

**Holocaust Survivors and Holocaust Memory in the Rehabilitation of Ashkenazi  
Haredi Society in the Yishuv and the State of Israel, 1945-1961\ Michal Shaul**

**Abstract**

Missing from the broad context of Holocaust scholarship is the role of haredi (ultra-Orthodox) survivors in shaping Holocaust memory and awareness in the pre-state and early state periods in Israel. On the one hand, studies demonstrating the central role Holocaust survivors played in this process during the first post-war years overlook the role of haredi survivors. On the other, studies of haredi society fail to highlight the contribution of survivors to this process in Israel. This historical study aims to fill these lacunae. It investigates the place of haredi Holocaust survivors in shaping and rehabilitating post-Holocaust haredi society in Israel and in molding its Holocaust memory, from 1945 to 1961 in particular, namely during the late Yishuv and early statehood periods. Its main finding was that Holocaust survivors, and their confrontation of the Holocaust and its ramifications, played a key role in the formation of haredi self-identity in Israel in the social, religious, institutional, and literary spheres, among others. The study focuses on the personal and public experiences of haredi Holocaust survivors in Israel from the initial post-liberation period until the Eichmann trial, which in Holocaust scholarship marks an attitudinal turning point toward Holocaust memory and survivors. It attempts to demonstrate the impact of this small minority (six to ten percent of *sheerit hapletah* in Israel) on the development and shaping of Holocaust memory and commemoration in Israel on the personal, communal, social, and national levels.

If Zionist survivors sought to put their past behind them, and rehabilitated their lives in the land of Israel in line with an ethos calling for a new life divorced from the

Diaspora model, haredi survivors sought to build their future based on resuscitation of the past and on their self-image as heirs to the traditional Jewish ethos. This adoption of a “restorative” viewpoint enabled haredi society to redefine itself and its goals, to locate its restructured community on the continuum of the pre-Holocaust Jewish world, and to heighten its distinctiveness vis-à-vis other facets of Israeli society.

This study traces two main instrumental means used by haredi survivors in their attempt to achieve rehabilitation in the present by restoring the past. One was the founding of formative frameworks—the haredi family, yeshivot, the Beis Yaakov educational network for girls, and the hasidic court—which despite their modernity and the influence of the local Israeli milieu were perceived as continuing the Eastern European Jewish legacy. The other took the form of commemoration of the past through varieties of literary expression and genres. In each channel of rehabilitation, acute awareness of the need for preservation and restoration of the past was a prime factor shaping how future generations were to be instructed.

Haredi survivors’ unique, subjective awareness and historiographical grasp of their personal biographies form the crux of this study. At the same time, Holocaust memory is viewed as a significant force driving historical-sociological processes in haredi society. The textual analysis therefore drew upon tools from social and cultural history and from *histoire des mentalités*. Wide use was made of primary sources written by haredi survivors, alongside archival documentation by absorption and rehabilitation agencies (such as Agudat Israel, the Zionist movement, the Joint Distribution Committee, among others). Also examined were dozens of introductions to haredi books in which the authors recounted their Holocaust experiences; contemporary literature written by

survivors; responsa literature composed by or for survivors; memoirs; and press items, among others.

This dissertation is divided into four parts. Part one contains background material on the depth of the Holocaust-created rift in haredi society and charts the main channels of rehabilitation treated in this study: literary expression, institutional renewal, and the rebuilding of the haredi ethos. Part two is concerned with the individual haredi Holocaust survivor's confrontation of Holocaust memory and its ramifications in the private sphere. Part three examines the role of Holocaust awareness and Holocaust memory in the rehabilitation of haredi society; namely, the function of Holocaust memory in "internal" haredi discourse. Part four investigates the extent to which haredi discourse on the Holocaust was integrated into the general Israeli Holocaust discourse that also began to develop at that time.

Part one is divided into two chapters. Chapter one provides historical background on the haredi community and the impact of the Holocaust-created breach on this society. This chapter also sketches an initial profile of haredi survivors and their activity in the early post-Holocaust years. Chapter two outlines the three spheres to which haredi survivors belonged and in which they operated: private, sectoral-haredi, and general Israeli. ~~Each of these spheres constituted a field of activity for survivors and paved the way to the paths of rehabilitation treated in this dissertation: literary expression in a variety of genres, the founding of modeling educational frameworks, and the re-creation of the haredi ethos.~~

Part two has two chapters. Chapter three analyzes the autobiographical introductions to rabbinical works written by rabbis who were Holocaust survivors in order to elicit their personal voices and the fashion in which they dealt with harrowing feelings of guilt.

Chapter four examines the ramifications of the Holocaust for the formation of new haredi family units in the post-war years and their impact on personal and communal rehabilitation.

The four chapters of part three treat how the survivors and their Holocaust awareness contributed to the post-Holocaust rehabilitation of haredi society. Chapters five and six are devoted to the place of Holocaust memory and its consequences for the development and rehabilitation of haredi-torani educational institutions. Chapter five examines the world of the yeshivot and the transformation of haredi society in Israel into a “scholar-society” (*hevrat lomdim*); chapter six focuses on the reconstruction of the Beis Yaakov educational network for girls in the post-Holocaust period.

Chapter seven treats three stories belonging to this myth and their role as a rehabilitative mechanism in haredi society. This study also revealed that previous studies’ depictions of the haredi leadership as hesitating to set praxis for commemorating the destruction of European Jewry are imprecise: rather, personal and communal initiatives by survivors and by relatives of the victims brought commemoration into the public haredi sphere during the period in question. Chapter eight discusses communal construction of Holocaust memory in synagogues, Torah libraries, and several hasidic courts. The Holocaust period itself, and afterwards, also saw the beginnings of a formative myth shaping the victims’ martyrdom.

Part four explores the question of whether Holocaust memory in haredi society of the 1950s should be regarded as “counter-memory.” Chapter nine treats the charged encounter between survivors and the Yishuv leaders as seen through the writings of two haredi educators: Yehudah Leib Girst (1905-63) and Pesya Shereshevski (1918-57).

Chapters ten and eleven analyze the activity and oeuvre of several writers who were Holocaust survivors and who represent different literary genres: journalism, belles lettres, teenage literature, autobiography, historiography, and public speechwriting. Chapter ten treats the different voices heard in haredi society during the period in question with regard to the various aspects of Jewish Holocaust heroism. Chapter eleven is devoted to the historiographical writings of Judah Leib Levin and the degree to which Zionist historiography influenced his *Megilat polin*. The examination of this work elicited a more complex picture of haredi historiography of the Holocaust than in the past and showed that its aims were not solely Judeo-centric or educational.

One central finding was that the oft-cited dichotomous division between the ethos of the Zionist majority in Israel and that of its so-called haredi enclave does not reflect the historical reality of the first post-World War Two decade, and that the processes of formation of the Zionist and haredi “collective identity” had a number of shared components during those years. The late 1940s and early 1950s saw a variety of contacts on different levels between haredim and Zionists in daily life, including discussion of Holocaust commemoration and its lessons. Like their non-haredi counterparts in Israeli society, haredi survivors took an active role in construction of Holocaust memory in haredi society prior to the Eichmann trial; also, like non-haredi society, the haredi one awarded primacy to the perspective of ghetto fighters and partisans, despite the fact that they comprised a minority voice among the survivors. The haredi contention that the debate regarding whether the Jews went “like lambs to the slaughter” concerned only the Zionists and did not arise in haredi society turned out to be unsubstantiated. The questions of Jewish heroism in all its facets and the moral aspects of the Jewish public’s

behavior during the Holocaust were discussed in the haredi press and in haredi study houses. Indeed, not only did some haredim partially accept aspects of the Zionist narrative with regard to the lessons of the Holocaust and the centrality of the Jewish yishuv in Israel, some even participated in its creation and crystallization. As was the case in contemporary Zionist society, haredi society's discourse was ideological, educational, and collective in nature and individual voices had little place. Individual experiences were often replaced by myths and didactic stories, some fictional, such as the story of the heroic death by suicide of ninety-three Beis Yaakov students, so as not to be sullied by the Nazis; or the story of the composition of the tune to *Ani ma'amin* on the train to the death camps. For haredi society, such narratives aimed to bestow religious-ideological meaning on the death of millions and to highlight the survival, and strengthening, of the haredi path during the Holocaust.

Faced with both with the destruction of its former Torah world, its rabbis and students, and the emerging alternative Zionist entity in the Holy Land, the haredi public, which saw itself as the remnant and representative of the authentic Jewish world "that was," developed a profound sense of internal mission aimed at continuing the chain of the generations, at strengthening the Torah world, and at keeping secularization at bay. Encouraged by this sense of mission, and by their self-perception as the victims' agents, haredi Holocaust survivors drafted the energies to restore the world of the past. Holocaust memory and its inculcation therefore assumed a focal role in the crystallization of haredi society and in the formulation of its current goals.