

נסתת הרבנים

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY

3080 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10027

212 RIVERSIDE 9-8000

Cable Address: RABBISEM, New York

September 7, 1978

Dear David:

My schedule and inclination prevented me from attending the session of the High Holy Day Sermon Seminar, sponsored by the Seminary for members of the Rabbinical Assembly, earlier this week where you delivered a presentation on the course you moderated at the Seminary earlier this year.

What I am about to write is based on hearsay, from several colleagues who reported to me that near the conclusion of your remarks, you were critical of the Rabbinical Assembly Mahzor for incorporating the Shoah in the general martyrology rubric.

You were alleged to have argued that since the Shoah was a catastrophe of such daemonic preparations, in the number of victims and the barbarity of the oppression, it required a separate liturgical category other than another chapter of the historic record of churban and catastrophe.

If my memory serves me correctly, one of your own undergraduate capers helped produce and edit a booklet of liturgical material and readings for Tisha B'ay in which there was a considerable amount of material about the Shoah reflecting your own view of the Shoah as part of the historic cycle of catastrophe.

No recognized rabbinic authority, of any persuasion, has adopted the Shoah as a special day of commemoration and liturgy.

You are familiar with the history of what has come to be called יום תשעה באב which was designated by the Israel Knesset to be observed on the 29th day of Nisan, annually, shortly after the conclusion of the Eichman trial. At that time, many Israelis wondered why European Jews had gone to their slaughter without resistance. Ben Gurion, if one can retroactively read his mind, was interested in emphasizing the יציאת מצרים of resistance to the Nazis. The date of the 29th of Nisan was chosen for no particular reason except that it fell somewhere between the uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto and Israel Independence Day which is observed on the 5th day of Iyar.

Since 1963 when יום תשעה באב was first publicly observed in Israel, no rabbinical organization or authority has confirmed this liturgical designation by the Israeli Knesset as statutory or normative. In 1964, the Rabbinical Assembly convened a group of rabbis on the 29th day of Nisan. If you have not already made use of this material, you should find the proceedings of that day, published in Conservative Judaism, of interest.

I had a particular interest in the martyrology section of the Rabbinical Assembly Mahzor. The selections from A.M. Klein and Soma Morgenstern were included by Jules Harlow at my suggestion.

We discussed about how to deal with the Shoah with many distinguished members of the Seminary faculty and other scholars and our decision was reached after what we hoped was thoughtful and prayerful considerations and I regret that you have

September 7, 1978

Dr. David G. Roskies

not had an opportunity to discuss this with me to ascertain why we did what we did in our Mahzor.

You are familiar with the ideological controversy which has flared and waned in our community over the theological meaning or meaninglessness of the Shoah. Richard Rubenstein seized the attention of many in our community with his assertion about what and who we are AFTER AUSCHWITZ.

Auschwitz as a special and unique and unprecedented event, and as a watershed in Jewish history and theology was the subject of many debates and symposia, many of which have been published.

Emil Fackenheim and Yitzhak Greenberg have also espoused the view of Auschwitz as a unique event requiring radically new theological categories. Several months ago, a major statement in this debate was made by Rav Yitzhak Hutner in the pages of the Jewish Observer, the literate organ of the American Agudath Israel, a thesis worth pondering, once one gets over the shock of reading his Satmar anti-Zionist bias.

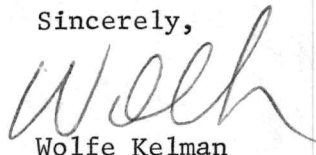
Probably the first course on the Holocaust and its literature offered in any school was taught here at the Seminary by Seymour Siegel, long before the Holocaust became grist for the media and other forms of exploitation. I recall attending his Seminar in which we had the privilege of hearing the authors of most of the significant literature published about the Shoah, including Elie Wiesel and Soma Morgenstern.

I share all of this with you to help me focus my own thinking on this issue, triggered by your critique of our Mahzor and to elicit from you how your own views have developed and changed on this matter.

I am forwarding a copy of this letter to the Editor of Beineinu, a mimeographed publication, distributed to members of the Rabbinical Assembly. If he should decide to publish all or part of this letter, he would want to include, as well, any comments that you have on this matter.

May you and all your loved ones be blessed with years of health, prosperity, creative achievement, and may we continue to share happy tidings one with another.

Sincerely,



Wolfe Kelman

WK:lw

Dr. David G. Roskies
Union Theological Seminary
New York, N. Y. 10027

Handwritten notes: P 11/11 11/18/78 11/27/78