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Sign of Haredi society coming to grips with the Holocaust

By [Tamar Rotem](#)

The conference on rabbinical writing in the Holocaust, held at Jerusalem's Binyanei Hauma Convention Center Sunday evening, may mark a step forward in the ultra-Orthodox community coming to grips with the Shoah.

The conference was organized by its sponsors, the Jerusalem Municipality's Torah Culture Department, as an evening for women. Indeed, Holocaust education and documentation has become predominantly a women's occupation in ultra-Orthodox society, as women are the ones who advance it in the educational seminars and colleges.

The conference hosts presented a CD-ROM containing a database of prefaces to religious texts - Torah interpretations and meditative literature - written from 1945 onward by rabbis who survived the Holocaust. Only one of the prefaces was written before the end of World War II.

The database project was initiated by ultra-Orthodox Holocaust researcher Esther Farbstein, director of the Holocaust Education Center at Jerusalem's Michlala Women's College in Jerusalem, with the support of the Holocaust Claims Conference.

The delegation of this work to women is typical for Haredi society: the holy book itself is written for the ultra-Orthodox men who must study the Torah, whereas the marginal

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autobiography of the holy book's author is left for the women. But Farbstein has managed to turn the writing of the marginal memoir into the main issue. Through her researches, the stories of the rabbis who wrote at this critical time become the source of new historic insights into the Jewish communities before and during the Holocaust, and about the dilemmas troubling the rabbis who went through the era.

Farbstein is seen as a trailblazer in Holocaust studies in the ultra-Orthodox community. Some say that had she not been the daughter of a family of rabbis, she would not have been permitted to go so far. But if the ultra-Orthodox public is eager to hear about the Holocaust, it is thanks to her. Even Yated Ne'emán, a newspaper symbolizing the conservative end of this community, has reported at length on the new database.

For almost two generations, the ultra-Orthodox avoided dealing with the Holocaust, at least officially. Farbstein says this derives from the trauma they experienced after the great destruction, the need to rebuild their communities and to survive in the face of secular Israeli society and Zionism. It may also derive from their revulsion at the Zionists' appropriation of the subject.

Professor Menachem Friedman, however, one of the leading experts on ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel, attributes it to Haredi society's reluctance to confront the most difficult questions arising from the period. Questions like "Where was God in the Holocaust?," and those raising doubts about the rabbis' performance during those dark years. These questions were seen by ultra-Orthodox society as threatening to their way of life, and pushed it into a defensive stance.

"Even now, the Haredim cannot ask, at least not openly, how the Gerrer, Satmar and Belzer rebbes and others fled and saved themselves, leaving their followers behind. The question is not only why the rabbis refrained from warning their followers, but also why they prevented them from migrating to Israel for fear of 'spoiling' them," says Friedman.

Friedman says these questions, which Agudat Yisrael newspapers dealt with passionately immediately after the Holocaust, gradually became taboo over the years.

Only after the attitude toward Holocaust study in ultra-Orthodox society began to change again, was the Holocaust study chair founded in the Michlala Women's College, and archives documenting the Jewish communities and the destruction of Haredi Jewry were opened. At the same time, countless books were written and published privately by Orthodox survivors documenting their Holocaust experience and the miracles they experienced.

But has there been any critical discourse about the leadership during the Shoah? The database provides an opportunity to examine this. It consists of about 100 mainly autobiographical introductions, which document the story of the writer and his community.

Farbstein, who presented the research at both Haifa University and Yad Vashem, believes these are historic documents that shed light on various issues and add insights into Jewish life before and after the Holocaust. For example, they teach much about the Jews of Hungary, specifically, the attempts made to rescue the refugees in Budapest; the last yeshivas there, and other dilemmas that occupied the country's Jews during the period.

The most interesting dilemmas are those pertaining to survival itself. Rabbi Weinberger of the town of Turka, in Galicia, contends with the question of whether or not to leave. Despite family pressure to leave, he decides to remain with his community. The prefaces also reveal that the option of pretending to be a gentile presented a halakhic dilemma, as adopting a non-Jewish identity

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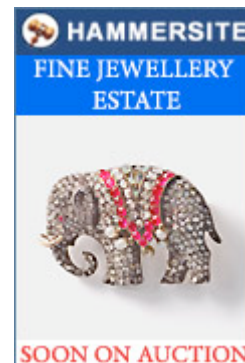
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can be tantamount to idol worship.

The question of whether to go to the Land of Israel also worried the ultra-Orthodox rabbis, many of whom strongly objected to Israel for ideological reasons.

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