

The Short Vort
November 9 and 10th, 2022
Marcheshvan 16th
Kristallnacht- As Told by Rabbi Shimon Schwab Zt"l

The Short Vort
Good Morning!

Today is the 16th of Marcheshvan 5783, and November 10, 2022

Kristallnacht

This year, the Hebrew and secular dates of Kristallnacht are in sync.
Kristallnacht began on the night of the 16th of Marcheshvan 5699, November 9, 1938.
On Sunday evening, November 11, 1984, I sat spellbound in the Main Shul of K'hal Adath Jeshurun ("The Breuer's Shul") at 85-93 Bennett Avenue in Manhattan.
I was attending a special address delivered by the Rav of the Shul, Rav Shimon Schwab זצ"ל (December 30, 1908 – February 13, 1995).
I have been present at many Holocaust commemoration events.
But none was like this one.
Rav Schwab, born in Germany, lived under the Nazis and arrived in the United States in 1936 only after realizing the impending danger to German Jews.
His mother tongue was German, so too could be said of many members of the Shul in 1984.
It was only forty-eight years after Kristallnacht and less than forty years since the Holocaust.
Almost everyone in their sixties and over, which was the majority of the assembled, lived through the Nazis.
Rav Schwab began to speak of Kristallnacht.
He spoke about how the "Night of the Broken Glass" was, in reality, the "Night of the Broken Illusion."
He spoke in graphic terms of how the brutality of the Nazis, revealed in graphic horror, was the final straw that convinced him of the futility of the belief in German Humanism.
I sat breathless as he described the delusional outlook of many Orthodox German Jews.
He drove home how their deranged belief in the moral betterment of the German people was smashed along with the shattered glass strewn in front of the Jewish-owned shops.
I sat in rapt attention as I listened to the brutally honest debunking of the delusional idea that the German people had morphed into a moral, ethical people.
It was that night that turned me into a Talmid of Rav Schwab.
I attended every Shiur and lecture I could.
His Sunday morning Navi Shiurim and his Shabbos afternoon Droshos were permanent fixtures of my weekly learning regimen.
I met with him privately, and he shared his most personal thoughts about Jews and their standing in America.
Yet, nothing will ever match the powerful, straightforward, and authentic words Rav Schwab spoke from the heart that night in Shul thirty-eight years ago.
I recently found the printed version of his powerful words.
I present key portions of them tonight, the eighty-fourth anniversary of Kristallnacht.
Particularly today, as anti-Semitism is rampant in our culture, politics, and daily life, his words are as poignant as ever.
For those who would like to see the entire Drosha, see,
<https://images.shulcloud.com/288/uploads/Writings/Rav%20Schwab/Kristallnacht%20A%20Historical%20Perspective.pdf>

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Rav Schwab began:

Tonight is the night after the 16th of MarCheshvan. Forty-eight years ago, on November 9, 1938, the so-called “Kristallnacht” occurred: the beginning of a historical tragedy with a fatal ending.

Rav Schwab briefly described how Herschel Greenspan, a Jewish student in Paris (after hearing about his parents being deported from Germany and dumped at the Polish border), killed a German undersecretary named Paris Vonrat.

Rav Schwab continues, The Nazis claimed:

“The Jews have taken revenge!!” This outcry spread rapidly throughout Germany. Two days later on November 9, the Nazis orchestrated a widespread attack on the Jews of Germany and axis- controlled Austria. This sudden burst of barbarianism was explained by the Nazis to the general public as “a spontaneous demonstration of righteous indignation by the German people against the Jews for the cowardly act of treachery” (the murder of Vonrat). All in all, as a result of this so called “spontaneous reaction,” 191 synagogues were set ablaze and another 76 were totally demolished, let alone the thousands of Jewish stores which were ravaged. Thus, the name “Kristallnacht” — the night of the broken glass, the shattered windows of Jewish establishments. That same day at least 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Others were killed or beaten. Of course, a pompous funeral was held for secretary Vonrat. To top it off, a collective penalty of one billion marks was levied against the Jews of Germany.

In reality, none of this was spontaneous. This offensive had been meticulously planned down to the first detail, in typical German fashion. The murder of Vonrat merely served as a catalyst to bring it all about sooner. Kristallnacht was a turning point for the Jews of Germany and Austria: From this point on there was no further place

for them in the German economy, and their own cultural life was brought to an abrupt halt. It was the beginning of the end. From the Kristallnacht leads a straight path to Auschwitz, Treblinka, Theresienstadt — to the murder of 6 million Kedoshim, 1/3 of our people. Amongst us there are still many who remember these events personally.

But there is much more to this story. By strange “coincidence” (nothing in life is a coincidence!), that same date, November 9, marks a celebration. Seventy-nine years earlier, in 1859, the whole German nation celebrated the Centennial of the birth of the famous German poet, Friedrich Phillip Von Schiller. Schiller was a great humanist, and no German could go through school without mastering Schiller’s plays and poetry. He had become, in effect, a national hero. All over Germany there was a jubilant celebration of his 100th birthday.

Also participating in this commemoration was the newly founded yeshiva in Frankfurt-am-Main, the Yeshiva founded by Rabbiner Samson Raphael Hirsch (of which our Yeshiva is a continuation). A detailed account of the school’s celebration can be found in the “Gesammelte Schriften”, Vol. IV. Briefly, the higher grades had assembled, together with the faculty, administration, the Board of the Kehillo and the general public. The rooms were festively decorated. Addressing the crowd was none less than the great Rav Hirsch himself. He proceeded to deliver a masterful oration on the topic of the ברכה pronounced over meeting one of the חכמי אומות העולם:

ברוך שנתן מחכמתו לבשר ודם

If Schiller were to come to us, said Rav Hirsch, we’d be required by our חכמים to pronounce this ברכה (the entire speech has been recorded under the title of the “Schiller-reder”). Extensively quoting from Schiller’s poetry, Rav Hirsch illustrated how this sublime individual stood for all we call virtuous: lofty ideas about the Almighty, righteousness, goodness, justice, honesty, beauty, free will, man above beast, family life, the dignity of women, virtue and truth, etc. All great ideas expressed, even by non-

Jewish sources, originate in the Torah. Because of such people, continued Rav Hirsch, the Jews of 1859 were experiencing a renaissance. Righteousness is spreading, the ghetto barriers are being broken down, the Jewish people are finally becoming welcome members in the civilization of mankind.*

This tremendous speech was delivered amidst festivities on November 9, 1859. The optimism he expressed was showed by almost all his contemporaries. That beautiful dream — that the Jews were finally accepted as equals — lasted for about 100 years until, suddenly, they were shaken out of this slumber.

Even during the early 1930's when Hitler began organizing the storm troopers, people refused to accept reality until they were rudely awakened by the shattering of glass at the Kristallnacht. The bubble had burst. Since the Middle Ages the Jews had thirsted for freedom. Just as they seemingly had reached that plateau — they enjoyed more human rights during the mid-19th century than ever before — along come the stormtroopers.

Let us keep in mind that they too were educated in German schools where Schiller and others like him were an important part of the curriculum. Despite this humanistic education, these SS men became more cruel than beasts of prey. They were the sadistic murderers and torturers of innocent men, women and children. So the dreaming Jewish soul awoke — was awakened — from a beautiful vision, more hungry for life and light and freedom than ever before.

Let us admit it. Our grandparents subscribed to an illusion — an imaginary faith in the civilizing result of a liberal education encompassing art, poetry, music, and theater. It was thought that man's inhumanity to man was a matter of the deep, dark past. Some still did not awaken from this vision until the smoke began to rise from the

burning shuls and ספרים, and until this illusory silence was broken by the shattering of windows and the screaming of frightened children in the night*.

Let us close this dark chapter with a firm belief in the נסים of הקב"ה, the One who will not desert us or forsake us: "אל יעזבנו ואל יטשנו" The age of Humanism was a passing episode in the annals of history. The sentiment was only skin deep- and short lived. When the fires of the Holocaust began burning, we suddenly were haunted by the words we say in our daily תפילות, as well as in נעילה of יום כפור:

The great men, the great figures and heroes	הלא כל הגבורים
are like nothing before you.	כאין לפניך
People of name and fame	ואנשי השם
are as if they never existed.	כלא היו
The wise men	וחכמים
are as if they have no knowledge.	כבלי מדע
Men of understanding	ונבובים
without intelligence	כבלי השכל
Most of their actions, are empty	כי רוב מעשיהם תוהו
and so are their lives empty.	וימי חייהם הבל לפניך
The supremacy of man over the animals	ומותר האדם מן הבהמה
proves to be hollow.	אין
Man is merely an intelligent animal.	

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