

## *Yitzhak Katzenelson's Theology of Despair*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Monotheistic religions have created long traditions of theodicy, which reconcile the basic premises of Monotheism and the hardships of historical reality. If God is just and omnipotent and if everything, is part of a God-guided history, then why is there so much pain in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? If there is God, why are there concentration camps, gulags, and mass killing sites?

The Holocaust of the Jewish people during World War II, an unprecedented manifestation of evil in modern history, threatens to be such a case, a scandal that tradition can no longer explain away. It stretches theodicy to its limits.

This paper represents the end of Jewish theodicy in the Holocaust year's writings of Yitzhak Katzenelson (1885 – 1944 Auschwitz), a gifted Bible teacher, a poet and a dramatist, who responded in his writings to the realities of the 'Shoa.' In the beginning, using traditional language, he offered consolation to the population of the Warsaw Jewish ghetto. However, as death became the dominant reality, his writings, which outlived him, reveal a ladder of despair, which takes his readers into the abysses of history. Finally, in his most important poem, "The Song of the Murdered Jewish People," written in the concentration camp of Vittel, France, Katzenelson is a prophet of despair. Theodicy collapses. Providence is now the great deception of Monotheism. Heavens are empty. The world has lost its meaning. In April 1944, Katzenelson was deported to Auschwitz and murdered.

### **THE END OF THE WORLD OF MEANING**

Monotheism is about one harmonious world; however, reality does not confirm this grand assumption. Here is the most severe challenge to all Monotheistic traditions. If God is just and omnipotent and if everything, is part of a God-guided history, then why is there so much pain in the world? Why are there illnesses and death? Why did bad things happen to good people? Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? Why do people inflict so much pain on other people? If there is God, why are there concentration camps, gulags, and mass killing sites?

Monotheistic religions have created long traditions of theodicy, which struggle with this principal problem and tries to reconcile the basic premises of Monotheism and the hardships of historical reality. The Holocaust of the Jewish people during World War II, an unprecedented manifestation of evil in modern history, threatens to be a scandal that traditional forms of theodicy can no longer explain away. Can theodicy give meaning to a total genocide, to the reality of Auschwitz, to the ideological and industrial like murder of millions, in a God Guided world?

The Holocaust years writings of Yitzhak Katzenelson (1885 – 1944 Auschwitz), a gifted Bible teacher, a poet, a dramatist, and a member of the Jewish underground in occupied Warsaw, who responded in his writings to the realities of the ‘Shoa’, might suggest that the Holocaust stretched theodicy to its limits.

Post-World War II history had added to this troubling question. The images of Hiroshima and development of mass-killing weapons hover above the heads of humanity. Even after Auschwitz, genocides recur in different parts of the world. Civil wars add to natural disasters and uproot millions of people from their homes, creating global waves of refugees. Global terror and religious fanaticism spread fear and hostility among men. Modern, industrial civilization puts a growing threat on the Earth Planet’s environment. All raise the principal question about the moral capacity of men to guide human history. Maybe, what Katzenelson suggested in days of total despair signifies the loss of human horizons.

### **THE WORLD OF MEANING**

What makes the physical world a home for humankind? Nature is blind to the feelings and thoughts of men. How can we avoid Ecclesiastes’ apparent conclusion that reality goes in a perpetual unchanged and cycle and hence humankind’s being is meaningless?

In human history, religious traditions helped men to overcome the blind ruling of nature and build a human-oriented cosmos. All human civilizations have a religious era in their early development. Religion is a total cultural system, which makes the work of Genesis; it organizes reality, creating a cosmos out of the primordial “Tohu VaVohu” (chaotic reality), and bringing meaning to the life of men. As a cultural system, it is more comprehensive than any specific religious law or rituals – it organizes the entire world as the home of Man, a reality in which human beings can function, create, develop, build and flourish. In an analogy to the world of computers, culture is the “operating system” that enables Man to execute all his or her life operations. We will take the culture from people, and their world would fall back to its “hardware” being, biological existence only. Religion is such an “operating system” that in a mythological language makes the world workable for men.<sup>1</sup>

Monotheistic mythology – the Hebrew Bible, and the succeeding Jewish, Christian and

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<sup>1</sup> Barbour Ian. G. *Myth, Models and Paradigms*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. 1974. Geertz Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Muslim traditions – ordered reality and gave meaning to human life along the lines of a grand mythical story, in which an omnipotent good and just God governs the world. It is a glorious and inspiring idea, even though it is not the only possible ordering principle of reality, and neighboring traditions challenged this grand hypothesis of Monotheism. The Hebrew Bible emphasizes the idea that God is the lord of the world who leads history along with perfect justice. “*The Rock! --His deeds are perfect, Yea, all His ways are just*” (Deuteronomy, 32:4), and “*He who rules the world justly and its peoples in faithfulness.*” (Psalms, 96:13), are examples of many Biblical texts that express this idea.<sup>2</sup>

This hypothesis is also the basis of the Biblical prophets complains to God when reality did not follow this grand assumption: “*You are always righteous, Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?*” (Jeremiah, 12:1). Such a God who brought to men the idea of justice is expected to govern the world accordingly. Here, the great question of faith arises: why does reality not confirm this great monotheistic assumption. Why “do bad things happen to good people?”<sup>3</sup>

The whole book of Job is dealing with the prima facie unjust suffering of just people. Job demands justice, questioning the fundamental assumption of Monotheism, God’s justice, suggesting that a cosmic sadist governs the world (Job, 9: 21-24). Job wants to understand why he suffers, but the answer he receives tells him only how he can endure his fate. God is present again. The question “why he had to suffer” remains unanswered; it continued to disturb generations of Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers.<sup>4</sup>

A most difficult experience for men is the experience of a chaotic and uncontrollable reality. Any cultural project is an attempt to create a meaningful reality out of the chaos or raw reality in which man can be human. Therefore, men construct cultural structures and try to reach uniting and ordering schemes that will make the world a human world. “*Understanding the world for a man*

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2. All Biblical quotations in this study are taken from the new JPS translation, Philadelphia: the Jewish Publication Society, 1988.

3 Kushner, Harold. S. When Bad Things Happen to Good People. New York: Anchor books, 1981.

4 Schweid, Eliezer. "Ish Yareh Elohim Berivo: the Question of God's Justification in the Book of Job," Iyun, 42, 1993, 227-247.

*is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal.*"<sup>5</sup> Religion provides men with such "seal."

Chaos is a major threat to human civilization, especially in dramatic moments when men struggle with the major questions of life and death. Sometimes reality seems to exceed the limits of human analytic capacities, his power of endurance, or his moral insights. Life becomes unexplainable, meaningless and therefore unbearable. Religious theodicy may offer an answer.<sup>6</sup> Monotheism is not only about the singularity of God – it is about the nature of the world, which is supposed to be a harmonious unity, governed one God, according to one law and ultimate justice. Whenever reality was incompatible with this paradigm, religious thought, Jewish, Christian and Muslim alike, was mobilized to establish a theodicy, which would restore the harmonious nature of the world and 'explain away' the presence of evil.<sup>7</sup>

Theodicy does not have one paved road. It is, rather, a rich field of efforts to give meaning to reality and justify it in the face of its imperfection and gross human suffering. Among others, it can be 'punishment of men's sins,' 'tribulations of God's love,' 'test of faith,' 'martyrdom' – a declaration of faith, 'purification of the suffering person,' 'the birth pangs of the coming of the Messiah,' 'redemptive suffering' – the suffering person will get his just reward in the world-to-come, and a 'the temporary eclipse-of-God.' As no answer was definitive, the culture of theodicy continued to prosper.<sup>8</sup> At the far end of theodicy, 'dogmatic theodicy' would deny the very legitimacy of questioning God's ruling. Men have to suspend their moral judgement and accept God's verdict as it is! Most of these theodicies already appear in the book of Job and various combinations throughout the history of religious Jewish-Christian and Muslim philosophies.

Modern thought has added two contradictory answers to the reservoir of theodicy. The first is the death of God theodicy. "We have murdered him" in Modernity, according to Nietzsche,<sup>9</sup> and "He was murdered in Auschwitz," as Elie Wiesel put it.<sup>10</sup> The second modern theodicy suggests that God is just an old illusion: there was never a God in Heavens. Theodicy finally fails. Men

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5 Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. New York: Vintage Books, 1955, 13.

6 Geertz, 1973, 100.

7 Gillman, Neil. *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997, 281 note 8. *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990, 187-213.

8 Birenbaum, David. *God and Evil*. Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, 1989, 20-36.

9 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, Fragment 125.

10 Wiesel, Elie. *Night, Dawn, Day*. Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1985, 82-83.

have to realize that they are alone in this world, suggests Yitzhak Katzenelson and years later, also Richard Rubenstein.<sup>11</sup>

History was not merciful to the Jewish people. In the Jewish collective mind, history gained a catastrophic image, which dominates the Jewish literary responses to catastrophe and liturgy. Jewish historical culture developed a form of radical theodicy – a whole tradition of Jewish martyrdom, ‘Kiddush Hashem,’ the Sanctification of God’s Name in total devotion, including death. It gives meaning to the repeated persecutions of Jews in history.<sup>12</sup>

The Holocaust of the Jewish people during World War II, as might be other genocides to its victims, is a major challenge to the cosmos of men, and it threatens to undo the work of Monotheism, returning human civilization to the beginning of its moral development. We may term it as “Ground Zero,” a term that got a new meaning in the light of the “September 11<sup>th</sup>” events in the USA, something unexplainable, a place without meaning, a moment that ends the previous history and starts a new one. The Holocaust is the returning of the world into chaos, a ‘black hole’ that threatens to swallow men’s spiritual energies and wipe away humankind’s horizons, resulting in a sad and hopeless, cynical and nihilistic human reality. We need the courage to enter this void and start to recreate our world.<sup>13</sup> Yitzhak Katzenelson was there. He did not survive the Holocaust, but in his writings, he invites us to enter the abysses of history and see if there are any exits to a post-Auschwitz human civilization.

### **A HEBREW EDUCATOR IN THE YIDDISH SPEAKING JEWISH GHETTO**

The archives of the Yitzhak Katzenelson Ghetto Fighters’ House at Kibbutz Lohamei HaGetaot (The Ghetto Fighters’ Kibbutz) in Israel hold the Holocaust years’ writings of the poet, dramatist, educator and Bible teacher Yitzhak Katzenelson.<sup>14</sup> His texts open a window into the inner reality

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11 Rubenstein, Richard. *After Auschwitz*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Com. Inc., 1966. (Summer 1970) "Job and Auschwitz." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* XXV, no. 4, (Summer 1970), 233-251. "God as Cosmic Sadist," *Christian Century* 87, No. 30. (July 29 1970), 921-923.

12 Roskies, David. *G. Against the Apocalypse*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984. *The Literature of Destruction*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988.

13 Neher, Andre. *The Exile of the Word: from the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*. Translated from French by D. Maisel. Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1981, 11.

14 Yitzhak Katzenelson (1886-1944) – known as "the mourner of the Holocaust" – was born to his parents Yaakov Binyamin Katzenelson and his mother Hinda from the Davidson family in Karlitz Lithuania in 1886. His father was a "maskil" (modern Jewish scholar) and Hebrew writer who was ordained as a Rabbi but did not want to make Rabbinism his source of living. From him, Yitzhak got his

of the Holocaust, the shattered world of its victims, which is quite often hidden by the historiographical study of the 'Final Solution.'<sup>15</sup> Katzenelson's work is not scholarly historiography, but rather a personal account of the real meaning of the Holocaust, documented in "real time." unaffected by the passage of time and later historical events. Its power resides in its authenticity and immediacy.

In the years before the outbreak of World War II, Katzenelson was part of his family education 'empire' in Lodz, leading intensive cultural work, teaching the Hebrew Bible and poetry, leading holiday parties, Shabbat evening celebrations ("Kabalat Shabbat") in the Borochove 'kibbutz hakshara' ('a preparation community of young Zionists who prepared themselves to life in Palestine). His vision was the revival of his people in the Land of Israel.

The Germans occupied Łódź on 8 September 1939. Katzenelson's Hebrew school was confiscated, and the poet had to go into hiding, like other public figures whose heads the Nazis sought. As soon as he could, he escaped to Krakow, where he stayed for a couple of months, and then with the help of friends, he reached Warsaw around 17-19 November 1939. His wife Hannah and their three sons, Zvi, Benzion and Benyamin, were managed to escape and join him in Warsaw in January 1940.<sup>16</sup> A few months after he arrived in Warsaw, the underground Zionist movement 'Dror' (Freedom) adopted Katzenelson and saved him from his loneliness among the thousands of uprooted Jews who flocked the city streets. There and then, he got a new milieu of creativity: a teacher in the Dror's underground school, and a poet who became the informal spokesperson of his young comrades' inner feelings.

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broad Hebrew education and a deep love to for his people. His mother came from a family of rabbis who had connections to the Hasidic movement in general and to the Chabad movement in particular.

In 1896 the family moved to Łódź in Poland and in 1906 Yitzhak started to work as an educator in the family Hebrew school, part of the family network of Hebrew educational institutions which included a kindergarten, an elementary school and a gymnasium. Nonetheless, the language that was spoken in the Katzenelson family home was probably Yiddish. The Katzenelson family education projects were part of a flourishing of Jewish culture in Łódź, both in Hebrew and in Yiddish. (Levinson, Avraham. "Lodz, my Hometown", Ben Yehuda Project, 1945. Online at: <http://benyehuda.org/levinson/lodz.html>; Shner Zvi. BaMishmeret. Tel Aviv: The Ghetto Fighters House & Hakibutz HaMeuchad, 1986, 73-76; Zur, Muki. Itzhak Katzenelson. Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2012.)

15 Roth, John K. "On Seeing the Invisible Dimensions of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 1, no. 1, (1986), 147-153.

16 Shner Moshe. Janusz Korczak and Yitzhak Katzenelson: Two Educators in the Abysses of History. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University; Zuckerman, Yitzhak. "In Warsaw Ghetto and Vittel Camp", in: Katzenelson, Yitzhak. *Ktavim Acharonim [Last Writings, Hebrew]*. Tel Aviv: the Ghetto Fighters House and Hakibutz HaMeuchad, 1969. 358-362; Zur, 2012

Katzenelson's story does not have a good ending. In July 1942, death approached the Warsaw Jewish ghetto. Katzenelson's wife Hannah and their two younger sons Benzion and Benjamin, had deported to Treblinka. Katzenelson cries and curses, lamenting the loss of his family and his people. In 1943 Katzenelson and his oldest son, Zvi, were deported to a concentration camp in Vittel France and from there, they were sent at the beginning of 1944 to Drancy and from there to Auschwitz. Much of Katzenelson's Holocaust years' writings survived the war in various hiding places. They are archived at the Yitzhak Katzenelson Ghetto Fighters' House.

From his arrival in Warsaw in the middle of November 1939, until his last days in the camp at Vittel in France at the beginning of 1944, he went through a spiritual journey, using models of Jewish theodicy in efforts to give meaning to the reality of his people.<sup>17</sup> Finding meaning in the difficult events became harder every day until it was impossible in the face of the destruction of his people. Towards the end of 1943, when death was everywhere, Katzenelson could not find any more answers to the challenge of reality, and he ended in total despair. As descendent of rabbinic lineage and as a Hebrew scholar, Katzenelson was versed in all layers of Jewish literature, and he was familiar with the vast corpus of Jewish literary responses to catastrophe; the Hebrew Bible was his main cultural reservoir. His writings reveal a Biblical prophet who leads a bitter dialogue with Biblical personalities. Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's words of hope and condolence got a new meaning in his interpretation of current reality. The ancient words of hope became words of despair.

Katzenelson guides his readers to an impossible reality with no meaning and no ethical directions. Creation has returned to nothingness. With the destruction of all structures of meaning, cynicism, and nihilism overrun the world.

Before the war, Katzenelson was mainly a Hebrew poet. Hebrew, the ancient language of the Bible, symbolized the future of Jewish nationality. The Zionist movement adopted Hebrew as a platform for its efforts to revive Jewish life and Jewish culture. The Land of Israel was dreamed of, sung and discussed in Hebrew. Katzenelson had visited Israel-Palestine twice in 1925 and 1934 and had thoughtfully planned his family immigration. Hebrew was Katzenelson's creative milieu. Now, as part of the Jewish population, struggles for life under the German yoke, he writes in

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17 Sheintuck, Yechiel. *Yitzhak Katzenelson's Rescued Manuscripts: From the Warsaw Ghetto and the Vittel Concentration Camp*. Jerusalem: Magness Press and the Ghetto Fighters' House, 2000.

Yiddish, identifying himself with the masses of the ghetto. The streets of 'Jewish Warsaw' spoke mainly Yiddish, not Hebrew, and Katzenelson was part of it.

### **A MESSENGER OF HOPE AND CONDOLENCES**

Following the reorganization of the 'Dror' movement in May 1940, Katzenelson got a creative milieu and a supportive audience. People use to associate the underground with the armed uprising in January and April 1943, but the road that ended in armed fighting started with extensive spiritual and social resistance, including the activation of an agricultural farm in the city suburbs, the publishing of the underground press, the running of a school and drama groups and even a children's choir.<sup>18</sup>

The realization of the real meaning of the Nazi policies, "the Final Solution," was not there yet, and Katzenelson positioned himself as a messenger of hope to his people. The underground educators' seminar, organized by Dror in May 1940 and then the establishment of the underground gymnasium in August 1940 were for Katzenelson forums of vital activity and a stage on which he could express his interpretation of the ghetto reality. The drama group that he established, the Bible-reading-evenings and his poetry reading events enabled him to offer the people of the ghetto his empathy and interpretation of their reality, giving them hope and redemptive horizons. Katzenelson left a deep impression on his young listeners.<sup>19</sup>

His plays *On the Rivers of Babylon* (March 1941) and *Job* (June 1941) merged Biblical narratives with the ghetto reality. The biblical stories were a prism, through which the ghetto inhabitants could see themselves. Zivia Lubetkin, a leader of the Dror underground, testified in a retrospective about the importance of Katzenelson's plays in the life of the ghetto:

Yitzhak Katzenelson's biblical play *Job* appeared in the Dror Press. It was written in 1941, and its publication was an important cultural event in the Jewish life of Warsaw. [...] Everyone who heard him read was inspired. It was evident that despite everything, the Nazis could not break

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18 Sheintuck, Yechiel, "On the Definition of Jewish heroism in the Days of the Holocaust," *Dapim Lecheker Tekufat Ha-shoah*, (Anthology), no. 3, (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1984), 61-95. Zuckerman, Yitzhak. *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1993, 61-64, 104.

19 Folman Raban, *Havka. They are still with me. The Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz: the Ghetto Fighters House*, 1997, 174-179.

our spirit; there were still creative forces amongst us.<sup>20</sup>

Lubetkin emphasized that the story of Job, apparently one of the darkest books of the Bible, was a source of inspiration for the inhabitants of the ghetto. Yitzhak Zuckerman (Antek), the leader of Dror, similarly remembered Job as an event that raised the spirit of the ghetto inhabitants.<sup>21</sup> How could these dramatic plays, which deal with human agony and national disasters, be a source of consolation?

The plays themselves do not display high literary qualities, but they carry a vital message to their audience, who gave it enthusiastic responses. *Job* deals with the unjustified suffering of the individual. *On the Rivers of Babylon* deals with the unexplainable suffering of the whole people (Psalms 137). Both narratives depict dark events but have happy ends. The narrative, by its very nature, surpasses its time. Like in a Midrash, Katzenelson takes old texts and gives them new context: the good-end there implies a good-end here.

The despair of the exiles to Babylon is abysmal. Facing the mockery of their Akkadian capturers, the exiles have no answer, nor hope, just hopeless thoughts of bitter revenge. The last verse of Psalm 137, horrible in its content, portrays the extremity of the exiled rage. Their despair touches – in Katzenelson’s play – the despair of the ghetto Jews. The text becomes a lyric tool, with which the ghetto people express their own agony. It gave them the words of the curse that they wish would strike their oppressors. The deeper the despair, the stronger the tidings concealed in the psalm for those who know the continuation of the ancient story. The exiles did not know, but the current Jews already know the good ending of the ancient story: the exile ended with the destruction of the Babylon empire and the return of the exiled, those who wanted to, in 538 BC, to Zion. It is a glimpse of hope. Maybe, like in the old story, their agony will end soon as well.

In similar logic, the story of Job carries with it a hope for a good ending. Indeed, the misfortune of Job was most painful. The entire book deals with Job’s struggle with his unexplainable and apparently unjustified suffering, but the reader of the book already knows its positive outcome. God returns to the reality of Job. He hears God’s words and his predicament is settled. Job gets back everything that he had lost. His world once again has meaning. The ghetto

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20 Lubetkin, Zivia. In *Days of Destruction and Revolt*. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House the Ghetto Fighters House, 1981, 62.

21 Zuckerman, 193, 114.

inhabitants could hope for such a good-end as well. Stories of victory and redemption are powerful means of theodicy. When people read their reality through a paradigmatic story, it becomes bearable.

### **THE BRAVERY OF THE PROUD SPIRIT**

With the growing hardships in the ghetto, starvation, illnesses, acts of terror and sporadic killings, the justification of the present reality became harder. Words of consolation and hope for near savior lost its relevancy.

Katzenelson finds the words to express the Jewish suffering in the ghetto. The “Songs of Hunger” (May 1941) and the “Songs of Cold” (February 1942) express the unbearable daily reality. A father looks with awful helplessness at his starving children, and he cannot do anything to give them something to eat. In an outcry of despair, he says that they had better leave their home to die on the street. Katzenelson gives words to the cry of every parent in the ghetto who helplessly sees the agony of his or her children. Families could not overcome their reality and collapse. People left their homes. Children were left to their fate in the streets. Adolf Berman, the director of Centus, the Jewish children’s aid organization, during the occupation years, described a reality of thousands of abandoned children among the 100,000 children in the ghetto.<sup>22</sup> Jewish self-aid, as extensive as it was, could not give shelter to many of them. Emanuel Ringelblum, the head of the Jewish self-aid efforts and the noted ghetto historiographer, left us with a painful account of children’s tragic reality in the ghetto (29 March 1940): many were just living in the streets of the ghetto.<sup>23</sup> Jewish society started to disintegrate.

The poem ‘Shlomo Zelichovsky’ (June 1941) was written a year before the mass killing reached the ghetto itself. It is still stamped with traditional formulas of theodicy – the idea of heroic martyrdom, ‘Kiddush Hashe.’ If death becomes an expression of unshakeable faith, it is not chaos anymore. It has meaning. It is even a source of pride.

The poem describes the execution of ten Jews from the Polish town of Zdunska-Wola on the evening of ‘Shavuot’ (Pentecost) in order to keep the Jewish population in a constant state of

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22 Berman, Adolf, "The Fate of Children in the Warsaw Ghetto" in: Guttman Yechiel and Rothkirchen Livia (editors). The Holocaust: Background-History-Implications. Jerusalem: Yad-Vashem, 1973, 294-308.

23 Ringelblum, Emanuel. Diary and Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: September 1939-December 1942. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters' House, 1992, 100.

terror and total obedience.<sup>24</sup> Katzenelson focuses on the image of one of the executed Jews, the Hassid Shlomo Zelichovsky, who went singing – as it was told – to the gallows, calling the Jews who were forced to witness the execution, to keep their spirits high.

Sing, earth, and heaven, sing sing, God, sing, O, Lord.

Sing all you down there, sing all you here, sing all you above!

Sing, all the worlds, sing Shlomo Zelichovsky's name –

He lifted up Mankind; He lifted Man on high.<sup>25</sup>

Zelichovsky was in his own mind, as well as in the imagination of the poet, a martyr in the long lineage of ancient Jewish martyrs who understood their approaching death as a 'holy death' and accepted it with joy.

'Kiddush Hashe,' holy Jewish martyrdom, is a formula of theodicy, as it gives meaning to death. It is a declaration of ultimate faith and the victory of the spirit. The decision to accept the inevitable coming death as holy is an interpreting decision. It gives holiness to a mere death and loads it with meaning, and it turns political defeat into spiritual victory. For many generations 'Kiddush Hashem' was a form of response, which make it easier for Jews to accept their difficult historical trial as well as an ideal example and ultimate moral compass for generations to come.

Rabbi Akiva, the most important Jewish martyr in Rabbinic tradition, died – as it is told in the Talmud – with a joyful declaration of faith (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot, 61: b) He died, saying the word "one" in the 'Shema Israel' prayer, the ultimate Jewish declaration of faith. When he was asked for the meaning of his approach, he added that he was waiting all his life for this moment of the ultimate declaration of faith. Rabbi Akiva's tradition inspired generations of Jews who went deliberately to their deaths when the only alternative was to blaspheme God and leave their faith.

Zelichovsky was sanctifying in his mind the name of God. He saw himself, as Rabbi Akiva of his time, gaining the highest privilege of becoming a martyr.

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24 The poem was written in Yiddish following news that reached the Warsaw underground and was published in Yediot the journal of Dror on June 9th, 1942, about ten Jew in Zdunska-Wola who were hanged by the Germans in the town square. One Hassid, a devoted member of a Hassidic community, Shlomo Zelichovsky, who was among the ten executed, encouraged the spirit of the crowded Jews, forbade them to mourn and sang all the way to the gallows (1969: 371).

25 Katzenelson, Yitzhak, *Ktavim Acharonim* [Last Writings, Hebrew]. Tel Aviv: the Ghetto Fighters Museum and Hakibbutz HaMeuchad 1969, 52.

Rejoice! To die this way is a privilege

We are lucky! We stand before all Israel, in the sanctification of his name.

It is a great privilege to be hanged on the gallows!

Let's sing, Jews, let us break into melody!<sup>26</sup>

The act faithful acceptance of death becomes, through the poetic representation of Katzenelson, an exemplary act for all the Jews. "*It is our fortune that we die like that,*" says Zelichovsky using the plural pronoun: we are the privileged. We are "lucky." Now, as in the old days, it is the Jews' privilege to die with a declaration of faith on their lips and in their hearts.

There is one difference, however, from the rabbinic texts that we find in the Katzenelson's text: while Zelichovsky glorifies the name of God, Katzenelson glorifies the name of Man. It is the poet's interpretation. With traditional idioms, he gives ultimate meaning not to God but to a person who shows such spiritual strength.

### **THE ABSURD BRAVERY**

In June 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union, and with the advance of the German army, the mass murder of Jews and other groups of people in the Baltics, Byelorussia, and Ukraine by the SS special units has begun. In January 1942, Abba Kovner published his known "*Do not go like sheep to the slaughter [...] Ponari is death*" public call. In March 1942, the mass killing of Jews in the Lublin area, part of the Reinhard Operation, has begun. The unbelievable news has reached Warsaw.

With the accumulating indications of mass murder, the justification of the present reality became harder. Words of consolation lost its relevancy. The Nazi logic behind the reality of the ghetto became apparent as a logic of total destruction. Death penetrated to the streets and houses of the ghetto. In the summer of 1942, the deportation of the Jews of Warsaw to Treblinka began as well. A square in the northern part of the ghetto, designated as the deportation place. It was the gate of hell.

On 14 August 1942, death touched Katzenelson personally, when his wife Hannah and their two younger sons Benzion (14) and Benjamin (11) were among the thousands of deportees. Already on that day, the poet cried out his great loss in his Yiddish poem 'The Day of my Great Disaster.' His world collapsed, and he could no longer find words of consolation. He becomes a

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<sup>26</sup> Katzenelson, 1969, 54.

poet of revenge, giving a voice to the concealed words of his young comrades of the underground.

After this bloody summer, Katzenelson's poetry becomes the 'Theodicy of the Absurd,' or a 'negative theodicy,' rebelling against the traditional formulas of theodicy. Katzenelson and his underground comrades already know the reality of mass murder in all its grievousness. Death is not the fate of a few individuals, but the fate of a whole people. It is a genocide. One can no longer praise suffering and death as the sanctification of His name.

In the last great poem, he wrote in the ghetto 'The Song of the Rabbi of Radzin' (November 1942 – January 1943) Katzenelson could no longer settle the absurdity of the Jews' reality. Trains of death travel throughout Poland telling the bitter truth: the world has lost all divine providence. It is a nihilistic world with no judgment and no judge.

Where do you go train cars? Say where you go?

To destruction, without law, without judge, to annihilation

"Without law and without a judge" – a voice of knocking, a loud voice:

Is it the wheels calling? Or Jews in the train cars?<sup>27</sup>

The world lacks basic justice, order, and moral meaning. The Midrash, in an Epicurean-like formula, provides an explanation: "*There is no judgment and no judge – God left his world and settled in heavens*" (Midrash Psalms, 10). Men are alone in the world with no hope for divine salvation or guidance.

The reality of 1942 is chaotic. God is still an existing being, a present persona, but, as in the ancient Midrash, God is there, but he can do nothing to save his people because of his ultimate weakness. This is an absurd theodicy, which Katzenelson draws from the reservoir of Jewish historical tradition: people suffer because God has lost his protective power.

The poem starts as the Rabbi of Radzin learns about the fate of the Jews of Lublin, where the infamous Reinhardt Operation to murder the entire Polish Jewish population has begun. His efforts to move God to action fail. "*Just like me, you cannot do anything to save your people.*"<sup>28</sup> Man has to understand that he is on his own in this world.

While God is helpless, "*his hand is short,*" the Rabbi moves to action. He is the one who

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27 Katzenelson, 1969, 92.

28 Katzenelson, 1969, 96-97.

rejects this helplessness. He is the one who pushes God out of his house to go and save the Jews of Lublin. When the death train travels throughout Poland, the Rabbi embarks on his grave mission, to bring the dead Jews in those train cars to a decent Jewish burial. He buys the dead and then buries them. All that he can do is offer his dead people the last grace of burial.

In a picture of deep cosmic sadness, he approaches a car, which seems empty, but then he hears a crying voice. Katzenelson draws a poetic theological scene:

The moon came out, pale, went down cold  
illuminates the train – stands alone  
Each car like an open grave stands bare  
Every car every car with its wide open mouth.  
The Rabbi observes this in the pale light,  
no one is inside yet it is as if someone is there!  
Inside someone is crying: the Rabbi asks:  
“Who cries there – says who?” please, say, who?  
and enters the train car: in its dark corner  
silent and hurting, he stood in his misery,  
He stood listening to the crying of the Master of the World...  
the Rabbi remained standing still, a very long time — silent  
In the empty dark train car, gathered in himself  
the Rabbi did not move a muscle, did not change his place  
To his God crying, he listened with great attention  
He kept silent and said not one word of consolation to Him.<sup>29</sup>

The Rabbi listens to God, crying for his children at the corner of the train car, and he has no consolation, not for God and not for men.

While in ‘Shlomo Jelikhovsky’ the overall tone is a tone of overcoming and triumph, like the spirit in the tradition of Rabbi Akiva’s death, as the act of Kiddush Hashem is an accomplishment of faith, here the poetic picture is of a decision to go beyond martyrdom into human action. There is only one last task: to bring to burial the murdered people. This is the outcry of Katzenelson: the Jewish people are dead, and there is not even a grave.

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29. Katzenelson, 1969, 125

The crying of God in the corner of the train car brings forward a traditional connotation with which Katzenelson, versed in Jewish traditions of destruction, is well familiar. The rabbinic Midrash (5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century AD), draws the picture of the 'Shekhina', the Spirit of the Holy, crying over its exiled children (The Midrash on Lamentations, 1).

In the Babylonian Talmud, the primary rabbinic canon, we find the story of Rabbi Yossi, who heard the cry of God at the hind-part of the Holy of Holies, the inner part of the destroyed temple:

He [Elijah] further said to me: My son, what sound did you hear in this ruin [the temple]? I replied: I heard a divine voice, cooing like a dove, and saying: Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world! (BT, Berachot, 3:1)

The cry of the Shekhinah, the feminine divine presence in the world, also reappears in Modern Hebrew literature in a poem of Katzenelson's contemporary, Haim Nahman Bialik, 'Alone' (1901-1902). There, God is crying, with broken wings, at the abandoned Beit Midrash.<sup>30</sup> Katzenelson expresses a shocking idea: at the beginning, the Holy-of-the-Holies was in Jerusalem. For Bialik, the Holy-of-the-Holies was the Beit Midrash. Katzenelson takes this motif one-step further – for him, the Holy-of-the-Holies is the death train car, the moving coffin of his people.

The Radzin Rabbi poem expresses a deep spiritual breakage. God becomes helpless. It is a useless God, whose cry is unwanted. God is left behind, and the Rabbi and his community leave the house of prayer and turn to a different historical pass. The poem gives birth to a new tradition of the Ninth of Av, which traditionally recalls the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>31</sup> Now, says Katzenelson, we have the Ninth of Av in every Jewish town. Every Jewish community is a destroyed Jerusalem.

Katzenelson introduces another major change to the tradition of Martyrdom when the Rabbi of Radzin refuses Rabbi Akiva's end. Rabbi Akiva, according to the Talmud (BT, Brachot, 61:b) taught the Torah in public and let the Romans catch him and sentence him to death. It looks as he choreographed his martyrdom in that way. The Rabbi of Radzin knows that he can have Akiva's fate by returning to his home, but he declines martyrdom and does not return home where the Germans await him. The Rabbi rebels against his former world and the narrative he was

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30 Bialik, Haim N. Kol Kitvei. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1941, 33.

31 Katzenelson, 1969, 128.

supposed to follow. The destruction of which people have to lament these days – he decrees his community – is not the destruction of old days but the current destruction of Jewish Lublin and its neighboring towns.

In the Rabbi of Radzin's poem, Katzenelson became the poet of the absurd uprising, the absurd activism of man who understands that now the responsibility lies on his shoulders only.

On 18 January 1943, Katzenelson and his remaining son Zvi were among a 'Dror' fighting squad, just before the first battle on Zamenhof Street. Zivia Lubetkin, a leading member of the Jewish fighting organization (ZOB) had recalled in her memoirs the inspiring words that Katzenelson shared with his comrades just before the "January Revolt" began: "*We should be happy that we are preparing ourselves, arms in hand, to meet the enemy and die if necessary. Our armed struggle will be an inspiration to future generations.*"<sup>32</sup> Now it was the time for men to take their fate in their hands. No God – only men could act. One cannot understand the drive behind the decision to fight without the spirit of resistance that was part of the Jewish underground and had now turned into the spirit of a new kind of theodicy: heroic death gives meaning to human life.

### **MY PEOPLE IS NO MORE**

Katzenelson was actually too old to take part in the fighting and, after the January 1943 battle, when the Jewish Fighting Organization prepared itself for the forthcoming last battle, Zuckerman decided to send the poet and his son Zvi to a hiding place in the other side of the ghetto walls.

Katzenelson did not listen to the warning of the underground and holding forged documents from Honduras, he and his son Zvi entered Hotel Polski, a supposedly secure place for people of foreign citizenship, and actually a Gestapo trap. As alleged foreign citizens, they were sent to a concentration camp in Vittel, France.<sup>33</sup>

In the end, Katzenelson did not survive the Holocaust, but several months in Vittel enabled him to respond to the history he was witnessed. The diary he wrote in Hebrew, the 'Vittel Notebook' (22 May to 16 September 1943),<sup>34</sup> includes extensive knowledge of the fate of Jews in Europe and the 'Final Solution.' Katzenelson describes the process of mass killing in detail and

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32 Lubetkin, 1981, 151

33. Katzenelson's imprisonment in Vittel was known in the ghetto and even in Palestine . See: Ringelblum, 1994, 233 and 327 in Ringelblum's last letter from May 1 1944, (a week before the Gestapo discovered Ringelblum's hiding place; he and his son were murdered, among many others.).

34 Katzenelson, 1969, 143-204.

states the number of “over six million” or even seven million Jewish victims.<sup>35</sup>

Katzenelson responds to reality as a commentator. Jewish culture provides him with the proper vocabulary and lexicon to give words to what he sees. The loss of Hannah and his two sons, Benzion and Benjamin, is integrated into his writing with the loss of his people. The image of Hannah is the image of all Jewish mothers. Benzion and Benjamin are the representation of all the murdered Jewish children. Personal grief merges with national grief.<sup>36</sup>

Katzenelson is connected to his people in his whole heart. The loss of his family and the loss of his people are one – an endless nightmare. The diary includes a poem, which became an element of the Ghetto Fighters’ Museum commemoration liturgy of, and in a Biblical style discuss the nightmare of the Holocaust:

I dreamed a dream  
It was grievously sore,  
My people had perished  
It is no more, no more!<sup>37</sup>

Katzenelson states a terrible truth: a whole people were murdered. It is not only a summary of hard historical facts but also an interpretive statement. Not all the Jews in the world were murdered; nonetheless, murder and destruction of such magnitude mean nothing but the annihilation of a whole people.

Katzenelson is in total despair. Insanity holds him. Where there is no consolation, there is madness: “Shall I continue to record the annihilation of the whole nation, my nation? [...] This pen, too, is broken, like myself, like my soul, like everything with me.”<sup>38</sup> Everything died for Katzenelson: his pen is broken, his heart is broken, and his soul is dead. The man who mourns over his wife mourns over all Jewish women. The father who mourns over his children also mourns on all the murdered Jewish children. Katzenelson became a national mourner.

Katzenelson knows that the murdered European Jews are only part of the Jewish people. I

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35 Katzenelson, 1969, 189.

36 Katzenelson, 1969, 185.

37 Katzenelson, 1969, 187. In the GFH archives there are four versions of the poem in the poet’s handwriting. The last version is from August 24, 1943, and this is the one, which was included in the diary. (See: Katzenelson, 1969, note on p. 382)

38 Katzenelson, 1969, 187.

know – he says – that there are Jews in America and the Land of Israel and that they will have wonderful children, but all of them will not be a replacement for the murdered people.<sup>39</sup> The living in the future is no substitute for the dead. He rejects now the good ending of Job who accepted his new ‘set’ of children. For Katzenelson, the loss is ultimate. Maybe, even the idea that life continues is unbearable. Therefore, he adds in the language of prayer, his hope that despair will not crush those Jews from other places when they hear about the destruction here.

His writings bear the connotation of the letter of support the prophet Jeremiah had sent to the Judean exiles in Babylon: (Jeremiah, 29: 4-6). Katzenelson refers ironically to the Biblical text to stress an opposite message. The old words of consolation are now the words of despair. Jeremiah wanted to say that there is a place for hope for renewal. Here, after the great deportation of the Warsaw Jews to Treblinka and the annihilation of millions of European Jews, there is no hope.

Despair becomes the central theme in the diary. It is impossible to relate to, to touch with words, the millions of murdered Jews. The talk about “the millions” is an escape from the horror. One can refer to individuals, one person, another person, another person. Then, one reaches despair. How one can say the ancient mourning prayer for one after the other, on into the millions?

The Jewish “Kadish,” the mourning pray, is an expression of consolation and justification of God’s ruling in the world. It is a form of theodicy. In regular life, the mourner recites this prayer before the grave of his beloved one. The meaning of this ritual is that even when reality seems chaotic, it is still governed by a mighty and just God. Reality is not chaotic but infused with a metaphysical order. There is still God in the world, and therefore there is a place for hope. However, when another one and another one join the dead person, millions of individuals and each one is “a whole world,” unique and indispensable – are the “Kadish” and “El Maleh Rachamim” (God is full of mercy) prayers become impossible.<sup>40</sup>

Every lost soul is a whole world – a traditional Jewish idea – and we do not really know it. Every human being who died for nothing renews the question about human life and death. “*Every soul of Israel is an abyss.*”<sup>41</sup> In Katzenelson’s mind, these nameless individuals got faces and names: all the women get the image of Hannah; all the children get the image of Benzion and

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39 Katzenelson, 1969, 185.

40 Katzenelson, 1969, 194.

41 Katzenelson, 1969, 190.

Benjamin. Such an infinite loss is insanity.

### **THE DEAD BONES WILL NOT RETURN TO LIFE**

Katzenelson's great poem 'The Song of the Murdered Jewish People' – originally written in Yiddish, describes the chain of events he was witness to. Its words are poison to the soul. It is a ballad, telling a sad story with a bitter ending. What is the opening scene of the story? The poet, carrying a harp, is a troubadour who wants to express his story through the words of a song. He stands up in the ruined city street and calls his people to gather around him. Here is the first layer of the irony in his words: there is no living crowd to come, as there are no more Jews. He is the last Jew. The poet calls his dead people to gather around him in a huge circle as in a huge dance.

12. Show yourself, my people. Emerge; reach out

From the miles-long, dense, deep ditches,

Covered with lime and burned, layer upon layer,

Rise up! Up! From the deepest, bottommost layer!

13. Come from Treblinka, from Sobibor, Auschwitz,

Come from Belzec, Ponari, from all other camps,

With wide-open eyes, frozen cries and soundless screams,

Come from marshes, deep sunken swamps, foul moss –

14. Come, you dried, ground, crushed Jewish bones.

Come, form a big circle around me, one great ring –

Grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers carrying babies.

Come, Jewish bones, out of powder and soap.

15. Emerge, reveal yourselves to me. Come, all of you, come.

I want to see you. I want to look at you. I want

Silently and mutely to behold my murdered people –

And I will sing... yes... Hand me the harp... I will play!

(October 3-5th, 1943)<sup>42</sup>

The picture is horrible: the entire dead Jews gather in a huge circle to listen to the last song, the elegy for themselves. The image of the troubadour is joined by the image of the Jewish *minyán*, the Jewish quorum for prayer. The poet becomes the prayer leader. There is no one to say the last prayer over the dead, so the poet summons the murdered Jews from the numerous places

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42 Katzenelson, 1969, 309.

of death, to join him in a Kadish minyan. In Wiesel's *Night* when Jews face their imminent death, they start to say Kadish for themselves.<sup>43</sup> Here the image is absurd: he is summoning the murdered Jews to say the Kadish for themselves, as there is no one left to say the words of lamentation.

When the poet is calling all the dead to rise from the valleys of death and gather around him in a huge circle, it connotes another image with deeply exegetical meaning. Katzenelson's valley of the bones crushed to dust recalls the valley of the dried bones of Ezekiel: "*The hand of the LORD was upon me, and the LORD carried me out in a spirit and set me down in the midst of the valley, and it was full of bones [...]*" (Ezekiel 37). Ezekiel's prophetic narrative is a theodicy, a classical Biblical metaphor for the hope of national revival. The Babylonian exiles are the dried bones who will return to life after they purify their souls. However, Katzenelson overturns the Biblical imagery, and his irony refers directly to the consoling words of Ezekiel. In his reality, in the face of total annihilation, even bones not left. "*Not even a bone remains of my murdered people.*"<sup>44</sup> The murdered Jewish people, whom he knew, will never return to life. "*They are gone! They will never be back on this earth!*" The same Biblical words, words of hope, turned out to be words of despair. Ezekiel and Jeremiah's prophecies became a luxury or even a mockery of those who saw the reality of the murdered people. Katzenelson is the Jeremiah and Ezekiel of his time, but with a reversed message. The words of the ancient prophets add contrast to the total despair in the words of the current prophet.

### EMPTY HEAVENS

With the collapse of the Biblical prophecies and other Jewish theodicies, the entire Jewish cosmos collapses as well, along with all its structures of meaning. Part 9 of the "Song of the Murdered Jewish People" speaks about the deceiving "Heavens." Katzenelson does not wrestle with the question of God's existence. He is interested in a broader question: the very possibility of metaphysics. It is not a theological dilemma, but a humanistic question about humanity and its cosmos. 'Heaven' is a value-concept, which represents in Jewish-Christian and Islamic traditions the dwelling of God and the basic values of Good, Justice and mercy. The person, who prays, raises his or her eyes and hands to Heavens, beseeching support and redemption. The direction Up is the direction of the Good in our language, and the direction down is the direction of failure and evil.

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43 Wiesel, Elie. *Night, Dawn, Day*. Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1985, 48-49.

44 Katzenelson, 1969, 310.

Spiritual directions have lost their meaning. Katzenelson describes a cosmic nothingness, a void, a spiritual emptiness – the Heavens have betrayed men. “*O, you deceitful, tricky, lowly heavens on high. How I regret that I once had faith in you, confided in you my joy, my loneliness, my smile, and my tears, you are no better than this filthy earth, this big heap of trash!*”<sup>45</sup>

Katzenelson uses harsh words to describe the ethical nature of the Heavens: “*vile whore*” and “*glittering like the eyes of mice.*” The Heavens promised good and demanded the Good, but they betrayed their believers. The Heavens saw everything that happened on earth and remained silent. They are not a source of life, but empty and lifeless: “*O you desolate, empty heavens, wide and desolate as the desert.*”<sup>46</sup> The Heavens are empty and meaningless. There is no God in heavens as generations of naïve believers held. If the Poem on the Radzin Rabbi portrays God as helpless, here in the last poem, God does not exist at all. He is just a mere illusion or deceit.

Not only has the present dramatically changed, but also all of history of Monotheism is false, a great lie of thousands of years’ indecent deceit: “*You have always deceived us, also lied to my prophets, already to my prophets and my ancestors!*”<sup>47</sup> If all of the tradition is a big lie, then there is no future, no present, and no past – everything is a false story. All the anchors of meaning failed.

Katzenelson, once a prophet of hope, the happy educator from Lodz, is now a prophet of despair. Step by step, he goes down the ladder of despair to the bottom of the abysses of human existence, to the true reality of the Holocaust. His language is the same language of the Hebrew Bible and the following Jewish traditions that he used in his educational work before the war, the same connotations, and the same metaphors that he used to construct his optimistic world. However, it is now the language of a totally broken reality.

Katzenelson’s final poem, ‘The Song of the Murdered Jewish People’ does not offer any way to escape the confrontation with the destruction of the world. It is a requiem to the Jewish people and to the very idea of Humanity. The Heavens are desolate, the source of the most prolonged illusion humanity has. The Jewish narrative has lost its validity and probably also the Christian and the Muslim narratives as well. There is no past, no present, and no future. The Jewish

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45 Katzenelson, 1969, 331.

46 Katzenelson, 1969, 333.

47 Katzenelson, 1969, 331.

people, he says ironically, have been just a fairy-tale, a passing dream, and his tradition a baseless story.

Nonetheless, we have a spark of light. Katzenelson wrote for future generations. He buried his last writings with the hope that they would reach future readers. He is doing this not as a historian, but as a commentator, a lamenter, and a prophet, one who gives his audience an uncensored account of what we call “the Holocaust.”

Katzenelson’s writings are more than a testimony; they are a commentary, an effort to give meaning to the events.<sup>48</sup> He invites us to enter the human reality of the inhuman reality of his people. If we could be there with him, we may get a better understanding of what the Holocaust really is. Katzenelson’s texts contain the insights of a sensitive person who was in the midst of darkness, in the very depths of the abysses of history, but who could also detach himself from its harsh reality and write his reflections. In his writings, which are his literary response to the destruction of his people and the murder of his own family, the despair is blatant. They are probably unsuitable for the ethos of renewal and return to a joyful life. The Israeli culture of remembrance and Holocaust education programs tend to avoid them. Teachers do not introduce them to their students, as they are too bitter. For the traditional person who seeks support in faith, his metaphysical void is too radical. A world with no divine presence seems unbearable. However, maybe this is the true meaning of the Holocaust: a reality that is impossible to face.

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48 Shner, Moshe. In the Beginning there was the Holocaust: a Spiritual Journey into the Abysses of History. Jerusalem: Magness Press, 2013, 176-201.