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Jewish Preaching in Response to Nazi Persecution and Mass Murder 1933–1945

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The Sermon as Text and Performance
 Jewish Preaching in Response to Nazi Persecution and Mass Murder
 1933–1945
 Marc Saperstein

It is truly an honor to be standing here tonight, having travelled from Cambridge, UK, to speak to this audience about a central aspect of my academic research and writing throughout most of my career: the sermon—as text and performance—in response to significant historical events. I am especially grateful to Professor Robert Ellison for his initiative in arranging for my being here this evening and the rest of the conference, and for following up on every conceivable detail.

Allow me to start with a bit of autobiography. I grew up listening to a sermon virtually every Friday evening and every Jewish holiday delivered by my father, Rabbi Harold I. Saperstein, at our congregation in Lynbrook, Long Island. They were generally about 20 minutes long. Even when I was too young to understand everything he was saying, I remember sitting next to my mother, looking around at the congregants while the sermon was being delivered, and noticing how everyone seemed to be listening very attentively to what my father was saying. As I grew into my teenage years, I not only understood more myself, but I also became aware of the preparation process: how the title of next week’s sermon would be announced at the end of every Friday evening service, how my father would begin to gather material during the week, then on Friday morning type out a text (single spaced, about six pages that were half the size of the full-size sheet).

And then how on Friday afternoon, he would *memorize* what he had typed, so that while he had the six half-sheet pages in front of him on the pulpit, no one in the congregation would be aware of the written text. When in 2000 I published a book of my father’s sermon texts called *Witness from the Pulpit: Topical Sermons 1933–1945*, one from each year with an introduction and annotations to each, several of the old-timers from the congregation said to me, “I never realized that he had a printed text in front of him.” I remember him once saying to me, “I want to know this material so well that if there should be a thunderstorm in the middle of my preaching and the lights should go out in the sanctuary, that would not interfere with my delivery of the rest of the sermon.” And also his saying to me, when I was preparing to give a speech for my Bat Mitzvah at age 13, “You don’t need to memorize the speech, but you should know it well enough that when you get to the middle of each sentence, you can look up and complete the sentence fully. And each time you look up, look at a different person directly and imagine that you are speaking only to him or her. That way everyone will think that you are speaking to them.”

[How different from the common contemporary technique, used even by experienced academics, of reading a paper and frequently looking up for just half a second, as if they wanted to be sure that the audience was still there!] While I was a rabbinical student and then for 13 years when I had a part-time congregation in addition to my academic position, I had plenty of opportunity to use these insights myself.

But my challenge this evening is to relate these techniques of communication from the pulpit to the investigation of the sermon from the past as a significant source for the study of history, including the history of religious thought. My PhD training at Harvard was as a medievalist; my dissertation was based on a unique and previously unstudied Hebrew manuscript written in mid-thirteenth-century southern France. After the book based on my dissertation, I began to turn to the texts of sermons as historical sources, leading first to *Jewish Preaching 1200-1800*, and then to several other books on medieval and early modern sermon texts. It took a leap of faith to apply my ever-deepening interest in the sermon as historical source to the 19th and 20th centuries in *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800-2001*. And even more of a leap to apply this material to our understanding of the Holocaust, in a book due to appear in late January called *Agony in the Pulpit: Jewish Preaching in Response to Nazi Persecution and Mass Murder, 1933-1945*.

Now many would react, “Do we really need another book on the Holocaust? Is there not a huge and ever growing number of books on all aspects of the subject?” I would argue that while this is true in general, it does not apply to the sermon as a historical source. Most of the studies of the Holocaust were written by scholars who look back to events in the past, review and analyse these events as fully as possible using both the relevant primary sources and the writings of earlier colleagues, and then compose an encompassing narrative adding their own perspective to the questions of what happened, and why. I make no pretence of belonging to this esteemed cadre. But there is a different category of historical research and publication, and that is to discover, analyse, and present *relevant, dated primary sources from the period* in a manner that will allow readers to judge the material for themselves.

This approach is based on clearly dated primary sources produced during the events, including the Diary, the Letter, the Minute Books of various communities, German documents such as the Einsatzgruppen Reports recording specific numbers of the Jewish civilians murdered by special units in cities and towns of eastern Europe, dated rabbinic responsa reacting to actual problems faced by Jews.

When we turn to another important question not just of what was happening day by day, but what exactly was known (and when) about the horrendous

events by various populations, probably the most important source the newspaper articles and editorials, and there have been many important studies of such texts based on the US, England, Palestine. My argument is that the dated texts of sermons delivered by religious leaders are just as important as the newspaper articles as evidence for what these religious leaders (in my case, the rabbis) knew, and how they communicated the information and interpreted its meaning to large audiences of listeners throughout the period of persecution and mass murder. The relatively few studies of Jewish preaching have focused on Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox rabbis in eastern Europe. I have expanded this significantly by including texts from 135 different rabbis, mainly from the US and England but including 15 different countries.

Here I turn to the theme of our conference and the nature of the sermon as historical source. Despite the comparison I have suggested between newspaper article and sermon as contemporary historical sources, there is of course an obvious and fundamental difference. The article—or the dated diary or letter—is indeed the source itself, and it can often be accessed in its original form in archival collections and even frequently on the Internet. But the texts of the sermons that I use in this book are obviously *not* the actual sermons. They bear a relation to the sermon analogous to the relationship between the symbols on sheets of music paper and the *sound* of the first *performance* of a fugue based on these symbols played on the organ by Bach, or the first performance of a sonata played on the piano by Beethoven.¹ Indeed, the musical score gives us *more* information than the sermon text, as it includes not just the notes to be played and heard, but many other indications of *how the music is to sound*: *andante*, *presto*, *lente*, *allegro con brio*, *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, *legato*, *pianissimo*, *fortissimo*—none of which is included in the sermon texts that we study.

Or, to provide another example—which, with all its abhorrence is still within the memory of people living today—it is analogous to the relationship between the written text of a Hitler speech from the 1930s or early 1940s and watching and hearing the speech when it was originally delivered (or—a step removed but still much better than reading a written text—watching and listening to a video-tape).

Totally missing from the written text of the sermon is everything that we would include in the category of “*delivery*”: the sound of the preacher’s voice, the pace of his speaking, the emphasis on certain words and phrases,² the occasional pauses, gestures and facial expressions, and the extent to which it is apparent that the preacher is either reading a text or actually is talking to people. All of this is lost in the written text on which we must depend.³

The preachers themselves were clearly aware of this distinction. As a leading New York rabbi, Louis I. Newman put it, “It is one thing to preach a

good discourse, and another to make it rousing and inspiring. No preacher knows how effective his sermon will be until he is in the midst of it, for there must always be a quality of vivid creativity, almost extempore style, in addition to the carefully prepared and written material he brings to the rostrum.”⁴ Or as Abraham A. Kellner of Albany put it: “The speeches as printed in this collection were preached essentially as they appear in cold print varying only in those essentials needed in transmuting the living word into blackface type. But it is common knowledge that the effect of the spoken word depends for its success not only on the material preached, but equally so upon the inspirational value which emanates from the enthusiasm and eloquence of the speaker.”⁵

The reaction of the listeners is also obviously lost in the written text, though it could indeed be argued that what the listeners heard and remembered may be as important a source for the effectiveness of communication as the analysis of a surviving text. We know this from the impact that Hitler had on those who were present at his speeches. The German historian Max Domarus published in 1965 a massive four-volume work presenting the texts of speeches delivered by Hitler between 1932 and 1945. In the Introduction, he wrote (using the English translation):

During my university studies and as a journalist, I had the opportunity to travel widely in Germany from 1932 to 1939 and to gain a close view of many significant aspects of the Third Reich. I personally heard Hitler speak and was able to interview public figures who had direct contact with him. In this way I was able to witness for myself Hitler’s astonishing power and influence as an orator. The enthusiasm his speeches prompted was not confined only to easily-aroused mass audiences, but also infected—perhaps even more strongly—individuals belonging to Germany’s leading circles.

It was the speeches delivered, heard and observed, not the written texts published in the *Völkischer Beobachter* or the German News Agency, and not *Mein Kampf*, that had the major impact.⁶ There are similar evaluations of the impact of Mussolini’s addresses.

Needless to say, the *substance* of Jewish preaching could not be more antithetical to the messages of the German and Italian dictators, but the impact of the gifted speaker was in some ways similar. Although today the role of the sermon in Jewish worship is far less dramatic than it was in the past, the principle that the impact of a sermon is usually more evident in the delivery than in a written text remains.

Many listeners have reported on the impact of hearing a powerful preacher. Jacob P. Rudin first encountered Stephen S. Wise when Wise spoke at Harvard in 1923, where Rudin was an undergraduate. Thirty years later, he recalled his reaction in an address to rabbinical students: “I heard a man speak as I

had never heard a man speak before. . . . I knew then and there that I would go to the Jewish Institute of Religion [to train to become a rabbi] if Dr. Wise would have me.”⁷

My father, Harold Saperstein, then an undergraduate at Cornell, similarly described the impact of hearing Wise deliver a sermon in the spring of 1931: “I shall always remember the sense of pride I had that morning in Sage Chapel as I looked around and saw the faces of thousands of university faculty and students, practically all non-Jewish, listening with rapt attention and profound respect to this Rabbi.” And he continued to describe Wise as preacher: “It was when he was expressing something that he felt very deeply, when the great fire of his spirit smouldered and burst into flame, that his voice became infused with passion. His whole body became transformed; he rose to oratorical heights, and lifted his audiences to levels that he alone could do. He was a dramatic speaker, but dramatic quality was not something that he achieved artificially. It was something that flowed out of the fervor and sincerity of his message.”⁸

The sermons of other rabbis with considerably less national reputation than Wise also apparently had a powerful impact upon their listeners. Here is how a congregant described Louis Wolsey, rabbi of Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia from 1935–1947:

As a preacher and public speaker, Dr. Wolsey has few peers. He has occupied pulpits in churches of almost all denominations and has addressed groups from every walk of life. His deep, resonant voice coupled with his impeccable diction and knowledge of semantics have created a great demand for his services as a pulpiter, and also a speaker before civic, communal and other organizational groups throughout the country.”⁹

Or here is the description of the young Abba Hillel Silver, then recently ordained and rabbi of a small congregation (not far away) in Wheeling, West Virginia, written by Abraham L. Feinberg, who—like Rudin and Saperstein—himself became a rabbi, and was once designated in a national poll as one of Canada’s “Seven Greatest Preachers:”

The choir finished singing. [Rabbi Silver] uncrossed his legs, placed his hands on the two arms of the chair and pushed himself up with elaborate slowness—a Lincolnesque giant bestirring himself from repose. Then the voice began, like a soft syllable prying loose an avalanche, its music packed with enormous power and gaining force with each word, until the air quivered with pathos, rumbled with wrath, and glowed with sheer grace of phrase and thought. When he closed his eyes, mine were opened on a realm of harmony and rapture. When he stepped back and lifted his mighty arms, intellectualized thunder rolled up and out from him, and shook the clustered lights and swept from pew to pew into the choir loft and out through the windows into the night.¹⁰

About twenty-seven years later, on September 1, 1943, Abba Hillel Silver delivered an address to a meeting of the “American Zionist Emergency Council” at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, New York. Emanuel Neumann, an American lawyer with strong Zionist commitments, described the effect of this speech: “Silver rose to speak, and he was superb. It was not only an emotional speech, but also an extremely well-constructed and closely-reasoned appeal to the intelligence of the delegates. . . . It is impossible to describe the electrifying effect of Silver’s speech, which swept the Conference like a hurricane. There was repeated and stormy applause, the delegates rising to their feet in a remarkable ovation. The battle for our ‘extreme’ position was won hands down and the decision was put into parliamentary form in committee. . . . The overwhelming majority were carried along to a ringing affirmation of a ‘Jewish commonwealth’ in Palestine.”¹¹

In a very different context but with similar evidence, Nathan Netter of France heard Rabbi Jacob Kaplan (many of whose texts are presented in translation in my forthcoming book) deliver a sermon in Vichy on Rosh Hashanah, September 21, 1941. Netter wrote, “The congregation, visibly moved, followed as if entranced the dynamic orator who, seeing us in effect *abandoned* by the powerful of the land, without help, without protection from those in positions of authority, found the perfect way of communicating the immense distress of this Jewish community, so distraught by fate.”¹²

The environment for Rabbi Shlomo Unsdorfer—placed under strict German military police guard in an old castle near Bratislava with his family and about 180 other Jews in September 1944—was dramatically different. According to the memoir written by his son, Simha Bunem Unsdorfer, the rabbi conducted services on Yom Kippur throughout the day, and asked especially that all Jews, “even those who have forsaken our religion and no longer believe in prayer,” should gather together for the *Yizkor* (Memorial) service. His son wrote, “They all came, and never shall I forget the short parable with which my father illustrated his sermon. Everyone was in tears: that was what he wanted to achieve. ‘The gates of tears are never closed,’ say our rabbis. If nothing reaches the ears of God, the tears of the innocent will always find Him.”¹³

It must be noted that not all the listeners preserved positive memories of the sermons they heard. The Fortunoff Archive of Survivors’ Testimonies at Yale University contains many references to sermons heard by the survivors, and some of these memories are negative. Sermons did apparently have an impact, though not necessarily what the preacher intended.

Nonetheless, memories can also supply important insights, not only about the content of a sermon, but about the dynamic process that produced this con-

tent. It is well known that German rabbis were permitted to lead religious worship, including a sermon, after the Nazi regime came to power, but with clear restrictions. A member of the Gestapo was present at every worship service to ensure that the sermon, delivered of course in German, would contain no criticism of the regime. Here is how the Martha Appel, wife of Rabbi Ernst Appel of Dortmund, later described the process of preparation for the sermons to be delivered:

He had to find words to describe our current situation not directly, but would unambiguously transmit to his audience what he wanted to tell them. . . . My husband and I attentively checked his sermons. Word for word we read them out loud and pondered if this or that sentence would rouse the disapproval of the Gestapo officer present in all services. There was so much my husband would have liked to say to his community on these Holy Days, that he could not. . . . My husband subjected himself [to this difficult task] in particular because he did not want to give the Nazis with his sermons the smallest pretext for banning his services and to arrest the community board.¹⁴

These severe limits to freedom of the pulpit, the challenge to communicate a meaningful message to a congregation without falling victim to the restraints of a totalitarian regime, severely limited the extent to which the texts of German sermons during this period seem appropriate for the forthcoming book.

Preachers who published texts of their sermons were of course very much aware of the distinction between a sermon delivered and a written transcript, between the performance and the text. Maurice N. Eisendrath, of Toronto, wrote in his Introduction to *The Never Failing Stream*, a collection of his sermon texts published in 1939: “Whatever efficacy such spoken words may possess is derived essentially from the circumstances surrounding their delivery, the manner of the presentation, the mood of the hearers, the fervour of the speaker—all of which are far too evanescent, and elude too dishearteningly the vain endeavour to reproduce them on the cold, white printed page” (p xi). And yet he published these cold, white printed pages, first—like a number of his colleagues—in pamphlet form not long after delivery, and later in a collection going back almost a decade, and the printed texts still reveal considerable power.

In his Preface to *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, a collection of twenty-six sermon texts delivered in Leeds between June 1940 and October 1943 by Eliezer Berkovits, a German rabbi who came to England as an immigrant in the spring of 1939, Berkovits wrote, “It is with some hesitation that I submit these sermons to a wider public. The spoken word is essentially different from the written one. Committed to print, it must lose some of the force and emphasis derived by it from both the original situation in which it has been spoken and the oratory of the speaker. To my mind the justification for this volume lies

in the persistence of the ‘original situation,’ which will most probably not pass for many years yet.” Here Berkovits explains that his decision to publish is based not on the sermons’ historical value as a source for future understanding of the past, but rather on the extremely pessimistic view that the realities addressed in his sermons from earlier years in the war are still relevant in December 1944, when he wrote the Preface.

Because of these considerations, the reality of any delivered speech or sermon would be conveyed much more closely by a videotape than by a typed or hand-written text. But the largest number of such preserved audio-visual texts from this period are probably by Nazi speakers, led by Hitler.¹⁵ I know of only one example of a Jewish sermon from this period preserved in video tape; it was delivered by an American Army Chaplain in Dachau on May 6, 1945, a few days after the liberation.¹⁶ There is indeed a large number of audio recordings made of sermons and addresses delivered by Stephen S. Wise.¹⁷ But the disadvantage of the recording for scholars using the sermon as a historical source is, of course, that the researcher does not have the opportunity to skim through pages of hundreds of printed texts to determine what is relevant to the subject at hand, and then slow down to analyse in depth. A recording is heard in real time. Though clearly a step removed from the actual sermon, written texts are both far more prevalent and considerably more useful for research than the relatively few recordings that have been preserved.¹⁸

There were more than a few distinguished and effective preachers who never wrote complete texts of their sermons. Occasionally, there were no texts at all, and no direct records of the sermons exist. Joachim Prinz, one of the most influential young rabbis in Nazi Germany before he left for the United States in 1937, wrote, “I have no manuscripts of any of my sermons as I am not in the habit of writing them. Had I collected them, they would convey to us today the method I used to approach our people.” Prinz provides a good description of the nature and impact of his preaching, but unfortunately not the kind of material that fits the criteria of most contemporary academic collections.¹⁹

A striking American example of a preacher who used only outline notes is Milton Steinberg, Conservative rabbi of the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York, who died in 1950 at age forty-six. Two collections provide sermon texts linked with the holidays and with weekly Torah readings respectively.²⁰ Both books contain material not in paragraphs or even in full sentences, but in brief outline form. The editor, Bernard Mandelbaum, wrote in his Preface to the first book, “The outlines indicate that Rabbi Steinberg spent a great deal of time in organizing his message to insure the logical and orderly flow of his ideas. He did not preach from a finished manuscript lest it impede the dynamic inter-communication between his listener, his theme and himself” (pp. vii-viii). Unfortunately, even in those relatively rare places where he refers explicitly to Nazism

and persecution, with one notable exception, the incompleteness of the formulation and the absence of dates make it impossible to include more than this one selection in my book.^{21]}

Sometimes the same preacher reveals a mixture of approaches to the preparation of sermons. It might be that a person started with fully written texts, and then—as he became more accustomed to public speaking—shifted to outlines. Or complete texts for holidays and important occasions, but outlines for ordinary Sabbath sermons. An interesting shift is revealed by the French Protestant pastor André Trocmé, who would become renowned for his leadership in providing refuge in *Le Chambon-sur-Lignon* for Jews trying to escape deportation by the Germans. In the summer of 1944 a camp for German prisoners-of-war was established near his village, and Trocmé decided that he would deliver sermons to the prisoners on Sunday afternoons after addressing his own congregation on Sunday morning. But this required something of an adjustment in his routine:

The preparation of my sermons for the Germans required a considerable amount of work. My usual routine was to deliver my sermons based on rather complete notes. Now I had to write out my text in full and request that Mlle. Hoefurt translate it into German. As my visits to the Germans were unpopular among the French, especially to the *maquisards*, I decided to preach in French on Sunday morning precisely the same sermon as the one I would deliver in the afternoon to the Germans.²²

The challenge of addressing the same content to German POWs and French villagers who had suffered under German occupation must have required considerable thought and preparation; no Jewish preacher that I am aware of had a similar experience.

What can be said about texts of sermons that have indeed been preserved, and that form the core of my forthcoming book? Other than tape-recordings, probably the most reliable record of sermons comes from those that were delivered without a written text but recorded stenographically during delivery, then typed up, reviewed by the preacher, and printed soon afterward in pamphlet form.²³ Obviously this was impossible in traditional Jewish practice, and it was apparently used only by Reform rabbis in Germany and the United States.²⁴ Occasionally, where stenographic transcriptions are preserved in archives, we find small blank gaps in the text, where the preacher apparently used a Hebrew or Yiddish word unfamiliar to the stenographer.

An eminent example is Solomon Freehof, rabbi of Rodef Shalom Congregation, Pittsburgh. According to Walter Jacob, who eventually succeeded him: “Freehof occasionally discussed his sermons casually with me as a young colleague but nothing was written down before delivery, and printed texts came from stenographic or tape recording.”²⁵ Max Nussbaum, describing his experience as

a rabbi in Nazi Berlin, wrote, “Leafing through my sermons of those years—which a faithful secretary of mine took down in shorthand while I spoke—I find one from November 4, 1938.”²⁶ This certainly promises a close relationship between the text and what the listeners heard. Lewis M. Barth, who grew up in Nussbaum’s Los Angeles congregation and helped edit his collection of sermons, wrote, “Nussbaum’s greatest talent was in oral presentation. He employed a stenographer to take down his sermons from the tapes on which they were recorded. These ‘first drafts’ were edited, often by Ruth Nussbaum [the preacher’s wife], and then typed in final form by Thelma Cohen, Nussbaum’s devoted secretary of many years.”²⁷ Here the stenographic transcriptions were indeed “first drafts” in relation to the published text, but they were the most authentic version of what the congregants actually heard. What was eventually published was several steps removed.

Stenographic transcription, however, was a rare exception to the general pattern, applying only to very large and wealthy congregations with distinguished rabbis who wanted a permanent record of the sermons. Of the many important (and even more of the unimportant) preachers who spoke without written text, the great majority did not have their words stenographically transcribed during delivery. Far more common as evidence for the sermon is the written text, typed or occasionally hand-written by the preacher before delivery.

In many cases, the sermons used in my book were never published, and the texts preserved are in archival collections of institutions or synagogues, or in some cases of family members. These are texts similar to those of my father: prepared fully in advance, used by the preacher during delivery.

With regard to texts published by the preacher, the relationship is more problematic. In some cases, the differences are not insignificant. One issue pertains to language. In medieval and early modern Jewish homiletical texts, a change in language was universal: preaching was almost always in the vernacular, but preachers who wrote up their texts for circulation and later for publication wanted them to be intelligible to educated Jews throughout the world, and they therefore wrote in Hebrew.²⁸ The published text is therefore in one sense fundamentally different from the sermon that was heard. The Israeli scholar Moshe Idel, speaking about the Hasidic sermon, has written: “The Hasidic sermon is pre-eminently an oral event taking place between the leader and his disciples, and it is the main tool of creating and communicating his ideas. This is why the vernacular is crucial. The Hebrew versions of the sermons are important for modern scholarship, but they reflect the events in the field to a smaller degree. Communication to the sympathetically predisposed audience therefore invites creativity in a new medium. . . .”²⁹

For sermons delivered in eastern Europe, this pattern of preaching in a vernacular language (usually Yiddish) and publishing in Hebrew remained in

our period. Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich in Transylvania preached in Yiddish; the texts of his sermons were translated into Hebrew by his grandson and published posthumously.³⁰ Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer in Bratislava preached in Yiddish; the texts of his sermons were found by his son, translated into Hebrew and published in Brooklyn. Unsdorfer actually wrote a full Yiddish text of his sermon on the day before delivery (usually Friday), then made a brief outline which he used during delivery.³¹ Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira delivered his Warsaw Ghetto sermons in Yiddish, but they were written—either before or immediately after the holiday or Sabbath—in rabbinic Hebrew.

Tobias (Tuviah) Geffen, preaching in Atlanta in the United States, apparently delivered his sermons in Yiddish, but published them himself in Hebrew.³² Moses Kahlenberg of Metz served a congregation of Polish refugees and must have preached in Yiddish, but he himself prepared the texts for publication in Hebrew. His sermons appear in a highly literary style, filled with allusions to biblical and rabbinic texts that seem to be intended more for rabbinic colleagues than for ordinary Jewish listeners. Although the basic content would be the same, there may indeed have been a very different style in the Yiddish delivery.

These are all sermons delivered in Yiddish but originally published in Hebrew—and appearing in my book in an English translation. Whenever there is a discrepancy between the language of delivery and the language of the printed text, some of the nuances of style are likely to be lost, but these nuances usually will not undercut the text's importance as a historical source.³³

In several other cases, the sermons delivered in a vernacular language were originally translated into English for publication. Ignaz Maybaum, a Liberal rabbi in Germany, was among an impressive number of rabbis permitted to immigrate to England in the spring of 1939; soon after his arrival in London, he began to preach in German to congregations composed of other German-speaking refugees, many of whom did not know English well enough to be able to follow an English-language sermon. In 1941, Maybaum published a collection of sixteen such sermons, "Preached at the Refugees' Services of the United Synagogue London," dated between May 12, 1939 and February 8, 1941, and presented chronologically. In his Preface, he wrote,

Till the war the sermons were preached in German. Then it was gradually replaced by English, until only English was used. . . . One cannot, even when most of the listeners are German-speaking, preach in the German language while German bombers, as on the Day of Atonement, 1940, roar overhead during the service (p. viii).

Seven of the sermons were delivered before the outbreak of the war, and were therefore clearly delivered in German. His statement indicates that the 13th sermon, delivered on Yom Kippur 1940, must have been delivered in English, as

were the following three sermons. But there is no obvious distinction in the style of the published texts between the first seven (definitely delivered in German and translated by the literary figure Joseph Leftwich) and the last four (definitely delivered in English), and it is unclear to what extent Leftwich might have helped in editing English language texts. The sermons are indeed extremely important because of their content, but conclusions relating to homiletical style must remain tentative.

Turning to the texts published in the language of delivery, occasionally we find an author explaining the relationship between the published text and what was actually said. Abraham M. Hershman, a leading Conservative rabbi in Detroit, wrote in his Foreword, “As for the sermons and addresses which the volume now offered to the public comprises, some have appeared in the press; others have been reproduced from type-written pages; most of them have been written out from notes.” Very few of the collections, however, contain such clear explanations from the author.

It would not be surprising to learn that a preacher preparing the texts of sermons for publication would review the text, perhaps add references to biblical or rabbinic quotations, and polish the style. This might also be done by a widow, or son or daughter of the preacher following the rabbi’s death. But the possibility of more substantial changes remains. The preacher might indeed have determined that the fully written text was simply too long for delivery, and eliminated one or more paragraphs from the text before him—often indicating this by putting the material in []. Thus the published text (or archival text) may contain more than what the congregation actually heard, with the deleted material serving as evidence for what the preacher knew but not for what he transmitted.³⁴

Alternatively, the preacher preparing a text for publication might have added a sentence or a paragraph or a page to complete a thought, or to introduce a new theme, that could not be adequately addressed in delivery for reasons of time. This may especially be true with regard to the more “timeless” sermons, the publication of which might be intended as help for future preachers. It is certainly the case that in addressing his own congregation a preacher can often get away with an assertion or theme that is not fully developed, but in a book intended for a wide readership decides that further development is necessary.

In sermons published not for a potential reader’s future use but as a record of what was said in crucial moments of the past, such tinkering with the original text is more problematic.

Occasionally we receive a different kind of editorial change admitted by the author. In the Introduction to his *Jewish Survival* (p. xiii), Abraham Mayer Heller, of the Flatbush Jewish Center in Brooklyn, wrote, “The success of the sermon is often much the result of the inspiration received from the audience.

Recognizing that it is well-nigh impossible to capture in cold print the warmth inherent in the spoken word, I have deleted from these published discourses, where feasible, such methods of approach and phraseology which characterize the oral sermon.” This is a clear statement of stylistic change intended to make the text more appropriate for those who would be reading it, but also making clear that in some or perhaps many cases, the text before the reader is not exactly what the listeners actually heard.

Something else that is lost as we read these texts is the situation of the moment. The preacher may assume that the listeners come with some knowledge of what has recently happened, and refer to “the events of the past week” without needing to explain exactly what events he has in mind. Even more important than what listeners might know are their feelings: do they come to the sermon with a sense of sadness, or discouragement, or confusion, or fear, or indifference? And how does the congregation of listeners respond to what is being said as they hear the words, and as they process the message immediately after?

In order to be able to appreciate the significance of a sermon or part of a sermon as a historical source, we need to try to imagine ourselves back in the position of the listeners, hearing the text being delivered by a good public speaker who is (usually) highly respected. In order to understand these texts, we also need to try to remove from our minds everything we know about what happened in the months and years after the sermon was delivered, to imagine that as the sermon was being prepared and then delivered, the future was as obscure and opaque as the future is for us today. After the fact, subsequent events may seem obvious. Before the fact, we are simply blind.³⁵

I hope that my presentation this evening has established at least two goals. The first is to establish that the study of the texts of sermons delivered by rabbis in various countries in response to Nazi persecution and mass murder is an integral component of our understanding of how rabbis responded from their pulpits to the ever more harrowing events that were occurring. The second is that there are significant challenges in analysing the textual records of these sermons as the best evidence for the sermon itself, which is the performance of a speaker addressing a congregation of listeners, drawing from the wealth of traditional sources from the Bible and rabbinic literature, many of these sources describing periods of persecution in the past, while eventually recognizing to an ever greater extent the unprecedented catastrophic uniqueness of the contemporary events. Through analysis of this interaction of text and performance, we may hope to gain some insight into the achievement of these religious leaders during circumstances that remain difficult for us even to imagine.

¹ Cf. Abraham Cohen, *Jewish Homiletics*, p. 182: “The written text of the sermon is comparable to a musical score, words taking the place of notes. The score is a dead thing until it is brought to life by the performer.” The difference, of course, is that the sermon is delivered by its creator, not by a different “performer.”

² In 1994, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published an article recounting an experience the author had reciting Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address the previous year in a nursing home. When he had finished, a woman in her 90s came over and told him that she had recited the Address at an Independence Day event in 1911, when a “grizzled Union army veteran” came over and corrected her emphasis on “*of* the people, *by* the people, and *for* the people,” saying, “Young lady, I heard those very words from President Lincoln’s lips, and he emphasized each time ‘*the people.*’” Bert Minkin, “Emphasis on the People,” in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 3, 1964, p. 122.

³ For a fine general treatment of the importance of delivery for a preacher see Abraham Cohen, *Jewish Homiletics*, pp. 183–200. Cf. on this theme Menahem Blondheim, “Divine Comedy: The Jewish Orthodox Sermon in America, 1881–1939,” pp. 193–94 on the “methodological nightmare” of studying the sermon in the context of its time and space: “The sermon, after all, is a one-time public, oral experience; it is evanescent. The text of the sermon is at best only a reflection, a written echo of the verbal role of one participant in a public event, or as anthropologists would call it, a cultural performance. The full meaning of such performances emerges only in the process of playing them out, in the present case, through the social context of preaching and the cultural significance of the occasion.” The distinction is often ignored, even by people working on the material. In an extensive review of a book on Cicero published in the *London Review of Books* (4 February 2016), James Davidson wrote “It is amazing enough that Cicero’s great speeches survive, giving us a ringside seat at these momentous trials and pivotal votes” (p. 14, column 2). But of course the “speeches” did not survive, only the texts of the speeches, and this is rather different from providing a “ringside seat.”

⁴ Louis I. Newman, “The Modern Clergyman and His Duties,” Radio Address on WMCA, November 21, 1935, in *Sermons and Addresses*, vol. 3, p. 113 (113–17).

⁵ Abraham A. Kellner, *A Rabbi’s Faith: Sermons of Hope and Courage*, p. vii.

⁶ Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations, 1932–1945*, p. 9, and 60–71 on “The Methodology of Hitler’s Oratory.”

⁷ Rudin, “Concerning a King: Founder’s Day Address,” 1954, pp. 3–4. Apparently the same decision was made by John J. Tepfer in the 1920s upon hearing Wise preach: *American Jewish Archives*, MS 586, “Biographical Sketch.” The obituary for Albert Gottschalk published by the *NYT*, Sept. 16, 2009, p. B16, states that “he decided to become a rabbi at [age] 15, partly because he was inspired by the anti-Hitler orations of Rabbi Stephen Wise.” Gottschalk eventually became President of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion.

⁸ Saperstein, *Witness from the Pulpit*, p. 149, 150: a sermon delivered at the time of Wise’s death in 1949,

⁹ Gustav C. Tassman, Introduction to Wolsey, *Sermons and Addresses*, p. v. Tassman was a distinguished academic in dentistry.

¹⁰ Abraham L. Feinberg, *Storm the Gates of Jericho*, p. 191. In the book, he identifies the preacher whom he heard while growing up as “Solomon Goldner,” for reasons unclear to me

(he also masks the true names of other rabbis to whom he refers). His substitution of “Goldner” for “Silver” seems like something of a game.

¹¹ Emanuel Neumann, *In the Arena*, pp. 189–92.

¹² Netter, *La Patrie égarée et la patrie renaissante*, p. 113

¹³ S. B. Unsdorfer, *The Yellow Star*, pp. 20–21; the quotation is from b. Bava Metzi’a 59a.

¹⁴ Martha Appel, cited by Astrid Zajdband, *German Rabbis in British Exile*, pp. 55–56. On this dynamic, cf. Alfred Jospe, “A Profession in Transition: The German Rabbinate 1910–1939,” pp. 59–61, and Joachim Prinz, *Joachim Prinz: Rebellious Rabbi*, pp. 105–6, 118–19, 166–67.

¹⁵ Pertaining to the rhetoric of Nazi speeches, Randall L. Bytwerk refers to an “oral version” of an important speech, delivered by Goebbels at the Sports Palace in Berlin on February 18, 1943, that is available in his book, *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*, stating that there are “significant differences between the written text and the oral recording: The most striking is that in the oral version, Goebbels begins to mention the extermination of the Jews, then catches himself in the middle of the word. It’s also interesting to note that the audience reactions reported in the text below are sometimes stronger than the recording justifies.”

<http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb36.htm>

¹⁶ The video tape is preserved in the US Holocaust Museum; a passage from the sermon—the text but *not* the performance—is included in my forthcoming book under the date.

¹⁷ For Wise: American Jewish Archives, MS-49, Series 3: Audio Recordings, 1931–1942 (20 Phonograph Boxes). According to Walter Jacob, Solomon Freehof’s sermons and addresses in Rodef Shalom Congregation of Pittsburgh were also regularly recorded (*Pursuing Peace Across the Alleghenies*, p. 47). Cf. also the statement written by the daughters of Rabbi Abraham M. Hershman of Detroit about their father: “During his ministry, his father-in-law, Eliahu Ze’ev Lewin-Epstein, had urged him to record his sermons on a Dictaphone. Unfortunately, being uncomfortable with any kind of mechanical device, he had resisted the suggestion. As a result, he was obliged to reconstruct most of his sermons and addresses [for publication] from notes.” Ruth and Eiga Hershman, “Rabbi Abraham M. Hershman,” p. 36.

¹⁸ In a fascinating study of sermons in the ultra-Orthodox communities of Israel, Kimmy Caplan has shown how **tape-recordings** of sermons have recently become extremely popular, to the point where women will listen to recordings of sermons as they are preparing meals in the kitchen, thus making the preacher’s voice now *more* accessible than a written text. Some halakhic authorities have permitted recordings to be made of sermons delivered on Friday evening through the use of the Sabbath clock. Caplan reports that some seven thousand sermon titles were available for purchase in 2006 (when his book was completed), with more being added week after week. Caplan, *Internal Popular Discourse in Israeli Haredi Society* [Hebrew], chapter 1, pp. 49–93.

¹⁹ Joachim Prinz, “A Rabbi Under the Hitler Regime,” in *Gegenwart im Rückblick*, pp. 231–38, with a full description of the service held on Friday evening, March 31, 1933, immediately before the Nazi-imposed Boycott of all Jewish stores, describes the service, the nature of the congregation, and a bit of the content of the sermon (232–34). A passage from Prinz’s sermon delivered on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, September 14, 1939, was published in the *Newark News* on that day and is included below.

²⁰ *From the Sermons of Rabbi Milton Steinberg: High Holydays and Major Festivals*, ed. Bernard Mandelbaum (1954); *Only Human—The Eternal Alibi: From the Sermons of Rabbi Milton Steinberg: The Weekly Sidrah and General Themes*, ed. Bernard Mandelbaum (New York: Bloch, 1963).

²¹ E.g., *From the Sermons of Rabbi Milton Steinberg*, p. 56:

“Would we not seek a scapegoat too?
even Hitler—

starving housepainter—cafes in Vienna—obsessed
one confines a lunatic—does not hate him

The saints would forgive, but fight Nazism—so must we.”

A few quotations from Steinberg’s *High Holydays* sermons are cited in *NYT* articles reviewing the preaching of New York rabbis on the day following the delivery, but there is nothing that justifies inclusion here. Other examples would be Jerome Malino of Danbury, Connecticut: the AJA has a complete collection of sermons delivered throughout his career, but all of the hundreds of texts are typed in the form of detailed notes. Similarly Julian B. Feibelman, Assistant Rabbi at Keneseth Israel, Philadelphia, 1926–1936, then at Temple Sinai, New Orleans, 1936–1967: the AJA has six boxes of sermons, the great majority of which are handwritten detailed notes.

²² Magda Trocmé, *Magda et André Trocmé: Figures de résistances. Textes choisis et présentés par Pierre Boismorand*, pp. 187–88. Mlle. Hoefurt was a professor of German at the Collège Cévenol, founded in 1938 by French pacifists in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, where the Trocmés also taught. Maquisards were French resistance fighters during the Occupation.

²³ Stenographic transcription during delivery was used for Patristic sermons (especially Augustine, Chrysostom, and others), providing texts that were apparently not subsequently edited by the preacher (see Johannes van Oort, “Augustine, His Sermons and Their Significance,” *Harvard Theological Studies*, 65:1 (2009): Article 300, p. 364.

²⁴ In a collection of his “Sermons, Addresses, Studies” delivered after our period, the American Orthodox rabbi Leo Jung wrote, “Many of them I dictated to Sylvia Haber, my loyal secretary, at the insistence of friends who wanted to see them in print” (Jung, *Harvest: Sermons, Addresses, Studies*, Preface).” This occurred after the delivery, possibly based on outline notes used by the preacher during the delivery and later in the dictation.

²⁵ Jacob, *Pursuing Peace*, p. 54. He continued, “His published sermons were taken from tape-recordings with only the most minor corrections. . . . Freehof’s manner of speaking was free of notes or a text. The sermon had been very carefully thought out, sometimes with notes for us at home, but no sentences were fixed, with the exception of a few opening and closing phrases. (p. 55).

²⁶ Nussbaum, “Ministry Under Stress: A Rabbi’s Recollection of Nazi Berlin, 1935–1940,” in *Gegenwart im Rückblick*, p. 244.

²⁷ Lewis M. Barth, “Introduction,” in *Max Nussbaum: From Berlin to Hollywood*, p. 2.

²⁸ See Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching, 1200–1800*, pp. 39–43, and *Exile in Amsterdam*, pp. 49–51.

²⁹ Moshe Idel, *Hasidism Between Ecstasy and Magic*, p. 242.

³⁰ Gershon Greenberg, “Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich’s (1863–1944) Religious Response to the Holocaust,” p. 66.

³¹ Gershon Greenberg, “Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer: With God through the Holocaust,” pp. 62–63, n. 2; also p. 64, reporting that “Before and after giving the sermon he added marginal notes about current events.”

³² See the discussion of language in the Introduction to the Geffen sermon in the “Complete Sermons” section. Cf. Menahem Blondheim, “Divine Comedy: The Jewish Orthodox Sermon in America, 1881–1939,” p. 194: “A substantial majority of Orthodox American sermons were delivered in Yiddish but published in Hebrew. Built into the study of these texts, therefore, is a very significant distancing between the oral performance and the written record.”

³³ Saul Levi Morteira, the leading preacher of the Portuguese community of Amsterdam in the first half of the 17th century, preached in Portuguese, the only language his listeners understood; yet he prepared the texts in advance in Hebrew (*Exile in Amsterdam*, pp. 50–51). As a parallel, it is reported by Leo Baeck’s granddaughter that when he went on a speaking

tour of the United States in 1948, he wrote out his text in his native German, and then prepared to deliver it in English, using a dictionary as reference for the precise meaning of specific words: Marianne C. Dreyfus, “Remembering My Grandfather, Leo Baeck,” *CCAR Journal* (Winter 1999), p. 52

³⁴ See, for example, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War*, p. 439, on two-and-a-half paragraphs placed in parenthesis by Maurice Eisendrath in a sermon delivered on Rosh Hashanah evening, 1941.

³⁵ For a fine articulation of this principle with regard to the Holocaust by a leading historian, see Jacob Katz, “Was the Holocaust Predictable?,” in *The Nazi Holocaust*, Part 1: *Perspectives on the Holocaust*, ed. Michael R. Manus, pp. 118–37.

<http://bit.ly/2fNaxRb>

See also Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, p. 16 on “‘backshadowing’ . . . in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they should have known what was to come*” (Levinthal’s statement about the “handwriting on the wall” is a fine example of this), and quoting Michael Ignatieff: “In no field of historical study does one wish more fervently that historians could write history blind to the future.”