:] *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics and Achievements*, ed. D. Bankier, D. Michman, Jerusalem 2008, p. 120; Schein quotes Philip Friedman: "Without these testimonies we would have almost no information about how people lived in the ghetto, how they supported themselves, about their cultural life [...] their works, their destruction, about folklore in the ghettos and camps, about the psychological side of what happened [...]"

⁷⁴ N. Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony...*, p. 192.

⁷⁵ M. Shaul, *Testimonies of Ultra-Orthodox Holocaust Survivors...*, pp. 26, 29.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12, 29-30; D. Deutsch, Session 7, Part 3: *Rabbinical Responses...*

⁷⁷ M. Shaul, *Testimonies of Ultra-Orthodox Holocaust Survivors...*, pp. 27, 29.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁷⁹ D. Deutsch, Session 7, Part 3: *Rabbinical Responses...*; M. Shaul, *Testimonies of Ultra-Orthodox Holocaust Survivors...*, pp. 27-28.

⁸⁰ D. Deutsch, *Religious and Halakhic Observance...*, pp. 129-130.

explained in oral testimony that he prayed to God although he did not have faith in Him.⁸¹ He engaged in prayer outside of a formal religious framework of belief as a means of personal expression.⁸² The survivor's act of praying allowed him to communicate his suffering as connected to local conditions, but he did not have faith in God because he believed that it would diminish his chances of survival.⁸³

Oral Testimony: Revising Relationships with God: Judith Meisel

Meisel (1928-2020) was born in Josvainiai, Lithuania, into what she describes as a middleclass, observant family. She makes the distinction that hers was not Hasidic, but a Jewish family deeply “rooted in Judaism,” particularly her mother, who conducted religious study meetings for women in her home.⁸⁴ The family maintained a kosher household, attended weekly services, observed Shabbat and the High Holy Days.⁸⁵ After Meisel's father died in 1938, the family moved to Kaunas.

During the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, from 1940 to 1941, the family continued to keep kosher and observe *Shabbat* in secret, although they were terrified of discovery.⁸⁶ After the German invasion in 1941, when Meisel was thirteen years old, the family was forced to move into the Kovno ghetto. From the beginning, her mother explained that the family had to behave with dignity despite their humiliating and degrading treatment as Jews.⁸⁷ Meisel and her mother were aware that the rabbonim, to preserve life, had released observant Jews from certain obligations including the maintenance of kosher dietary laws. However, her mother would not eat non-kosher meat, as she didn't “want to give Hitler the satisfaction of [Jews] eating non-kosher food.”⁸⁸ In response to her mother, Meisel, as stated previously, explains that she believed that Hitler would kill Judaism even if he didn't kill all the Jews.⁸⁹ While in Stutthof, Meisel describes how she and others argued about the existence of God, as she could not believe that God would “do this.”⁹⁰ At

⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁸² Ibidem, pp. 130-131.

⁸³ Ibidem, pp. 131.

⁸⁴ J. Meisel, Interview 5916..., seg. 4, tape 1, mins. 2-3.

⁸⁵ Ibidem, seg. 4, tape 1, mins. 3-4; seg. 5, tape 1, mins. 4-5.

⁸⁶ Ibidem, seg. 26, tape 1, mins. 25-26; seg. 124, tape 5, mins. 2-3.

⁸⁷ Ibidem, seg. 143, tape 5, mins. 21.

⁸⁸ Ibidem, seg. 49, tape 2, mins. 18-19.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, seg. 49, tape 2, mins. 18-19.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, tape 3, mins. 8-10.

the camp, she lost track of the dates of the High Holidays.⁹¹ However, she explains that continual debates as to the existence of God “keep us going.”⁹²

Meisel and her sister escaped from the Stutthof camp during a Soviet bombardment. They then posed as Catholics and were sheltered by nuns from whom they learned the catechism and Christian prayers.⁹³ Meisel explains that when they knew that liberation was close, they wanted “to survive as Jews,” not as Catholics.⁹⁴ Meisel describes with sadness that after the defeat of the Germans, Judaism was no longer the same for her compared to her beliefs prior to the war, “Observances, and – and Judaism is not what it was. And what happened, and the kind of things the war in Eastern Europe, the kind of Jewish life [...]”⁹⁵ She explains that after the war many people did not keep kosher households, although she explains that she does.⁹⁶ She also details the two things that sustained her during the horrors she experienced were, “[...] the smell of my mother’s cooking and baking, and there’s a flower called nasturtium. It’s like a holy flower. The scent of it just – it doesn’t same – not here, it’s not the same, or in California.”⁹⁷

While Meisel was in the Kovno ghetto at the same time as Rabbi Oshry, her religious beliefs and practices changed under the circumstances. They did not mirror his portrayals of observant Jews. Although, raised as an observant Jew in a kosher household, Meisel questioned God’s existence, as she could not reconcile the suffering she witnessed and experienced with God’s will. However, she explains that what “kept her going” were arguments about the existence of God which provided her with a middle ground between the polarity of full faith and a realization that God was not all powerful. In this way, she created room for the possibility of God in her individual struggle with her faith, as she credited her questioning of God as keeping her alive. Meisel’s descriptions of her beliefs about God during the Holocaust reveals that unlike her mother’s refusal to eat nonkosher meat to survive, she wrestled with her faith in God which supported her survival through considering God’s power outside of a formal religious framework.

⁹¹ Ibidem, seg. 70, tape 3, mins. 8-10.

⁹² Ibidem, seg. 70, tape 3, mins. 8-10.

⁹³ Ibidem, seg. 85, tape 3, mins. 23-24.

⁹⁴ Ibidem, seg. 85, tape 3, mins. 24-25.

⁹⁵ Ibidem, seg. 49, tape 2, mins. 18-19.

⁹⁶ Ibidem, seg. 49, tape 2, mins. 18-19.

⁹⁷ Ibidem, seg. 109, tape 4, mins. 15-17.

As stated earlier, Meisel explains that the two things that sustained her were the smells of her mother's cooking and that of nasturtiums. She does not mention God. However, she describes the nasturtium as a holy flower. After the war, the scent of the flower, like her faith in the power of God, was not the same, but the flower and God still existed for her. They remained as memories of the security she once felt in her belief in God. Her kosher household signals a belief in God while the loss of the scent of the *holy flower* reflects God as present but powerless in her life.

Oral Testimony: Revising Relationships with God: Sidney Shachnow

Shachnow (1934-2018) was born into a religious, middle-class family in Kaunas.⁹⁸ His father and uncles would lay *tefillin* and pray most days.⁹⁹ His extended family went to the synagogue on the High Holidays, and he went with his father and uncles on other days as well. His family and their businesses were not affected by the Soviet occupation.¹⁰⁰ However, when the Germans' invaded, Shachnow describes that the lawlessness in Kaunas put the Jews in grave danger and harmed his family.¹⁰¹ As he lay in his bed in an adjoining room, he listened as a man broke into their home, beat his grandmother, and then raped his mother in their kitchen as his father hid under his bed.¹⁰²

Shachnow was seven years old when his family was forced to move into the Kovno ghetto. He explains it as a turning point, as his religious life came to an end.¹⁰³ For him, it did not mean that the family were no longer Jewish, but prayer for him was repurposed, "[...] if you prayed, it was one of those prayers from you and God, directly. And of course, you did all the talking. God never answered back."¹⁰⁴ Shachnow explains that while in the ghetto, he questioned God's ability to create miracles, "This would be a good time for God to show himself with a miracle. And He fell asleep at the switch."¹⁰⁵ As a young boy in the ghetto, Shachnow witnessed suffering and

⁹⁸ S. Shachnow, Interview 52911..., seg. 4, tape 1, mins. 3-4.

⁹⁹ Ibidem, seg. 14, tape 1, mins. 13-14.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, seg. 23, tape 1, mins. 23-24.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, seg. 28, tape 1, mins. 27-28.

¹⁰² Ibidem, seg. 26, tape 1, mins. 25-27.

¹⁰³ Ibidem, seg. 57, tape 1, mins. 56-57.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, seg. 57, tape 1, mins. 56-57.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, seg. 58, tape 1, mins. 57.

violence which included brutal attacks on ghetto residents. At a work site, he was viciously beaten by a guard.¹⁰⁶

After liberation, Shachnow, his mother, and younger brother made their way to Germany and lived in what he describes as a Jewish community while waiting for his father to join them.¹⁰⁷ On his own initiative, he studied with a rabbi for his bar-mitzvah with “lingering questions about God.”¹⁰⁸ He describes how he discussed his doubts with several rabbis who told him, “[...] you need to have faith. God knows what He’s doing. He has a reason for it.”¹⁰⁹ The rabbis’ responses made him believe that “[...] they themselves didn’t know, couldn’t articulate and explain it.”¹¹⁰ When the interviewer asks him if he was proud of his bar mitzvah, he explains, “I was still torn and still confused. I’m not clearer about it today than I was then.”¹¹¹

However, Shachnow explains that the theft of his bike from outside of the synagogue in which he was studying for his bar mitzvah triggered grave doubts in the power of God, “You would think God would look out and make sure the bike was intact.”¹¹² He explains that the bike secured his income as a delivery boy for the black market.¹¹³ The shock of the theft caused a rupture in his faith, “This is it, we—we’re entering a new relationship, God and I.”¹¹⁴ The interviewer asks him to explain the relationship, “[...] relationship with God is God, and I’m a skeptic. I believe in Him, but I think that the first responsibility of taking care of yourself is you. You can’t rely on God.”¹¹⁵

Shachnow explains that he is unable to “be a good religious individual,” to sustain “a degree of faith,” because of the devastation and pain that he witnessed and experienced.¹¹⁶ He believes that the horrendous experiences during the Holocaust demanded that God reveal Himself through miracles.¹¹⁷ His incomprehension of God’s absence, in God’s failure to provide a miracle to stop the suffering in the midst of the Holocaust, caused him to question God’s power. The theft

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, seg. 76, tape 1, hrs./mins. 1:15:00-1:16:00.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, seg. 136, tape 1, hrs./mins. 2:15:18.

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, seg. 139, tape 1, mins. 2:18:00; seg. 140, tape 1, hrs./mins. 2:19:00-2:20:00.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, seg. 139, tape 1, mins. 2:18:00; seg. 140, tape 1, hrs./mins. 2:19:00-2:20:00.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem, seg. 139, tape 1, mins. 2:18:00; seg. 140, tape 1, hrs./mins. 2:19:00-2:20:00.

¹¹¹ Ibidem, seg. 141, tape 1, hrs./mins. 2:20:00-2:21:00.

¹¹² Ibidem, seg. 142, tape 1, hrs./mins. 2:21:00-2:22:00.

¹¹³ Ibidem, seg. 141, tape 1, hrs./mins. 2:21:00.

¹¹⁴ Ibidem, seg. 143, tape 1, hrs./mins. 2:22:00.

¹¹⁵ Ibidem, seg. 143, tape 1, hrs./mins. 2:22:00.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem, seg. 59, tape 1, mins. 58-59.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem, seg. 57, tape 1, mins. 56-57.

of his bicycle made him realize that he could not rely on God, however, he explained that although his relationship with God had changed, he still believed in Him, “I still believe in God, because every so often when I get in trouble, I used to turn to Him [...] but I don’t lay *tefillins*. I don’t use the scarf.”¹¹⁸ For Shachnow, questions of faith in God’s power in relationship to his suffering are ongoing debates that he has directly with God.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

The published writings of Rabbi Oshry and the oral testimonies of Meisel and Shachnow reveal variations in religious thought in relationship to the Holocaust. However, it is important to distinguish their genres of expression as indicators of their purpose. Rabbi Oshry’s *responsa* appear as published Orthodox historiography that were designed as narratives to reaffirm faith in a post-war Orthodox audience. His perspective reveals his own beliefs while also explaining those of others. In contrast, the oral testimonies of Meisel and Shachnow were unrehearsed, live-recorded explanations of their individual thoughts and beliefs as survivors of the Holocaust. They each speak for themselves. Their testimonies had no designated ideological audience per se, as they were recorded to preserve their individual stories.

Rabbi Oshry’s *responsa* as interpreted as Orthodox historiography places him in the role as a “teacher” of Orthodox faith. His *responsa* presents events in the ghetto that are shaped by the author’s religious beliefs as based on faith in an all-powerful God. What is important is not factual accuracy, but the alignment of Orthodox faith. In his work, he contextualizes the horrific suffering and death in the Holocaust in the long history of the Jews as another trial among many. His works are valued for his interpretations of *Halakha*, and are representative of his Orthodox teaching, which as such, identify his purpose.

The oral testimonies of Meisel and Shachnow reveal their individual thoughts about religion as they explain their pre-war beliefs in the power of God which they did not retain in the Kovno ghetto or after their liberation. Instead, they questioned their religious faith in relationship to the Holocaust. Their testimonies present an unglorified reality in which they did not find God’s power or understand God’s will.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, seg. 61, tape 1, mins. 59-61.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem, seg. 60, tape 1, mins. 59-60.

Meisel's description of a nasturtium as a holy flower symbolizes her loss of faith in the power of God while retaining a belief in Him. She acknowledges the flower as holy, but it does not have the same scent. For her, religion lacks its core essence of God's power, but He still exists – a flower without a scent. Moreover, she maintains a kosher household as her mother did prior to her imprisonment in the ghetto, but she does not believe in God as all powerful.

Shachnow, too, retains a belief in God amid his loss of faith in God's power. As a young child in the ghetto, he no longer was observant, but instead had a personal relationship in which he spoke to Him, but he explains that God never spoke back and did not create miracles. His final rupture of his belief in the power of God occurs after the theft of his bicycle while he was studying for his bar mitzvah. He explains that he continues to pray directly to God, while believing that God will not protect him, and concludes that he must protect himself.

The divergent perceptions of an elite Orthodox rabbi and two ordinary Jews are important sources for inquiry and analysis of religious thought during the Holocaust as they reveal differing motivations, perspectives, and interpretations. However, as Deutch and Shaul argue, academic researchers have more largely embraced the glorification of Jewish observance of *Halakha* during the Holocaust as presented by Orthodox elites and deemed heroic, which has eclipsed inquiry into the religious beliefs of ordinary Jews. This imbalance of academic inquiry identifies oral testimonies as understudied sources of religious thought in the historiography.

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Summary

The role of Jewish religion during the Holocaust is complex in its ambiguity. To address the topic, this article will provide a limited analysis of the faith in the power of God from the contrasting perspectives of an elite Orthodox leader, Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, and two non-elite, ordinary Jews, Judith Meisel and Sidney Shachnow. All three were imprisoned in the Kovno ghetto from 1941 to 1944. Rabbi Oshry's purpose in his rabbinical writings, as Orthodox historiography, was to portray the observant as heroic to maintain the post-war faith of the Orthodox. He glorified religious observance of Jews during the Holocaust, in the seeming-absence of God, to reaffirm faith in the power of God. In contrast, the oral testimonies of Meisel and Shachnow reveal their personal anguish as they describe their individual doubt in the power of God. They explain that they questioned why God did not act to stop the destruction and slaughter. The post-war oral

testimonies of Meisel and Shachnow were not created for an identified audience per se, as their testimonies were unrehearsed. In contrast, Rabbi Oshry edited and revised his published work over several decades after the war for an Orthodox audience. David Deutsch and Michal Shaul argue that in the historiography the religious perspectives of elites that glorify the observant during the Holocaust, such as those of Rabbi Oshry, have been embraced in by researchers. In contrast, they identify a near absence of academic inquiry into the religious questioning of ordinary Jews, such as Meisel and Shachnow, as revealed in oral testimonies. While this article is necessarily restricted in its scope due to its focus on the perspectives of three subjects, its purpose is to identify variation in religious thought as affected by the Holocaust.

Key words: Holocaust, Lithuania, Kovno ghetto, Oral testimony, Religion