

Finding a Language of Loss

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By: Yehuda Fogel



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled," 1991.

Felix's piece is a lamentation, after the death of his partner, and evokes the emptiness in life after loss.

How can we cultivate a language of loss?

This is a question that haunts, traps, and limits many of us. There is something about grief and mourning that leaves us without words, trapped somewhere between silence and speech. We are not sure what to say, and yet equally unsure how to be silent. Uncomfortable in speech, uncomfortable in silence, we struggle to find a language of loss, a way of navigating between the Scylla of silence and the Charybdis of speech.

It was that most profound of traumas, the Holocaust, that led poets and philosophers, those on the front lines of language, to rethink the very meaning and capacity of language. Theodore Adorno (1903 – 1969) famously put it this way: "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," a line that itself has ironically prompted an astounding amount of poetry as people

have worked to come to terms with the impossibility of speech, of art, and the equal inability to express pain, suffering, and loss through silence alone. Paul Celan, a Romanian-Jewish German-language poet, wrote poetry after the Holocaust that was infected (or is it broken?) by the rupture in meaning and language that he suffered during the war years, resulting in a sort of poetry that is somehow both nonsensical and deeply painful (“*blessed art thou / No One / In thy sight would / we bloom / in thy / spite.*”)

This challenge faces the very words we choose when discussing the losses of our life. On a national level, we speak of *Churban*, *Shoah*, *Holocaust*; Each word is complicated with long histories of those who choose to use or not use one or several of these terms, each with its own challenging set of feelings and emotions associated with it. (The poet Jerome Rothenberg, in his book *Khurbn*, says this about the word Holocaust: “It was a word with which I never felt comfortable: too Christian & too beautiful, too much smacking of a “sacrifice” I didn’t & still don’t understand. The word with which we spoke of it was the Yiddish-Hebrew word, *khurbn* [*khurban*], & it was this word that was with me all the time we stayed in Poland.”)

In our own lives, the experience of loss is equally complicated by the language that we use – grief, mourning, loss, each has its own flavor, scent, feeling to it. Loss is somehow the most ambitious, the most vague term of all, and yet also the most precise. Loss; As in lost, something that will yet be found, returned? (According to *etymonline.com*: *lost* c. 1300 “wasted, ruined, spent in vain,” and also “no longer to be found, gone astray.”) Loss speaks to the empty space now in our lives, the impossibly full emptiness, the empty seat at the table, unoccupied bed, empty *shtetls* and shuls. This absence dwells in our communications about loss as well, as we struggle to articulate what loss is to us, and our love for those who are experiencing loss.

How might we develop a language of loss? Rabbi Josh Grajower, in his touching conversation with 18Forty about the loss of his wife, Dannie Grajower, speaks of the importance of therapy in the process of grief, to learn a language of loss for one’s loved ones, one’s children, and one’s self. A qualified therapist can help one develop a realistic and meaningful *language* of loss.

Today is the 9th of Av, a day marked by a long and profound history of loss for the Jewish people. On this day, the Jewish people honor the profound losses that they experienced as a nation, and as individuals, from the beginning of the Jewish story to today. There is an emptiness at the heart of the 9th of Av, as we honor that and those who are no longer with us. In fact, some commentators see in the hebrew word for the 9th of Av (Tish’a) a reference to the hebrew word for forgetfulness, weakness, displacement (n-sh-y), as we struggle as a people to come to terms with the loss at the heart of our lives. Today, some of us will engage with loss through liturgy, through poetry and prayers, seeking the absent through words. There is also a tradition to refrain from casual conversation on the 9th of Av – perhaps a way to embrace the subtle silence of loss.

Reflecting loss at this moment is not simple, coming after a year in which it felt like every article was about loss, every walk down the street shadowed by endless reminders of the loss of so many of our loved ones to COVID-19. We have nothing to say, have had nothing to say, and yet our year has been complicated by endless speech as we run from silence. Today, we are embracing the language of loss, as we try together to find a way towards meaningful engagement with the losses of our lives. In our conversations with those who have lived with loss, we hope to listen and learn about the language of loss, and consider together how we can cultivate a more compassionate, honest, and vulnerable stance amidst the great pain of mourning. While we reflect on these conversations, we are also reading Liliana Furman and Liliana Ruth Feierstein's powerful article on the questions of language of loss, "The Paper Bridge: Jewish Responses to Destruction." This article focuses on the dilemma facing Jews after the Holocaust, as they worked towards a mode of language that provided meaningful response to the rupture. We read this article in light of today, and this year, and wonder: *How might we cultivate our own language of loss?*

THE PAPER BRIDGE: JEWISH RESPONSES TO DESTRUCTION

Author(s): Liliana Furman and Liliana Ruth Feierstein

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THE PAPER BRIDGE: JEWISH RESPONSES TO DESTRUCTION¹

Liliana Furman and Liliana Ruth Feierstein

This article, which deals with the Nazis' attempt to destroy the Jewish people and their culture, embodied in the symbol of the Book, seeks to reveal the metaphorical replies which the *She'erit Hapletah* succeeded in producing in the years immediately after liberation (1945–1951), despite endless and unutterable pain. It had to do with starting to read again, that is, to live. It pays homage to the survivors' will to live.

The Destruction and Confiscation of Jewish Books

The loss of Jewish books to the Nazis' depredations is irreparable. Accounts reporting that during the burning of the Lublin Yeshiva library, which lasted some twenty hours, the Nazis called in a military band to drown out the loud laments of the Jews of Lublin,² illustrate the depth of the anguish. According to estimates, the Nazi machinery confiscated between three and four million Jewish books,³ of which only a portion could be recovered. During the plundering of Judaica organized by Alfred Rosenberg (in the name of the Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question), editions of the Talmud were sold and Torah scrolls were burned and defiled.⁴

In February 1946, in an old I.G. Farben warehouse, the U.S. Army established the Offenbach Archival Depot for the purpose of uniting the confiscated institutional and private libraries that were piled up in Frankfurt, Munich and Berlin⁵ – many of them still in packing crates. The heaps of books, Torah scrolls and loose documents in this depot were a surviving fragment from the many buildings that had housed books: libraries, archives and

* Liliana Furman was born in Buenos Aires. Has a degree in Jewish Education and Psychology and a Masters in Jewish Studies from the University of Freiburg. A graduate of the Senior Educators Programme of the Melton Center, Hebrew University, she works for the American Jewish Joint distribution Committee as a Programme Director in Germany.

Liliana Ruth Feierstein was born in Buenos Aires. She gained her PhD at the Heinrich Heine Universität Düsseldorf and was awarded the Augsburger Wissenschaftspreis für Interkulturelle Studien 2008. Currently she is an assistant teacher and researcher at the University of Bayreuth.

synagogues, crushed into ruins by the Nazis' boots. Captain Isaac Benkowitz (the second director of the Offenbach Archival Depot) described in his diary the impact made by encountering these remnants:

I would walk into the loose document room to take a look at the things there and find it impossible to tear myself away from the fascinating piles of letters, folders, and little personal bundles. Not that what you held in your hand was so engrossing, but rather what the next intriguing item might be. Or, in the sorting room, I would come upon a box of books which the sorters had brought together, like scattered sheep into one fold – books from a library which once had been in some distant town in Poland, or an extinct Yeshiva. There was something sad and mournful about these volumes ... as if they were whispering a tale of yearning and hope since obliterated ... I would find myself straightening out these books and arranging them in the boxes with a personal sense of tenderness as if they had belonged to someone dear to me, someone recently deceased.⁶

Jewish life is based on texts – nevertheless, in the immediate post-war years, a gulf opened between the surviving fragment of texts and *She'erit Hapletah*, the human remnant who had survived and who gave themselves this name, in an intertextual allusion to the remnant that returned to Israel from captivity in Babylon (Ezra 9:15). As long as the books were warehoused in Offenbach, the survivors lacked even the minimum quantity of texts required to continue the Jewish cycle of life. So they began to demand their return by the U.S. Army, in order to bridge the wide gap between the textual remnants and the human remnants. Who sought to obtain the books in order to read them, and why?

Life after Death: The Displaced Persons

In the years between the German capitulation and the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, the number of Jewish inhabitants of the Displaced Person (DP) camps in the zones of occupation ranged from 50,000 (May 1945) to 185,000 (late 1946).⁷ The majority came to the U.S. occupation zone in 1946: most of them were Jews who were able to escape the Nazis' clutches and had fled to the USSR: partisans and people who had survived in hiding places. Approximately 100,000 liberated survivors fled to occupied Germany to escape anti-Semitism in their countries of origin: this movement was known as *Bericha* (flight). The U.S. Army was instructed to admit Jews to its zone, even if this meant once again adapting the available structures for the people already lodged there.⁸

They arrived with only what they wore on their backs and with their souls in tatters. The hope of finding relatives still alive gradually disappeared as the

extent of what had happened became increasingly apparent; the possibility of beginning a new Jewish life in their native countries seemed unimaginable. They lived in the camps and reconstructed there the only life 'under normal conditions' that they had ever known: the life of the cities, *shtetls* and population groups before the war; their everyday language was Yiddish. The Jews of Central and Eastern Europe had possessed a rich, diverse ideological, political and religious tradition, which now sought to unfold again in the everyday life of the DPs. The laws of the American military occupation guaranteed their survival and organized their routine: however, they provided no spiritual or political answers that would help the survivors come back to life. In the words of Shlomo (Samuel) Gringauz, head of the association *She'erit Hapletah* (the surviving remnant), which encouraged autonomy and self-administration for the DP camps: '... we're not alive: – we are still dead'.⁹ In this context, the need to resume the common cultural and religious traditions that the war in most cases had interrupted moved into the foreground once again. After the book burnings and the crematoriums, the question was how and why should they come back to life, after they had gone through death?

The Answers

In Jewish tradition, there is no personal or communal ritual of spiritual recovery that is not accompanied and supported by texts: by the Torah, the Talmud and rabbinic literature. There is no revival of time without daily sanctification of it and without commemoration of the festivals, guided by the Siddur, the Machzor, the Megillot or the Pesach Haggadah. There is no law without halachic literature, the commentaries, and the written decisions and rulings recorded in the *Responsa*. When the very heart of Judaism was destroyed by the destruction of the written word it was a mortal blow. Different people and groups (Zionists, Bundists, Orthodox Jews, etc.) tried various ways, all of which were connected in some fashion with the Jewish texts and their interpretation. The answers of the survivors, it appears to us, had to do with three interrelated 'modes' or spheres of existence: namely, death, life and writing.¹⁰

The Desire for Death: Nakam (Revenge)

After the end of the war, Europe was haunted by the phantom of revenge. While mere justice, such as the Nuremberg Trials and the denazification process, was deemed an act of revenge by the majority of the German population (without mentioning here the expulsions from the East), Jewish combatants and survivors discussed the possibility and the legitimacy of taking the law into

their own hands.¹¹ Sometimes individually or in small groups, they assassinated former members of the SS who had escaped justice.¹² In the same spirit, a group of partisans, survivors from the Vilna Ghetto under the leadership of Abba Kovner, took the name DIN (court),¹³ and developed two plans of revenge: (a) poisoning the water supply of four German cities and (b) poisoning the food of the former SS members who were imprisoned in American military camps.¹⁴ The latter plan was carried out in April 1946 in a camp near Nuremberg, by lacing some of the bread with arsenic. Roughly 2,000 prisoners were made ill by the poison, but no one died.¹⁵ The plan for mass poisoning through the water supply was never executed.

And Back to Writing

A few months earlier, in February 1946, a poem by Baruch Cynamon was published in a daily newspaper of the Derendorf DP Camp, which unleashed an intense debate among the Jewish readers, who asked themselves: is that the Jewish spirit? The last lines of the poem are as follows:

I only want to wish them [the Germans]
The same experiences I had:
May they know my bitterness
May their sisters be raped
And then murdered!
May their parents be buried alive!
May their brothers drop from fatigue!
To wash, give them soap made from their own bones!
May they suffer my bitterness!!¹⁶

Again, the written word played a central role in Jewish history. Instead of putting the human wish for revenge into practice, it was – to borrow a term from Sigmund Freud (1856–1936) – processed in a poem (here, let us also recall the brief verses that Primo Levi dedicated to Adolf Eichmann).¹⁷ Once again literature defended and protected the Jewish people: even from their own thirst for revenge. Here the principle enunciated by Emmanuel Levinas, citing Leon Ashkenazi, is again relevant: the originality of Judaism lies in the moment of arrest between nature and man, between the idea and the act, the moment in which a mitzvah is performed, the moment that preserves our humanity through language and text.¹⁸

Berel Lang falls back on the psychoanalytic concept of displacement to explain why there were almost no acts of physical revenge on the part of either the weakened survivors or the Jewish communities. He sees the ‘displaced’ expression of revenge in a certain use of boycotts by the victims, who, for example, refused to buy German products or step on German soil.

For the displaced persons, these displaced forms of revenge seem to have found a better place in literary displacement. Analyses of the work of Elie Wiesel by Naomi Seidman¹⁹ and of the work of Edgar Hilsenrath by Jennifer Taylor²⁰ suggest that for some survivors, literature was a certain form of vengeance. While Wiesel tried to write ‘to testify, to stop the dead from dying, to justify my own survival’,²¹ Hilsenrath, according to Taylor, sought to revenge himself on the German language and culture by repossessing and masterfully appropriating them, and by ridiculing the *Herrenmenschen*, the members of the ‘master race’ who once believed that Nazi language was equivalent to the German language.²²

In this way, literature provided a legitimate arena for Jewish revenge – a symbolic and humane revenge that allowed the authors to express and thus to process their feelings in this moment of arrest between the individual and the act. A similar life instinct (and here let us recall that life is the value par excellence in Judaism)²³ became a concrete reply to so many deaths. When Ben Gurion learned of the DIN group’s intention of poisoning cities, he condemned the plan and thus allied himself with the Jewish tradition that responds to death with life: ‘Revenge in history is a very important thing indeed, but if we could bring back six million Jews, rather than kill six million Germans – this would be even more important.’²⁴

The Desire for Life: Children

The same message, but endowed with the force of a commandment, underlies Mitzvah 614, which Emil Fackenheim wrote after Auschwitz: ‘Jews are commanded to survive as Jews.’²⁵ In the face of the horror of the events, the response was life – in a more comprehensive way than vengeance and death. While some continued to wonder why there were so few acts of revenge by the Jewish people, the Allies were astonished to see, a few months after the war’s end, a real ‘Baby Boom’ in the DP camps. Alina Grossmann notes: ‘almost one-third of the Jewish women between 18 and 45 were either pregnant or had just had a baby [...] Women who only a few weeks earlier had been “living dead,” emaciated and amenorrheic, now carried babies to full term’.²⁶ Buoyed by confidence in a future that would help them start to live again, the survivors pinned their hopes on life with a vitality that defied all the predictions of the physicians and sociologists. At the same time, the German population recorded a historically low birth-rate. Michael Brenner mentions a fertility rate of 7.35 percent for Germans in Bavaria in 1946, while in the DP camps it reached 29 percent and rose to 35.8 percent in 1948²⁷ – data that would bring a smile to old Freud’s face. An equally hopeful indication can be found in a report presented to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)²⁸ in January 1946 by Rabbi Israel Rosenberg (1875–1956): ‘A request has been

made for gold from the Military Government to manufacture in Germany 10,000 wedding rings.²⁹ The army's metal was melted down to make rings, which again sealed a covenant: with another person and with life itself.

The Desire for the Written Word: The Book

Another answer, which plays the central role in this article, was to reclaim the *ot*, the letter, to emphasize the sign (in Hebrew, *ot* means both 'sign' and 'letter'). For some people, this meant resuming the dialogue with G-d by means of 'His' texts; for others, it meant to continue the dialogue under normal conditions. The point was to restore the *brit*, the covenant between Israel and G-d that was broken by the Holocaust.³⁰ There is no cultural recovery, not even the most secular in the entire spectrum, that is not placed in relation to the religious texts – even if only to contradict them.

During the war, the written word continued to be a great source of support for the Jewish people: the accounts of libraries such as those in the Vilna Ghetto or even in Buchenwald, as well as in the underground of the Warsaw Ghetto, bear witness to that fact. All concurred that in the worst imaginable nutritional conditions, hardly adequate to sustain life, there was a 'hunger for the printed word'.³¹ Many readers wanted to flee from reality, while others sought answers and inspiration in order to face this unprecedented situation.³² When hunger cannot be assuaged, reading becomes indispensable – and how could it be otherwise, when people then have to return to (a)normality again? Is there any book in the world that could yield an answer to the fundamental question: how and why did what happened occur?

From Word to Lead: The Printing Plates of the Rom Press

Amid the fighting in the ghetto, the poet and partisan Abraham Sutzkever gives an initial answer to that question. In his poem '*Di blayene platn fun roms drukeray*' (The Lead Plates at the Rom Press), written in the Vilna Ghetto on 12 September 1943,³³ he imagines a scene in which the Jewish fighters melt down, to make bullets, the lead plates that had been made for the printing of the most beautiful and most widely used Talmud edition – the Vilna *Shas* – by the most famous Jewish publishing house that ever existed: the press of the Rom family. The printing-press letters of Jewish wisdom from exile ('a verse from Babylonia, from Poland a verse') are converted into weapons for use against the enemy, the Nazis ('*un schmeltzn oyf koyln dem gayst funem blay*', 'and melt into bullets the soul of the lead'). In Sutzkever's words:

*Mir hobn vi finger geshatrekte
durkh gratn
tsu fangen di likhtike luft fun
der fray –*

Like fingers stretched out through
the bars in the night
to catch the free light of the air that
is shed –

*durkh nakht zikh getsoygn, tsu
nemen di platn,
di blayene platn fun roms
drukeray.
Mir, troymer, badarfn itst vern
soldatn
un shmeltzn oyf koyln dem gayst
funem blay.
un mir hobn vider geefnt dem
shtempl
tsu epes a heymisher eybiker heyl.*

*mit shotns bapantsert, bay shayn
fun a lempl –
gegosen di oysyes – a tseyl nokh
a tseyl,
azoy vi di zeydes a mol inem templ*

*In gildene yom-tov-minoyres –
dem eyl.*

*Dem blay hot geloykhtn baym
oysgish koyln,
makshoves – gegangen an os
nokh an os.*

*A shure fun bavel, a shure fun
poyln,
gezotn, gefleytst in der zelibiker
mos.*

*di yidishe gvure, in verter
farhoyln.
muz oyfraysen itster di velt mit
a shos!*

*un ver s'hot in geto gezen dos
klezayen
farklamert in heldishe yidishe
hent –
gezen hot er ranglen zikh
yerusholaim,
dos folk fun yene granitene vent;*

*farnumen di verter, farshmoltsn
in blayen,
un zeyere shtimen in hartsn
derkent.*

we sneak in the dark to grab up, as
in spite,
the Rom printing plates, with old
wisdom inbred.
We dreamers now have to be
soldiers and fight
and melt into bullets the soul of the
lead.
And now, once again we broke open
the seal
of a strangely familiar, a timeless
dark cave.
And armoured in shadows, with
candles concealed,
we poured out the letters – in lead
lines engraved,
thus did, in the Temple, our
forefathers wield
the golden *menorahs*, poured in oil
that was saved.
Liquid lead shining brightly in
bullets so fine,
ancient thoughts – in the letters that
melted hot.
A line from Babylonia, from Poland
a line,
boiled, flooded together, in the
foundry pot
Jewish valour, hidden in word and
in sign,
must now explode the whole world
with a shot!
And he who saw Jewish youth in
their prime
clutching the weapons in ghetto
halls –
he saw the last struggle of
Yerushalayim,
the heroic fall of those granite
walls;
took in the words, poured in lead,
out of time,
and heard in his voice their ancient
voice calls.

Sutzkever invites us to take part in some wordplay and in a bit of poetic wishful thinking, in which words are converted into lead bullets, the *Shas* into a *shos*, the Talmud into a shot.³⁴

From Lead to Word: The Talmud of *She'erit Hapletah*

The cultural treasures destroyed by the Nazis and the books which they burned can never be replaced, any more than our 6,000,000 dead martyrs can be restored to us. But the printing of this new edition of the Talmud in Germany represents a small measure of moral restitution to the Jewish people for all we have lost. (Rabbi Solomon Shapiro, 1948)³⁵

Apparently the lead printing plates of the Rom Press were never melted down³⁶ – who knows what became of them? Perhaps they were destroyed, just like the millions of books that were confiscated and destroyed by biblioclasts. Of the approximately two million Jewish books from all over Europe that were waiting in the Offenbach Archival Depot to be identified and returned,³⁷ the JDC in April 1946 borrowed for use in the DP camps only 20,000 volumes whose owners could not be determined: an insufficient quantity for the religious and educational needs of the DPs. In the same time period, various Jewish organizations printed books and educational materials: the *Vaad Haatzala* (Rescue Committee), religious books in particular; the JAFP (Jewish Agency for Palestine), books for Zionist training; and the JDC, *Siddurim*, *Haggadoth*, *Megilloth*, and *Shulchan Arukh*.³⁸

In the same year – and almost as if responding to an inherent Jewish logic, and to the knowledge that has sustained and protected the people for centuries – Rabbi Rose (who also involved Rabbi Samuel Snieg in his project) and Rabbi Horowitz, both survivors of concentration camps (Slobodtka and Dachau) and both from Lithuania (the cradle of the *Shas*) hit upon the same idea quite independently of each other: someone ought to publish a new Talmud in the ruins of Germany.³⁹ This idea became the central element in the Jewish rebirth of the surviving remnant – to return to the book, and not to just any book. The Talmud that was photographed to make printing plates for the new copies was the *Shas* from the Rom Press in Vilna. The same Talmud that Sutzkever had melted down into lead bullets in his poem returned as a written work in post-war Europe to offer the survivors a ‘portable homeland’ (Heinrich Heine, 1854).⁴⁰

Only a few Jewish books have evoked as much resistance, both inside Judaism and in the non-Jewish world, as the Talmud.⁴¹ When the Talmud was assembled, it was structured around a literary and legal setting like the *Mishnah*.⁴² It simultaneously presented a vision and a suggestion for what Jews ought to be like and how Jews should lead their lives. The text is put together on the basis of constantly questioning the text; again and again, it pores over its own inflections and perfections, and creates intertextual relationships by ignoring the dimensions of time and space; it links passages until the literal meaning is forgotten.⁴³ No subject is too important or too unimportant. ‘*Elu v’elu divrei elohim chaim*’ (‘These and those are words of the Living G-d’). Some of the survivors longed to return to this world.

In 1945, at the Benedictine monastery of St Ottilien near Landsberg, where Rabbi Snieg and Rabbi Rose were interned in the DP camp, a hidden copy of the treatises *Nedarim* and *Kiddushim* was discovered. In the same year, 3,000 reproductions of it were made with the support of the *Vaad Hatzala*.⁴⁴ In 1946, in a Munich cemetery, three volumes that had survived a book burning were discovered.⁴⁵ In September of the same year, the plan to print the entire Talmud took shape. Both rabbis went to Rabbi Philip Bernstein, Advisor on Jewish Affairs to the U.S. Army, seeking to arouse his enthusiasm for the idea: 'The publication of the Talmud became his "baby"'.⁴⁶ On the one hand they stressed the great symbolic value that a Talmud printing supported by the U.S. Army would have, and on the other they pointed to the real needs of the approximately twenty *yeshivot* (Talmud schools) with 1,500 pupils.⁴⁷ Bernstein persuaded the U.S. Army authorities, who then decided to include the costs in the war reparations that Germany was required to pay to the Allies (!).⁴⁸ Taking into account the acute paper shortage⁴⁹ and estimating what they viewed as the realistic needs of the Jewish population of the DP camps, the U.S. Army approved the printing of fifty copies of the *Shas* Talmud (the rabbis had originally requested 3,000!), which were to be produced with zinc plates based on original copies in a photomechanical reproduction process. Since it proved impossible to find a complete Talmud edition amid the destruction in Europe, two original sets had to be brought from New York by the JDC, which had also decided to support the project financially and organized a fundraising campaign to collect almost US\$18,000 for the printing of at least 1,000 additional copies.⁵⁰

Gerd Korman analyses the historical context of the enthusiasm that characterized the launching of the project: no clear and satisfactory alternative for the Jewish population of the DP camps in Germany was in view, nor was a political solution for the *Yishuv* (Jewish community in Palestine) in sight. The idea that the DPs would end up staying in Europe was spreading in non-Jewish circles. In this context – Korman asserts – the Talmud reprint project can be interpreted as a kind of political pain reliever for Diaspora Jewry.⁵¹

In February 1947, work on the reprinting began, under the direction of Rabbi Rose and Rabbi Snieg. The first copy (the treatise *Shabbat*) was published in late 1948⁵² by Winter Verlag in Heidelberg⁵³ – and in early 1951 printing of 700 copies was completed.⁵⁴ At the bottom of the title page, designed by Rosenkranz (like both rabbis, a survivor), is a sombre, black-and-white depiction of a concentration camp, in which barracks and people collecting corpses are seen.⁵⁵ Above it are these words: 'Labor Camp in *Ashkenaz* (Germany) in the Era of National Socialism', and a verse from Psalms (119: 87): '*Kimeat kaluni baaretz, va ani lo azavti pekudecha*' ('They almost obliterated me from the earth, but I forsook not Thy precepts'). Above, in the right and left margins, a landscape with palms in *Eretz Israel* is depicted.



Title page of the *Talmud of She'erit Hapletah* (design by Rosenkranz). We are grateful to the J dische Hochschule Heidelberg (Heidelberg College of Jewish Studies) for this photograph. The library there has a complete set of the *Talmud*.

In the centre are the title of the treatise and the names of the publishers: '*Vaad Hagudat Harabanim* (the Rabbinic Organization in the American Sector) with the aid of the American Military Command and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Germany.' At the top are words from a Psalm, '*me'shi'bud l'geulah, me'afelah l'or gadol*' ('From bondage to freedom; from

deep darkness to a great light'), beneath a light-flooded illustration, possibly of Jerusalem.⁵⁶ From the darkness of the camp, the people of Israel rise toward the radiant light of Jerusalem.

The edition of the Talmud in Germany accompanied the dramatic years between the DPs' uncertainty about their future and the creation of the State of Israel and the War of Independence, as well as the founding of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). These were turbulent times for international politics and for the situation of the Jews in particular: in 1948, the State of Israel and the first volume of the Talmud saw the light of day simultaneously. By the time printing was completed in 1951, most of the potential readers had left Germany: the DP camps were dissolved in 1952, and only a small remnant was left, people who for health reasons could not risk emigration and lived at the Föhrenwald Camp, which functioned until 1957.⁵⁷ The symbolic value of the text as a territory for the Jewish people diminished once the new homeland in Israel was established – the response came at the wrong time. The printing and distribution did not acquire the symbolic significance that many supporters and many of those responsible had hoped. After the intellectual and religious centre of Jewish Europe had been destroyed and defiled, the State of Israel, upon its founding, asserted its claim to be the sole heir and representative of Judaism, while the American Jews began to make use of their demographic and political strength. The new Jew was embodied by the Israeli *kibbutznik*, who held a rifle in one hand and a plow in the other. The figure of the 'passive and intellectual' Jews of the Diaspora, linked with the image of the Talmud student, turned into the exact opposite. Rabbi Snieg and Rabbi Rose dreamed of travelling to Israel to present a copy to Chaim Weizmann in person. Finally, they delivered a Talmud treatise only to General Lucius Dubignon Clay as the representative of the U.S. Army, in 1949. The fact that such a project could have no place in the new international environment is demonstrated by the reply written by Ruth Havicho on behalf of Ben Gurion, to acknowledge the receipt of the Talmud: a brief, curt 'Thank you'.⁵⁸

Epilogue: From Death to Life through the Written Word

One day a time will come when people enter into the land of eternal peace and justice forever. However, the path to that country will lead them across the River Sambatyon, which rages and boils with pitch and sulfur six days of the week and is still only on Shabbat, as the Fathers say. [...] Miraculously two bridges (for people) will extend across the river: one made of iron, the other of paper [...] Those who are accustomed to take everything by force will storm the iron bridge, so that the righteous ones are left behind and have no recourse



General Clay receives an edition of the Talmud of She'erit Hapletah. Source: JDC Archives.

but to set their trust in, and their feet on, the paper bridge. And the people on the iron bridge will watch what they are doing and hardly be able to contain their laughter [...] But suddenly the iron bridge, just before the first person has stepped off it, breaks in half. And the current will swallow up all those who were so sure of themselves. But the righteous ones will safely make their way across the paper bridge into the Promised Land, and there will not be one whom the bridge does not safely bear ...⁵⁹

The imagery of the old tale of the paper bridge, here retold in a literary adaptation by Mark Rasumny, appears to have been more current than ever in the years following the Shoah. The destruction and theft of Jewish books had a significance for Jewish tradition that implies far more than the partly irretrievable loss of the mere works. Thus the response of *Am HaSefer*, the People of the Book, to the destruction also implies use of a paper bridge that leads simultaneously into the past and into the future. Although in the new political context of Germany in 1951 there were no longer any readers for the Talmud of *She'erit Hapletah*, the JDC imparted a new meaning to the project by deciding to send the editions to Jewish communities and libraries throughout the

world.⁶⁰ They received, from the ruins of Germany, a newly printed piece of paper, a surviving remnant, a bridge made of the written word, which carried the memory of the righteous ones and the Jewish will to live ahead into the future.⁶¹

Only forty sets remained in Germany, though only because the U.S. Army thought that 'some of these books printed in Germany should be left ... in Germany'.⁶² Some years later, various religious institutions wanted to gain possession of those printing plates for the *Shas* Talmud, which represented the glory of pre-war Vilna, because after being melted down into bullets in the words of the poet, they had been recovered for the survivors through the fresh encounter of book and reader. For much more secular reasons, the new edition of the Talmud on German soil by the JDC was not authorized: this chapter in history was considered to be closed.

The Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs wanted to acquire the printing plates in 1954, in order to print more copies. However, time had taken its toll on them and they were no longer usable. In the new international and Jewish contexts, the plates of the Rom Press and the *She'erit Hapletah* had become unfruitful. The source had dried up: no more *Talmudim* could be produced on this basis.

According to Roskies, the Jewish responses to catastrophes were based on pre-existing patterns that endeavoured to place the tragedies in a continuum (destruction of the temple, exile, restoration, exile, Inquisition, and so on) which returns meaning to them by alternating historical dramas with the promise of a return to normality; 'God never withdrew from the Covenant'.⁶³ The printing of the Talmud in Germany after the Shoah thus represented the response of Orthodox Judaism 'that was expected of it': the resubstantiation of the law and of religious life. It can, however, also be interpreted in the three 'modes' discussed in this article – death, life and writing. First, as a displaced form of revenge, which can be read from a survivor's account of a scene that took place in Bergen-Belsen in 1944. Herbert Kruskal, in his memoir, describes an angry tirade on the part of the dreaded head of the *Arbeitsdienst*, Fritz Rau, when he discovered books in a barracks: 'Everybody here seems to be some kind of rabbi. I just hope you didn't dare to bring the Talmud in here'.⁶⁴ Some years later the Talmud was printed in Germany, in a large edition, for export. Second, this also signified a return to Jewish life: the resubstantiation of a secret and protected territory (the scriptures), where the children could find an identity and a space where they belonged. Third, this future space in reality is a return to the book; it is the longing for the written word that has not let go of the Jewish people for centuries. Is it possible to imagine a response that could be more in accord with what is most valuable in the Jewish tradition of the Diaspora, which contains different levels of meaning fused with the story of some printing plates embodying the most brilliant and most terrible moments of European Jewry?

Notes

1. This article was published within the framework of the conference 'Jüdischer Buchbesitz als Raubgut' [Jewish-Owned Books as Looted Property], held in Hannover in May 2005, where a movement of German librarians started a campaign to restore the books salvaged after the looting, as far as possible, to relatives of the original owners or to Jewish institutions. The minutes of this symposium can be read in Regine Dehnel, ed., *J discher Buchbesitz als Raubgut* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2005). The authors thank the archivists of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in New York, Sherry Hyman und Misha Mitsel, for their assistance with research.
2. Markus Kirchhoff, *H user des Buches. Bilder j discher Bibliotheken*, (Simon Dubnow Institut für jüdische Geschichte und Kultur an der Universität Leipzig, Leipzig: Reclam, 2002), p. 121.
3. Peter Honigmann, 'Talmuddrucke im Nachkriegsdeutschland', in *berlebt und unterwegs. J dische Displaced Persons im Nachkriegsdeutschland*, (Frankfurt am Main: Fritz Bauer Institut, 1997), pp. 249–266; here p. 252. On the Offenbach Archival Depot, see also <http://www.ushmm.org/oad/main2.htm> (9 June 2005).
4. Roskies quotes from Sutzkever's accounts (in *Fun vilner geto* [Moscow, 1946], pp. 114–1209) of the theft of books from the Jewish library in Vilna and the desecration of the sacred texts, such as the sale of 500 Torah scrolls that were used as lining for boots. See David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 228. The Offenbach Archival Depot had in its possession 600 Torah scrolls whose origin could not be determined.
5. On the problems of returning Jewish libraries to East European countries whose Jewish populations had been decimated, see Kirchhoff, *H user des Buches*, p. 150 ff., as well as the aforementioned documents of the Offenbach Archival Depot (see note 3).
6. Cited in Seymour J. Pomrenze, *Personal Reminiscences of the Offenbach Archival Depot 1946–49. Fulfilling International and Moral Obligations*, November 30, 1998, <http://www.ushmm.org/oad/main2.htm>.
7. See Israel Gutman, ed. (Eberhard Jäckel et al., eds. of the German edition), *Enzyklop die des Holocaust*. Vol. 1, (Munich, Zurich: Piper, 1995), p. 346.
8. See Gerd Korman, 'Survivors' Talmud and the U.S. Army', *American Jewish History* 73, no. 3, 1984, pp. 252–285; here p. 256. Haim Genizi adds that 'in August 1947 there were 222,000 Jews out of 747,000 DPs in U.S. Zones in Germany and Austria', in *America's Fair Share. The Admission and Resettlement of Displaced Persons, 1945–1952*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), p. 29. Based on the statistics in Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 278 and 282, fig. A2, A7.
9. Quoted from Zeev Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Quote No. 24, p. 31. Speech given by Z. Grinberg, MD, Head Doctor for Political Ex-prisoners in Germany, at the Hospital Liberation Concert in St Ottilien on May 27, 1945.
10. Of the numerous and diverse responses, only three approaches are addressed in this article. In no way do they cover the entire spectrum of the many attempts, nor do they claim to be the most representative. Thus, for example, the article does not mention the response of the Zionist organizations, which was most decisively and successfully presented and which culminated in the founding of Israel in 1948. Analysis of this

process would exceed the conceptual scope of this article, which concentrates on the replies intrinsic to the *She'erit Hapletah* movement immediately after the war's end in the areas controlled by the Allies. On this subject, see the conclusions of Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope*.

11. Jael Geis, 'Yes, you have to forgive your enemies, but not before they are hanged', Gedanken zur Rache für die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden im unmittelbaren Nachkriegsdeutschland, in *Menora. Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte 1998*, eds. Julius Schoeps, Karl Grötzingen and Gert Mattenklott (Bodenheim: Philo, 1998), pp. 155–180; here p. 162.
12. Probably there were 'mix-ups' as well: Kovner himself reported in his notes that he thought he had been present at Eichmann's assassination until he learned of his capture in Argentina in 1961. See Tom Segev, *The Seven Million* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), p. 148.
13. The history of the DIN group is presented in detail in Jim G. Tobias and Peter Zinke, *Nakam. Jüdische Rache an NS-Täter*innen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2003). In 2000, when the book was presented in the press and Tobias was filming a documentary on the subject, the Nuremberg public prosecutor's office investigated two members of DIN on a charge of 'attempted murder' (!). After Tobias refused to provide information about the contemporary witnesses' places of residence and the press learned of the investigation, the public prosecutor's office abandoned the action. This attempt shows the extent to which the past is still alive in Germany, so that it is still possible today, as Tobias said, that 'In Nuremberg, the city of the Race Laws, only investigations of Jews were initiated'. On this subject, see 'Vorschriften sind Vorschriften', *Die Tageszeitung* 6057, February 2, 2000, p. 1.; 'Rache macht schlechte Politik', *Aufbau* 66, no. 9, May 4, 2000, p. 1, 'Racheanschlag auf SS-Männer bleibt ohne juristische Folgen', *Aufbau* 66, no. 10, May 18, 2000, p. 1; as well as the above-mentioned book by Tobias and Zinke, p. 133 ff.
14. Cited in Berel Lang, 'Holocaust Memory and Revenge. The Presence of the Past', in *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture and Society* N.S., 2 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 1–21. On this subject, see also Segev, *The Seven Million*, and Tobias and Zinke, *Nakam*.
15. See Segev, *The Seven Million*, p. 145.
16. Geis, 'Yes, you have to forgive', p. 156 ff.
17. The poem by Levi is also quoted in Lang, 'Holocaust Memory and Revenge'.
18. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968), p. 177.
19. Naomi Seidman, 'Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage', in: *Jewish Social Studies. History, Culture and Society*, N.S. 3, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 1–19.
20. Jennifer Taylor, 'Writing as Revenge. Reading Edgar Hilsenrath's *Der Nazi und der Friseur* as a Shoah Survivor's Fantasy', in *History of European Ideas*. Official Journal of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas 20, no. 1/3 (New York: Elsevier Science, 1995), pp. 439–444.
21. Cited in Seidman, 'Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage', p. 4. Original in Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Schocken, 1995), p. 239.
22. 'The novel is at once a *Bildungsroman* and an *anti-Bildungsroman*, a fairy tale and a subversion of the fairy tale' (Taylor, 'Writing as Revenge', p. 440).
23. Innumerable Jewish sources point to this, including: 'I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed' (Deuteronomy

- 30: 19), as well as 'Therefore was the first man created alone, to teach us that whoever destroys a single soul, Scripture ascribes to him as if he has destroyed an entire world, and whoever preserves a single soul, Scripture ascribes to him as if he has saved an entire world' (Talmud Sanhedrin 4:5).
24. Quoted in Segev, *The Seven Million*, p. 151.
 25. In the traditional version, the Torah contains Torah 613 *mitzvot* (commandments). In the 614th commandment, Fackenheim wrote: 'Jews are forbidden to give Hitler posthumous victories.' It actually contained four parts: 'Jews are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish'; 'to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish'; 'forbidden to despair of Man, lest they cooperate in delivering the world to the forces of Auschwitz'; 'forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish'. See Emil L. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 84.
 26. See Alina Grossmann, '35,8 Promille. Geburten in Displaced Persons-Lagern', in *Die Macht der Zeichen*, eds. Daniel Tyradellis and Michael S. Friedlander (Berlin: 2004), pp. 143–145.
 27. Cited in Tyradellis and Friedlander, *Die Macht der Zeichen*, p. 144.
 28. An American Jewish charitable organization founded in 1914, whose mission is to help Jewish communities worldwide in situations of crisis and need.
 29. JDC Archive 45/64, 406; report by Rabbi Rosenberg dated January 1, 1946.
 30. Roskies, *Fun vilner geto*, p. 8.
 31. Cited in Kirchhoff, *H user des Buches*, p. 132.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
 33. The poem is a transcription from Abraham Sutzkever, *Poetische Verk*, Vol. 1, (Tel Aviv: 1963), p. 335; the original appeared in *di festung*. Roskies asserts that the poem was first dated 18 February 1944, and that Sutzkever altered the date later. He states that the invention of the event makes Sutzkever's poem all the more brilliant, 'because the image of sacred letter melted down into lead bullets is the perfect symbol of the Jewish Resistance, a revolution in Jewish conscience that drew its strength from the most ancient sources'. Roskies, *Fun vilner geto*, p. 250 ff.
 34. On this subject, see also André Vogel Ettin: *Speaking Silences: Stillness and Voice in Modern Thought and Jewish Tradition* (Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1994), p. 177 ff.
 35. Quote from a JDC document: 'Religious Director for Germany describes printing of New 'Talmud of Shearit Hapleta' JDC Archive 45/46, 1268, 1949, p. 1.
 36. There are different statements about this, however. Roskies refers to a conversation with Kovner in the 1980s; see Roskies, *Fun vilner geto*, p. 250 ff. See also Vogel Ettin, *Speaking Silences*, p. 177 ff.
 37. Here we do not want to neglect to mention Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, an association that was founded in 1947 by the majority of worldwide Jewish organizations to deal with the Jewish cultural and religious property that had been looted by the Nazis and recovered by the U.S. Military Government. It was active from 1948 until the end of January 1951 in Germany. Among those who took on this task were Salo Baron, Hanna Arendt (she visited Germany in 1946 to take delivery of books – documented in her article 'Report from Germany') and Gershom Scholem, whose work included identifying the Hebrew manuscripts.
 38. Letter from Rabbi Solomon Shapiro to Mr. Edward Phillips of the Committee on Cultural Affairs, 19 December 1947. It mentions 'a big printing program', with the

- following books to be published: 'Prayer books 10,000, Prophets 5,000, Haggadah 10,000, Shulchan Aruch 5,000', as well as a 'colossal matzoh baking project to supply all of Germany'. The two reports to Leo W. Scherz, director in the U.S. Zone, by Rabbi Alexander Rosenberg dated 29 January 1946 (JDC Archive 45/64, 406) and July/August 1946 (JDC Archive 45/64, 406) also mention a project for publication of '25,000 daily prayer books, 10,000 Chumash and Rashi, five volumes of the Prophets and Hagiography in 1000 copies each.'
39. The versions of the first printing of the entire Talmud given by Peter Honigmann and Gerd Korman exhibit several historical differences.
 40. See Heinrich Heine, *Heines Werke in fünf Bänden*, Vol. 5 (Berlin: Aufbau, 1978), p. 374.
 41. Korman reminds us that 'Every Jew in Poland was ordered, upon pain of death, to carry to the Nazi bonfires and personally consign to the flames his copy of the Talmud' (Korman, 'Survivors' Talmud and the U.S. Army', p. 266).
 42. See Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: 1992), p. 11. Stemberger emphasizes that there is not yet definite evidence to indicate whether the Mishnah was conceived of as a compendium, a textbook or a codex. At any rate the Mishnah in addition is the first collection of rabbinic laws of the second century C.E. in which rabbinic traditions appear. See Hans Jürgen Becker, *Die großen rabbinischen Sammelwerke Palästinas*. (Tübingen and Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999), p. 1.
 43. Here, see Levinas, *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques*, p. 18 ff.
 44. See Honigmann, 'Talmuddrucke im Nachkriegsdeutschland', p. 256 ff.
 45. See Korman, 'Survivors' Talmud and the U.S. Army', p. 265.
 46. Regarding the role of Rabbi Bernstein, see Haim Genizi, 'Philip S. Bernstein. Adviser on Jewish Affairs. May 1946 – August 1947', Publication on the website of the Wiesenthal Center <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/resources/books/annual3/chap06.html> (1 April 2005).
 47. Calculation by Honigmann, 'Talmuddrucke im Nachkriegsdeutschland', p. 250.
 48. Memorandum by Theodore D. Feder, 10.27.1988 (JDC Archives). See also Korman, 'Survivors' Talmud and the U.S. Army', p. 270.
 49. For some of the U.S. Army authorities, the need to print a 'book' of this size in post-war conditions was incomprehensible. Thus, Colonel Garde argued in a report as follows: 'The U.S. Zone contained 1,400 tons of paper. Divided by 16 nationals those books and magazine supplies came to 88 tons for each million. There are 190,000 Jews in Germany. All are not 'Orthodox.' Conclusion: 115 tons of paper for one book title even though it be the Talmud, would be far in excess of reasonable demand.' Quoted in Korman, 'Survivors' Talmud and the U.S. Army', p. 269.
 50. See JDC Archives Document 45/64, 1268.
 51. Korman, 'Survivors' Talmud and the U.S. Army', p. 260.
 52. Letter from the JDC Archives dated 3 November 1949 (Document 45/64, 1268).
 53. The edition of the Talmud of *She'erit Hapletah* was forgotten not only by historians, but also by Winter Verlag itself, the most prestigious academic press in Heidelberg, which does not even mention it in its lavish chronicle. Some Jewish historians have pointed out how important it was to select Heidelberg as the place of publication, since this city was one of the centres of the book burnings and its university was one of the most active in National Socialism.
 54. On the 'reduction' to 650 copies because of economic problems and paper shortage, see a memo dated 3.22.1960 (JDC Archives 45/64, 1265). 'However, with the changes in the economic situation in Germany and the stabilization of currency, it will be possible to publish only 650 sets with the funds that have been allocated.' (Statement

- by Rabbi Shapiro. Minutes of the meeting of the Committee on Cultural Religious Affairs of the AJDC, June 27, 1949). See also the record titled 'Meeting of the Committee on Cultural Religious Affairs of the JDC', dated 6.27.1949 (JDC Archives 45/64, 1268). In the same document: 'A sample volume was presented to General Lucius D. Clay before he left Germany, and he was deeply touched by the token.'
55. Honigmann points out a noteworthy difference between the editions: in the first edition, the wheelbarrow is empty, and in the second edition it is laden with corpses, which can be interpreted as part of the process of processing death in the camps during these years. See Honigmann, 'Talmuddrucke im Nachkriegsdeutschland', p. 252.
 56. Honigmann, 'Talmuddrucke im Nachkriegsdeutschland', p. 256
 57. Jacqueline Giere, 'Introduction', in *berlebt und unterwegs. J dische Displaced Persons im Nachkriegsdeutschland*, ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Fritz Bauer Institut, Campus, 1997), pp. 13–23; here p. 18.
 58. Quoted in Korman, 'Survivors' Talmud and the U.S. Army', p. 279.
 59. Mark Rasumny, 'Die Brücke der Gerechten', in *Federmenschen*, ed. Andrej Jendrusch (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1996), p. 155.
 60. On the JDC's distribution criteria, see the letter from Judah Shapiro 'To All Country Directors and Department Heads, Printing the Talmud in Germany', dated 7.22.1949 (JDC Archives 45/64, 1268), the memorandum 'Babylonian Talmud Reproduced in Heidelberg, Germany', dated 7.6.1951, and the memo dated 3.22.1960 (JDC Archives 45/64, 1265), in which the following approximate distribution figures were given: Israel 400, United States 70, South America 10, European states 50, North Africa 10, South Africa 1, Canada 10. In addition, Yale, Harvard, Chicago, Columbia, Brandeis and Yeshiva Universities, as well as other renowned universities, colleges and *yeshivot*, the Library of Congress, and the New York Public Library (JDC Press release 6.21.1951) received the complete set (19 volumes).
 61. There was also some thought of giving every rabbi who had been a DP a complete set, 'the list must be limited to outstanding refugee rabbis who are actually engaged in rabbinical and talmudical studies' (Confidential minutes of the Meeting of the Committee on Cultural Religious Affairs of the Joint Distribution Committee, May 25, 1950).
 62. Cited in Korman, 'Survivors' Talmud and the U.S. Army', p. 276.
 63. Roskies, *Fun vilner geto*, p. 21.
 64. Thomas Rahe, 'Rabbiner im Konzentrationslager Bergen Belsen', in *Menora. Jahrbuch f r deutsch-j dische Geschichte 1998* (Bodenheim: Philo, 1998), pp. 121–151; here p. 129.