

Iyyar 5766

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"Who Beat My Father?"

Issues of Terminology and Translation in Teaching the Holocaust

Workshop by Jessica Setbon

Below are some examples of translation challenges. When the students enter the classroom, the teacher hands out the Hebrew citations and asks them to try their hand at translation into English. Then they compare their own attempts with the professional translation.

1. Rabbi Haim Sabato: תיאום כוונות (p. 162) (Yediot Aharonot, 2005)

מקורב הייתי בילדותי אצל האדמו"ר מקלויזנבורג בנתניה, אדמו"ר, נין לצדיק רבי חיים מצאנז,  
הלוא הוא אוד מוצל מאש הותיר לנו ה' לפליטה ממחנות המוות **בשרפה הגדולה אשר שרף ה'**  
**במלחמה העולמית.**

*Adjusting Sights*, trans. Hillel Halkin, p. 140 (Toby Press, 2003)

When I was a boy, my father used to take me to the Kloyzenburg *Rebbe* in Netanya. The Kloyzenburger was a great-grandson of that great Jew, Rabbi Haim of Zanz, and a survivor of the camps **in which so many died in God's great Holocaust.**

2. Menachem Michelson: Biography of Pinchas (Tibor) Rosenbaum  
(unpublished), p. 22

בתחילת מלחמת העולם השנייה, כשהתחדשו רדיפות היהודים שבסופן הגיעו עד **לשואה**  
**האיומה**, נאלץ הרב משה חיים עצמו להימלט על נפשו ולהתחבא.

trans. Jessica Setbon and Shira Leibowitz Schmidt:

At the beginning of the Second World War, when the persecutions of the Jews were renewed, culminating in **the terrible Holocaust**, Rabbi Moshe Chaim was forced to flee for his life and go into hiding.

3. Rabbi Israel Meir Lau: “Do Not Raise Your Hand Against the Lad” (Yediot Aharonot, 2005), p. 12

יציאתי **מכבשן האש**, ביננין הבית בארץ מולדתי והמעבר **משואה לתקומה**—זהו סיפורו של  
הספר.

trans. Jessica Setbon and Shira Leibowitz Schmidt (unpublished):

My delivery from **the fiery furnace**, the building of a national home in our native land, and the transition **from Holocaust to revival**—that is the story of this book.

## I. Introduction

In my work as a translator, I have tackled a number of Holocaust texts from various fields, including philosophy, autobiography, and history. In translating these texts from Hebrew to English, I have confronted the challenge of how to render basic Holocaust terms in Hebrew for a broad English-speaking audience. In the context of the classroom, this question is particularly important since many of the materials the Holocaust educator uses are translations, often from Hebrew. In this workshop, I will reveal how the problem of translating Holocaust terminology highlights the border between authenticity and accessibility, between traditional conceptions of the historical reality of the Holocaust and modern, politically correct language. Using several examples, I will show how a translator chooses a specific solution for a certain piece, thus influencing interaction with the material on the part of the reader, or, in this case, the student.

## II. Naming the Unnamable

Probably the most problematic term in this field is the group of terms used to designate the event itself, the Nazi destruction of European Jewry. Below I will give a brief survey of the history of these terms, highlighting the problematics of their translation.

### A. Holocaust

Dictionary definition from *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, 2000*:

1. Great destruction resulting in the extensive loss of life, especially by fire.
- 2 a. The genocide of European Jews and others by the Nazis during World War II.  
  
b. A massive slaughter.
3. A sacrificial offering that is consumed entirely by flames.

In an extensive study of the history of the word “Holocaust,” researcher Jon Petrie found the range of acceptable meanings to be wide enough to include the massacre of Armenians in 1909, the San Francisco earthquake fire of 1914, and such benign events as breaking china and an exploding lightbulb.

Interestingly, this word, the most commonly used English term for the destruction by the Nazis of European Jewry, is derived from a translation—of the Hebrew word *olah*, lit. “that which goes up,” i.e. in smoke. The word *olah* is used in the Bible to mean an offering completely burnt on the altar. The Septuagint translates the word *olah* into the Greek *holokauston*, meaning burnt whole: holo- (whole) + kaustos, burnt (from kaiein, to burn). This was rendered in many European languages as “holocaust.” The word *holocaust* appears in Catholic Bibles in English and in French as the translation of *olah*, but not in Protestant or Jewish ones, which translate *olah* as “burnt offering.” Particularly in the academic world, the claim is often made that the word “Holocaust” should be rejected since

it carries the biblical, Judeo-Christian meaning of “sacrifice,” a theologically problematic concept when applied to Hitler’s Jewish victims. Those who argue against it want to avoid calling the Nazi’s murder victims a sacrifice to any kind of god, implying there was something sacred about their death. But the word “holocaust” carries this connotation mainly in French, where the Catholic Bible predominates.

In English, the word in secular texts has almost always referred to a killing or sacrifice to honor an ILLEGITIMATE god. By far the best known “religious” use of the term holocaust within a Holocaust text is that of Francois Mauriac. In his French introduction to Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, Mauriac writes: "For him [Wiesel] ... the God of Abraham ... has vanished forevermore ... in the smoke of a human holocaust exacted by Race, the most voracious of all idols." Here “holocaust” means a pagan offering to a false god.

Indeed, over a hundred years before *holokauston* and its derivations appeared in the Septuagint, Xenophon, in a text read by virtually all students of classical Greek, employed the root *holokau* to refer to Greek pagan sacrifices. For example: "he offered the customary holocaust [*holokautei*] of hogs." (*Anabasis* - c. 365 BCE. - VII, viii, 4 and 5.) The Greek word's first recorded employment thus referenced a pagan sacrifice, not a sacrifice to the biblical Lord.

The word Holocaust as the appropriate English translation of the Hebrew *shoah* was popularized by Yad Vashem publications in the 1950s. Interestingly, in the first few years of the decade the museum used the translation “Disaster,” “the Great Disaster,” “the Destruction Period,” and “the European catastrophe.

But by the 1960s, “Holocaust” was well-established as the accepted term. This undoubtedly influenced the widespread use of this term in the United States. Researcher Jon Petrie has an interesting theory as to why “holocaust” was chosen instead of other possible translations of the word Shoah (catastrophe, destruction): alliteration with “heroism,” the buzz-word associated with the event in the 1950s, part of the name of Israel’s memorial day. He notes the high frequency of other “h” words that might be associated with the Nazi destruction: Hitler, horror, hurban, Hiroshima.

## B. Shoah

The word “Shoah” is the standard term in Hebrew used to indicate the Nazi destruction of European Jewry. What is the original meaning of this word? Interestingly, in reference to the destruction of European Jewry, this word was first used in mandatory Palestine as a translation of another word: “catastrophe.” For example, in a declaration by Chaim Weizmann in 1934 before the Zionist Action Committee, he comments on Hitler’s ascension to power: “*unvorhergesehene Katastrophä, etwa ein neuer Weltkrieg.*” The Hebrew press renders *Katastrophä* as Shoah. So the term Shoah in Hebrew is really a translation in itself.

The Hebrew root is *shin, aleph, heh*. This root appears twelve times in the Bible. These usages are listed below, with explanations of the most important.

1. Isaiah 10:3, castigating the Israelites: ומה תעשו ליום פקדה ולשואה ממרחק תבוא

Artscroll: “What will you do about the day of retribution, about **catastrophe** that comes from afar?”

Rashi on this verse equates *shoah* with *hurban* (destruction).

2. Isaiah 47:11, speaking to the Babylonian persecutors of the Jews

ותבא עליך פתאם **שואה** לא תדעי

“There will come upon you a sudden **disaster** such as you have never known.”

Radak says this means *shemamah* (annihilation).

3. Ezekiel 38:9, speaking about the enemy Gog:

ועליה **כשואה** תבוא כענן לכסות הארץ תהיה

“Like **a storm** you will come; you will be like a cloud covering the earth”

Rashi: *ke-shoah*, like darkness covering the earth; *shoah*- “*bruine*” in medieval French, meaning fog and also tumult; battle, war.

4. Zephaniah 1:15, announcing the Day of the Lord, when He will destroy the sinners among Israel

יום עברה היום ההוא יום צרה ומצוקה יום **שאה ומשואה** יום חשך ואפלה יום ענן וערפל

A day of fury is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of **destruction and desolation**, a day of darkness and blackness, a day of cloud and thick cloud.

Rashi: *shoah* = *shimamon* (devastation), *meshoah* is a superlative.

5. Psalms 35:8-disaster (of Israel’s adversaries)

6. 35:17-destruction (of the adversaries for Israel)

7. 63:10-destruction (of adversaries for Israel)

8. Proverbs 1:27-“When your fear arrives as **sudden darkness**” (Israel’s)

9. Proverbs 3:25

אל תירא מפחד פתאום ומשאת רשעים כי תבא

“You will not fear sudden terror, nor the **holocaust** of the wicked when it comes.”

(for Israel)

10. Job 30:3 – the fathers of those who scoff at Job are banished to a place of  
שאה ומשאה – darkness, destruction, and desolation

11. Job 30:14 – the scoffers תחת שאה התגלגלו – “they roll under the **ruins**”

12. Job 38:27 God’s control over nature: להשביע שאה ומשאה – “rain...to sate  
desolation and wasteland”

Thus in the Bible, the word is often associated with divine vengeance and retribution, with war and destruction annihilating everything in its path, both humanity and geography. The biblical meanings reveal why the formulators of modern Hebrew adopted this word to refer to the destruction of European Jewry. Yet to speakers of modern Hebrew, the word does not carry the biblical connotation of retribution, of some sort of divine reasoning for the death, of martyrdom. Instead, that concept is expressed by the word *hurban*, as we will see. Therefore Hebrew speakers can use the term *shoah* in an opaque manner. Unlike the word “Holocaust,” Shoah does not imply any difficult spiritual position vis-à-vis the victims.

Shoah became the word of choice in Israel, institutionalized by the first Knesset in its declaration of April 12, 1951, establishing Yom Ha-Shoah Ve-Mered Ha-Getaot, the national day of remembrance for the Holocaust and the



Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Today it is by far the most widespread term in use in Hebrew.

In the last several decades, because other ethnic groups, even the Palestinians, have consciously co-opted the term “holocaust” to speak of their own genocides, many Jewish and some non-Jewish institutions have begun to prefer the transliterated term “Shoah” in English as well. We may very well be witnessing a decline in popularity of the term Holocaust in favor of the term Shoah.

### C. Churban

In the ultra-Orthodox sector, the term *Churban* (destruction) or *Churban Europa* (translated as “Churban Europe”) is often preferred. This word has historical and theological significance, as it is the term used to designate the destruction of the First and Second Temples, as well as the pogroms in Europe. It first appears in the Talmud (e.g. Gittin 57b, referring to the destruction of the Temple). It was popularized among the ultra-Orthodox community by a *shiur* given by Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, which was published in the *Jewish Observer* in October 1977. In reply to the question, “*Is the term « Shoah » (lit. “Holocaust”) acceptable in describing the Churban – the destruction of European Jewry during World War II?*”

Rabbi Hutner writes:

Is the term “*Shoah*” acceptable? The answer is CLEARLY NOT. The word *Shoah* in Hebrew, like Holocaust in English, implies an isolated catastrophe, unrelated to anything before or after it, such as an earthquake or tidal wave.

As we have seen, this approach is far from the Torah view of Jewish history....

We have exposed graphically the mistake of the founders of Yad V'Shem who felt compelled to find a new term for the destruction of European Jewry because of its proportions and dimensions. Ironically, the artificially contrived term they finally applied empties the *Churban* of its profound meaning and significance. In appropriating a term which signifies isolation and detachment from history, they did not realize that the significance of the "Holocaust" is precisely in its intricate relationship with what will come after. The pattern of Jewish history throughout the ages is *Churban-Galut-Geula* –Destruction-Exile-Redemption, and no event requires new categories or definitions.

Rabbi Hutner explains clearly why the term Churban is preferable to many observant Jews. They prefer to place the event in its historical context, to view it as part of a cyclical pattern of history that has theological meaning. Indeed, Rabbi Hutner further writes that it was due to their widespread assimilation and adoption of gentile modes of behavior that the Jews of Europe met with destruction. He finds biblical basis for this historical event in Deut. 31:16, וזנה נכר הארץ אחרי אלהי נכר הארץ which he understands as "to fall prey to the lure of strange nations and trust in them," following Targum Onkelos טעות עממי ארעא "the temptation of foreign nations."

For example, the ultra-Orthodox magazine *Jewish Observer* (May 2003) recently published an article on the very topic we are discussing, entitled "Teaching *Churban Europa* to our Children." Following are several quotes from the article, showing how the term puts the events of 1939-1945 into historical perspective:

"A virtual Holocaust industry has been created by **this latest Churban.**"

“For nearly a generation, very little was written or spoken about **this Churban** in *Klal Yisrael*.”

The phrase “this Churban” invites the comparison to the previous ones in Jewish history, emphasizing the historical process.

Yet in secular contexts and communities, this kind of moralizing is unaccountable and inappropriate. The problem with this term is that it is not opaque. It carries spiritual baggage. It can be construed to imply that the Jews brought the destruction upon themselves, as they did in times past, due to their own sinful behavior. In defense of this criticism, Rabbi Hutner writes:

Since the *Churban* of European Jewry was a *tochachah* phenomenon, an enactment of the admonishment and rebuke which *Klal Yisrael* carries upon its shoulders as an integral part of being the *Am Hanivchar*, G-d’s chosen ones, we have no right to interpret these events as any kind of *specific punishment for specific sins*. The *tochachah* is a built-in aspect of the character of *Klal Yisrael* until *Moshiach* comes and it is visited upon *Klal Yisrael* at the Creator’s will and for reasons known and comprehensible *only to Him*.

In other words, it is not individual acts and sins that were punished, but the overall misguided behavior of the entire Jewish people, just as in the days of the prophets.

In the ultra-Orthodox sector, the term *Akeida* is also sometimes used. This term refers to the story of the binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac, and appears throughout Jewish history to refer to martyrs, those who have died for the sanctification of God’s name, *Kiddush Hashem*. In translating the autobiography of Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, former chief rabbi of Israel and presently chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, I confronted this concept in the very title of the book, which is אל תשלח

ידך אל הנער “Do Not Raise Your Hand Against the Lad.” With these words, God’s angel stops Abraham from putting the knife to his son’s neck. For the titles of the book sections, Rabbi Lau also borrows terms from the story in Genesis 22. Part I, which describes his Holocaust experiences, is called “The Knife, the Fire, and the Wood,” recalling Isaac’s question to his father, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?” Part II, which describes the rabbi’s rise to office and his mission to perpetuate the memory of the Holocaust, is called “The Ram’s Horn.” Abraham sees the ram caught in the thicket by its horn, and he offers the ram to God instead of his son. In an address at the Ginzach Kiddush Hashem Museum in Bnei Brak, the ultra-Orthodox Holocaust memorial museum, Rabbi Lau explained that he had first heard this term used by the Rebbe of Gur to refer to the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, and that he had adopted it as fitting.

To me this image seemed theologically difficult, and I asked Rabbi Lau about it in person. How, I asked, can we compare the images in this story to what happened in the Holocaust? I understand that Isaac symbolizes the Jew as victim. But the rest of the constellation does not fit: how can we possibly compare Abraham to the Nazi slaughterers? How can we compare the supreme act of faith in our God to the Nazi’s travesty of human morality? No, replied Rabbi Lau, the metaphor does not extend that far. It stops at Isaac as victim. No one intends to make the rest of the comparison. Still, I think I am probably not the only person to question this term as appropriate. Indeed, I discussed the entire problem of terminology with the rabbi, and he said that in the translation we must use the

commonly accepted term in English, “Holocaust.” “In this case, I must follow the rest of the world,” he conceded. Since his goal is to make book available to the widest possible audience, Jews and gentiles included, he feels he should use the most universally recognizable term. But I might yet convince him that Shoah is another possible solution.

## II. Who Beat My Father? – Germans/Nazis/SS

Another thorny issue in the terminology of the Holocaust is “the Germans.” In their personal accounts, many survivors employ this generalization to describe the individuals responsible for their suffering, thereby condemning the entire German people in a manner considered unacceptable in today’s sensitive political world.

What are the different implications if the term SS or Gestapo or Nazis were used rather than “Germans”? Some maintain, especially in the United States, that it is not PC to blame “the Germans” for the Holocaust. Yet most survivors do not recognize this difficulty and remain highly resistant to changing their terminology, thus risking the alienation of the potential readers and publishers of their accounts.

In translating Rabbi Lau’s autobiography, I confronted the question of how to render the following sentence: “The Germans beat my father.” Should I use Germans, or Nazis? Or perhaps SS or Gestapo? When I put the question to Rabbi Lau’s brother, Naphtali Lau-Lavie, himself a survivor, he answered me

resolutely. “It was the Germans. Do not dare to change it. All of the German people were responsible.”

In this opinion, Mr. Lau is in agreement with Harvard professor Daniel J. Goldhagen, author of the seminal work *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. Goldhagen’s groundbreaking research on original material about the perpetrators of the killings led to a revolution in academia. Whereas heretofore academics had spoken of the murders in the Holocaust in the past tense, Goldhagen concluded that indeed, we can speak of “the German people” in general as orchestrators and actors. Although of course there were individual dissenters and objectors, as well as those who helped save Jewish lives, the vast majority of the German people were responsible, directly and indirectly, for the Holocaust.

Thus technically it would not be a problem to translate “the Germans” literally, and especially in deference to the author’s point of view as a survivor. I had the opportunity to ask Rabbi Lau himself about this issue as well, and he replied that although today it is true that one has to be careful about making generalizations about specific nations, “everyone knows that when it comes to the Holocaust, we mean the vast majority of the German people, and not every single individual.” So he thought the word “Germans” should be preserved. However, given the intended audience for this book, which is not academic but popular and broad, some sensitivity to politically correct language should still be maintained. Thus in the translation, I am trying to vary the terms and avoid using “the Germans” exclusively in the relevant passages.

### III. Conclusion

We have explored some of the most difficult questions of terminology that arise in discussions of the Nazi extermination of European Jewry. In teaching this subject to students, the most important point to point out at the end of the teaching module is that as critical readers, we must be sensitive to the issues of terminology and translation that lie behind the words printed on paper. As enlightened consumers of information about this intensely powerful and disturbing period of history, we are equipped with a new awareness of how this material is particularly vulnerable to interpretation by a specific writer or group. We can analyze the usages of varying terms in different types of texts, and understand why specific individuals and groups choose certain words for their history or biography. Most importantly, when it comes time to write our own analyses of this history, we will make our own choice of terms with a conscious awareness of their meaning and implication.