

## Post-World-War-II American Jewry and the Confrontation with Catastrophe

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Learsi played another important role in the process of enshrining the Holocaust in American Jewish public culture in precisely the period of time surrounding the tercentenary. Working with a committee of other American Jews in 1952 initially under the auspices of the American Jewish Congress, he composed and then distributed widely a reading for use at Passover sederim. (40) Distributed nationally and internationally through Jewish community councils, printed in Jewish newspapers, and endorsed by rabbis for their congregants, the English and Hebrew text brought the imagery of the destruction into Jewish homes and communities. Dedicated to the memory of "the six million of our brothers of the European exile" who had been slaughtered "by a tyrant more wicked than the Pharaoh who enslaved our forefathers in the land of Egypt," the short piece described the Nazis as "evil ones," whose brutality "defamed the image of God in which man was created." The passage reminded American Jews that, on the first night of Passover in 1943, the "remnants of the Warsaw Ghetto rose up to slay their oppressors as they were about to be slain." Yet despite the evil they had endured, the survivors of the concentration camps and ghettos emerged from their trauma envisioning a day "when justice and brotherhood would reign among men."

The committee that put the text together and labored to disseminate it in the American and world Jewish communities sought support for the reading by noting in a mass mailing letter that, "There is agreement among all Jews that the memory of the Six Millions of our people who perished at the hands of the Nazis, and the heroes of the Ghetto uprisings, should be kept alive and held sacred." These particular words, the committee believed, would be "a most effective means for preserving that memory. It is simple and profoundly moving." And rather than keeping the Holocaust and references to it hidden or subterranean, the committee "set itself the task of bringing this Ritual to the widest possible notice" by encouraging rabbis to describe it from the pulpit, to put notices about it in organizational bulletins, among other promotional tactics, and to use it in interdenominational religious services. Jewish communities across the country used the Learsi text in their annual Warsaw Ghetto memorial evenings, sponsored often by local branches of the Labor Zionist Organization of America, along with the Workmen's Circle. The brief Hebrew and English statement, accompanied by traditional prayers normative for memorial occasions, as well as by such songs already associated with the Nazi catastrophe as "Ani Ma'amin" and "The Partisan's Hymn" and by survivor testimonies, was read in local communities throughout the 1950s.

Letters of praise came to Learsi directly or to the American Jewish Congress from rabbis, Jewish educators, and individuals who used it, heard it, and found themselves moved by it. While some letter writers offered suggestions as to possible alterations to the text, particularly in the Hebrew, most lauded it and shared their experiences when using it. Two examples should suffice.

Rabbi I. Usher Kirshblum of the Kew Gardens Hills Jewish Center in New York wrote in April 1952 that he not only urged his congregants to use it in their homes, but that he, himself, did so as well. He invited to his first seder that year "native Americans who sustained no personal losses through the Hitler holocaust." When the time came for Rabbi Kirshblum to commence the holocaust reading, he explained to his "guests ... the new ritual. I gave them no instructions whatsoever." All "automatically rose from their seats and with heads bowed listened most attentively to the prayer. When my wife, children, and I began to sing the immortal 'Ani Maamin,' a tune which they [the guests] had never heard before, everyone of them made a serious attempt to join me. The solemnity, not sadness, lasted until we reached the favorite Seder melodies." The second seder had a different history. The Kirshblum

family hosted "a family of new immigrants who are the sole survivors of the Nazi persecutions." As Rabbi Kirshblum "recited the prayer ... in Hebrew, their tear ducts and mine refused to remain dry. They found it most difficult to join me in the chanting of 'Ani Maamin' which they knew, alas, so well. After a while they expressed deep gratitude to me for having introduced it into my Seder for they felt that at last there was meaning to the death of their sainted martyred parents." (41)

Rabbi Isaac Klein, a well known Conservative rabbi, wrote in 1957 that he had already been using the Ritual of Remembrance for three years and ever since had been "trying to spread it among the members of my congregation." Klein recounted to Leari that he had taken the ritual, laden with the images and words of the horror of the Holocaust, to an even larger audience, remarking that, "at a local T.V. program, we had a Model Seder and I incorporated the service into it. We ordered a few hundred copies.... All those who used it were very much impressed." (42) In both Kirshblum's and Klein's missives, as well as in the others that flowed into the offices of the Seder Ritual Committee, a process by which the Holocaust had made its way into American Jewish liturgy became clear.

*Perform this Ritual*

*after the THURD of the Four Ceremonial Cups,  
just before the door is opened  
for the symbolic entrance of the Prophet Elijah.*

*All rise,  
and the leader of the Seder recites the following:*

בְּלֵיל שְׂמוּרִים זֶה נֶעְלָה בְּדַחֲלוֹ וּרְחִימוֹ אֶת זְכוֹר שֵׁשֶׁת מְלִיוּנֵי אֲחֵינוּ  
בְּנוֹלַת אִירוּפָּה, אֲשֶׁר נִסְפוּ בְּיַדֵּי עָרִיץ וּמֹזִיד אֲשֶׁר הִרַע לְעַמּוֹ  
שִׁבְעָתַיִם מִפְּרָעָה.

וְזֶה דְבַר הָעָרִיץ לְשִׁלְחֵי מִזְמָתוֹ: לָכוּ וּנְכַחֲדֵם מְנוּי וְלֹא יִזְכָּר שֵׁם  
יִשְׂרָאֵל עוֹד. וַיִּהְרְגוּ תַמִּימִים וְטָהוֹרִים, אֲנָשִׁים נְשִׁים וְטָף, בְּאֵד־יָדָע ל  
וּבְמִשְׁרָפוֹת־יַבְבָּשׁוֹן. וְלֹא נִרְבָּה לְסַפֵּר בְּרַע מַעֲלָלֵיהֶם פֶּן נַחֲלַל אֶת  
צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ נִבְרָא הָאָדָם.

וּפְלֻטָּת עַמּוֹ בְּנִטְאוֹת וּבְמַחֲנוֹת־הַשְּׂמֵד מָסְרוּ נַפְשָׁם עַל קְדוּשַׁת הַשֵּׁם,  
וּרְבִים מֵחַם לָבָשׁוּ רוּחַ גְּבוּרָה וַיִּתְקוּמָמוּ נֶגֶד הַרְשָׁעִים וַיִּפְּלוּ בְּהֵם  
חֲלָלִים. וּבְלֵיל הַתְּקֻדָּה חָג הַפֶּסַח קָמוּ שְׂרֵי־יָדֵי הַנְּטוֹ בְּנִרְשָׁה וַיִּלְחָמוּ  
עִם הַטְּמָאִים כִּיְהוּדָה הַמַּכְבִּי בְּשַׁעֲתוֹ. הִנְאֻחָבִים וְהַנְּעִימִים בְּחֵייהֶם  
וּבְמוֹתָם לֹא נִפְרְדוּ וְאֶת כְּבוֹד יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל גַּם הִרְיָמוּ.

וּמִמַּעַמְקִים פָּתְחוּ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים אֶת פִּיהֶם בְּשִׁירַת אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּבִיאַת  
הַמְּשִׁיחַ.

*All sing ANI MAAMIN ("I Believe"),*

*the song of the martyrs in the ghettos and liquidation camps:*

אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאַמּוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה בְּבִיאַת הַמְּשִׁיחַ:  
וְאֵף עַל פִּי שִׁיתְמַהֲמַה, עִם כָּל זֶה אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין!

*English rendition of the Hebrew:*

On this night of the Seder we remember with reverence and love the six millions of our people of the European exile who perished at the hands of a tyrant more wicked than the Pharaoh who enslaved our fathers in Egypt. Come, said he to his minions, let us cut them off from being a people, that the name of Israel may be remembered no more. And they slew the blameless and pure, men and women and little ones, with vapors of poison and burned them with fire. But we abstain from dwelling on the deeds of the evil ones lest we defame the image of God in which man was created.

Now, the remnants of our people who were left in the ghettos and camps of annihilation rose up against the wicked ones for the sanctification of the Name, and slew many of them before they died. On the first day of Passover the remnants in the Ghetto of Warsaw rose up against the adversary, even as in the days of Judah the Maccabee. They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided, and they brought redemption to the name of Israel through all the world.

And from the depths of their affliction the martyrs lifted their voices in a song of faith in the coming of the Messiah, when justice and brotherhood will reign among men.

*All sing ANI MAAMIN ("I Believe"),*

*the song of the martyrs in the ghettos and liquidation camps:*

I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah:  
And though he tarry, none the less do I believe!