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## Holocaust

### My rebbe, right or wrong

By Efraim Zuroff

Tags: Nazis, Holocaust, Europe >>

#### Hidden in Thunder

**Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership During the Holocaust**  
 by Esther Farbstein (translated from the Hebrew by Deborah Stern), Mossad Harav Kook / Feldheim, 769 pages (in two volumes), \$50

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Among the most painful and difficult dilemmas faced by Jewish leaders in occupied Europe during the Holocaust were demands by the Nazis that they choose Jews to be turned over to them for transfer to different locations. Although such demands were usually accompanied by assurances that those selected would not be harmed or adversely affected by the move, it was clear that such promises by the Nazis could rarely, if ever, be trusted, and consequently most Jewish leaders refused to accede to them. There were, however, some people in positions of authority in large ghettos who, though they had no illusions about the Nazis' intentions, believed that the sacrifice of the least productive elements of the ghetto population (the ill and those unemployed) might in the long run help rescue the rest, or at least part, of the Jewish community.

The most notable proponents of the latter approach were Yaakov Gens in Vilna and Chaim Rumkowski in Lodz, both of whom adopted the highly controversial policy of consistently bowing to such demands. They justified their decision by claiming that it offered the best and probably only opportunity

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to allow at least part of the community to survive, with the possibility that it could resume Jewish life after the war's end.

In the cases of both Rumkowski, who headed the Judenrat (Jewish council) in Lodz, and Gens, chief of the Vilna ghetto's Jewish police, they sought rabbinic approval for their actions. Rumkowski, for his part, repeatedly turned to the rabbis in the Lodz ghetto to obtain their consent for his policies. And Gens claimed that he had been instructed by the rabbi of the nearby village of Oshmiana to turn over five elderly Jews who were in hiding, to fulfill the quota demanded by the Nazis. Esther Farbstein informs us, however, that Gens was clearly lying when, at a meeting of the ghetto leadership, he claimed to have rabbinical approval for trying to rescue Jews via modified cooperation with the Nazis. Farbstein proves that a careful reading of additional contemporary sources clearly shows that the rabbi had given his approval only after the individuals in question had volunteered to be among those turned over by the Jewish police.

This revelation regarding Gens' misrepresentation of a rabbinic decision is a good example of Farbstein's strengths as a Holocaust researcher. Well aware of the halakhic prohibition of mesira (the turning over of Jews to non-Jews who intend to murder them), and the refusal of rabbis elsewhere to sanction such behavior, she suspected that Gens had manipulated the decision of the rabbi of Oshmiana to falsely adduce rabbinic support for his policy. Through examination of further contemporary sources, Farbstein was able to prove her contention that Gens was lying.

This is only one example of many extremely important issues Farbstein examines from the vantage point of halakha (Jewish law) in "Hidden in Thunder." Thus she brings an added dimension to our knowledge of events and topics in which Orthodox leaders, and especially rabbis, were directly involved during the Holocaust.

In this respect, Farbstein's motivation in undertaking this ambitious project is crystal clear. As she writes in her preface to the first volume, she seeks to "unveil" the world of Jewish law and thought to "historians whose access to this material is limited." In her opinion, religious life during the Shoah has been ignored for many years not only because there is a lack of testimonies from observant survivors, but also because there is a tendency among Holocaust scholars, almost none of whom are ultra-Orthodox Jews themselves, to create a "political-polemic atmosphere" around religious Jewry and its leaders, which leads them to make sweeping assumptions that lack a factual basis. These are then compounded, she suggests, by those scholars' own lack of understanding of the inner world of believing Jews.

If Farbstein could have objectively integrated her expertise and deep knowledge of the ultra-Orthodox world and mindset with her skills as a university-trained historian, the results would have been exceptionally significant. Unfortunately, it is the agenda as formulated in her preface that dominates the book's entirety. What could have been a uniquely important addition to Holocaust scholarship is reduced to what is, at best, a more sophisticated presentation of the ultra-Orthodox position concerning several critical issues regarding Orthodox leaders that have been the subject of acerbic polemics ever since the Holocaust. It is also a collection of testimonies and perspectives from religious sources that have heretofore been unknown to scholars in the field.

This is doubly unfortunate, as Farbstein comes to her task with unique credentials. With a graduate degree from the Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry, the world's premier institution for Holocaust studies, and with a most-impressive ultra-Orthodox pedigree as the wife of the head of the Hebron Yeshiva and the great-granddaughter of the Ger Rebbe, Avraham

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Mordechai Alter, Farbstein possesses the necessary tools to conduct pioneering research in the field: access to Haredi sources, knowledge of the mindset of ultra-Orthodox Jews and training as a professional historian. In the end, however, these two volumes come with only the veneer of objective historical research, and ultimately read like something closer to hagiography.

This is clearly evident in Farbstein's focus on two highly controversial subjects: the priority given to the rescue of rabbis and Torah scholars (as opposed to run-of-the-mill Jews) during the war; and the decision of three leading Hasidic rebbes to escape Nazi-occupied Europe, leaving their adherents behind. This is hardly surprising, since it is these two questions that continue to be bitterly debated, serving as a source of constant friction and hostility in the relations between ultra-Orthodoxy and the rest of the Jewish world.

### **Priority for whom?**

The first subject was highlighted by the activities of the Va'ad Hahatzalah rescue committee, which was established in the United States in mid-November 1939, in the wake of the escape of hundreds of Polish rabbis and yeshiva students from Eastern Poland, which the Soviet Union had occupied that September, to the independent republic of Lithuania. Created by American Orthodox rabbis, the Va'ad was initially established for the sole purpose of rescuing these rabbis and yeshiva students, who were seen as the elite of the world of Torah study and as deserving of absolute priority in all rescue projects. Farbstein explains the halakhic basis for granting rescue priority to these groups and presents the Va'ad's activities in an entirely positive light, while neglecting to mention a very problematic policy it pursued in the latter stages of the war.

Thus while a theoretical case could certainly be made for granting Torah scholars priority if they are among a group of Jews all facing the same degree of physical danger, it's difficult to believe that halakhah would support sending money to rabbis and yeshiva students who are not facing death, at the same time that other Jews are in danger of being murdered.

This was the situation in 1944 and 1945, by which time it was absolutely clear in the U.S. that Jews living under Nazi occupation were facing the threat of mass murder. During those years, the Va'ad, which in the meantime had officially expanded its mandate to include the rescue of all Jews, sent a significant portion of the funds it raised (close to 40 percent) to groups of rabbis and yeshiva students who had already found refuge in Shanghai and Soviet Central Asia. They undoubtedly faced difficult physical conditions, but by then they were not threatened with physical annihilation. In addition, these refugees were simultaneously being assisted by other Jewish relief agencies (the Joint Distribution Committee in Shanghai, and both the JDC and the Jewish Agency in Central Asia), so that the funds sent from the U.S. were not absolutely critical for their physical survival. Instead, they were used to enable them to pursue Torah study on a full-time basis.

At the same time, the Va'ad had found a means to send funds into occupied Europe to save Jews in Hungary, Slovakia and Poland from deportation to death camps. It did so by helping to move them from more dangerous places to less dangerous ones, supplying them with false documents and the like, objectives that clearly should have been given absolute priority over the support of Torah study. Oddly, there is absolutely no mention of this dilemma in Farbstein's book, nor is there any suggestion that the policies of the Va'ad were at any point highly questionable, even from a halakhic standpoint. Also missing from the context is the fact that most of the refugee rabbis and yeshiva students who had escaped to Lithuania, whom the Va'ad was established to save, were ultimately murdered by the Nazis.

One of the main factors responsible for this result was the refusal of most of the yeshiva heads who had been among those who escaped from eastern Poland to Lithuania to endorse a rescue scheme for emigration via the Far East. Only the Mir Yeshiva, whose head, Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, was convinced by Zionist leader Zerach Warhaftig to make arrangements to supply all his students with the necessary documents and visas to enable their emigration from the Soviet Union (which occupied Lithuania in June 1940) via Japan, was saved in its entirety. The vast majority of students from the 20 or so other yeshivot who had escaped to Vilna chose, upon the advice of their rabbinic leaders, to pass on the admittedly dangerous option of applying to emigrate from Soviet Lithuania. Farbstein also neglects to point out that among those who advised their students not to try and emigrate via the Far East were yeshiva heads who themselves had visas to the U.S., at least one of whom, Rabbi Aron Kotler, of the Kletzk Yeshiva, indeed went to America.

This total reluctance to criticize rabbinic leaders, which is characteristic of Haredi historiography, can also be clearly seen in the manner in which Farbstein assesses the decision of several leading Hasidic rebbes to escape from Nazi-occupied Europe. The three most famous cases in this regard are those of the Ger Rebbe, the Belzer Rebbe and the Satmar Rebbe, all of whom left behind their followers and fled to the safety of Palestine, a decision that has been severely criticized by non-Haredi scholars and polemicists.

### **"Sense of public duty"**

Farbstein is correct when she points out that each such decision must be analyzed separately, given their different historical contexts. (The Ger Rebbe escaped from Poland in 1940, the Belzer left Poland initially and then Hungary in January 1944 and the Satmar was on the "Kasztner transport" released in December 1944.) Ultimately, however, the rationale she presents to justify their escape is the same in all three cases, pointing to their "sense of public duty"- which dictated that they rescue themselves, as the future of Judaism was to a large extent dependent on their survival. Farbstein compares the rescue of the rebbes to that of Zionist leaders, whose escape she belittles as virtually worthless in terms of the Jewish future.

At the same time, however, that Farbstein justifies the escape of the rebbes, she also points to the extremely positive and inspirational role played by those rabbis who did not escape overseas, leaving unanswered the obvious question of the positive role that the Ger, Belzer and Satmar Rebbes could have played had they chosen to remain with their communities. What is clear in this sense is that Farbstein consistently supports the decision of the rabbis, even if in certain instances they appear contradictory. This basic inability to criticize Orthodox rabbis reduces the analytical elements of Farbstein's study to hagiography rather than history.

Having established these major flaws, this book does perform an important service by bringing many previously inaccessible sources by ultra-Orthodox authors to the knowledge of scholars and other interested parties. It also provides insight into the hitherto-unknown role played by certain Polish rabbis in spreading knowledge of the Final Solution. Also of interest and importance are the sections dealing with the response of Orthodox rabbis to various ethical dilemmas, such as demands to turn over Jews (as mentioned above) or to compile lists of Jews to be sent to camps. In that respect, it is clear that Jewish law was put to severe tests by the trials and tribulations experienced by Jewish leaders and communities during the Shoah, a point repeatedly emphasized by Farbstein.

In closing, I feel that in certain respects these volumes are just as much a memorial to the rabbis and observant Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust as an attempt to chronicle their suffering and loss. And that is

precisely part of the problem posed by a book of this sort, which due to the empathy and ideological affinity of the author for its subject cannot offer a truly objective analysis of their record during World War II.

*Dr. Efraim Zuroff, director of the Israel office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, is the author of "The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Va'ad ha-Hatzalah Rescue Committee, 1939-1945" (Ktav and Yeshiva University Press, 2000).*

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