

***Yossel Rakover  
Speaks to God***

**Holocaust Challenges  
to Religious Faith**

***Zvi Kolitz***



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idea is fascinating. Doesn't it make the whole thing even better and more mysterious? Isn't the text—almost biblically!—a magnetic work which attracted adapters and editors on its way who then often contributed the best ideas? There is no Yiddish original from the year 1946! But if so, why didn't Zvi Kolitz tell me?

In Buenos Aires telephone information no longer knows the *Yidische Tsaytung* (but there are thousands of Señor Stoliars; which of them should I ask?). And from Berlin to New York, no Jewish library can help with a copy or even a microfilm of the mysterious paper. I call the Jesuit College in the Argentine capital on the off-chance they'll have some information. An unknown Father Oscar Lateur picks up the receiver. He can't help either, how could he? My article must be finished; I have already failed to make the deadline. Discouraged, I open the newspaper and look at today's wounds: the mutilation of Bosnia, the shadows of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse over Russia, the deadly spiral of pre-Easter terror in Palestine, plans to electrify the barbed wire around the Gaza Strip. Suddenly the fax comes to life, there is a soft purring. I read B-u-e-n-o-s A-i-r-e-s as the first page leaves the machine. It is a chaotic, stuck-together article in Hebrew letters. Only the headline appears in Latin letters: "EL DIARIO ISRAELITA — Miércoles 25 de Setiembre 1946." Gigantic blots of ink decorate each page. The pages are blotchy, here too dark, here too pale, here and there a bit missing, and yet it is clearly legible: "YOSSEL RAKOVERS VENDUNG TSU G-OT — Dertseylung fun ZVI KOLITZ far di Yidische Tsaytung." There follows an indecipherable introduction, then in clearer fragments: "In eyner fun warschawer geto, tsvishn hoyfns fun farsmolyete shteyner und mentshlekhe beyner is qefunen gevorn . . . di vayterdike tsavoe geshribn fun a jidn . . ." And further on, quite clearly: "Varshe, dem 28stn april 1943 — Ikh, Yossel, der zun fun David Rakover fun Tarnopol, a khosid fun gerer rebn un opshtamiker fun di tsadikim gadoylim un kadoyshim fun di mishpokhes Rakover un Mayzls, shrayb di dosike shures, ven dos Varshaver geto is in flamen . . ."

## *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God*



*Zvi Kolitz*

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining, I believe in love even when feeling it not; I believe in God even when He is silent.

*—inscription on the wall of a cellar  
in Cologne where a number of Jews  
hid for the entire duration of the war*

In the ruins of the ghetto of Warsaw, among heaps of charred rubbish, there was found, packed tightly into a small bottle, the following testament, written during the ghetto's last hours by a Jew named Yossel Rakover.

Warsaw, April 28, 1943

I, Yossel, son of Dovid Rakover of Tarnopol, a Hasid of the Rebbe of Ger and a descendant of the righteous, learned, and God-fearing families of Rakover and Meisels, am writing these lines as the houses of the Warsaw ghetto go up in flames. The house I am in is one of the few still not burned. For several hours an unusually heavy artillery barrage has been crashing down on us, and the walls around me are crumbling and disintegrating under the con-



concentrated fire. Before long the house I am in will be transformed, like almost every other house in the ghetto, into a grave for its defenders. By the dagger-sharp, unusually crimson rays of the sun that penetrate through the small, half-walled-up window of my room, through which we have been shooting at the enemy day and night, I see that it must now be late afternoon, just before sundown, and the sun probably has no idea how little I regret that I will not see it again. Something peculiar has happened to us; all our notions and emotions have changed. Death, swift and abrupt, looks like a savior to us, like a liberator, breaking our shackles; and beasts of the field seem so lovable and dear that I feel deep pain whenever the evil fiends that dominate Europe are referred to as beasts. It is not true that there is something beastly in Hitler. He is, I am deeply convinced, a typical child of modern man. Humanity as a whole has spawned him and reared him, and he is the frankest expression of its innermost, most deeply buried wishes.

In a forest where I once hid, I encountered a dog one night, sick and starving; perhaps mad as well, his tail between his legs. Both of us immediately felt the kinship, if not in fact the similarity, of our situations, because the situation of a stray dog is not, by and large, much better than ours. He cuddled up to me, buried his head in my lap, and licked my hands. I do not know whether I ever cried so much as that night. I threw my arms around his neck, crying like a baby. If I say that I envied the animals at that moment, it would be no wonder. But what I felt was more than envy. It was shame. I felt ashamed in front of the dog to be, not a dog, but a man. That is how it is. That is the spiritual state to which we have come. Life is a tragedy, death a savior; man a calamity, the beast an ideal; day a horror, night—a relief.

Millions of people in the great wide world, who love the day, the sun, and the light, do not know, do not have the slightest idea, how much darkness and unhappiness the sun has brought us. It has been turned into a tool in the hands of the evildoers, and they have used it as a searchlight, to track the footprints of those who are fleeing.

When my wife, my six children, and I hid in the forest, it was night, and night alone, that concealed us in its bosom. Day turned us over to those who were seeking our lives. How can I ever forget the day when the Germans raked with a hail of fire the thousands of refugees on the highway from Grodno to Warsaw? As the sun rose, the airplanes zoomed over us. The whole day long, without letup, they murdered us. In this massacre from the sky, my wife perished, with our seven-month-old child in her arms. Two more of my five remaining children disappeared that day without a trace. Their names were Dovid and Yehuda, one was four years old, the other six.

At sunset, the handful of survivors continued their journey toward Warsaw, and I, with my three remaining children, started out to comb the fields and woods at the site of the massacre in search of the children. "Dovid! Yehuda!"—so, throughout the night, our voices cut, as if with knives, the dead silence around us; and a forest echo, helpless, pitiful, and heart-rending, answered our cries, in tones of lamenting eulogy. I never saw my two children again, and in a dream I was told not to worry about them, because they were in the hands of *Ribono-shel-Oylom*.<sup>1</sup>

My other three children died in the course of a year in the Warsaw ghetto. Rokhele, my little daughter, ten years old, had heard that it was possible to find scraps of bread in the public dump outside the ghetto walls. The ghetto was starving at the time, and the bodies of those who died of starvation lay in the streets like heaps of rags. The people of the ghetto were prepared to face any death except death by starvation. This was because the desire to eat remains even after systematic persecution has destroyed all one's spiritual desires, and even if one wishes to die. I have heard about a half-starved Jew who once said to another: "If I could only have one meal like a human being, I would be willing to die!"

Rokhele told me nothing of her plan to steal out of the ghetto, a crime punishable by death. She and a girlfriend of the same

1. Lit. "Master of the World," i.e., God Almighty.



age started out on the perilous journey. They left home under cover of darkness, and at sunrise she and her friend were caught outside the ghetto walls. Nazi ghetto guards, together with dozens of their Polish underlings, at once started in pursuit of these two Jewish children who had dared to hunt for a piece of bread in a garbage can in order not to die of hunger. People witnessing the chase could not believe their eyes. Even in the ghetto it was unprecedented. One might have thought they were pursuing dangerous criminals. Dozens of fiends running amok after a pair of starved ten-year-old children who did not last very long. One of them, my child, running with her last ounce of strength, fell exhausted to the ground, and then the Nazis drove a bayonet through her head. The other girl saved herself, but, driven out of her mind, died two weeks later.

The fifth child, Yacob, a boy of thirteen, died of tuberculosis on his Bar Mitzvah day, and his death was a deliverance for him. The last child, my fifteen-year-old daughter Khave, perished during a *Kinderraktion*<sup>2</sup> that began at sunrise last Rosh Hashona and ended at sunset. That day, before the sun went down, hundreds of Jewish families had lost their children.

Now my time has come. And like Job, I can say of myself—nor am I the only one who can say this—that I return to the soil naked, as naked as on the day of my birth.

I am forty-three years old, and when I look back on the past I can assert confidently, as confidently as a man can be in judging himself, that I have lived an honest life, and that my heart was full of love. At one time I was blessed with success, but I never boasted about it. I had many possessions and, as my rebbe used to say, very rarely had to make sacrifices. By law and by faith, if I had ever been tempted to steal, it would only have been so as to enjoy depravity for its own sake. My house was open to the needy, and I was happy whenever I was able to do anyone a favor. I served God enthusiastically, and my sole request to Him

2. Lit. "children's action"; a roundup of Jewish children.

was that He allow me to worship Him *bikhol livovekha, bikhol nafshekha ubikhol miodekha*.<sup>3</sup>

After everything I have lived through, I cannot say that my relationship to God remains unchanged, but I can say with absolute certainty that my belief in Him has not changed a hair's breadth. In the past, when I was well and well off, my relation to God was as to one who kept on granting me favors for which I was always indebted; now my relationship to Him is as to one who owes me something, owes me much. And since I feel that He owes me something, I believe that I have the right to demand it of Him. But I do not say, like Job, that God should point a finger at my sin so that I may know why I deserve this; for bigger and better people than I are firmly convinced that what is now happening is not a question of punishment for transgressions but rather that something very specific is taking place in the world. More exactly, it is a time of *hester ponim*.<sup>4</sup>

God has veiled His countenance from the world, and thus has delivered mankind over to its most savage impulses. And unfortunately, when the power of impulse dominates the world, it is quite natural that the first victims should be those who embody the divine and the pure. Speaking personally, this is hardly a consolation, but since the destiny of our people is determined, not by earthly, material, and physical calculations, but by calculations not of this earth, spiritual and divine, the believer should see such events as a fragment of a great divine reckoning, against which human tragedies do not count for much. This, however, does not mean that the pious of my people should justify the edict by claiming that God and God's judgments are right. I believe that to say we deserve the blows we have received is to malign ourselves, to desecrate the *Shem hamfoyrosh*<sup>5</sup> "Jew," and

3. "With all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5), a biblical quotation included in the Shema prayer, the profession of faith recited twice daily by observant Jews.

4. God's "Veiling of His Countenance."

5. Lit. "The Ineffable Name," a phrase usually referring to God, but here applied to the ordinary Jew.



this is the same as desecrating the actual *Shem hamfoyrosh*—God; God is maligned when we malign ourselves.

In a situation like this, I naturally expect no miracles, nor do I ask Him, my Lord, to show me mercy. May He treat me with the same countenance-veiling indifference with which He has treated millions of His people. I am no exception, and I expect no special treatment. I will no longer attempt to save myself, nor flee any more. I will facilitate the work of the fire by moistening my clothing with gasoline. I have three bottles of gasoline left after having poured several dozen on the heads of the murderers. That was one of the finest moments in my life, and I roared with laughter. I had never dreamed that the death of human beings, even of enemies—even of such enemies—could so delight me. Foolish humanists may say what they like. Vengeance was and always will be the last means of waging battle and the greatest emotional gratification of the oppressed. Until now I never understood the precise meaning of the passage in the Talmud that states: “Vengeance is sacred because it is mentioned between two of God’s names; as it is written: ‘A God of vengeance is the Lord.’”<sup>6</sup> Now I understand it. Now I know why my heart is so overjoyed when I recall that for thousands of years we have been calling our Lord a God of vengeance: “A God of vengeance is our Lord.”

Now that I am in a position to see life with particularly clear eyes—something only rarely given people before death—it seems to me that there is a fundamental difference between our God and the God in whom the nations of Europe believe. Our God is a God of vengeance, and our Torah is full of death penalties for the seemingly smallest sins, yet at the same time the Talmud relates that it was enough for the Sanhedrin, the highest tribunal of our people when it was free in its own land, to sentence a person to death once in seventy years to have the judges considered murderers.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the followers of the God of

6. Berakhot 33a, citing Ps. 94:1.

7. See Mishnah Makkot 1:20, Talmud Bavli Makkot 7a.

the nations, the so-called God of love, who commanded them to love every creature made in the divine image, have been murdering us without pity, day in, day out, for almost two thousand years.

Yes, I have spoken of vengeance. We have had only a few opportunities to see true vengeance. But when we saw it, it was so good and so worthwhile to see, I felt such deep satisfaction, such tremendous pleasure, that it seemed as if an entirely new life was springing up in me. A tank had suddenly broken into our street. It was bombarded with flaming bottles of gasoline from all the embattled houses. They failed to hit their target, however, and the tank continued on its way. I and my friends waited until the tank was literally passing under our noses. Then, through the half-bricked-up window, we suddenly attacked. The tank burst into flames, and six blazing Nazis jumped out. Ah, how they burned! They burned like the Jews they had set on fire, but they screamed more. Jews do not scream. They accept death as a savior. The Warsaw ghetto perishes in battle. It perishes shooting, struggling, blazing, but no, not screaming!

I still have three bottles of gasoline, and they are as precious to me as wine to a drunkard. After emptying one over my clothes, I will place the paper on which I write these lines in the bottle and hide it among the bricks of the half-walled-up window of this room. If anyone ever finds it and reads it, he will, perhaps, understand the emotions of one of the millions of Jews who died forsaken by the God in whom he believed unshakably. I will let the two other bottles explode on the heads of the evildoers when my last moment comes.

There were twelve of us in this room at the outbreak of the revolt. For nine days we battled against the enemy. All eleven of my comrades have fallen, dying silently. Even the little boy—God only knows how he got here—about five years old, who is now lying dead near me, with his lovely little face wearing the kind of smile that appears on the faces of children who are peacefully dreaming. Even this child died with the same epic



calm as his older comrades. It happened early this morning. Most of us were already dead. The boy scaled the heap of corpses to catch a glimpse of the outside world through the window. For several minutes he stood beside me like that. Suddenly he fell backwards, rolling down the pile of corpses, and lay like a stone. On his small, pale forehead, between the locks of black hair, there was a spattering of blood.

Until sunrise yesterday, when the enemy opened a concentrated barrage against our bunker, one of the last in the ghetto, every one of us was still alive, although five were wounded, each of them still fighting nonetheless. Yesterday and today, all of them fell, one after the other, one on top of the other, standing at their posts and firing until shot to death.

Apart from the three bottles of gasoline, I have no more ammunition. There is still heavy firing from the three floors above me, but they cannot send any help, for the stairway has been destroyed by shellfire, and I think the house is about to cave in. I am lying on the floor as I write these lines, surrounded by my dead comrades. I look into their faces, and a quiet but mocking irony seems to animate them, as if they were saying, "Be patient, you foolish man, another few minutes and everything will become clear to you too." This irony particularly cries out from the face of the little boy lying at my right hand as if asleep. His tiny mouth is drawn into a smile exactly as if he were laughing, and I, who still live and feel and think like a being of flesh and blood—it seems to me that he is laughing at me. He is laughing with that quiet but eloquent, penetrating laughter characteristic of those who know a lot when they try to convey *true knowledge* to those who know *nothing* and think they know everything. Now he knows everything, the boy. It's all clear to him now. He even knows why he was born even though he had to die so soon, and why he died only five years after his birth. And even if he doesn't know why, at least he knows that whether or not he knows it is completely unimportant and insignificant in the light of the revelation of the divine glory in that better world where he now finds himself, perhaps in the arms of his murdered parents to whom he has returned. In an hour or two I too will make the

same discovery. Unless my face is eaten away by the flames, a similar smile may rest on it after I am dead. Meanwhile, I am still alive, and before my death I would like to speak to my God as a living man, a simple, living man who has had the great but unfortunate honor of being a Jew.

I am proud that I am a Jew not *in spite of* the world's treatment of us, but precisely *because of* this treatment. I would be ashamed to belong to one of the peoples that spawned and raised the criminals who are responsible for the deeds that have been perpetrated against us.

I am proud to be a Jew because it is an *art* to be a Jew, because it is *hard* to be a Jew. It is no art to be an Englishman, an American, or a Frenchman. It may be easier, more comfortable, to be one of them, but not more honorable. Yes, it is an honor to be a Jew!

I believe that to be a Jew means to be a fighter, an everlasting swimmer against the turbulent, criminal human current. The Jew is a hero, a martyr; he is holy! You, our enemies, declare that we are bad. I believe that we are better and finer than you, but even if we were worse, I would like to see how you would look in our place!

I am happy to belong to the world's most unfortunate people, whose Torah represents the loftiest and most beautiful body of law and morality. This Torah has been made even holier and more immortal by the degradation and insult to which it has been subjected by the enemies of God.

I believe that to be a Jew is an inborn trait. One is born a Jew exactly as one is born an artist. It is impossible to be released from being a Jew. A divine attribute within us has made us a chosen people. Those who do not understand this will never understand the higher meaning of our martyrdom. "There is nothing more whole than a broken heart," a great rebbe once said,<sup>8</sup> and there is no people more chosen than a people permanently persecuted. If I did not believe that God once picked us

8. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1811); see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (New York: Schocken, 1981), p. 148.



to be a chosen people, I would believe that our tribulations have made us chosen.

I believe in Israel's God even if He has done everything to stop me from believing in Him. I believe in His laws even if I cannot justify His actions. My relationship to Him is no longer the relationship of a slave to his master but rather that of a student to his teacher. I bow my head before His greatness, but will not kiss the rod with which He strikes me.

I love Him, but I love His Torah more, and even if I were disappointed in Him, I would still observe His Torah. God means religion, but His Torah means a way of life, and the more we die for this way of life, the more sacred and immortal it becomes.

Therefore, my God, allow me, before death, being absolutely free of every semblance of terror, finding myself in a state of absolute inner peace and assurance, to argue things out with You for the last time in my life.

You say that we have sinned? Of course we have. And therefore that we are being punished? I can understand that too. But I would like You to tell me *whether any sin in the world deserves the kind of punishment we have received.*

You say that You will yet repay our enemies? I am convinced that You will. Repay them without mercy? I have no doubt of that either.

Nevertheless, I would like You to tell me *whether any punishment in the world can compensate for the crimes that have been committed against us?*

You say, perhaps, that it is no longer a question of sin and punishment, but a situation of *hester ponim* in which You have abandoned humanity to its impulses? Then I would like to ask You, God—and this question burns in me like a consuming fire—*What more, oh, what more must transpire for You to again reveal Your countenance?*

I want to tell You openly and clearly that now, more than in any previous period of our endless path of agony, do we have—we the tortured, the humiliated, the strangled, the buried alive and burned alive, we the insulted, the mocked, the ridiculed, the

murdered by the millions—that now do we have the right to know *the limits of Your patience.*

I should like to tell You something else: Do not put the rope under too much strain, because, God forbid, it might snap. The test to which You have put us is so severe, so unbearably severe, that You should—You must—forgive those of Your people who, in their misery and rage, have turned away from You.

Forgive those who have turned from You in their misery, but also those who have turned from You in their happiness. You have transformed our lives into such an unending ordeal that the cowards among us have tried to avoid it, to run away from it any way they could. Do not strike them for it. One does not strike cowards, one pities them. And on them more than on us, O God, have mercy!

Forgive those who have desecrated Your name, who have gone over to the service of other gods, who have become indifferent to You. So severely have You struck them that they no longer believe You are their Father, that they have any Father at all.

I tell You this because I believe in You, because I believe in You more than ever, because now I know that You are my Lord, because surely You are not, surely You cannot be, the God of those whose deeds are the most horrible manifestation of godlessness.

If You are not my God, whose God are You? The God of the murderers?

If those who hate me and murder me are so sinister, so evil, what then am I if not the one who reflects something of Your light, of Your goodness?

I cannot praise You for the deeds You tolerate. I bless and praise You, however, for the very fact of Your existence, for Your terrible greatness, which is so awesome that even what is happening now makes no impression on You! And precisely because You are so great and I so small, I pray You, I warn You in Your own name: stop underscoring Your greatness by tolerating the torments of the persecuted.



Nor am I asking You to strike down the guilty. It is the dreadful logic of the inexorable course of events that they will eventually strike themselves, for in our being killed the conscience of the world has been killed; in the murder of Israel a world has died.

The world will be devoured by its own evil, it will drown in its own blood.

The murderers have already passed sentence on themselves and will never escape it; but may You execute a sentence, a doubly severe sentence, on those who condone the crime.

Those who condemn the murder with their mouths, but rejoice at it in their hearts.

Those who meditate in their foul hearts: "Yes, he is evil, this tyrant, but he is doing a piece of work for us for which we will always be grateful!"

It is written in your Torah that a thief is to be punished more severely than a brigand, even though a thief does not attack his victim physically and merely attempts to take his possessions by stealth.

The reason is that the brigand, who attacks his victim in broad daylight, fears neither man nor God. But the thief fears man, not God.<sup>9</sup> That is why his punishment is more severe than the brigand's.

It would not bother me if You treated the murderers as You treat brigands, for their attitude toward You and toward us is the same, and they make no secret of their murders and their crimes.

But those who are silent in the face of murder, those who have no fear of You, but fear what people might say (fools! they are unaware that people will say nothing!), those who express sympathy for the drowning man but refuse to rescue him—punish them, O Lord, punish them; I implore You, punish them; I pray, punish them like thieves!

9. His criminal acts show that he does not fear God, but since he breaks in at night or when no one is home, it is obvious that he fears other human beings. See Baba Kamma 79b.

Death can wait no longer, and I must finish my writing. On the floors above me, the firing is growing weaker by the minute. The last defenders of this stronghold are now falling, and with them falls and perishes the great, beautiful, God-fearing Jewish Warsaw. The sun is about to set, and I thank God that I will never see it again. The red glow of the conflagrations comes in through the little window, and the bit of sky I can see is red and turbulent like a waterfall of blood. In about an hour at the most I will be with my family and with the millions of other dead members of my people in that better world where there are no more doubts, and where God alone is sovereign.

I die peacefully, but not complacently; persecuted, but not enslaved; embittered, but not cynical; a believer, but not a suppliant; a lover of God, but no blind amen-sayer.

I have followed Him even when He repulsed me. I have obeyed His commandments even when He has struck me for it; I have loved Him and will continue to love Him even when He has hurled me to the ground, tortured me to death, made me an object of shame and ridicule.

My rabbi always told the story of a Jew who fled from the Spanish Inquisition with his wife and child, striking out in a small boat on the stormy sea until he reached a rocky island. A bolt of lightning killed his wife; a storm rose and hurled his son into the sea. Alone, solitary as a stone, naked and barefoot, lashed by the storm and terrified by the thunder and lightning, with disheveled hair and hands outstretched to God, the Jew continued on his way across the desolate, rocky isle, turning to God with the following words:

"God of Israel, I have fled here in order to be able to serve You undisturbed, to follow Your commandments and sanctify Your name. You, however, do everything to make me stop believing in You. Now, lest it occur to You that by imposing these tribulations You will succeed in driving me from the right path, I notify You, my God and the God of my father, that it will not avail you in the least. You may insult me, You may strike me, You may take away all that I cherish and hold dear in the world, You may tor-



ture me to death—I will always believe in You, I will always love You! Yea, even in spite of You!

And these are my last words to You, my wrathful God: Nothing will avail You in the least! You have done everything to make me renounce You, to make me lose faith in You, but I die exactly as I have lived, an unshakable believer!

Praised forever be the God of the dead, the God of vengeance, truth, and law, who will soon show His face to the world again and shake its foundations with His almighty voice.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.<sup>10</sup>

Into your hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit.<sup>11</sup>

10. Deut. 6:4. The first line of the daily Shema, recited also as the conclusion of the Vidui, the deathbed confessional prayer.

11. Ps. 31:6. Recited as part of the Vidui.

## *To Love the Torah More Than God*



*Emmanuel Levinas*

Among the recent publications devoted to Judaism in the West, there are a great many beautiful texts. Talent is not a problem in Europe. Rarely, however, are the texts real. Over the past one hundred years, Hebrew learning has faded, and we have lost touch with our sources. What learning is still being produced is based on an intellectual tradition; it remains self-taught and untutored, even when it is not improvised. And what worse corruption can befall an author than being read only by people who know less than he does! With no one to check them, no one to put them in their places, authors tend to mistake the lack of counter-pressure for freedom, and this freedom for the touch of genius. Small wonder that the reading public remains skeptical; for them, Judaism, with its few million unrepentant adherents left in the world, is no more than a matter of quibbling over religious observances—something uninteresting and unimportant.

I have just read a text which is both beautiful and real—as real as only fiction can be. An anonymous author published it in an Israeli journal; under the title “Yossel, Son of Yossel [sic] Rakover of Tarnopol, Speaks to God,” it was translated for *La terre retrouvée*, the Zionist paper in Paris, by Mr. Arnold Mandel, who, it would appear, read it with deep emotion. The text deserves even