

Dying With God: The Paths of Three *Rashei Yeshivot* during the Lithuanian Holocaust

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This article will attempt to grasp the religious mindsets of three *rashei yeshivot*, Elhanan Wasserman, Avraham Yitshak Blokh, and Avraham Grodzensky, as they approached their deaths by execution in June 1941, July 1941, and July 1944 respectively. To this end, I will employ writings by them and testimonies of others.

For Wasserman, life and death were of *da'at torah* (Torah-knowing), and *da'at torah* provided a cosmic dialectic between catastrophe and redemption, whereby those instilled with *da'at torah* would endure through suffering into death – and beyond. Blokh spoke of an internal union and dialectical interaction between God and man, whereby *bitaḥon* (trust) evoked God's *hesed* (covenantal love) and *hesed* evoked *bitaḥon*. Ultimately, *bitaḥon* became grounded in God: Blokh annulled himself and leaped into God with faith. Grodzensky entered death with *devekut* (adherence) to the *Shekhinah* of *torah mi'sinai*. Conscious that his soul was a portion of God, he passed into death touching the unity of *din* (strict justice) and *rahamim* (compassionate love).

Elhanan Wasserman (1875-1941): *Da'at Torah*

Wasserman was a graduate of the Telz Yeshiva, and son-in-law of yeshiva founder Meir Atlas. At the end of a year and a half in America, he had become aware of the imminent dangers of the Nazi regime, but insisted

on returning to his yeshiva.¹ In October 1939, six months after returning to Baranowitch, Wasserman moved his yeshiva to Vilnius/Vilna.² He wrote Mosheh Bloye in Jerusalem in November, saying that he knew that his yeshiva could not remain long in Europe, and was considering moving to Jerusalem. In March 1940, he moved the yeshiva to Trokai. Following the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in June 1940, he wrote Shelomoh Volbe in Stockholm about securing a visum via Sweden for China.³ In July, he wrote Israel Rosenberg in New York about moving to America.⁴ Yet Wasserman never left Lithuania. The Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators took him from Avraham Grodzensky's home in Slabodké (Kaunas/Kovno) and killed him in the Ninth Fort outside the city.⁵

1. On the attempts made to persuade Wasserman not to leave, see: Sorski, *Or Elhanan*, pp. 212-213.
2. Wasserman's son, Naftali, was killed in Kovno on October 30, 1941. Naftali's wife gave birth in the Telsiai/Telz ghetto in the fall of 1941, and died shortly thereafter.
3. In 1966, Volbe testified:

When the Russians entered Lithuania, people who knew I was in Stockholm turned to me. Ha'rav Elhanan Wasserman was among them, and he asked for a visum for himself [*she'bikesh vizah bishvilo*]. At that time people did not know about Curacao [which required no visum] and I found a visum for him to China. Volbe, Sha'ar Ha'edut (testimony), December 1966, Yad Vashem Archives 03/3044; Goldbaum, *Kovets Ma'amarim*, pp. 219-220.
4. On Wasserman's going to Palestine only with the yeshiva, see: Wasserman, Vilna, to Bloye, Jerusalem, November 21, 1939, in: Goldbaum, *Kovets Ma'amarim*, p. 211; on not abandoning the yeshiva, see: Blokh, Telz, to Bloye, Jerusalem, November 6, 1939, Central Agudat Yisrael Archives; regarding a move to America, see: Wasserman, Trokai, to Eliyahu Tsadok Wasserman, Jerusalem, March 15, 1940, in: Goldbaum, *Kovets Ma'amarim*, p. 211; regarding a move to American, see: Wasserman, Trokai, to Rosenberg, New York, July 10, 1940, in: Goldbaum, *Kovets Ma'amarim*, p. 215.
5. According to a different report, he was taken from the nearby home of Aryeh Malkiel Friedman, see: Sorski, *Or Elhanan*, pp. 403-415. Pasha Kogon, "Di Farnikhtung Fun Di Yiden Oyfn Nayntn Fort Nebn Kovne", Munich, May 19, 1947, Yad Vashem Archives. For a description of Wasserman's last moments, see Oshry, *Hurbn*, pp. 18-50. The periodical *She'arim* received a letter dated March 21, 1945, from a "well-known" yeshiva survivor, in response to an October 11, 1944 letter from (presumably) the editor:

Almost all have been killed *al kiddush hashem*. In the house of Rav (hereafter: R.) Avraham [Grodzensky], R. Elhanan Wasserman, R. Mosheh Hayim Saks

In January 1940, he attended the all-Lithuanian rabbinical conference in Vilna⁶ and published the articles *Ha'yesurin Matsivim Ethem* and *Torah Etsot Far Ale Tsaytn in Dos (Y)idishe Lebn*, which was published in Kovno - Telz.⁷ His thinking behind these writings may have been derived from discussions following the Vilnius Torah Conference that had taken place in June 1939,⁸ his treatise *Ikoeta Di'meshil'ha*, completed in America after Kristallnacht with input from his son, Elazar Simḥah,⁹ and his letter to *ḥareidi* Jews in America from the summer of 1939.¹⁰

and his son, R. Mosheh Rayz, R. David Nader, and subsequently R. Yehezkel Berenshtayn, R. Tsevi Shnayder, R. Ya'akov Shelomoh Gurvitch and their families. R. Isser Shor. ... It was left to R. Avraham to keep watch in the ghetto, under great difficulties, i.e. until June 9, 1944, and also R. Zalman Permut, Binyamin Azinsky, Shimen Kaydaner, R. Daliksut, R. Shemuel Abba Snieg and fifty members of the yeshiva. But the ghetto has been split, and I do not know where these dear ones are. I did see Yisrael Grodzensky, Rivkah, Yitshak Grodzensky, R. Shemuel Abba Snieg and his wife Ḥannah, the daughter of R. Barukh Halevi Gurevitch, whom he married in the ghetto, and a number of yeshiva students, when they transported them to Germany. (Unknown author, "Mavet Ha'kedoshim", p. 1).

Page 3 of the article (with author's name) was unavailable. Even as late as 1943, rumors persisted that Wasserman was found hiding in Riga. Cooper, "Rabbi Elḥanan", p. 1. A cable dated October 23, 1944, from Avraham Kalmanovitch, New York, to Amletto Giovanni Cicognani, Washington, D.C., sought help from the Vatican in rescuing Wasserman and Grodzensky, whom, it stated, had been taken to Germany when the Germans left Kovna in summer 1944. Va'ad Hatzalah Archives. The Agudat Yisrael of America office wrote to John Pehle of the War Refugee Board, April 24, 1944, asking him to send a message through the Department of State to the American Ambassador to Switzerland to transmit to Sternbuch, to locate a number of rabbis, including Wasserman. Agudat Yisrael Archives.

6. Y.D.Z., "5-te Allitvishe Asefat Rabanim", p. 3.
7. Wasserman, "Torah Etsot", p. 3; idem, "Ha'yesurin", p. 3.
8. Shtayer, "Ah Shmues Mit Rabi", p. 1.
9. Interview with Elazar Simḥah Wasserman, August 21, 1989, Jerusalem.
10. Wasserman, "Mikhtav Le'yahadut Ha'ḥareidit", p. 5. For more on the topic, see: Greenberg, "Elḥanan Wasserman's Response", pp. 171-204.

Da'at Torah

Wasserman's mentor, the Hofets Hayim, held that Torah was the foundational program of the universe, and included everything one needed to know. Torah was the inner essence of the human being, to the point that it blended with life itself.¹¹ The only point of difference between Wasserman and his mentor was that the former held that *gedolei ha'dor* mediated authoritatively between the individual and scripture.¹² When he spoke, Wasserman said, he did not express his own thoughts, but *da'at torah*.¹³ A Jew without it, he believed, was a body without its limbs.¹⁴

This principle was brought forward to the threshold of the catastrophe in the *Ikveta Di'meshiḥa* text, published internationally between fall 1938 and August 1939. The Torah, he complained, was being degraded; *gedolim* were consulted only when there was a question about the *Kaddish*.¹⁵ Torah failure, which manifested itself politically in socialism, communism, and Zionism, was so deep as to create an Amalek internal to Israel itself. In the summer of 1939, he wrote a letter to Young Israel in America, in which he described this failure as heresy.¹⁶ The internal Amalek was expressed dialectically, with the external manifestation of Amalek, who persecuted the Jewish people. This persecution was proportionally severe, and so extreme as to constitute the turmoil associated with the coming of the messiah. Drawing on the Hofets Hayim, Wasserman predicted that Jews across the globe would soon become homeless, their families torn apart;

11. Brown, "Doktrinat Da'at Torah", pp. 537-600; Katz, "Da'at Torah" pp. 41-50.

12. In 1922, Wasserman accused the Mizrahi of modifying *dinei torah* without the authority of the *gedolim*; E.S. Wasserman, "An Ofener Brif", pp. 89-91; idem, "Tefillah Be'rabim", p. 9.

13. Wasserman, "Shalom U'verakhah", p. 3.

14. Idem, "Am Yisrael", p. 3. Elijah Ben Solomon, "Ad Mishlei 13:3", p. 38.

15. Idem, "Ikveta Di'meshiḥa", *Di Vokhntsaytung*, 4 no. 167, p. 1; *ibid.*, no. 175, p. 2; idem, "Ikveta Di'meshiḥa", *Beit Ya'akov*, pp. 2-3; idem, "Ikveta Di'meshiḥa", *He'atid*, pp. 4; idem, "Gedanken Vegen Yahadut", pp. 4-5; idem, "Golus Politik", pp. 25-26.

16. Idem, "Mikhtav Le'yahadut Ha'hareidit", p. 5.

they would suffer hunger, poverty, and have no way to earn a living. Unlike the Spanish exile, when Jews found refuge in Turkey, Poland and Holland, now they would be expelled everywhere and admitted nowhere.¹⁷

Nothing could be done. Because Torah was forgotten and faith had largely disappeared, Jews could not know why they suffered, nor know how to seek a way out; without the weapon of Torah, there was no way to fight the evil inclination.¹⁸ They were drawn to despair, to the point of seeing no way out other than suicide. The people of Israel could only try to endure until the external Amalek, brought by God, would so exhaust Israel that God would call the suffering to a halt, for Israel would have entered the range of the persecuted (Ecclesiastes 3:15). This would not lead to return of the status quo ante. The dialectic between internal and external Amalek could not be dismantled; it had to be replaced entirely. Indeed, all exilic history that led up to the failure had to be removed from consciousness. The catastrophe, Wasserman concluded, would be replaced by the very foundation of the universe – the Torah. And with it, redemption.¹⁹

In his June 1940 publications in Kovno and Telz, Wasserman stressed that Amalek, personified by the Hamans of history, was brought by God as both an external projection of an internal failure and as punitive means of forcing Israel away from sin. The catastrophic backdrop described in the *Ikveta Di'meshiḥa* treatise was a period of chaos when events and processes that used to take generations happened overnight, and when the labor pains preceding birth were the most terrible of all (citing the Gra). To confront this, Wasserman drew from his teacher the Ḥofets Ḥayim and urged Jews to engage with Torah and benevolence.²⁰

17. Idem, *Ma'amar Ikveta Di'meshiḥa*, passim; Kaplan, "Torah, Erets Yisrael", pp. 10, 11; Editor, "Mador Ha'masa", pp. 165-204 and passim.

18. Idem, "Am Yisrael, Ha'torah Veba'galut", p. 3.

19. Idem, *Ma'amar Ikveta Di'meshiḥa*, passim.

20. Elijah ben Solomon, "Be'inyanei Erev Rav", pp. 5-7; Wasserman also cited Sanhedrin 98^b in his letter from Smiloshoki to Sheragah Fayvel Belk, New York, February 14, 1940, in: Goldbaum, *Kovets Ma'amarim*, p. 3. Wasserman, "Ha'yesurim Matsivim", p. 3.

Wasserman's deliberation whether to take refuge in the Land of Israel was also based upon *da'at torah*. He identified the *hofshi'im* as fanatical apostates who were forcing Jewish children to learn from heretical teachers. The *hofshi'im* persecuted Torah scholars and the Sabbath-observant like medieval inquisitors, creating a threat to Israel's existence that did not even exist during the Crusades; for then Jews still had Torah.²¹ In reaction to the 1929 pogrom at the Hebron Yeshivah, Wasserman thought it was a mistake to worry more about the small number of Jews who were murdered, rather than the thousands who were losing Torah and becoming heretics. Neither the Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini, nor the British High Commissioner, nor Nazi or Italian agents were to blame. It was the Zionists, whose Torah failure had caused this disaster. The Arabs, he held, were God's instruments to force the Jews back to Torah.²² He continued in this vein well into 1937. If the secular Zionist Hellenists in Palestine had the power, he declared, they would kill the pious Jews.²³ Let them dare to go to war against heaven, he continued.²⁴ It took German Jews 150 years of conversions to Christianity before Hitler would push those with any genetic percentage of Jewish lineage back to Judaism, he remarked, but only thirty for the heretics to take over the *Yishuv*.²⁵ Following the Vilnius Torah Conference, he suggested that the White Paper, Arab terror, and Palestine's political problems in general resulted from the *Yishuv's* failure to relate to God through Torah.²⁶

Wasserman could not have been sanguine about the prospect of finding refuge for the yeshiva or himself in Palestine, which he believed was under a secularist tyranny. He wrote to his brother in March 1940 from

21. Wasserman, "Vos Darfen" as cited in: E.S. Wasserman, *Yalkut Ma'amarim*, pp. 77-87.

22. Idem, "Dos Gute Inim Shlekhtn", pp. 2-3.

23. Idem, "Ikveta Di'meshiḥa", *Dos Yudishe Togblat*, p. 7.

24. Idem, "Dos Gute Inim Shlekhtn", pp. 2-3; idem, "Ah Yudishe Melukhah", pp. 1-2; idem, "Be'avirah", p. 4; idem, "Ki Hi Hayekha", p. 9; idem, "Gezerot", pp. 5-6.

25. Sigel, "Der Gaon R. Elhanan", p. 8; Editor, "Grandiezer Kabalat Panim", p. 2; Wasserman, "Ha'rav Ha'gaon", p. 2.

26. Shtayer, "A Shmues Mit Rabi", p. 4.

Trokai, that he was not considering abandoning the yeshiva and traveling alone to the Holy Land (it would also be impossible to travel through Riga or Germany). Moreover, if it came to getting certificates for him and his family, should they have to leave Trokai, he could hardly expect any favors from the leftists (i.e. secular Zionists).²⁷

What, then, was Wasserman's mindset at the time of his murder? He had resigned himself to the fact that the troubles were pre-messianic and that it was impossible for the people of Israel to do anything about them. But while suffering was a prelude to redemption, *da'at torah* was a means of enduring it. With Torah as the very essence and source of his life, Wasserman faced his death. On February 14, 1941, he wrote that to be spared the pangs of the messiah, one must engage in *gemilut ḥasadim* and Torah (Sanhedrin 98^b).²⁸

Avraham Yitshak Blokh (1890-1941): *Bitahon*

Blokh, a Telz graduate, succeeded his father, Yosef Layb, as the Telz *rosh yeshiva* in 1921.²⁹ From 1939 until summer 1940, he wrote letters to

27. On July 16, 1948, Eliyahu Botschko, Montreux, wrote:

I am convinced that if our *gedolim* such as *Hofets Hayim*, Rabbi Grodzensky, Rabbi Aharon Wasserman, Rabbi Menaḥem Zemba, Rabbi Meir Shapiro and others were alive today and saw the *hurban* of Poland, Lithuania, Germany and Hungary, [they would say that] they would have flown to the Land of Israel on eagles' wings – despite the danger that some of our fanatics would have regarded their rushed flight as violation of Agudat Yisrael principles.

Botschko, "Ein Geleitwort", p. 4; Wasserman, Trokai, to Eliyahu Tsadok Wasserman, Jerusalem, March 15, 1940, in: Goldbaum, *Kovets Ma'amarim*, vol. 2, p. 214.

28. Elijah Ben Solomon, "Beur Li'tekunei Ha'zohar 126^a", cited in: Wasserman, "Omer Ani Ma'asai", [1931/1932], pp. 276-280; idem, "Di Moradige Pasirungen", p. 3; Wasserman, Smiloshoki, to Sheragah Fayvel Belk, New York, February 14, 1940, in: Goldbaum, *Kovets Ma'amarim*, vol. 2, p. 221.

29. Telz Yeshiva graduate Natan Ordman recalled:

Along with his deep, great genius in Torah, Blokh also had broad knowledge of secular *Wissenschaft*. He treated it as supplemental; and it never intruded upon his time for Torah. [...] It is worth mentioning that the young genius had a

Cyrus Adler of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and to Avraham David Burak of the yeshiva graduates organization, both in New York. In his letters he described the yeshiva's financial plight: there was an influx of students from Memel/Klaipėda, Poland, Belgium and Holland, while at the same time, donations from abroad were being diverted to German Jewry.³⁰ Nevertheless, Torah studies continued,³¹ even after the yeshiva was forced to evacuate its main building in June 1940, following the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, and after Passover 1941, when the Soviets made it illegal for non-Telz residents to return to the rooms they had been renting in the city in order to study at the yeshiva. In late June, when the Germans arrived, Blokh was given the option of leaving but declined, and on *erev Shabbat*, June 27, he, his family, and 2,500 Telz Jews were marched to Lake Mastis. From there he was taken to the Rainiai labor camp, where he was tortured until he was taken to a death pit and killed on July 16, 1941.³²

correspondence with Prof. Albert Einstein. He directed Einstein to the Torah root for the famous theory of relativity – for which the Prof. praised him and was thankful to him.

Ordman, "Sar Ve'gadol", pp. 2-3.

30. Blokh, Telz, to American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (hereafter: JDC), New York, April 16, 1939; Blokh, Telz, to Cyrus Adler, JDC, New York, April 16, 1939; Ginzberg, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, to Adler, New York, April 21, 1939; Adler, New York, to Blokh, Telz, May 1, 1939; Blokh, Telz, to JDC, Paris, December 13, 1939; Blokh, Telz, to Adler, New York, February 11, 1940; Ginzberg, New York, to Adler, New York, February 20, 1940. Blokh, Telz, to JDC, New York, June 7, 1940. All in the JDC Archives, Jerusalem, file entitled, "Cult: Lithuania Yeshivah in Telsh", pp. 92, 94, 99, 100, 104, 109, 110, 111, 124, 125, 178-179. Blokh to Burak, Brooklyn, November 17, 1939, in: Burak, *Pirhei Aharon*, p. 276.
31. Editor, "Ah Kaybel Fun Telzer", p. 2.
32. On the destruction of the Jewish community of Telz, see: Girsh-Bod, "Mi'shoah Li'tekumah", pp. 330-337; Holer-Verias, "Bi'yemei Ha'shoah", pp. 338-345; Bat-Ami, "Tov Li Aniti", pp. 355-361; Zinger-Tayts, "Telz Bi'yemei Ha'shoah", pp. 363-366; Shavel, "Payn, Laydn un Retung", pp. 393-399; Shohat (Schif), "Der Tragisher Goral", pp. 408-419; Levin, "Telz", pp. 305-319; Minah Karshtat-Yudelevitch testimony, Yad Vashem Archives 140/1573; Tsevi Brik testimony, Yad Vashem Archives 03/6139; Hayim Layb-Aryeh Shavel testimony, Yad Vashem Archives 03/6528; Kagan (Hurvits), "Der Goyral Fun", pp. 491-493.

Three *sihot* (discourses) reflecting Blokh's religious mindset have survived from this period: *Romemut Yemei Ha'din: Yemei Ha'teshuvah* (September 1939), *Kavei El Hashem* (probably winter 1939/40) and *Kal Kedoshav Be'yadekha* (following the Russian occupation of the yeshiva building, June 1940).

In *Romemut Yemei Ha'din*, Blokh identified the chaotic conditions as *et pekudah*, a crisis period under God. In ancient times, Mordekhai reacted to Haman's decree of destruction by leading Torah study. As the decree fell on the sixteenth day of Nissan, when a flour offering was brought to the Temple, Mordekhai was engaged in studying the laws pertaining to this activity (e.g. Leviticus 2:2). This enabled his students to endure. In Blokh's days, the assaults could be dealt with through *mussar* (morality), *da'at* (knowledge), and daily *mitzvot*, permeating one's life with Torah. Blokh spoke of the importance of performing *mitzvot* in the face of death, at the boundary between life and death, between time and eternity. When a *mitzva* was performed at the brink of life's end, it confirmed a lifetime of commitment to the Torah. When there was a trespass at this point, it revealed a lifetime lapse of Torah.³³

In *Kavei El Hashem*, Blokh centered the process towards death around *bitaḥon*. The unfolding crisis, a function of Israel's relationship with God, had to be understood in terms of absolute trust in divine providence and omnipotence. Whatever happened, it was brought about by God and was for the best. Drawing upon Baḥyah ibn Pakudah's *Hovot Ha'levavot* (*Sha'ar Ha'bitaḥon*), Blokh's *bitaḥon* was the enactment of God's presence, the uninterrupted consciousness of this presence, and, ultimately, the readiness to die in sanctification of God's name. *Bitahon* expressed itself as the ability to endure the ascents and descents of life, knowing that since God governed all, all was for the best. In turn, this unbroken consciousness assured that the presence and protection of God would remain in effect, and that the *Shekhinah* and providential rule would stream into one's

33. Blokh, "Romemut Yemei Ha'din", pp. 173-177; Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi, "Sha'ar Sheni", p. 16^a.

life.³⁴ The dialectical structure of *bitaḥon*, where unqualified trust in God's providential presence assured the divine presence and that presence evoked that trust, pointed to an internal point of reality, which existed prior to experience, where God and man met in union. In the face of crisis, divine, objective, good reality and human, subjective trust in goodness flowed into one another: *bitaḥon* evoked God's *ḥesed* and *raḥamim*, and God's *ḥesed* and *raḥamim* evoked *bitaḥon*. Conversely, fear would evoke suffering (citing Berakhot 60^a).

In the course of this *siḥah*, Blokh lost his grounding. He knew that goodness would surely follow the hiding of God's face (Moshe Ḥayim Luzzatto (Ramḥal), *Da'at Tevunot*, *siman* 48). He understood that during a plague, as during his time, the angel of death ruled authoritatively and the innocent joined the guilty as victims. Nevertheless, he could not comprehend how the earth was being given over to the hands of the wicked (Job 9:24); he could not understand the harshness of the *din*. Blokh addressed his anxiety by raising the concept of *et pekudah* to the level of *ikveta di'meshiḥa*, and concluded that such conflict could only mean that the messiah was on his way (*Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, *parashah* 42, *siman* 8). When this happened, *bitaḥon* dictated surrendering: the absorption of the subjective into the objective to the point of absolute reliance upon God's goodness and loss of self. Faith needed to move from man to God. Thus, the dialectical co-dependence articulated at the beginning of the *siḥah* became a relationship grounded in God and not in man. Mutual activity created the dynamics of a passive human being and an active God. At this point, the dilemmas and fears of the active, autonomous believer disappeared.³⁵

Shortly thereafter, the yeshiva building was appropriated and turned into a Lithuanian *Volksschule*. In his *siḥah* titled, "Kal Kedoshav Be'yadekha" (citing Deuteronomy 33:3), Blokh interpreted the crisis as God ceding authority to the enemy and letting them act at will (Berakhot 7^b). The darkness of evil had eclipsed all light, and no hope remained. At such a

34. Blokh, "Tefillah", pp. 158-172.

35. Idem, "Kavei El Hashem" (forthcoming).

moment, a pious Jew had to passively self-surrender to the active God, and leap into the God beyond human perceptions of destruction vis-à-vis potential *hesed*, and who transcended the passage from darkness to light. With this leap of faith, a pious Jew would annul himself and even his conscious choice of yielding to God (*bitul atsmo, lehashlikh et atsmo le'gamrei tahat hanhagat Hashem yitbarakh*), "We do not know the ways of God. What we must do is lower ourselves at thy feet ... to come closer to God, serving Him with greater care."³⁶ Earlier, on the eve of Kristallnacht, Blokh had said the seeds of the impending crisis were in nineteenth century assimilation, which eventually evoked God's measure-for-measure punishment in the form of Nazi oppression. It was no longer possible to think about events or even try to understand them. One had to diminish the self to a point where one had no choice but to leap into God. In this sense, he said, misery itself would serve as the means of rescuing the soul.³⁷

This progression, from a co-dependent, dialectical expression of *bitahon*, to *bitahon* grounded in God, to *bitahon* in the form of leaping into God, may be detected in Blokh's words and actions following his expulsion from Telz. As the Jews of Telz were marched towards Lake Mastis, he led them in reciting Psalms. He declared that *teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah* would avert the evil decree, and recited the *vidui* to accept God's determination of death with love. He recited Psalms 91 as he had done when bombs fell on June 22nd, on June 25th when the Germans came, during Sabbath at Lake Mastis, and again on July 13th in the Rainiai labor camp. He told his family that repeating it with *kavanah* would elicit God's good will: "I will say of the Lord, who is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust" (Psalms 91:2). After he was forced to perform the humiliating "devil's dance", where male inmates had to move about on their knees with their hands in the air or run in circles, fall down, and get up on command, he declared, "Sovereign of the World, You are righteous and Your deeds

36. Ibid.

37. Blokh, "Otot Me'et Ha'hashgahah", pp. 1, 3, translation, "Signs From Heaven", pp. 25-28; idem, "Kal Kedoshav Be'yadekha" (forthcoming). The editor of the volume, Yitshak Finkel of the Telz Yeshiva in Jerusalem, informed the author that this was written after the yeshiva building had been occupied.

are righteous”, and he asked his daughter to recite *hilkhot kiddush hashem*, which included the principle of not violating *mitzvot* except to avoid death; but choosing death when it came to idolatry, murder and forbidden sexual relations. According to testimonies of survivors and records from the field trials of the murderers from 1944-1945 held by the KGB, at the death pit outside Rainiai, Jews were forced to undress to their underclothes and lie face down on the ground to be shot. Then a new group was forced to push the bodies into pits and then lay down on top of them, and be killed themselves.³⁸ After Blokh was beaten on the head at the pit to “knock out his God”, he declared: “God is for everyone.” He asked for water to purify himself, and cried out the *Shema* as his soul left him.³⁹ That is, *bitaḥon* remained, even as he faced an incomprehensible reality. Through it and with it, Blokh faced and passed through death.

Avraham Grodzensky (1883-1944): *Devekut*

Grodzensky became *rosh yeshiva* of Slabodkè in 1939, when Yitshak Ayzik Sher left for Switzerland for health reasons. He continued to conduct lessons after the Russians appropriated the building in June 1940. Having declined the opportunity to leave for America in December 1940, he

38. The KGB files in Vilnius contain field trial testimonies by perpetrators. Desyatnik, (?), criminal case no. 9387/3, vol 1, 62-63 (June 23, 1945) and criminal case no. 3398/3, vol. 1, 64-66 (June 23, 1945); Sulcas, Kazys, criminal case no. 3398/3, vol. 1, 51-59 (January 9 and 16, 1945); Idzelevicius, Kazys, criminal case no. 3398/3, vol. 1, 15-19 (January 22, 1944); Zavalys, Kazys, criminal case nos. 12400/3, 12409/3, vol. 1, 19-21, 27-33 (August 30, 1948). Provided and translated from the Russian by Ruta Puisyte, Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum, Vilnius.

39. Rambam (Moses ben Maimon), *Mishneh Torah*, Halakhot Yesode Ha'torah 5, halakhah 1 and halakhah 4; Sanhedrin 74^a and Avodah Zarah 27^b on Hilkhot Kiddush Hashem; Hannah Peltz-Saks testimony, Yad Vashem Archives 071; Raḥel Fulder and Hannah Peltz-Saks testimonies, Yad Vashem Archives 0.3/8515-0330/393; Elitsur-Rituv, “Mi'yomana shel Sarah Elitsur-Rituv”, pp. 346-349; idem, *Ba'yeri Uva'mistarim*, pp. 235-238; Shoshanah, “Ha'yeshivah Behit'pathutah”, pp. 263-293; Blokh-Ausbund, “Ha'derekh Ha'ahronah”, pp. 326-329; Blokh-Klayner, “Hurban Telz”, pp. 400-408; Rabinowitch, “Telz”, pp. 448-460.

suffered through the bombing of Kovno, the burning of its synagogues, and the June 1941 mass slaughter of rabbis and students by Lithuanian nationals. Due to an incapacitating leg ailment, he was left behind when Wasserman and others (including Moshe Hayim Zaks and Yehezkel Berenshtayn) were taken from his home in July 1941 and killed in the Ninth Fort. He continued to lead studies even after the Germans closed off the ghetto in August 1941. After the deportation on July 8, 1944, he was taken from his hiding place, beaten and hospitalized. The next day the hospital was set aflame and he was killed.⁴⁰

Grodzensky wrote eight volumes during his captivity, of which two survived. They were published in *Torat Avraham*, while other writings, dating from May 1938 and January-February 1940, made their way to publication in Palestine in the journals *Keneset Yisrael*, *Hane'eman* and *Tevunah*.

In May 1938, Grodzensky described how the People of Israel shared an image of God that was common to all human beings, but was also unique. They became a new, separate creation at Sinai, where they drew from God's *Shekhinah* and bonded with it in an experience of collective *devekut*. This spiritualized their physicality and purified it. In a collective act of *devekut*, they transcended the finite mind bound by time, space, and binary thinking, where good and evil, spirituality (soul) and materiality (body) were mutually exclusive, to apprehend points of infinitude where dualities were subsumed into union. They touched upon the divine perspective, where past, present and future were one – as were suffering and comfort.⁴¹ In December 1938, he wrote that following Sinai, it remained

40. Oshry, "Der Kiddush Hashem", p. 6; idem, "Di Shehitah", p. 5; idem, "Der Letster Shiur", p. 6; idem, "Der Tragisher Toyt", p. 6. Y. Grodzensky, "Kavim Le'toledot Ha'mehaber", pp. 10-18. Fukhs, "Kovno", pp. 233-252. Tory, *Surviving*, pp. 368-371; Gutman & Person, "Der Religiezer", pp. 36-51; Langleben, *Hayim shel Kiyum Mitzvot*, passim; Editor, "Lefi Ha'shemuot", p. 1; Roz, Munich, to Tikochinsky, Benei Berak, July 15, 1944, in: Roz, *Shirat Shemuel*, pp. 148-152; Volbe, *Ve'emunatekha*, pp. 40-42, 106-110; JDC Archives, Jerusalem, reel 737, frames 401, 528; Mordekhai Tsukerman testimony, Yad Vashem Archives 03/11932; Shmuel ben Menahem Daytsh testimony, Yad Vashem Archives 03/7622; Esther Rivka Zaks, Yad Vashem Archives 03/11500.

41. Grodzensky, "Geulat Yisrael," pp. 78^b – 79^b; idem, "Devekut", pp. 84^b – 85^a; idem,

for each individual Jew to process a *Shekhinah*-grounded consciousness of the divine. That is, the individual must become conscious of his soul as a portion of God, and apply this consciousness daily by means of Torah study.⁴²

He explained that from the objective, metaphysical viewpoint, the bond from Sinai between Israel and the *Shekhinah* could not be broken. But from the subjective, historical perspective, without Torah, the processing of consciousness of the divine would be interrupted. When this happened, given the objective bond, God intervened (out of His *hesed*) and injected suffering into Israel's life. This suffering set off *teshuvah*, which would close the distance between the individual Jew and Sinai, and subjectively enact the objective bond – with the degree of suffering corresponding to the distancing. Suffering inflicted from above turned the individual's attention to sin, to understanding the error and how to correct it. Ultimately, *teshuvah* would mend the tear in consciousness, to the point of grasping how God's *din* (suffering) and His *hesed-rahhamim* were, ultimately, of one root.⁴³

Grodzensky's religious life and thought centered around *devekut*, first experienced collectively at Sinai and then processed individually through Israel's history, by means of living according to the Torah. *Dvekut* provided access to the higher truths of unity between opposites, such as suffering and love as comprehended by the finite mind, inspiring the Jew to recite *ha'tov v'eha'metiv* ("Blessed be He that is good and bestows goodness") and *dayan ha'emet* ("Blessed be He that judges in truth") prayers with equal devotion. In December 1938, Grodzensky wrote that Rabbi Akiva, whose *devekut* included an apperception of the single source for *din* and *rahhamim* of such intensity that he could rejoice over loving God with all his soul, even as God took his soul from amid the flames, was the exemplar. His

"Hesed Ve'kiyum Ha'olam", pp. 107^a – 111^a.

42. Grodzensky, "Bitahon Be'ruhaniyut", pp. 113^b – 115^b; idem, "Torat Ha'sekhel Ha'enoshi", pp. 136^b – 139^a; idem, "Geulat Yisrael", pp. 78^b – 79^b.

43. Idem, "Teshuvah", pp. 24-32; reprinted in: Y. Grodzensky, *Torat Avraham*, pp. 228^b – 233^a.

Shema declaration, that "the Lord is One", that God was the one source of creation, and that what appeared as contradictory to the human mind was actually reconciled from the divine perspective, affirmed and enacted the unity. Rabbi Akiva reacted to Tinnieus Rufus' mockery for reciting the *Shema* while being tortured, saying that he, Akiva, took pleasure in his agony because now he could be certain that his life-long recitations about loving God through death were authentic. With his *devekut*, Akiva experienced the inner unity between pleasure and agony, and the confirmation of his lifetime commitment to this truth.⁴⁴

Amid the crisis, Grodzensky continually sought to draw his students into the event of Sinai. Following the invasion of Poland, he addressed the yeshiva and called for *teshuvah*: "If a man sees that powerful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct" (Berakhot 5^a). With Poland being destroyed before their very eyes, and millions of Jews suffering on account of their Judaism, the yeshiva had to examine its ways – lest its teachers and students be among those of whom it has been said, "The flames surrounded them but they had no idea what they meant."⁴⁵

Testimonies about Grodzensky reflect the centrality of *devekut*. After Mordekhai Tsukerman was released from prison (for having studied Torah during a work-break in the shoe factory), Grodzensky joined suffering with relief when he greeted him with Rabbi Akiva's words to Papos, "Happy art thou, to have been imprisoned on account of words of Torah" (Berakhot 61^a). Tsukerman later testified that in the ghetto, Grodzensky explained how suffering was tied to the decline in Jewish faith, *bitahon*, and Sabbath observance, and was ultimately intended to evoke *teshuvah*.⁴⁶ In June 1946, Ephraim Oshry recalled Grodzensky's conviction that a person truly devoted to sanctifying the name of God unto death would not feel the pain (as Rabbi Akiva). Shortly before he burned to death in the hospital, Grodzensky told his student Shemuel Ya'akov Roz that his own

44. Idem, "Simḥah", pp. 18^a – 19^b; idem, "Yirah, Ahavah, Va'ḥesed", pp. 111^a – 112^a.

45. Idem, "Derekh Aliyah", pp. 16-23.

46. Y. Grodzensky, "Kavim Le'toldot", pp. 10-18; Mordekhai Tsukerman testimony, July 20, 2000, Yad Vashem Archives 0.3/11932.

suffering did not pain him – only that of his ill brethren.⁴⁷ A decade later, in Munich, Roz wrote to Mosheh Tikochinsky that when the hospital was about to be set aflame, he and others had tried to remove Grodzensky, but his leg ailment caused so much pain that he asked them to go and leave him.⁴⁸ His nephew, Yitshak Grodzensky, reported that at those final moments, Grodzensky cried out in despair: "They teach us to accept sufferings in love, to bless the evil as we bless the good. But this time I do not accept their teaching. I cry, not over the loss of our lives, but over the removal of the image of God from man."⁴⁹ His *devekut* remained; but now with concern that those who did not have access to the collective experience of Sinai no longer carried the image of God. Adhering to God, his spiritualized body moved into death.

Our three leading *rashei yeshivot* lived spiritually. At the end, they passed through the partition of death that divided the known and the unknown with faith in God – which itself came from God. Their *da'at torah*, *bitahon*, and *devekut* would become legacies for their colleagues and students.

47. Oshry, "Der Tragisher Toyt", p. 6; Rodzensky, "Simḥah Bi'yesurin", pp. 189-193. Elsewhere, Grodzensky rejected the notion that suffering could be transcended by other worldly means. Grodzensky, "Yirah, Ahava, Va'hesed" [December 3, 1938], pp. 111^a – 112^a; idem, "Ḥanukah" [December 24, 1938], pp. 121^a – 122^b.

48. Roz, Munich, to Tikochinsky, Benei Berak, July 17, 1954, in: Roz, *Shirat Shemuel*, pp. 96-99.

49. Y. L. Grodzensky, *Shevilim*, pp. 152-153.

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