

# 18 ■ Kristallnacht: A Historical Perspective

**T**onight is the night after the 16th of MarCheshvan. Forty-eight years ago, on November 9, 1938, the so-called “Kristallnacht” occurred: the beginning of a historical tragedy with a fatal ending.

This was a bloody drama indeed. The prelude to this chain of events, though, is not known to most people.

One Friday morning early in November, 1938, all Polish Jews residing in Germany were suddenly arrested and herded onto trains heading toward Poland. All trains stopped at the border town of Spongene (which I remember well from my own travels between Germany and Poland). All day long on the fateful Friday Jews of all ages were arrested for no reason — and heralded over to this Polish border town where, minus their belongings, all 12,000 of them were unceremoniously dumped. Some women had taken along Shabbos candles to light in the train, and the Jewish natives of Poland did their best to welcome these sudden immigrants. However, as you can imagine, these displaced refugees went through much pain and agony.

Among the refugees dropped off at Spongene were the parents of a certain Herschel Greenspan, a Jewish student who was studying in Paris. When he heard of his parents' fate, he became so outraged that he decided to take revenge on the German people. This was ridiculous, of course, but understandable. In his desperation he bought a pistol with the intention of shooting the German ambassador in Paris. Approaching the secretariat, he announced that he had an urgent message to deliver to the ambassador. The secretary, a man named Vonrat, refused him admission and, in the course of heated argument Greenspan shot Vonrat and wounded him mortally. This confrontation occurred on November 7, 1938.

"The Jews have taken revenge!" This outcry spread rapidly throughout Germany. Two days later on November 9, the Nazis orchestrated a widespread attack on the Jews of Germany and axis- controlled Austria. This sudden burst of barbarianism was explained by the Nazis to the general public as "a spontaneous demonstration of righteous indignation by the German people against the Jews for the cowardly act of treachery" (the murder of Vonrat). All in all, as a result of this so called "spontaneous reaction," 191 synagogues were set ablaze and another 76 were totally demolished, let alone the thousands of Jewish stores which were ravaged. Thus, the name "Kristallnacht" — the night of the broken glass, the shattered windows of Jewish establishments. That same day at least 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Others were killed or beaten. Of course, a pompous funeral was held for secretary Vonrat. To top it off, a collective penalty of one billion marks was levied against the Jews of Germany.

In reality, none of this was spontaneous. This offensive had been meticulously planned down to the first detail, in typical German fashion. The murder of Vonrat merely served as a catalyst to bring it all about sooner. Kristallnacht was a turning point for the Jews of Germany and Austria: From this point on there was no further place

for them in the German economy, and their own cultural life was brought to an abrupt halt. It was the beginning of the end. From the Kristallnacht leads a straight path to Auschwitz, Treblinka, Theresienstadt — to the murder of 6 million Kedoshim, 1/3 of our people. Amongst us there are still many who remember these events personally.

But there is much more to this story. By strange “coincidence” (nothing in life is a coincidence!), that same date, November 9, marks a celebration. Seventy-nine years earlier, in 1859, the whole German nation celebrated the Centennial of the birth of the famous German poet, Friedrich Phillip Von Schiller. Schiller was a great humanist, and no German could go through school without mastering Schiller’s plays and poetry. He had become, in effect, a national hero. All over Germany there was a jubilant celebration of his 100th birthday.

Also participating in this commemoration was the newly founded yeshiva in Frankfurt-am-Main, the Yeshiva founded by Rabbiner Samson Raphael Hirsch (of which our Yeshiva is a continuation). A detailed account of the school’s celebration can be found in the “Gesammelte Schriften”, Vol. IV. Briefly, the higher grades had assembled, together with the faculty, administration, the Board of the Kehillo and the general public. The rooms were festively decorated. Addressing the crowd was none less than the great Rav Hirsch himself. He proceeded to deliver a masterful oration on the topic of the ברכה pronounced over meeting one of the חכמי אומות העולם:

ברוך שנתן מחכמתו לבשר ודם

If Schiller were to come to us, said Rav Hirsch, we’d be required by our חכמים to pronounce this ברכה (the entire speech has been recorded under the title of the “Schiller-reder”). Extensively quoting from Schiller’s poetry, Rav Hirsch illustrated how this sublime individual stood for all we call virtuous: lofty ideas about the Almighty, righteousness, goodness, justice, honesty, beauty, free will, man above beast, family life, the dignity of women, virtue and truth, etc. All great ideas expressed, even by non-

Jewish sources, originate in the Torah. Because of such people, continued Rav Hirsch, the Jews of 1859 were experiencing a renaissance. Righteousness is spreading, the ghetto barriers are being broken down, the Jewish people are finally becoming welcome members in the civilization of mankind.\*

This tremendous speech was delivered amidst festivities on November 9, 1859. The optimism he expressed was showed by almost all his contemporaries. That beautiful dream — that the Jews were finally accepted as equals — lasted for about 100 years until, suddenly, they were shaken out of this slumber.

Even during the early 1930's when Hitler began organizing the storm troopers, people refused to accept reality until they were rudely awakened by the shattering of glass at the Kristallnacht. The bubble had burst. Since the Middle Ages the Jews had thirsted for freedom. Just as they seemingly had reached that plateau — they enjoyed more human rights during the mid-19th century than ever before — along come the stormtroopers.

Let us keep in mind that they too were educated in German schools where Schiller and others like him were an important part of the curriculum. Despite this humanistic education, these SS men became more cruel than beasts of prey. They were the sadistic murderers and torturers of innocent men, women and children. So the dreaming Jewish soul awoke — was awakened — from a beautiful vision, more hungry for life and light and freedom than ever before.

Let us admit it. Our grandparents subscribed to an illusion — an imaginary faith in the civilizing result of a liberal education encompassing art, poetry, music, and theater. It was thought that man's inhumanity to man was a matter of the deep, dark past. Some still did not awaken from this vision until the smoke began to rise from the

\* For elaboration on the Hirsch world-view of our acceptance into mankind as part of the ultimate גאולה, see the Hirsch Chumash: Vayikra...

burning shuls and ספרים, and until this illusory silence was broken by the shattering of windows and the screaming of frightened children in the night\*.

Let us close this dark chapter with a firm belief in the נסים of הקב"ה, the One who will not desert us or forsake us: "אל יעזבנו ואל יטשנו" The age of Humanism was a passing episode in the annals of history. The sentiment was only skin deep- and short lived. When the fires of the Holocaust began burning, we suddenly were haunted by the words we say in our daily תפילות, as well as in נעילה of כפור יום:

The great men, the great figures and heroes	הלא כל הגבורים
are like nothing before you.	כאין לפניך
People of name and fame	ואנשי השם
are as if they never existed.	כלא היו
The wise men	וחכמים
are as if they have no knowledge.	כבלי מדע
Men of understanding	ונבובים
without intelligence	כבלי השכל
Most of their actions, are empty	כי רוב מעשיהם תוהו
and so are their lives empty.	וימי חייהם הבל לפניך
The supremacy of man over the animals	ומותר האדם מן הבהמה
proves to be hollow.	אין
Man is merely an intelligent animal.	

This תפילה aptly describes the painful lesson we have learned.

We subscribe to the visionary concept of תורה עם דרך ארץ But we are reminded of the saying of our חכמים in the מדרש on קהלת:

\* Most members of our Kehilla know of a miraculous incident which occurred to our late Rav זצ"ל the day after Kristallnacht. Rav Breuer was arrested and detained along with the other Jewish men. At the lineup, the Nazi officer told him to go home, as he was over 60 years old and not subject to arrest. In his extreme honesty, Rav Breuer protested that he was only 57. The Nazi screamed back, "Don't contradict me! You are over 60 and out you go — or else!" If not for this נס, would our Kehilla be here today? Who knows....

גם יאמר לך אדם: "יש חכמה בגוים" - תאמין. "יש תורה בגוים" - אל תאמין"  
Should someone tell you of knowledge, of science, of wisdom among the nations — believe him. But if he tells you of תורה among them — don't believe him.

True — there is science, technology, law, medicine, political science, history, languages, psychology et al. Our tradition of תורה עם דרך ארץ applies to that too — that is, תורה has given of his wisdom to flesh and blood. Therefore, we make a ברכה when we see a great scientist — we respect the accomplishments of science and most areas of human knowledge.

Most areas, that is. We do not extend תורה עם דרך ארץ to include philosophy, ethics, morality and humanism. The teaching of what is right and wrong, what is noble and ignoble, what is decent and indecent, this is not in the realm of תורה. We do not even study a ספר מוסר written by a non-Jew. This is תורה! The תורה instructs us in these areas. No longer are we going to seek our Schiller to teach us about humanity. It no longer interests us.

The lessons of Kirstallnacht — from one November 9th to the other — "תורה בגוים" אל תאמין! Don't believe there is תורה among גוים. Let us not make the same mistake as our ancestors, to believe there is any other ethical culture for us besides the תורה.

I recall when I became בר מצוה. There was a large table upon which all the gifts were displayed (some people still do that!). I received a ש"ס from my grandfather זצ"ל (a rarity in those days!). I got משניות, I got a set of רמב"ם (beautiful!)... but, believe it or not, I got a set of Schiller, a set of Goethe, of Gilpatse, of Lessing, of Sarmes! I got all the classics! And so did all other בר מצוה boys back then.

Another lesson from the Kristallnacht: give the בר מצוה boys ספרים! If they aren't fluent in Hebrew, give them Art Scroll! If they can't read לשון הקודש give them translations! But classics? This is not done anymore.

Yes — a tremendous lesson. If gentiles develop an ethical cultural group good for them, they need it. For us it means nothing. It's a thin veneer which does not penetrate. It fades

away. The Nazis were also students of Schiller and Goethe. They studied ethics and humanism — and then they tortured and burnt and destroyed one-third of our people. These were the תלמידים of this empty humanistic culture. It has lost all meaning for us. Only the teachers of תורה are entitled to teach us what is right and good and true and beautiful:

“כי הם חיינו ואורך ימינו”

I am certain that the saintly נשמה of Rabbiner S.R. Hirsch פירוש החומש will agree with my conclusion. In his פ' וירא, he makes the following comment. אברהם אבינו was chosen to head the Chosen Nation because he could be trusted to instruct his progeny:

“ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט”

It does not say that they will keep the laws of ה' and, IN ADDITION they will ALSO do צדקה ומשפט. The practice of צדקה ומשפט is only to be defined through the ה' דרך! צדקה ומשפט is humanism and ethics. But if it doesn't grow from the field of תורה it withers and dies — it is worthless. Only through תורה learning do we learn ethics — לעשות צדקה ומשפט.

Even the most shining examples of greatness among the אומות העולם are short-lived episodes. Their lessons are fleeting; they do not penetrate. Only that code of morals, that צדקה ומשפט, which derives from ה' דרך — from the תורה חוקי — can be taken seriously by Our People. It lasts for all eternity.

“יראת ה' טהורה — עומדת לעד”