

# 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 Spangene (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.

# SELECTED WRITINGS

**A Collection of Addresses and Essays  
on Hashkafah, Jewish History  
and Contemporary Issues**

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**YRSRH**

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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-

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 יעזבונו 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 יום כפור ועילה of

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 עמ דרך ארץ תורה  
But we are reminded of the saying of our חכמים in the מדרש on קהלה:

\* 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 Kehillo be here today? Who knows....

אם 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, חכמה בגוים. ה' 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 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 a משנייה, 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 הקודש לשון 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 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 חוקי התורה, which derives from ה' דרך — from the תורה — can be taken seriously by Our People. It lasts for all eternity.

“יראת ה' טהורה — עומדת לעד”