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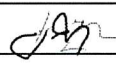
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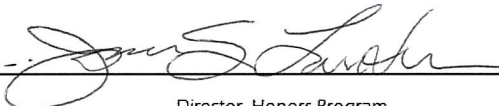
Intended date of commencement May 5, 2023

Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s)  5/2/2023
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Reader(s) _____ Date _____

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Date

Certified by  5/3/23
Date
Director, Honors Program

Humanitarian Zionism: The Vaad Hatzalah and Abraham Joshua Heschel

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Andrew James Steele

May 5, 2023

Introduction

In 1939, the year the Orthodox rescue organization Vaad Hatzalah was founded, and the year Abraham Joshua Heschel secured a path out of Nazi occupied Poland, Zionism had a plurality of meanings. Today, Zionism has been defined by a similar set of principles: the support for a Jewish state in historical Palestine based on the unique right of the Jewish people. Additionally, today's perceptions of Zionism is influenced by a shift towards Revisionist Zionism (a more nationalistic, maximalist, and militant form of Zionism) which gained ground after the Second World War – especially in the United States. Even the United Nations has branded this definition of Zionism as Zionism's *primary* form with the controversial Resolution 3379 which condemned Zionism as a type of racism in 1975.

Orthodoxy has historically been depicted as split on the issue, with one side of the camp arguing that “Zionism wanted to leave religion out of the national revival [of the Jewish people] and as a result the nation would become an empty shell.”¹ For the ultra-Orthodox in 1939, only the Messiah could bring about the emergence of a Jewish state, and not secular political actions. On the other hand, groups like the Mizrachi saw Zionism as a religious imperative. Indeed, “religious faith without the national spirit was only ‘half Judaism’” and statehood had to be tied to cultural Zionism which rehabilitated the Hebrew language and created a holy linguistic tie between the Jewish people.² However, prominent Jewish intellectuals like Heschel and well known organizations like the Vaad Hatzalah operated as a medium between these two camps – rejecting the rigidity, nationalism and secularism of Revisionism, while maintaining the imperative to resettle the religious roots of Judaism, its great rabbis and students, in Palestine and elsewhere. While the Vaad and Heschel were not directly affiliated within one another,

¹ Laqueur, Walter. *A History of Zionism*. Tauris Parke, 2003, page 556.

² Laqueur, Walter. *A History of Zionism*. Tauris Parke, 2003, page 659.

meaningful evidence exists that Heschel shared a similar theological and ethical tradition with the Vaad's leadership and its president Rabbi Eliezer Silver in particular. In other words, Heschel's writings were by no means a direct product of the Vaad's activities, but inhabited the same intellectual space that justified and was contemporary to the Vaad's policies. For this reason, the Vaad and Heschel's writings on Zionism should be examined as an often-ignored crossroads for Zionism, where desperate humanitarian efforts were at the forefront of nationhood.

Heschel would become the leading Jewish intellectual of the 20th century in issues like Judaism's association with humanitarianism, while the Vaad manifested similar ideas through its rescue efforts and plans to inject the Zionist project with spiritual redemption. The story of humanitarian Zionism and its roots in the social justice messaging of the Hebrew prophets must be evaluated in the context of the Vaad's operations and the writings of Heschel who was an advocate for the Vaad's principles. A study of the Vaad as an Orthodox organization and Heschel as an Orthodox leader reveals that the understanding of Zionism was rarely static in the Orthodox community, and it existed as a unifying force among those concerned with an effective Holocaust response effort. This was especially true in light of the fact that settlement in Palestine served as a unique option for rescue alongside the United States and Canada, and Palestine remained one of the few hubs on the planet for the Jewish Yeshiva system.

The shift towards Revisionism in the wider Jewish community occurred due to "the profound horror caused by the murder of millions of Jews in Europe, and the absence of any effective reaction on the part of the civilised world. The liberal element in Zionism, the faith in humanity, suffered a blow from which it was not fully to recover. The appeals to fraternal help, to human solidarity, to which a former generation of Zionists was accustomed, no longer found a ready

response.”³ However, before the time that Zionism had taken on a distinctively Revisionist approach, the Vaad Hatzalah and Heschel’s reflective writings between his arrival in the U.S. and well into the 60s acted as examples when Zionist principles were very much based in a faith for humanity and a need to appeal to human solidarity. For this reason, as well, the Vaad’s activities and Heschel’s fervent belief in the social justice principles of the Hebrew prophets cannot be ignored as part of Zionism’s DNA, where humanitarianism and nationhood were common goals in the mission to settle Jews in Palestine and elsewhere.

The Vaad’s understanding of nationhood cannot easily fit the definition of Zionism as racism in the UN’s 1975 resolution or any modern understanding of the term, as it was non-nationalistic, grounded in religious rejuvenation along Orthodox lines and basically only concerned with humanitarian efforts. By the culmination of its settlement mission, the Vaad had entirely expanded its scope to include the rescue of the Jewish masses. As news of the Holocaust had become widespread by the end of 1942, the Vaad was particularly drawn to organizations that realized the full extent of the disaster and put the rescue of Jewish lives above all political ambitions. This shift led to an association with the radical Emergency Committee created by activist Hillel Kook (known in America as Peter Bergson) which occurred in 1943. 1943 serves as a crucial turning point for the Vaad because it had split from the American Jewish Conference, its previous partner in funding, and needed to adopt a new mantle to revitalize its efforts. By associating with Bergson’s Emergency Committee, the Vaad pursued an aggressive publishing campaign in 1943 to raise awareness for the Shoah and provoke a public reaction.

³ Laqueur, Walter. *A History of Zionism*. Tauris Parke, 2003, page 756.

Similarly, Heschel's understanding of Zionism must be looked at as a crucial intellectual link to the work of organizations like the Vaad Hatzalah. However, Heschel's theology was by no means a linear result of the Vaad's activities. Instead, Heschel's perspective of a state based on the emotional, mental, and spiritual renewal for a people rattled by disaster demonstrates the way in which humanitarian Zionism, as advocated in the Vaad, found common ground with the wider Orthodox community and particularly those of Eastern European roots. For Heschel, Zionism was an opportunity for both Jewish and human redemption as the survival of the Jewish people and the guarantee of their physical wellbeing and gathering together after thousands of years of diaspora would prove to be the ultimate act of human vindication.⁴

Can this altruistic understanding which came from principles of Halakah (or Jewish law) still be considered a form of Zionism – modern, nationalistic, and secular Zionism? It certainly existed along other unique strains like the Territorialism movement which originally had planned for a Jewish state in Uganda or the Bund group in Poland which was against the antagonizing effects of displacing Arabs upon settlement in Palestine.⁵ While these objectives seem entirely opposed to the modern understanding of Zionism, they still exist as examples of its distinct forms in the early 20th century as does the Vaad's stance on nationhood and settlement in Palestine and elsewhere. In this paper, I will argue that the Vaad and Heschel's understanding of nationhood, were unique in their appeal to the social justice principles of the Hebrew prophets and the necessity of rescue over modern nationalist ambitions. Because of this, the Vaad's efforts and Heschel's works exist as a point in Jewish history where American public sympathy towards

⁴ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 110.

⁵ Laqueur, Walter. *A History of Zionism*. Tauris Parke, 2003, page 572.

Zionism was mainly attached to the imperative to save Jewish lives as the British White Papers and strict immigration quotas in the United States and Canada restricted the flow of refugee migration.

Additionally, in its efforts, the Vaad was willing to compromise with its contemporary Jewish organizations over various Zionist, religious and political affiliations for the singular goal of saving Jewry. This runs contrary to what Holocaust historian David S. Wyman and others have referred to as a period of division between respective Jewish organizations and their stances on Zionism. The Vaad acts as a counter example to this narrative, as its unified and impressive efforts during the Holocaust years were not broken by polarization over Zionism and issues of nationalism, but instead a policy of aversion to the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee as a fund for rescue efforts. The safety and religious nourishment of Europe's Jews was the priority over their place of destination. To further this point, Heschel's background as a scholar respected by the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox institutions around him which had unique stances on the Zionist issue, shows that the appeal of humanitarian Zionism was not lost to religious sectarianism in the Holocaust period and its immediate aftermath.

The importance of this: Zionism during the era of Heschel and the Vaad should be understood with greater detail. Zionism, in its complete history, was not uniquely driven by nationalism or the need for statehood, but a humanitarian message as well. This understanding can 1) dispel the myth that Zionism in its complete history has been a story of militancy and nationalist expansion and 2) create a greater appreciation for the work of Jewish organizations like the Vaad which saved thousands of lives through settlement in Palestine and the social justice ideals of mindful Jewish thinkers like Abraham Joshua Heschel.

A Brief Historiography of Zionism and the Vaad

Since the publication of David S. Wyman's work *The Abandonment of the Jews*, historians have increasingly drawn attention to Zionism as a main point of contestation between Jewish groups in the Holocaust era, propagating that "the split over the issue of Zionism proved unbridgeable [and that] ...It was the chief obstacle to [the] formation of a united drive for rescue."⁶ Wyman's work quickly became a landmark in the field after its debut in the 1980s "[receiving] high praise from such distinguished scholars as Irving Abella, who, writing in the *American Historical Review*, called it a 'landmark study...Objective and dispassionate...a model of historical writing'."⁷ While the work never argued that Zionism was the explicit cause for Holocaust rescue failure, it centered the responses of Jewish organizations around the issue. In 1987, Richard Breitman and Alan Kraut reaffirmed Wyman's point in *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry* when they claimed the "lack of Jewish enthusiasm to liberalize [US] immigration policy...arose out of conditions peculiar to the time [including]...Zionism."⁸

In the early 2000s, Medoff and Wyman co-wrote *A Race against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust*, which put a greater level of emphasis on the Bergsonite groups involved in rescue efforts (the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews and the Emergency Committee for the Rescue of European Jewry). Bergson was a Revisionist Zionist and a follower of the militant Zionist Ze'ev Jabotinsky who advocated the creation of a Jewish army in Palestine to fight the Nazis and occupy Palestinian territory by force. The Emergency Committee created by Bergson was responsible for pushing the Secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. and other State Department members to organize the War

⁶ *Abandonment of the Jews: American and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* by David S. Wyman, page 401

⁷ *Abandonment of the Jews: American and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* by David S. Wyman, page 420

⁸ *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* by Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, page 80

Refugee Board which would rescue over 250,000 Jews.⁹ Wyman and Medoff argue that the primary reason why the Bergsonites were outsiders to mainstream Jewry was their Revisionist stance on Zionism which was perceived as “usurping [or undermining the objectives of] the established leadership. [As a result, Jewish leadership] labored to impress upon the [US] government...that Bergson did not represent American Jewish opinion.”¹⁰ The Vaad would come to associate itself with the Emergency Committee in 1943.

Like Wyman’s other works, Zionism is a focal point for division between mainstream Jewish leaders and the Revisionist Bergsonite camp. By exclusively focusing on the feud between these two camps, Wyman frames the falling out of major Jewish rescue organizations as a rift between ideas of Jewish nationalism, with hostile mainstream leaders on one side and unconventional Revisionists on the other. Ironically, Wyman neglects to mention that the Vaad Hatzalah, who were closely aligned with Bergson’s Emergency Committee, were composed of two diverging parties on the Zionist issue: 1) “the Mizrachi, [who] believed in the return of Jews to *Eretz Israel*” and that the Torah had to be the “foundation of...regeneration” in Palestine and 2) “Agudath Israel...[which] had been established in part by groups who opposed all efforts to revive Jewish nationhood based on the peoplehood of Jews rather than by God.”¹¹

Contemporary to *A Race against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust*, Efraim Zuroff published *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust*, which detailed the activities of Vaad Hatzalah between 1939-1945. Zuroff’s work focused on how the Vaad as America’s foremost Orthodox rescue committee, came to change its initiative from the

⁹ *A Race against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust* by David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff, page 49

¹⁰ *A Race against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust* by David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff, page 43

¹¹ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 12

preservation of torah life and scholarship to rescue of the Jewish masses. According to Zuroff, the early work of Vaad Hatzalah was primarily concerned with the rabbinical scholars and rabbis of Poland and Eastern Europe. Efforts had included the establishment of a brief safe haven in Lithuania, securing rescue channels through Japan and Shanghai, and accessing a limited amount of visas from the Canadian immigration bureau. Through these efforts, the Vaad secured funds both with and independently from the Joint Distribution Committee or JDC (the foremost agency for Holocaust rescue funds across all sectarian organizations).

The Vaad's commitments would take a sharp turn in 1943, when they publicly listed demands "to send food and medicine to Jews in ghettos through the International Red Cross or a neutral commission; to persuade neutral countries to admit Jews escaping Nazi persecution and guarantee their maintenance; to facilitate the entry of refugees to the United States; and to open Palestine to Jewish immigration."¹² These demands, issued directly to the White House, were a drastic step forward in broadening the Vaad's objectives, and had occurred at a time when considerable political momentum was behind the Vaad. On the same date, the Vaad had organized the first mass protest towards the Holocaust in American Jewish history which included the participation of over 400 Orthodox rabbis in marching on the capital. The political momentum created by these events would only slow down due to frictions with the JDC.

The distrust towards the JDC stemmed from a worry that "it was...more than likely that the plight of refugee scholars who were not under Nazi occupation would...be accorded a very low priority in the distribution of relief funds."¹³ Guided by Halakah or Jewish law, the Vaad did its

¹² Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 264.

¹³ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 231.

upmost to secure study spaces and proper conditions for Rabbinic work to continue studies despite the dire circumstances and threat of extermination. Even though the conditions of the early refugee Yeshivas were abysmal, Vaad Hatzalah and Orthodoxy in general were committed to constant study as the text of Torah offered *eternal* answers to their plights. For the Vaad, active non-interrupted study was the way the Jewish people would eventually rebuild themselves from the ashes of early war Europe.

To the average gentile or American Jew who was more assimilated in their practice, this concept would have seemed of minimal importance compared to the issue of mass relocation, but for the Vaad, the rescue efforts from Lithuania to Shanghai would require that *minhagim* (religious customs) be strictly adhered to throughout. Between the Zionists of Vaad Hatzalah and anti-Zionists alike, an adherence to Halakha (Jewish law) was a unifying principle which the Reform and secular rescue organizations paid little attention to in their rescue efforts. In practice, Halakah law includes commands for bystanders to intervene in the rescue of fellow Jews and gentiles alike. Each type of intervention and case requires a unique solution as dictated by the law. It was an adherence to this system, during a time of peril, that kept rescue solutions a priority for the Vaad.¹⁴ Peter Bergson and other members of the Emergency Committee would later validate the Vaad's commitment to Halakah in interviews with David S. Wyman. Bergson testified that the Vaad concentrated mostly on physical rescue and securing the safety of individuals on a case-by-case basis. This was driven by "the old Jewish theological concept of 'He who saves one soul, saves the whole world'." and not any ulterior political motive.¹⁵

¹⁴ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 287.

¹⁵ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Interview between Peter Bergson and David S. Wyman on April 13-15, 1973.

In other words, while many Jewish organizations were focused on broader political issues like the creation of a state in Palestine during the crisis, the Vaad was honed in on a meticulous and practical plan to identify individual Jews to save and secure their visas for transport in the early war years – often singling out siblings, children and couples at a time for rescue.¹⁶ This was especially true of Isaac Sternbuch’s efforts (Sternbuch was the premiere representative of the Vaad in Switzerland) to deport Jewish children to Switzerland (one of the few neutral European nations) in order to secure their safe passage to other safe havens.¹⁷ Zuroff notes that Sternbuch’s negotiations were some of the most significant in the Holocaust period with “\$5,000,000 [being collected]...in exchange for the lives of 300,000 innocent people.”¹⁸

Alex Grobman’s work *Battling for Souls* picked up where Zuroff left off in the Vaad Hatzalah, specifically detailing the crisis which led to the Vaad’s breakup in 1947 after Mizrachi, its Zionist branch, left the organization. In its post-war years the Vaad primarily cared for the remaining Orthodox communities in Europe and eventually initiated the settlement of refugee children in Palestine under the leadership of Stephen Klein, chairman of the Vaad’s immigration committee. This came with the express aim of reviving the Jewish nation through improvement in children’s education, as better Jewish educational facilities existed on Palestine territory and “Jewish...homes [of European rescue organizations] were inadequate because they lacked teachers and the strong leadership needed to develop a curriculum and administration.”¹⁹ Additionally, visas were secured for Orthodox refugees facing pogroms in post-war Europe to travel to safe havens like South America, Costa Rica, Canada and the United States.²⁰ Any

¹⁶ *The New York Mirror* Issued December 9, 1945, page 3. Yeshiva University Archives, Vaad Hatzalah Collection.

¹⁷ *The New York Mirror* Issued December 9, 1945, page 1. Yeshiva University Archives, Vaad Hatzalah Collection.

¹⁸ *The New York Mirror* Issued December 9, 1945, page 1. Yeshiva University Archives, Vaad Hatzalah Collection.

¹⁹ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 114.

²⁰ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 210.

official Vaad policy of temporary settlement in the United States with the future goal of relocation to Palestine, was driven by a fear of growing anti-Semitism as the war closed, and not aspirations to create a nation state in Palestine.²¹ The Vaad had witnessed the outcomes of harsh pogroms in Europe and feared that mass migration to the United States would solicit similar reactions.

Grobman describes Vaad's fallout as a consequence of disorganization and not feuds over Zionism. This would eventually lead ex-members of the Vaad to form the Central Orthodox Committee or COC, which would have a greater cooperation with the Jewish Joint Committee (which was responsible for almost all of Jewish funds to Europe). The desire for this restructuring came from Zionist, non-Zionist and neutral elements alike. In this context, the Vaad faded away as certain core members clung to its remnants rather than joining the broader and more unified coalition of the COC.

The Vaad's Work from 1939-1943: Yeshiva Rescue and Nationhood Through Orthodoxy

To further understand the unique nature of Vaad Hatzalah rescue missions in regard to Zionism, it is crucial to examine specific cases themselves to demonstrate that any settlement in Palestine was just one part of the Vaad's larger mission to save Jewish lives. Before the creation of Israel in 1948 and the news of the Holocaust reached the Vaad, most of the Vaad's efforts sought to rejuvenate the nation through the preservation of Torah scholarship. Wider rescue efforts would not come to fruition until after 1943. Despite this, the Vaad still searched day and night for humanitarian corridors for Yeshiva students and Rabbis. Much of this thinking was driven by the idea that redemption for the Jewish people would be derived from a return to

²¹ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 217.

Orthodoxy. The early work of Dr. Samuel Schmidt (a friend of the then president Rabbi Eliezer Silver) in the Lithuanian Yeshiva system was emblematic of the Vaad's objectives before the turning point in 1943. Schmidt's aid work was principally about preserving the scholastic achievement of Yeshiva studies and bringing the cultural knowledge of Yeshivas to the wider Jewish world as "[Jews had to] possess the true, basic, specifically Jewish sense to be able to comprehend the dynamic Jewish cultural current that [was] being generated and stored for future generations in [the] Yeshivot."²² The ability to preserve this cultural system, was thus explicitly tied to the rescue of its great scholars.

From the Vaad's early work in the Vilna and its safe havens in Central and East Asia, to its broader rescue attempts in Switzerland, and finally the displaced persons crisis, leadership was mainly concerned with securing visas and travel permits through any *neutral* countries (even the Caribbean Island of Curacao) and away from the violence of mass extermination and post-war pogroms (particularly in Poland). At the Vaad's founding in 1939, it was clear that Vilna, Lithuania could only act as a temporary depot for the yeshivot (Torah institutions) as Soviet occupation loomed large: "teachers who have shown much self-sacrifice and devotion, will continue to exist in their present locations or be transferred to more secure places...the rescue of the Yeshivot will demand tremendous material means and considerable financial assistance."²³

In 1939, the two secure places for final destination outside of Europe would either be the United States or Palestine²⁴. The "holy places of learning in Eretz Israel" (Palestine), were some

²² Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Letter of Dr. Schmidt to Mrs. Schmidt, February 28, 1940, American Jewish Archives.

²³ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Eliezer Silver, *Vaad Hatzalah*, pages 21-22.

²⁴ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. "The Resolutions of the Agudath Harabonim Convention", Archives of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds.

of the few Yeshivot left outside of the European sphere and Orthodox Jews had been providing significant aid to them for decades.²⁵ The idea of relocation to Eretz Israel was not based on the fulfilment of Zionism or Jewish statehood, but instead necessitation as Yeshivas in Palestine were beginning to collapse and they were one of the few places of Jewish learning outside of Europe. It is likely that the desire of Lithuanian and Polish Rabbis and students who resided in Vilna to relocate to Eretz Israel was not driven by the desire for Jewish statehood, but a distaste for the Yeshiva system in the United States as “Rabbis schooled in European *yeshivos* regarded American rabbis as not having the same extensive background and rigorous training as they had. American and European rabbis were also divided on how to prevent assimilation.”²⁶

In the wake of continued restrictions towards Jews entering Eretz Israel, the Vaad scrambled to secure travel documents that would allow refugees to make their way through the Soviet Union. Rabbi Finkle (a prominent Mizrahi rabbi) was solely concerned with Soviet exit permits by August of 1940, regardless of final destination.²⁷ The only way to reach non-occupied territory would be through the Soviet Union to Japan where there was hope to secure transport to either the United States or the Dutch colony of Curacao in the Caribbean (the Dutch consul was one of the few Western powers with a fairly relaxed immigration quota between its colonies).

Given the limitations of the immigration quota in Palestine, it was clear that America would act as a temporary safe haven for refugees. When the Vaad secured visas for each gaon (Torah scholar) or sage they were, “not only saving a soul but part of [the] nation, an organ upon which the soul is dependent...injecting new blood, live blood into the body of American Jewry to

²⁵ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 287.

²⁶ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 263.

²⁷ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Letter of Zerach Warhaftig to Metcas Olami – Mizrahi, March 26, 1940 in Natanel Katzburg, Ed, *Pedut, Hatzalah be-Yemei ha-Shoa, Mikorot a Mecckhkarim* (Ramat-Gan, 1984), pages 25-33.

sanctify and purify the souls of people who...strayed from the path of the Torah.”²⁸ Joseph Levinson (a member of the Vaad) published this statement during the summer of 1940 in the *Ha-Pardes*, an Orthodox journal which served as the central mouthpiece to the public throughout the Vaad’s operations. Levinson and others were making it clear to the public that the Vaad stood for relocation in the United States as its official policy due to the limitations of the White Papers. The article’s mention of “injecting new blood” suggests that refugee scholars who arrived in America were there to stay.

Therefore, in 1940 it was clear that Eretz Israel was not looked at as a realistic option for settlement until war conditions improved. Improving the Yeshiva system in America through the “injection” of the best Torah scholars was a clear priority for the Vaad over Zionist measures in 1940. The “nation” would not be built through settlement in Eretz Israel but Torah study in America. This message, while tweaked to serve the masses of Holocaust victims in 1943, would continue throughout the Vaad’s campaign. In the years 1940 and 1941, the Vaad facilitated this process through its “Ticket Campaign”, which secured funds from all sects of Jewish life.²⁹

Garnering financial support from the wider Jewish community was seen as a way of reengaging Jewry with the Orthodox system, as many were sympathetic to the plights of Torah scholars. Support would come from Reform and Conservative donors as well, who could both agree that the religious knowledge of Yeshiva scholars was inimitable.

By 1941, it was dawning on the Vaad and Orthodoxy in general that America remained one of the last cultural sites of Judaism. Rabbi Kotler, the head of a Yeshiva in Lithuania, flew to the

²⁸ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Rabbi Jacob Levinson, “Chovat ha-Hatzala”, *Ha-Pardes*, 14, no. 11 (Shevat 5701/February 1941), pages 11-12.

²⁹ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 134.

United States with an appeal for American Jewry to support the rescue effort. In his address to American Yeshiva students, Kotler noted that “yeshiva students [were] the only ones studying torah ...their hope in the surviving remnant—American Jewry—[was] that they [would] come to the rescue to save them, but it must be admitted that American Jewry [had] not fulfilled its obligation.”³⁰ As a leader in the Lithuanian Yeshiva system, Rabbi Kotler had worked tirelessly to facilitate humanitarian corridors through the Far East and specifically to Japan and Shanghai. His arrival to the United States marked one of the first instances of practical success for the Vaad in bringing Lithuanian Yeshivot to the United States--its main significance was an appeal to the moral responsibility of broader American Jewry to not only fund the campaign but reconnect with Orthodox tradition. In the same speech he remarked, “The *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) is bleeding, and it is up to you leaders of Israel to do everything possible to save the yeshiva students.”³¹ Thus, the rescue effort to bring Kotler and others to the US was inextricably linked with an appeal to broader American Jewry to rebuild “Israel” through a return to Yeshivot torah study.

Another core component to Orthodox rescue efforts in the Vaad’s early years was a strict adherence to Mishnah (religious laws) regarding rescue practice. Mishnah law strictly dictates, “If one person is able to save another and does not save him, he transgresses the commandment *Neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor* [Leviticus 19:16]...if one hears heathens or informers plotting evil against another or laying a trap for him and does not call it to the other’s attention and let him know; he transgresses in each case of the injunction...for if one

³⁰ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Protocol of the semiannual convention of Agudath-ha-Rabbaniom, Session B, April 30, 1941, page 3, Archives of *Agudath-ha-Rabbanim*.

³¹ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Protocol of the semiannual convention of Agudath-ha-Rabbaniom, Session B, April 30, 1941, page 3, Archives of *Agudath-ha-Rabbanim*.

destroys the life of a single Israelite, it is regarded as though he destroyed the whole world.”³²

Despite frustrations over the Japanese refusing visas beginning in 1941, the Vaad immediately looked for alternative safe havens for yeshiva scholars in East Asia. While immediate relocation to the U.S., Palestine and Canada remained implausible, Shanghai served as the next stop for yeshiva scholars stranded on the Japanese mainland -- any idleness in searching for long term solutions was viewed as a violation of the Mishnah tract on rescue. It was clear from the outset that Shanghai served as just another step along the way for refugees and not a final destination.³³

The urgency to relocate the yeshiva students from Japan, regardless of destination, led to immediate complications for the Vaad, as lists had to be composed over which scholars would receive a priority.³⁴

What eventually emerged from this was doubt in the practicality of Mishnah laws in regard to who would receive rescue priority first: students or rabbis, wives or children. In some instances, priority lists were organized in a complete violation of Mishnah law. For example, during the latter half of May, 1941, the Vaad composed a list where “the wives and children of the roshei yeshiva...[were placed] immediately after their husbands and ahead of all students.”³⁵ This list and others like it would serve as a pretext to a change in Vaad policy after Stephen S. Wise announced the full report on Holocaust atrocities in 1942, which confirmed two million deaths and broadened the scale of the humanitarian crisis. Because the strict adherence to individual tracts of Mishnah regarding rescue priority could not be carried out in a realistic framework, the

³² Kirschenbaum, Aaron. “The Bystander Duty to Rescue in Jewish Law.” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1980, page 205.

³³ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad Ha-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 152.

³⁴ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad Ha-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Letter of the unified committee of *Bnai Torah* to Rabbi Ashkenazi, May 20, 1941, Archives of Rabbi Meir Ashkenazi.

³⁵ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 161.

Vaad came to prioritize the efficiency and dynamism of rescue efforts. This would lead the Vaad to a wider platform and a greater commitment to preserving life above all other political or religious priorities. With developments of America's entry into the war, it was clear that refugee scholars entering Shanghai in 1942 were there to stay until the end of the war. Rather than pushing for the ultimate goal of relocation to either the yeshiva system in America or Eretz Israel, the Vaad turned its focus to the maintenance of the Yeshivot in Shanghai.³⁶

The financial records of the Vaad between 1939 and 1943 reflect a prioritization of funds to rescue and to maintain settlement in Palestine. The Vaad's budgeting bulletin in 1943 reflected that in 1943, \$187,555 was remitted to Siberia and other foreign countries for relief and clothing and that in 1941, only \$3,000 was remitted to the Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs.³⁷

While there is little data on how much the Vaad was lending to Zionist causes like the Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs in 1943, it is clear that the \$183,555 in aid to the yeshivot between 1941 and 1943 was far more significant than the \$3000 in funds for the Emergency Committee for Zionist affairs just a few years earlier in 1941. A clear pattern of prioritizing the maintenance of stranded Yeshivot had emerged in these years. This practice, along with others, suggested that the existential threat to Jewish nationhood for the Vaad was not the maintenance of a state in Palestine, but the safety and continued studies of Judaism's greatest scholars.

A Turning Point in 1943 and Mass Rescue

³⁶ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Letter of Hyman to Rabbis Rosenberg and Silver, June 18, 1942. American Joint Distribution Committee Archives.

³⁷ Excerpt from budgeting bulletin, Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, 1943, Yeshiva University Vaad Hatzalah Archives, page 5. The document stated the Vaad agenda in early 1943, with little mention of Zionist affairs. Much focus went to maintaining the refugee yeshivot.

In September of 1942, the Polish general consul in New York leaked details of the ongoing Final Solution to leaders of Agudath Israel (one of the constituents of the Vaad). The information quickly reached Orthodox circles, and head rabbis soon began to demand that the information be publicized to galvanize the Jewish community and American public into action. However, mainstream leadership – primarily Rabbi Stephen S. Wise – held those in Orthodoxy who knew of the Final Solution to a silence, until details could be confirmed by the State Department. Any early announcement of the Final Solution risked alienating the Roosevelt administration by undermining its image to the global public, and Orthodox leaders kept their word of silence until November of 1942. At first, the Vaad was primarily concerned that the refugee scholars in Shanghai would be abandoned by Jewish fundraisers following news of the wider disaster.³⁸ The Vaad largely remained antagonistic to organizations like the JDC in later 1942, as it feared they would reduce funding to refugee scholars and redirect it elsewhere. Some elements of the Vaad also blamed the catastrophe on members of the Reform community, who they viewed as having strayed from the Jewish path and provoked God’s wrath. During a special day of mourning held on December 2, 1942, Rabbi Moshe Shatzkes of the Vaad Hatzalah stressed, “We believe in God and his Torah, and we are not questioning the severity with which the Jewish people are currently being judged, nor do we question the anger.”³⁹

What changed the Vaad’s finger pointing and appeals to prayer in early 1943 was: 1) a dawning realization that the catastrophe would have to be dealt with across the entire Jewish community and 2) a realization that the Vaad’s contemporary Jewish organizations were

³⁸ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. “Seder ha-Aseifa Shel Vaad Hatzalah,” *Ha-Pardes*, 16, no. 10 (Tevet 5703/December 1942), 8.

³⁹ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. “Aseifat Vaad Hatzala,” *Ha-Pardes*, no. 10 (Tevet 5703/January 1943), 6.

prioritizing the Zionist issue over the immediate rescue of Jews. The change in thinking was spearheaded by Dr. Isaac Lewin, a prominent member of Agudath Israel who attended a meeting in Pittsburg early in 1943 with other Jewish leaders to discuss a united front on the issue of the Final Solution. What Lewin found when attending the conference, was that most leadership was either concerned with the creation of a Jewish state or the issue of labor rights in Palestine. Lewin and others of the Orthodox community involved in the Pittsburgh meeting found that, “the conference, which had originally been convened to deal with postwar problems, especially the Palestine issue, was ignoring the most pressing Jewish issue: the rescue of European Jewry.”⁴⁰

As a response, the Vaad formed its own “Council of Jewish Organizations for the Rescue of the Jews in Europe” to prioritize the rescue of the wider masses. The primary aim of the Council was to unite American Jewry in an effort to redirect attention towards the rescue issue. Letters from 1943 reflected an increasing attention to aid directed towards the masses, such as one in September of 1943 from Vaad president Eliezer Silver to the executive vice chairman on the JDC where he “advised of [the] possibility [of making] large sums available to Jews in ghettos via International Red Cross...[a] possibility confirmed by the State Department” and was “greatly surprised [that the] opportunity [had] not [been] utilized” by the JDC.⁴¹ While aid to the Torah scholars in Shanghai during 1943 remained the larger priority, the shift in rhetoric is noticeable in this letter and others. In addition, the Vaad organized a delegate of Agudath ha-Rabbinim (Union of Orthodox Rabbis) leaders to meet with the Secretary of State and other Jewish members of congress and the Roosevelt administration to discuss rescue proposals in February of 1943. These proposals were not without popular support; “they reflected increased

⁴⁰ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 240.

⁴¹ Letter of receipt from Joseph C. Hyman, Executive Vice Chairman at JDC to Rabbis Rosenberg and Eliezer Silver, September 1943. Yeshiva University Archives, Vaad Hatzalah Collection.

demands by American Jewry for practical measures that would facilitate rescue.”⁴². Other shifts in efforts during 1943 included a ransoming plan which would have paid for the rescue of 70,000 Romanian Jews through the Council of Jewish Organizations for the Rescue of the Jews in Europe.

From the onset of this change in approach, the Vaad refused to participate in public displays of appeal if its surrounding Jewish organizations would not let go of the Zionism issue. One instance of this “was whether to participate in the mass ‘Stop Hitler Now’ rally...[the Vaad] would participate only if the demands made at the rally dealt exclusively with rescue and not with political issues.”⁴³. The fear here was that any conflicts over statehood and the Zionist mission would inhibit efforts to rescue Jewish masses as a whole through practical rescue projects. Any points of disunity were secondary to the Vaad in its political messaging. This was also demonstrated through the fact that Vaad leadership was willing to cooperate with Stephen S. Wise and others, despite the fact that they had been snubbed chairman positions on Wise’s Emergency Committee. Rabbi Kotler, who had been involved with the Yeshiva community in Lithuania, stated that he would “work with the Pope if it would save even the fingernail of one Jewish child.”⁴⁴ There was a clear desperation to reach across both the religious and political aisle to find practical rescue solutions. In fact, the Vaad did begin correspondence with the Pope through letters of appeal with the hope that the Vatican would intervene on the behalf of Polish Jewry. In March 1943, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis wrote “[we] apply to [the] Pope for official intervention...remaining several hundred thousand threatened with immediate

⁴² Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 242.

⁴³ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 243.

⁴⁴ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Amos Bunim, *A Fire in His Soul*, p. 110.

annihilation...only you can rescue us...As religious leaders of American Jewry in solemn convocation [we] plead to His Holiness.”⁴⁵.

In their addresses to the Pope and American congressmen over the plight of Polish Jewry, Vaad leaders involved in the American Jewish Conference continued to refer to their cause as a “convocation” or collective American Jewry, suggesting that religious divisions were not a dividing point for them in face of Nazi oppression. However, the quiet lobbying of the Emergency Committee and the American Jewish Conference was increasingly becoming a point of frustration for Vaad leaders, as they had both achieved little practical success in rescuing Jewry. Appeals to the Vatican were largely unsuccessful in altering the plight of Polish Jewry and efforts to ship food and parcels to concentration camps gained little support from the U.S. State Department. Because of this the Vaad began to consider charting a new course with forces that would effectively prioritize rescue by the end of 1943.

Two major events galvanized the Vaad to chart its own path on the rescue issue and become more confrontational in its approach to the public over rescue efforts. The first was the failure of the Bermuda Conference, which was a meeting organized by the Roosevelt administration to discuss the establishment of a refugee board and a solution to the ongoing Nazi murders in Europe, which ended in an absolute stalemate. The Vaad had tried and failed to convince Jewish congressman Sol Bloom, who had participated in the Bermuda Conference, that neutral ships had to be sent to Europe with food parcels for concentration camp inmates and Jews under the occupation of Germany. The idea behind this was to have all parcels ship through the Red Cross as a means of establishing neutrality and abiding by the Geneva code. Bloom’s lack of effort in pressing the issue at the conference was a massive disappointment to Vaad leadership and a

⁴⁵ Draft of cable from the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, New York, to Pope Pius XII, Vatican City, 12 March 1943. Yeshiva University Archives, Vaad Hatzalah Archives.

wakeup call that more needed me to be done to sway the State Department and Roosevelt administration to take more humanitarian action. The quiet diplomacy of the Emergency Committee and the American Jewish Conference felt like traps, as the Vaad was making little progress with either coalition.

Secondly, the Vaad felt a degree of ostracization from both the Emergency Committee and the American Jewish Conference as both were increasingly dominated by political actors who wanted to press the creation of Israel over rescue missions. Additionally, the American Jewish Conference only afforded one delegate to represent both the Union of Orthodox Rabbis and Agudath Israel out of its many delegates, which came off as a form of Orthodox discrimination. Tensions would eventually culminate in the decision of the Emergency Committee to dissolve its non-Zionist elements and create a new joint effort composed of those strictly dedicated to the Zionist effort in September of 1943. The Vaad, with the American Jewish Committee (not to be confused with the American Jewish Conference) and the Labor Committee, voted against the measure for dissolution in a 5-4 vote which broke up the only wholly unified measure for American Jewish action in the Holocaust's history.⁴⁶ As mainstream leadership on the committee had proven it was committed to work only with those who were primarily sympathetic to the issue of statehood, the Vaad was forced into finding an alternative which would prioritize rescue. A unified coalition with Zionists who put statehood first was no longer realistic.

Eventually, the Vaad turned towards the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe founded by Peter Bergson because it too prioritized the rescue of Jewry above all other objectives. This happened in part because the Emergency Committee used high-profile tactics and public activism, which was preferred over the American Jewish Conference's quiet acts of

⁴⁶ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 265.

diplomacy and lobbying which were seen as idle by the leadership of the Vaad. As the Emergency Committee was more militant and confrontational in its tactics, the Vaad also gradually became more public in its appeal to rescue European Jewry, which would ultimately culminate in the “400 Rabbi March” on Washington. In the instance of choosing a new organization to affiliate with, Vaad leadership explicitly avoided organizations prioritizing the Zionist issue. For example, “Although it is likely that anti-Zionist leader Jacob Rosenbaum would have preferred a political alliance with the leaders of the American Jewish Committee, who also opposed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine...the activist leaders of the Agudat ha-Rabbanim [Union of Orthodox Rabbis] viewed the...Emergency Committee...as more natural allies.”⁴⁷ It was through the Emergency Committee that the march on Washington was organized.

On October 6, 1943, the leaders of the Vaad and other Orthodox officials gathered in Washington to conduct the only mass protest against the Holocaust in U.S. History. Among the demands which were read out loud to the Vice-President of the United States: “1...adopt immediate and practical measures of rescue...2...warn Germany...will be held accountable...3...send ships and food and medical supplies to the Jews starving in ghettos...4...influence and persuade neutral countries to allow the Jewish refugees...5...open the gates of the United Nations to provide havens...6. Open the doors of Palestine...7. Create a special intergovernmental agency to save the remnant of Israel.”⁴⁸ None of these demands alluded to the issue of a Jewish state in Palestine. The mention of Palestine was explicitly meant

⁴⁷ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 243.

⁴⁸ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 78th Congress, First Session, October 6, 1943. No. 147:11.

as an appeal to create a humanitarian corridor as there were existing limitations to the immigration quota in the US. Settlement in Palestine, which directly prevented Jews from reaching a possible safe haven and was not linked to the common demand mainstream Jewish leadership had made that FDR and the State Department support the creation of a political state in Palestine, but the existential threat which the White Papers posed to Jews who could otherwise live safely if resettled there. In addition, while the March did not achieve its immediate goals of changing U.S. State Department policy: “It was...a dramatic event which helped further sensitize the public to the plight of European Jewry...[it] projected the Vaad ha-Hatzalah and its leaders into the larger rescue picture in a meaningful way for the first time, reflecting their growing desire to play a key role in rescuing all Jews and not just rabbis and Yeshiva students.”⁴⁹.

The occurrence of the March on the day before Yom Kippur, the holiest Jewish day of the year, also explicitly tied the immediate rescue of Europe’s Jews with the holy aspect of the Vaad Hatzalah’s work. The event was both an act of political confrontation and a period of spiritual mourning on display to all of humanity. Dr. Samuel Margoshes, editor of the Yiddish daily journal *Der Tog*, noted the universalism of the Rabbis appeal to human solidarity as “thousands of bystanders got to know, possibly for the first time, that millions of Jews were sent to death in Nazi-held Europe, and that millions more [were] in jeopardy...What was even more heartening than the amount of attention showered on the Pilgrimage, was the attitude displayed by the populace to the procession of Orthodox Rabbis as it moved...They watched in wonderment and respect. The traffic stopped...I myself saw many a soldier snap to salute, as the oldest Rabbis remarkably reminiscent of the patriarchs in Dore’s Bible, passed in review. There was something

⁴⁹ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 264.

of the quality of a religious procession that characterized the Rabbinical Pilgrimage and compelled the respect of every passerby.”⁵⁰ The image of a religious pilgrimage was fitting in Margoshes description as the Vaad had intended the event to appear as a delegation of Israel appearing before the powerful US State Department. Their willingness to engage the public with the plight of European Jewry, was explicitly tied to the message that the nation of Jews, a nation defined by peoplehood and not the physical demarcations of a state, was reliving a period of great suffering – something of biblical proportions.

This is why the delegation began in prayer before reaching the capital. Their prayer was not only for the plight of Jewry, but the United States in its war effort – suggesting that the rescue of Europe’s Jews was inexplicably tied to a holy task that crossed national lines.⁵¹ It was this moment which elevated the humanitarian aspect of the Vaad’s work above its surrounding Jewish organizations, as mainstream leadership sought to distance itself from the Rabbis whom they deemed “not representative” of the entire Jewish community⁵². Such a public display would prove to be formative in convincing Jewish members of congress and Secretary of Treasury Morgenthau to convince the President that a War Refugee board was needed for Europe’s Jews. The creation of this board would save over 250,000 lives.

In 1944, the Vaad formally outlined its commitment to the rescue of wider European Jewry as a part of its mandate.⁵³ This turned its focus to lobbying the State Department to take more militant action against war criminals and warn of consequences for Holocaust participants as “all

⁵⁰ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Quoted in *The Answer*, March 12, 1944.

⁵¹ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 259.

⁵² Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 263.

⁵³ Resolutions adopted by the Annual Conference of the Va’ad ha-Hatzalah, New York, 5-6 January 1944. Yeshiva University, Vaad Hatzalah Archives.

Jews in concentration and labor camps...[had to] be treated as prisoners of war”⁵⁴ Rabbi Wilhelm Wolbe who served as the Vaad’s representative to the War Refugee Board, helped assist Jews in the Balkans in their effort to emigrate to Palestine while they could.⁵⁵ Other Vaad activists like Renee Reichman, attempted to establish humanitarian corridors to North Africa, with the aim of evacuating some 500 children from Hungary to Tangiers. Isaac Sternbuch, the premier representative of the Vaad in neutral Switzerland, helped to orchestrate the rescue of some 1,600 Hungarian Jews from deportation to Auschwitz. This was done with the help of Zionist leader Reszo (Yisrael) Kastner, who saw common ground with the Vaad in prioritizing rescue over statehood as the Holocaust went on. The success of this project would lead the Vaad to begin negotiations with Jean-Marie Musy (the Swiss diplomat connected to Himmler) which was technically outside of U.S. policy because the State Department refused to engage in ransoms with adversaries.

Through the connection of Reszo and the Jewish diplomat Sally Mayer, the Vaad was able to establish a direct channel with Heidrich Himmler to ransom the lives of 300,000 Jews before deportation to the death camps. The plan would see 15,000 Jews deported to neutral Switzerland each month with a total expense of 20 million Swiss Francs for the total 300,000. By the end of 1944, the Vaad had raised approximately \$250,000 in the span of a few months to cover all initial ransoms and was even willing to gut its fundraising campaign for the rehabilitation of Jewish religious life in order to pad the funds.⁵⁶ While the initiative proved unsuccessful as Himmler backfired on his promises (likely as an act to taunt American Jewry before the war’s

⁵⁴ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*. Letter from Archibald MacLeish, Assistant Secretary of States, Washington, to Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz, Va’ad ha-Hatzalah, New York, 9 February 1945.

⁵⁵ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 277.

⁵⁶ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 280.

end), the Musy Negotiations were one of the most significant rescue developments during the war. In the Vaad's own words, "if the Vaad Hatzalah had had more funds during the past years many more of our lost brothers would be alive today."⁵⁷ Tragically, the Vaad could not convince mainstream leadership to engage in ransoming with Himmler before his mind was changed. It is likely that part of this hesitancy on the part of the JDC came with the fear that such rules broke with United States law and could risk alienating the Roosevelt administration in its gradual cooperation on other issues including Jewish statehood.⁵⁸

As Vaad rescue projects grew in scale, monthly budgets increased to unprecedented costs as rescue missions now encompassed smuggling operations and maintenance costs meant to cover hundreds of thousands of Jews. For example, "by the end of October 1944 the Vaad Hatzala had sent Isaac and Recha Sternbuch slightly more than \$420,000...with the overwhelming majority of those funds being spent to finance rescue activities in, from or through Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and Rumania."⁵⁹ Efforts like the "Musy Negotiations", grew to a price which was too much for the Vaad to bear independently. As the Allies marched on Berlin, the Vaad proposed, "[to connect] all bodies national...economical...and labour wing...[with a] wide scale [approach]. [It was] perhaps possible [to] connect...[the] Joint [Distribution Committee] for creation of [a] Joint fund dedicated for [the speedy] rescue [of Europe's Jews]"⁶⁰ By the end of the war this was causing strains between the Vaad and members which had helped form the organization. One such strain, the transport of Jewish refugee children to Palestine, "was

⁵⁷ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 284.

⁵⁸ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 284.

⁵⁹ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 279.

⁶⁰ Cable from Rabbis Eliezer Finkel, Josef Mishkowsky, and Yehezkiel Sarna, Council for Relief of Rabbis and Theological Students from Russia, Jerusalem, to the Vaad Hatzalah, New York, March 5, 1945. Yeshiva University Archives, Vaad Hatzalah Collection.

discussed pro and con at great length and the conclusion was finally reached that the same committee which was appointed to meet with Agudath Harabonim in order to discuss the question of the Morning Journal campaign [an Orthodox newspaper outlet] should also advise them that since it is impossible for [the Vaad] financially to carry through with their request... it [was] necessary [to] weigh all...needs and decide whether Palestine [was] the most important at the moment”⁶¹.

The issue in question here, was not one of Palestine statehood but the disposal of refugee children to Palestine who had been found orphaned. As displaced persons camps were terrible environments for these orphaned children to live in, the Vaad and its constituency began efforts to transit them to Palestine where they could enjoy greater care. However, this was becoming too much of a financial burden for the Vaad to handle, and it confused priorities, partially because the Vaad’s unwillingness to fund strictly through the Joint Distribution Committee which would have centralized funding. Issues of fundraising competency like this, would eventually lead members of the Vaad to split off and form a union with the JDC through the Central Orthodox Committee. Until then, efforts continued to resettle orphaned children in Palestine through organizations like Rescue, Inc.

A bias developed towards the JDC, that it would undermine the Vaad’s efforts of religious rejuvenation of post-War European Jewry as the Vaad claimed it was tinged by secularism and “had provided relatively minimal assistance, and only after a lengthy delay and under extreme restrictive conditions, for urgent projects sponsored by the Vaad Ha-Hatzalah.”⁶² Therefore, while there were some associated with the Vaad who were beginning to feel the financial weight

⁶¹ Minutes of the Meeting of the Administrative Committee of the Vaad Hatzalah, April 16, 1945, page 5. Yeshiva University Archives, Vaad Hatzalah Collection.

⁶² Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 283.

of independent rescue projects, and were considering alignment with the Joint Distribution Committee, there were others who still held major resentment. In the post-War landscape, the Vaad saw religious rejuvenation as its primary goal in re-establishing the peoplehood of global Jewry. The results of the war had greatly impacted this effort as many lost faith in both Judaism and humanity -- “One study showed that fifty-five percent of the survivors could be classified as observant before the war, but that this number decreased to thirty-four percent ‘just after the Holocaust’ ...this increased the number of non-observant to sixty six percent.”⁶³.

This effort would involve a return to Orthodoxy. The JDC programs for education in DP camps were entirely secular and “the Vaad Hatzalah was not included in this group, in part because spiritual and religious rehabilitation was not mentioned anywhere in the directive.”⁶⁴. Therefore, while tensions were bursting at the seams regarding policy towards the JDC, most members of the Vaad could agree that a particular role needed to be played for religious rehabilitation of Orthodoxy. One concerning aspect of the JDC’s DP plan was “The failure to mention [Orthodox] rehabilitation in [its objectives]. Many JDC personnel couldn’t connect with the survivors because they did not speak their languages; they knew little of European and Jewish culture and did not empathize with their religious beliefs.”⁶⁵.

As a result, the Vaad came to serve a unique role in providing support for Orthodox DP’s and returning a sense of Jewishness to their lives while the JDC and other mainstream organizations sought a ‘one-size fits all approach’ to rehabilitate European Jewry with the eventual plan of reintegration to Europe or migration to Palestine. Nathan Baruch, the director of Vaad relief work in post-War Europe, played an especially important role in this process by accommodating

⁶³ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 23.

⁶⁴ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 97.

⁶⁵ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 98.

the needs of Orthodox communities and organizing their visas to the United States. While the goal of Baruch and others was to eventually send such communities in Palestine, it was important for their own wellbeing to leave the poor conditions of DP camps behind. DP's themselves, "wanted to go to America where there was an established Jewish community. Once the State of Israel was formally declared, they would move and establish communities there."⁶⁶

Rebuilding the peoplehood of Europe's DPs would primarily involve reinvigorating the presence of Orthodox tradition in Jewish life by supporting those looking for a return to Orthodoxy and encouraging others to join Orthodoxy through humanitarian intervention. In this effort, emigration to Palestine served more as an image of hope for DP's who wanted a return to Jewish society than an effort towards statehood. It also provided a more humanitarian home than the poor conditions of DP camps. Nathan Baruch found that children DP's were especially attached to this as "he was overwhelmed with the children's 'spirit'...their zeal and hope and sureness of finally getting to Eretz Israel."⁶⁷ Lastly, emigration to Palestine served as an escape from post-war pogroms as "Poles were murdering Jews in post-war Europe" and efforts needed to be made to ease British restrictions to Palestine.⁶⁸

Compatibility between the Vaad and Zionism

While political tensions over Zionism existed within the Vaad, leadership was primarily concerned with rehabilitation after the war effort. Irving Bunim, a leader of the Vaad and supporter of the Young Israel Movement, which believed in Jewish statehood, emphasized the

⁶⁶ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 226.

⁶⁷ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman. Rabbi Nathan Baruch to William Alpert, September 15, 1946.

⁶⁸ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman. Irving Bunim to Rabbi Jacob Rosenheim, July 2nd, 1946; Helfand, 203.

need for this priority in 1946 when he wrote to the Vaad's anti-Zionist elements stating, "Agudah [non-Zionist] or Mizrachi [Zionist] is not the question nor the problem today. Hunger is starving both – the Poles are murdering both – and the British bar both from entering Palestine."⁶⁹. The departure of the Vaad's Mizrachi members in 1947 can easily be mistaken as a fallout over Zionism, but it proved to be more than that. The more likely cause of Mizrachi's initial departure from the Vaad was a disagreement over attitudes towards the JDC combined with inter organizational rivalry.

For example, "Rabbi Lookstein...an active leader in the Mizrachi movement, was upset that a number of organizations claiming 'special interest' in providing for the Orthodox community had caused confusion at home and abroad. He wanted an authoritative body recognized by the Orthodox community and the JDC to stimulate Orthodox Jewish life in Europe and provide access to the JDC's financial resources."⁷⁰. Other Mizrachi had the same complaint: "The next speaker was Mr. Gellman of Mizrachi. Mr. Gellman defended the work of the J.D.C. and advised that a great number of complaints have been lodged against the Vaad Hatzala throughout Europe. He agreed that we must have one orthodox machine to rescue orthodoxy whom Joint Is helping, but not enough."⁷¹. This issue was not exclusive to Mizrachi members: "Rabbi Reuben Levovitz, representing Agudas Harabonim, also favored a central body and wanted to reach a new understanding with the JDC."⁷²

As a result, the COC or Central Orthodox Committee would be formed in 1947 as a branch connected to the JDC. The overwhelming majority of aid to European Orthodoxy would occur

⁶⁹ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman. Letter from Irving Bunim, Vaad Hatzalah, New York, to Jacob Rosenheim, President, Agudath Israel, New York, July 2, 1946, page 1.

⁷⁰ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 236.

⁷¹ Minutes of meeting held at McAlpin Hotel, March 6, 1946, page 1. Yeshiva University Archives, Vaad Hatzalah Archives.

⁷² *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 236.

through the COC, leaving the Vaad a much more peripheral organization.⁷³ Many members of the Vaad – Mizrachi, Agudah, etc. – would leave to join the COC as the main organ of Orthodox relief efforts out of necessity. Still, the remnants of the Vaad had significant work to be done regarding emigration efforts and yeshivot aid: “to organize the large and small yeshivos, assist rabbis and Torah scholars and their families scattered over many lands, and organize emigration...Eretz Yisrael.”⁷⁴

The Vaad began preparations for mass emigration to Palestine as early as 1946, by creating “38 hachsharot (training centers to prepare people to live in Palestine)” across the US zone of post-war Europe.⁷⁵ Part of this change was precipitated by pogroms occurring across Poland and Eastern Europe in the wake of the displaced persons crisis, as antisemitism was firmly enmeshed in Europe. Additionally, Vaad teams were sent to almost every DP camp in Germany to assist with emigration to Palestine. By 1947, much of the Vaad’s fundraising efforts were directed towards the transfer of DPs from camps in Europe to France, where they could obtain emigration visas to Palestine.⁷⁶ Here, orphaned children were registered with the Chief Rabbi’s Council of France for future emigration to Kibbutz (Jewish socialist communities) in Palestine. This allowed displaced children to have a greater sense of community as much if not all of their family members were lost to the Holocaust. The other side of this effort concerned placing orphaned Jews in the hands of Jewish communities rather than gentile ones to prevent assimilation in order to ensure the survival of Jewish culture in the younger generation. In all of

⁷³ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman. Harry M. Rosen, “Some Questions and Answers Concerning the Agreement Between the JDC and the Union of Orthodox Rabbis with Specific Reference to Status of Vaad Hatzalah”, August 21, 1947, JDC-NY Archives JDC Collection, 45/64 File No. 4070.

⁷⁴ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman. Rabbi Eliezer Silver to Rabbi Nathan Baruch, Fall 1948 (RNB File).

⁷⁵ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman. Abraham Hyman, *The Undeclared* (Jerusalem, Gefen, 1993): 290-291.

⁷⁶ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 133.

these efforts, the Vaad rescued about 2,000 displaced orphans and placed them in Orthodox communal homes.⁷⁷ The reasoning for migrating orphans to Palestine was less based on the effort to populate Zionist communities there, but to find the remaining Orthodox homes of the world for children to thrive in as most had been destroyed in Europe in the wake of the Holocaust and migration quotas to the United States remained limited.

Other efforts by the Vaad in emigration to Palestine would involve the mass publication of Orthodox literature to be sent to Palestine and the integration of Yeshivot scholars displaced by the Holocaust into the Palestinian Yeshivot system.⁷⁸ Displaced rabbis and students of the Yeshivot system of Europe were often prioritized as migrants whom the Vaad sought to obtain visas for.⁷⁹ This priority would change with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, as the Vaad began assisting the general DP population in emigration efforts -- about two-thirds of Europe's remaining DP's would emigrate to Israel over the United States.⁸⁰ Part of this push was driven by the fact that U.S. quotas for immigration remained comparatively limited than that in Israel, which established the right to citizenry based on Jewish lineage as a cornerstone of its democracy. During the final years of the Vaad (1949-1954), the Vaad would coordinate fundraising efforts with Orthodox organizations across the United States to help these DP's in their process of integration. Agudas Harabonim (the Union of Orthodox Rabbis) specifically, "asked the Vaad to assume larger roles in specific areas [in Israel]. In Israel they were to provide assistance to the newly arrived rabbis and students and 'help in their rehabilitation' [and to continue] the immigration program for rabbis and yeshiva students [to Israel]."⁸¹ The last

⁷⁷ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 238.

⁷⁸ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman. Rabbi Eliezer Silver to Rabbi Nathan Baruch, July 29, 1948.

⁷⁹ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 223.

⁸⁰ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 277.

⁸¹ *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-War-Europe* by Alex Grobman, page 284.

mission of the Vaad would concern fundraising for yeshivos and religious kibbutzim and moshavim (settlements) in Israel in 1954.

The Zionist project, in the mind of the Vaad, was most in need of this kind of transitional assistance as religious institutions which would prove to be the bedrock of many Orthodox Israeli communities, needed funding and resources to integrate in a new environment. As historical work continues on the Vaad it is essential to recognize that its strain of Orthodox leadership proved essential in saving Jewish life and adding a humanitarian component to Zionist initiatives during and after the Holocaust. The Vaad's faith in Judaism's religious principles and adherence to a code that prioritized the preservation of each individual life reveals a time when actions tied to Zionism were driven by a humanitarian effort and not ideas of nationalism or statehood. This runs counter to the image of Zionism today which has been shaped by a shift towards Revisionist principles of nationalism, militancy, and the maximal expansion of Israel's territory.

For the Vaad, nationhood was rarely a physical state occupying a space, but the holy people of Israel who would return to peoplehood through an observance of eternal Torah principles. The Orthodox leadership of the Vaad believed that a return to these Torah principles would create a sense of belonging that existed in *time* and not the physical *space* of Israel. As one member of the 400 Rabbi March Abraham Joshua Heschel remarked, "danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time...Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern... There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share,

not to subdue but to be in accord.”⁸² It was this understanding of a peoplehood driven by an adherence to eternal Torah principles, which led to the prioritization of saving each Jewish life over any political aspirations for statehood.

Heschel, Eliezer Silver and Agudath Israel:

Abraham Joshua Heschel served as the leading Jewish intellectual of the 20th century, with major publications like *The Sabbath*, *The Prophets* and *God in Search of Man*. At the core of Heschel’s philosophy was the ideal of social justice, which Heschel saw as directly related to the message of the Hebrew prophets. All of these works espoused the Jewish attitude that harming an individual is like harming the entire world – Heschel drew close attention to underserved communities like the elderly, African Americans, and refugees from the Soviet Union during his career. The years between Heschel’s arrival in the United States all the way through the displaced persons crisis of the late 1940s, were formative in influencing his goals as a theologian in the realm of social work – particularly his involvement in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

To address Heschel’s connection with the Vaad, it is crucial to discuss his close relationship with Agudath Israel President Rabbi Eliezer Silver who was Heschel’s closest tie to the organization. In addition to this, it is important to acknowledge that while there are a limited set of documents revealing direct interactions between Heschel and the Vaad, his connections to the organization were meaningful. For example, Heschel received his secondary education at the same Yeshiva in Vilna, Lithuania, which many Vaad leaders had received theirs and turned their

⁸² *The Sabbath, Its Meaning for the Modern Man* by Abraham Joshua Heschel. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. Page, 13.

attention to during the early years of the Holocaust.⁸³ While Heschel never held a direct role within the Vaad, his connection to Silver reveals a valuable insight into how the Vaad's leadership and Heschel shared a common philosophy of Torah adherence and goal of pushing placing responsibility in the hands of everyday Jewish Americans to act on the atrocities occurring throughout Europe.

Heschel had arrived in America on March 21, 1940, after nearly a year of communications with the Hebrew Union College President Julian Morgenstern to secure a work visa as an assistant professor in Cincinnati.⁸⁴ Upon arrival, Heschel found himself in an academic environment where he was respected and admired, but somewhat estranged from his colleagues who taught at the Reform minded university. Heschel had hoped for a teaching position at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, given that the theology taught there was more in line with his conception of Judaism. During his later years at the HUC, Heschel would use his interregnum as associate professor to frequent the JTS in New York where he formed a connection with JTS chancellor Dr. Louis Finkelstein. Heschel and Finkelstein formed a quick connection as Heschel had eastern European origins and Finkelstein was "related by blood-kinship or marriage to almost every important Hasidic 'dynasty' in Europe."⁸⁵

The shared desire to revive 'Traditional Judaism' through the evacuation of eastern Europe's greatest Jewish Rabbi's to Palestine and elsewhere would prove a common denominator between Heschel and Finkelstein, the latter of which offered a letter of support to the Vaad Hatzalah in its funding campaign to secure the transport of the stranded Shanghai scholars.⁸⁶ Finkelstein's

⁸³ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*. Julian E. Zelizer, Yale University Press, 2021. Page, 18.

⁸⁴ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*. Julian E. Zelizer, Yale University Press, 2021. Page, 38.

⁸⁵ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*. Julian E. Zelizer, Yale University Press, 2021. Page, 38.

⁸⁶ Zuroff, Efraim. *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Vaad-Hatzala Rescue Committee 1939-1945*, page 134.

affiliation with the Vaad was a rarity during the Holocaust era, given the Orthodox nature of the Vaad and the Conservative nature of the JTS. The correspondence between the two showed a willingness to cooperate on the issue of rescuing Orthodox scholars and a shared belief that the redemption of world Jewry would come through the preservation of its greatest Traditional Torah remnants. Aside from Eliezer Silver, this was one of Heschel's first contacts with Jewish leadership that was connected to the efforts of the Vaad Hatzalah.

In 1942, Heschel became increasingly aware of the dire situation of his family members in the Warsaw Ghetto as news came back that the Nazis were beginning to liquidate and transfer members to Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Heschel became infuriated by what he saw as inaction on the part of the American Jewish community and participated in the mass rally of 20,000 Jews and their allies in Maddison Square Garden on July 21, 1942.⁸⁷ This served as a precursor to Heschel's participation in the Rabbi's March of 1943, which marked the beginning of his career in public activism and lasted throughout the Civil Rights Movement up until the mass exodus of Jews from the Soviet Union. Yet despite the Maddison Square Garden rally, Heschel felt that much of the Jewish leadership surrounding him was timid in their criticisms of the Roosevelt administration – the rally itself included a message from the President, which was met by applause and a show of support throughout. Tied to this sense was Heschel's growing belief that the events of the Holocaust had been precipitated by a lack of spirituality in the Western world “in the embrace of scientific rationalism.”⁸⁸ Like his other Orthodox colleagues, Heschel saw an increasing absence of prayer and religious tradition in daily Jewish life and implored his community to demonstrate their Jewishness in public settings. He began to feel

⁸⁷ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*. Julian E. Zelizer, Yale University Press, 2021. Page, 56.

⁸⁸ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*. Julian E. Zelizer, Yale University Press, 2021. Page, 57.

increasingly isolated from the Reform community at HUC and as 1943 came he learned that his mother had died from a heart attack after she was attacked by Gestapo officers as the Warsaw Ghetto was liquidated. This would ultimately push him towards frustration with mainstream and Reform organizations, which he saw as slow to address the genocide of Jewish people overseas.

Heschel had labored for years to find safe routes for his family members during the Holocaust but was met with constant disappointment and depression when news came back that they were either missing or killed. To heal his own crisis of mind, Heschel turned to the Cincinnati Orthodox community where he encountered chief Rabbi Eliezer Silver, who was the head of Agudath Israel and the president of the Vaad Hatzalah. Both Heschel and Silver shared the belief that rescuing the remaining Jews of Europe was a 'mitzvah' or an imperative deed. Heschel himself a refugee, knew the importance of securing a route for other religious scholars and supported Silver's efforts to lobby the US State Department to secure visas for the last remaining Torah remnants. Despite the fact that Agudath Israel was a non-Zionist group, Silver supported the idea of resettlement of the Torah remnants in Palestine for the sake of preserving the best of the Yeshiva system. Heschel's 'The Meaning of War', published in 1943, alluded to this underlying imperative between all Jewish denominations regardless of their orientation towards Zionism.

Heschel's words were filled with an existential fear that the remnants of Jewry in America and beyond were forgoing the great temple of Judaic knowledge through inaction with the Holocaust: "A messenger recently came and conveyed the following message from all the European Jews who are being slaughtered in the hell of Poland. We, Jews, despise all those who live in safety and do nothing to save us...Let the blasphemy of our time not become an eternal scandal. Let future generations not loathe us for having failed to preserve what prophets and

saints, martyrs and scholars have created in thousands of years.”⁸⁹ To sit in idleness as the Torah remnants perished was to ignore God’s covenant with humanity and forsake the offer of redemption. For Heschel, redemption was not only a series of behaviors that needed to be changed, but the literal act of ingathering the diaspora to communally worship the Sabbath.

As Heschel turned away from involvement in the academic communities at the HUC and elsewhere, he became more entangled with the spiritual Orthodox community surrounding him in Cincinnati. This would push his work towards the social justice ideals which were so common in his later work, as Orthodox organizations like the Vaad and its constituent group Agudath Israel were far more confrontational and vocal in their efforts towards Holocaust rescue and relief. Heschel would participate in the swearing in ceremony of Rabbi Eliezer Silver at the 1940 Agudath Israel convention, only one year after the Vaad Hatzalah was founded by Silver in 1943. Heschel belonged to a small committee of other Jewish leaders and rabbis who would decide the fate of Agudath Israel’s leadership for the coming years.⁹⁰ Additionally, Heschel would have been among the leadership that confirmed Rabbi Mordecai Shlomo Friedman to the position of Boyaner Rebbe at Agudath Israel. Friedman formed his own parallel organization called the Council of Grand Rabbis, which served as a Hasidic arm of the Vaad Hatzalah focused on fundraising. The 1940 Agudath Israel convention would lead to the drafting of a series of resolutions related to settlement in Palestine including: “To appeal to all non-Jewish leaders for common action to protect the Holy Land...from devastating air attacks” and to “establish a chain of orthodox schools.”⁹¹ Thus, efforts to re-establish religious life in America proposed by

⁸⁹ *The Meaning of War*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1943. Rubenstein Library Archives at Duke University. Pages 3-4.

⁹⁰ ‘Every Friday’ Magazine, “Cincinnati Jewry Warm Host to Convention”. Published August 30, 1940. Rubenstein Library Archives at Duke University. Pages 1-2.

⁹¹ ‘Every Friday’ Magazine, “Cincinnati Jewry Warm Host to Convention”. Published August 30, 1940. Rubenstein Library Archives at Duke University. Page 2.

Heschel and other leadership at Agudath Israel was intrinsically tied with the need to create a hospitable environment for the Torah remnants arriving in Palestine.

As Heschel continued his association with Silver, he was invited to participate in the Rabbis March on Washington, D.C. during 1943. In the same year, the Vaad had associated itself with activist Peter Bergson's Emergency Committee which was placing pressure on the State Department to open refugee channels to Palestine by repealing the White Papers issued by Britain. Bergson's propaganda efforts undoubtedly had an effect on building political momentum for opening up Palestine among other Jewish organizations, including the American Zionist Emergency Council. The AZEC would issue a petition in 1943 signed by leaders of higher education, including members of the Jewish community like Albert Einstein and Heschel himself.⁹² The petition emphasized that the objective of the Israeli state was not to displace Palestine's existing religious communities, but to fulfill the 'legal right' of the Jewish nation (as defined by the League of Nations charter) to self-determination and the promise Great Britain and the U.S. Congress had made to the League of Nations in 1922 to facilitate the establishment of a homeland for the Jews of the world in Palestine. By employing the language of 'self-determination' Heschel and the other signatories were emphasizing a humanitarian ideal consisted with many Zionist thinkers before them. Scholars like Omri Boehm, have distinguished phrases like 'self-determination' from those like 'national sovereignty' as the former was concerned with placing the fate of Jewish communities, traditions, institutions and pursuits in the hands of Jews themselves under a "bi-tri-national or quasi-national state" and the latter was concerned with exclusive Jewish ownership of historical Palestine.⁹³ Zionists like Ben Gurion

⁹² 'A Petition to the President of the United States': Submitted by Members of the Faculties of American Higher Learning. Rubenstein Library Archives at Duke University. Page 1.

⁹³ *The Haifa Republic*. Omri Boehm. New York Review of Books, 2022. Page, 52.

had been emphasizing this difference for years before as “[the Jewish] aim [was] not to rule over others, not to be a ruler nation like all the other ruler nations, [but to be] the masters of [their] own fate, no more than that and no less.”⁹⁴ In this sense, the signatories were maintaining the unique dream of peoplehood in Israel not as a nationalist endeavor as with other nations, but a mission to hand opportunity and self-determination over to the masses of diaspora Jews.

The signatories relied on the success stories of migration to Palestine as a cause for a renewed League of Nations commitment as “the progress made by the Jewish National Home [had] been among the most remarkable achievements of modern times. More than a half million victims of prejudice and intolerance [were] enabled, without infringing on the rights of any other people or religious group to remake their lives in dignity and self-reliance on their ancestral soil.”⁹⁵ The petition would serve as an impactful accompaniment to the march organized by the Vaad and Bergson, which demonstrated a willingness of gentility to engage in the issue of rescue for Holocaust survivors and the facilitation of a new department to provide a pathway for Jews to Palestine and other safe havens.

While the march was rarely mentioned in Heschel’s writings, scholars like Julian E. Zelizer, have typically marked the event as the starting point of Heschel’s career in “grassroots activism in the pursuit of justice.”⁹⁶ In Heschel’s career, “[his] intellectual pursuits were directly connected to these experiences even if he did not always articulate the relevance of this relationship. His taste of activism in... Washington, and more important, the acute horrors of WWII only heightened his desire to explore his theological interests. The ravages of war, in his

⁹⁴ *The Haifa Republic*. Omri Boeh. New York Review of Books, 2022. Page, 54.

⁹⁵ ‘A Petition to the President of the United States’: Submitted by Members of the Faculties of American Higher Learning. Rubenstein Library Archives at Duke University. Page 2.

⁹⁶ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*. Julian E. Zelizer, Yale University Press, 2021. Page, 61.

mind, were a product of the spiritual crisis of mankind.”⁹⁷ According to Zelizer, it was the Rabbis March on Washington which spurred Heschel into publishing a variety of pieces on Holocaust theology which eventually earned him a full-time position at the HUC, where he had previously served as an associate professor.⁹⁸ It was only until later in the war that Heschel’s affiliation with the Reform community began to diminish as he later gained a position at the Conservative JTS in New York and became weary of the accommodationist views of Wise (the leader of Reform Jewry) towards the Roosevelt and Truman administrations which put Jewish lives at risk.

Heschel would spend the immediate years following the Holocaust attempting to contact scholars and academic connections he had made in his time in Warsaw and Berlin. Letters between Heschel and the Hebrew Shelter and Immigrant Society show an ongoing effort between 1945-1947 to contact one Chil Hofer, who had been repatriated in Poland.⁹⁹ While not of the same Orthodox cloth of the Vaad Hatzalah, the Hebrew Shelter and Immigrant Society (HIAS) belonged to several other major Jewish organizations which convened with the Vaad Hatzalah in the summer of 1940 to establish subcommittees across organizations tasked with securing U.S. visas and raising funds across the Jewish community. It was largely thanks to the efforts of the Vaad and HIAS that scholars like Hofer were able to receive direct aid from Jewish posts in Lisbon and Teheran. It appears that Heschel made regular donations to the HIAS in the form of blankets, foods, and oils to keep contacts who he had left in Europe protected and well nourished.¹⁰⁰ Heschel’s communications with the HIAS in the immediate aftermath of the

⁹⁷ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*. Julian E. Zelizer, Yale University Press, 2021. Page, 62.

⁹⁸ *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*. Julian E. Zelizer, Yale University Press, 2021. Page, 62.

⁹⁹ Letter to Abraham Joshua Heschel from Fanny Silverstein at the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Society. July 12, 1945. Rubenstein Library Archives at Duke University.

¹⁰⁰ Receipt from HIAS to Abraham Joshua Heschel. June 11th, 1945. Rubenstein Library Archives at Duke University.

Holocaust were just one of the many ways Heschel continued his association with the humanitarian work at the Vaad through its work to secure visas and migration permits for Orthodox scholars across Eastern Europe and the former USSR.

Heschel's Holocaust Theology and Humanitarian Zionism:

The benefit of studying Heschel within the context of early Zionism is that his theology never laid claim to one Jewish group. For example, Heschel received an Orthodox secondary education during his early years at the Vilna, while his higher education continued at the secular University of Berlin where he encountered a variety of Jewish belief systems. Heschel's time in Jewish activism also reveals that he never saw one sect, political or religious, as superior to the other – he spent his efforts with non-aligned organizations like B'nai B'rith, Reform academic institutions like the HUC, devout Orthodox groups like Agudath Israel, anti-Zionist coalitions like the American Jewish Committee and Conservative seminaries like the JTS. Heschel found traces of the core Jewish message, what he described as the message of the Hebrew Prophets, in all of these institutions. For this reason, Heschel's understanding of Zionism appealed to American Jewish institutions, because its focus remained on preserving the physical wellbeing, spirit, mental tenacity, and moral commitment of the Jewish people and not the political or divisive. It was because of this that Heschel could be invited to give a sermon with all three majors denominations (Reform, Conservative and Orthodox) and their respective institutions within the same month.¹⁰¹ The significance of this: Heschel's understanding of Zionism and its theological significance, which is based in the same understanding as Eliezer Silver's at the Vaad, found an audience in almost every Jewish religious or political sect across the United

¹⁰¹ Letter to Heschel from Louis Finkelstein at the JTS. June 7th, 1943. Rubenstein Library Archives at Duke University.

States. These same understandings can be found in the work done by Omri Boehm, who has documented scores of Zionist passages on the intended bi-tri-quasi nature of nationhood in historical Palestine before Zionism was corrupted with the idea of exclusive sovereignty of the land.¹⁰²

‘Event’ was at the core of Heschel’s understanding of the interplay of God in history. The idea of ‘event’, which involved a considerable degree of abstraction in Heschel’s writing, was meant to replace a fixed understanding of God in terms of what Heschel called ‘thinghood’. In other words, the *personhood* of God could not be defined as an unchanging figure or form in space, but a presence articulated in moments of time, however brief, “a word spoken, a word expressed, springing from a Presence, a word in time, a pathos overflowing in words. [The prophet’s] experience is a perception of an act that happens rather than a perception of a situation that abides.”¹⁰³ History and God were not one and the same, and events which transpired below were not reflections of what God had willed above: “History is where God is defied, where justice suffers defeats. God’s purpose is neither clearly apparent nor translatable into rational categories of order and design...God’s power in history does not endure as a process; it occurs as extraordinary events.”¹⁰⁴ Human beings were left with the responsibility to alleviate hatred and violence in the world, while God’s actions were often articulated as miracles or signs of mercy upon humanity meant to inspire the best in humanity – the most poignant in modern Jewish history being the ingathering of the diaspora in Palestine. This dualistic aspect of Heschel’s

¹⁰² *The Haifa Republic*. Omri Boehm. New York Review of Books, 2022. Page, 55.

¹⁰³ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. Harper & Row, 1969. Page, 553.

¹⁰⁴ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Prophets*. Harper & Row, 1969. Page, 214.

theology pushed for a use of human agency in resolving the world's dilemmas, like the Holocaust and the displaced persons crisis, while simultaneously acknowledging the presence of God's presence in history through miracles and transformative spiritual events.

In Heschel's theology, Jewish history was a process of longing for a return to the nation of Israel. While the land of Israel held significance in memory, "[Jews did] not worship the soil. The land of Israel without the God of Israel" would exist today and be gone tomorrow.¹⁰⁵ Nationhood could only be defined by the ingathering of the diaspora and not the physical land of historical Palestine itself, "The holiness of the Sabbath preceded the holiness of Israel. The holiness of the land of Israel is derived from the holiness of the people of Israel. The land was not holy at the time of Terah or even at the time of the Patriarchs. It was sanctified by the people when they entered the land under the leadership of Joshua. The land was sanctified by the people, and the Sabbath was sanctified by God."¹⁰⁶ This interpretation of peoplehood and self-determination before claims over space, territory and land, which Heschel saw as inferior to eternal Torah practices in time, would create room for his bi-tri-quasi national interpretation of a state system in Palestine and nationhood for the Jewish people.

In his major work, *The Sabbath*, Heschel emphasized the fleetingness of empires like ancient Rome, the Ottoman Empire and even the Third Reich. While these empires were certainly defined by a strong ethno-national component, they lacked the unique quality of the Jewish people in their investment in space rather than time. Heschel saw the event of the Sabbath as the central way in which the Jewish people had retained their identity, culture and spiritual history through millennia with the "difference between the Sabbath and all other days is not to be

¹⁰⁵ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 101.

¹⁰⁶ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 12.

noticed in the physical structure of things, in their spatial dimension. Things do not change on that day. There is only a difference in the dimension of time, in the relation of the universe to God. The Sabbath preceded creation and the Sabbath completed creation; it is all of the spirit that the world can bear.”¹⁰⁷ Because of this, the ingathering of the Jewish people in Israel was not only significant because of its political implications, but the spiritual implication that the diaspora could finally observe the Sabbath as a whole.

To Heschel, this was the resolution which God had promised throughout all of Jewish history, a promise which the Jewish people had not taken for granted and forgotten even in their most disastrous moments. Jews in “Auschwitz and Dachau, in Bergen-Belsen and Treblinka, [had] prayed at the end of Atonement Day, ‘Next year in Jerusalem.’ The next day they were asphyxiated in gas chambers.”¹⁰⁸ However, what had ultimately sanctified the land was not the simple return of the Jewish people, but the act of saving human life as “No act [was] as holy as the act of saving human life. The Holy Land, having offered a haven to more than two million Jews—many of whom would not have been alive had they remained in Poland, Russia, Germany, and other countries— [and] has attained a new sanctity.”¹⁰⁹ In fact Heschel believed the events which preceded the creation of Israel held even more spiritual significance than those described in the bible as the martyrdom of the Jews in Nazi death camps were interpreted as infinitely greater than the binding of Isaac.¹¹⁰

The preservation of human life not only consisted of the physical wellbeing of Jewish individuals, but what Heschel considered a chance at renewal and resurrection. Having been

¹⁰⁷ *The Sabbath, Its Meaning for the Modern Man* by Abraham Joshua Heschel. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005. Page, 28.

¹⁰⁸ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 17.

¹⁰⁹ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 96.

¹¹⁰ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 113.

through one of the greatest disasters of any nation in history, the Jewish people had been exposed to hell and were now awaiting the chance to escape as “[they] all died in Auschwitz, yet [their] faith survived. [They] knew that to repudiate God would be to continue the holocaust... Now...living in hell...[Their] present life [was their] afterlife...The Jews go to Israel not only for physical security for themselves and their children; they go to Israel for renewal, for the experience of resurrection.”¹¹¹ These words paralleled biblical passages which Heschel often referred to in sermons and speeches regarding the necessity of relocating Holocaust survivors to Israel. The fact that so many Jews had either lost their faith in Auschwitz or were alienating themselves from Jewishness out of fear of violence was enough to convince Heschel that the moment was the loudest echo of the Jewish dilemma in modern history, with implications reaching all the way back to the covenant between God and the Jewish people and the efforts of the prophets during exile.

In *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, Heschel repeatedly quotes the prophet Ezekiel when he proclaims, “Thus says the Lord God: Behold I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel...I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land...(Ezekiel 37:1—14.)”¹¹² Thus, Heschel’s interpretation of the return to Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel) or Zion, was not an act in the metaphorical sense, but a literal moment in history when Jews would ingather from the diaspora in Palestine. Realizing this historical act would serve not only as a reaffirmation of the biblical past but “offer an anticipation of the promise of the future.”¹¹³ In other words, the

¹¹¹ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 95.

¹¹² *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 93.

¹¹³ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 106.

physical ingathering of the diaspora in Eretz Israel was a precursor to the spiritual resurrection of the dead as foretold by the prophets.

On the individual level, Heschel believed the relocation of Europe's Jews to Palestine would act as a counter to the cynicism created by the Holocaust. Rather than accepting the nihilism and inhumanity which the Nazi project had attempted to instill in the Jewish people through their systematic murder and degradation, Heschel saw settlement in Israel as, "a repudiation of the thought that man in history 'lives toward the death.' [Israel's] existence is a witness that man must live toward redemption."¹¹⁴ Cynicism, which Heschel saw as the root of the Western obsession with technology and power, could be overruled through the example of cultivation in Israel.

Like most Jews who were sympathetic to Zionism at the time, cultivation entailed spiritual worship alongside the physical transformation of the land from a desert to a garden. While this image also played a role in the disinformation campaign that Palestine was an arid land unoccupied by any indigenous peoples, Heschel was likely using the metaphor to encourage the mobilization of all developing nations and states dedicated to acting as safe havens for refugees worldwide.¹¹⁵ Israel would also take on an international and multifaith component in that the Yeshivas there would act as "not only a place of refuge for the survivors of the holocaust, but also a tabernacle for the rebirth of faith and justice, for the renewal of souls, for the cultivation of knowledge of the words of the divine...a light within history."¹¹⁶ Thus, the implications of bringing the greatest torah scholars in the world to Israel went beyond the Jewish people, encompassing humanity as a whole.

¹¹⁴ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 106.

¹¹⁵ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 113.

¹¹⁶ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 112.

It was because of this wider human component, not limited to the Jewish experience, that Heschel purposefully made room for the co-aspirations of Palestinian peoples in historical Palestine alongside the Jewish nation. Cultivating the land through spirituality and scholarship could not be a Jewish project alone, but a burden shared between peoples: “All of us must learn how to create in this dreadful emptiness of our lives, how to be illumined by a hope despite disaster and dismay.”¹¹⁷ Only through the co-development of nations in Palestine could the messianic promises of, “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” be reached.¹¹⁸

While Heschel mischaracterizes the extremist nature of Arab nationalism as the sole reason for lack of cooperation in historical Palestine, he was ultimately optimistic that Jewish and Arab peoples had a great deal in common and could work towards transforming the land, “The thing that separates us from the Arabs is the claim of two per cent of the area of the Middle East, while the values and interests that unite us comprise 90 per cent of our personal and social being.”¹¹⁹ Between the two peoples, Heschel saw a common “heritage of suffering and humiliation.” from colonial and traditionally Western forces.¹²⁰ Therefore, Arabs also were a necessity in the scholastic project of Israel’s higher learning institutions as “young Israelis and Arabs could join in a mutual discourse of learning. The old prejudices could be replaced by a new comprehension and respect, born of a reciprocal dialogue in the intellectual domain.”¹²¹ Those Jews who came to settle the land of Palestine had a responsibility to encourage interfaith dialogue and rebuild networks after the Palestinian refugee crisis which Jews had “[not been absolved] responsibility

¹¹⁷ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 177.

¹¹⁸ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 126.

¹¹⁹ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 139.

¹²⁰ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 150.

¹²¹ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 148.

for...Jewish people in Israel as well as the Jews everywhere [must] contribute generously toward a just and charitable solution to this human tragedy.”¹²²

Conclusion:

In assessing the legacy of Zionism, it is difficult and painful for a great deal of the world to consider that much of the Zionist project included a genuine effort towards cooperation and basic humanitarian principles. This paper has attempted to argue that in Zionism’s complex, hopeful, painful, and divisive legacy, a core component has become overlooked in the popular understanding of the creation of Israel and its implications. While Zionism harbors a legacy of oppression, ethnic violence, and closed mindedness, it also reflects the best of the Jewish tradition in its most humanitarian aspects. For the leaders who sought to preserve and retain the human face of Zionism, ethno-nationalism, exclusive claims and the political were secondary to the imperative to preserve and protect Jewish life. This was accomplished with a combination of practical efforts to secure visas, rescue routes, safe havens, and food and supplies for the victims of the Holocaust and a spiritual revival which placed the preservation of Jewish texts and ancient tradition at the forefront of its agenda.

In this branch of humanitarian Zionism, the Vaad Hatzalah and Abraham Joshua Heschel served as crucial institutional and intellectual components (respectively) who effectively brought the priority of saving Jewish lives in the physical and spiritual sense to the forefront of the Zionist question. Both the Vaad and Heschel were inextricably linked in their efforts. Whether humanitarianism remains a core component of Zionism today, is a question both the Vaad and Heschel would hope for in the affirmative. What is more important is reconciling the DNA of the

¹²² *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1969, page 147.

Vaad and Heschel in Zionism and the predicament of the State of Israel, its actions, and the perceptions around it today.

As judicial overhauls and prospects of annexation loom over the legacy of Israel in the 21st century, it is central that scholarship remembers and celebrates the legacies of the Vaad and Heschel in adhering to the social justice principles and humanitarian angle of the Hebrew prophets. Both the Vaad as an institution and Heschel as an intellectual knew that history would only prove kind to Zionism if the humanitarian aspects of its mission were upheld – the temporal qualities contained in the pages of the Torah and thousands of years of Jewish scholarship. Intellect, its fostering and preservation, was of necessity to keep the Zionist mission alive. This was demonstrated through the thousands of lives saved through the Vaad's efforts to uphold the Yeshiva system and the spiritual questioning Heschel brought to the Jewish community in its search for meaning as Israel became a state. Hopefully, the Zionist project of Israel will continue to keep this tradition well and alive.

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