“IF MY LIFE ENDS,” READS THE LAST LINE OF CHAIM Kaplan’s Warsaw Diary, “what will become of my diary?” (400). Kaplan’s life ended in the death camp Treblinka in December 1942 or in January 1943; the exact date is uncertain. It is certain, however, that, apart from surviving the Shoah—which in itself borders on the miraculous—very little has become of his diary. Very little, in fact, has become of any of these diaries composed with courage and trepidation, in times and places where, by all that is rational, they should not have been composed at all. Yet, from little girls to old men, Jews did set their hands to blank pages in the midst of a world that had gone blank. Precisely when every trace of all that was meaningful and sacred in life was being erased, Jews of every ilk—but nonetheless Jews—struggled to utter a word that might transcend this erasure. Precisely when writing a diary became a crime, it became most needful for the recovery of a life that had been deemed criminal. Contrary to all that reason might have predicted, thousands of pages from these diaries have reached our hands. And, far from an egotistical concern for the fate of himself or his memory, Kaplan’s question about the fate of his diary is a question concerning the fate of the truth, to which the fate of humanity is tied.

According to the Talmud, it is a religious duty to “carry out the wishes of the deceased” (Gittin 14b); just so, it is a religious duty to respond to Kaplan’s question and to the cries of those who shared his fate. Like it or not, the voices of these victims and the truth that they sought persist. That is why this book delves into their diaries. Written from a Jewish perspective, it is a Jewish response to Jewish outcry.
Which is to say, it is a book that examines a searing question rising up from these scrolls of agony: how is the interior turmoil of the human diarist linked to the exterior annihilation of humanity? Or: what is the connection between the response to the collapse of life and the effort to regain a life? Or: what does writing the diary have to do with living a life, when both are under assault? These are a few variations on a single question. It is above all a Jewish question, which, like the Covenant entered into for the sake of “all the nations of the earth” (Genesis 18:18), is a question that concerns all humanity. “There comes a time,” Elie Wiesel has written, “when one cannot be a man without assuming the Jewish condition” (Beggar 77), and assuming the Jewish condition has come to entail addressing the Jewish question that arises from these diaries. Kaplan himself believed that the time for this confrontation is precisely the time now upon us, in the post-Holocaust era. After the Shoah, he asserts in his entry for 10 October 1940, “either humanity would be Judaic, or it would be idolatrous-German” (130)—either yehidutiyt or germaniyt-eliyliyt in his Hebrew (201), suggesting an embrace either of the truth or of the lie, either of meaning or of the void. And Kaplan’s concern for the fate of his diary is inextricably tied to this either/or.

The project here undertaken is an attempt to embrace the truth and meaning, both terrible and sublime, that Kaplan and other Jewish diarists sought to embrace. Once again, in contrast to most others who have examined these diaries, I wish to emphasize the word Jewish and, in that emphasis, adopt a premise set forth by Emmanuel Levinas: “Jewish existence itself is an essential event of being; Jewish existence is a category of being” (Difficult 183). How that category is distinguished will be seen in the ways in which the Holocaust diary is distinguished from other diaries; generally speaking, these distinctions are outlined in the titles of the chapters that go into this study. Seeking a link between those Jewish lives lost and our own lives, moreover, its method is phenomenological, in the sense that Levinas ascribes to phenomenology when he says, “Phenomenology is a way of becoming aware of where we are in the world, a sich besinnen that consists of a recovery of the origin of meaning in our life world, or Lebenswelt” (“Dialogue” 14–15). In the Holocaust diary, to be sure, this recovery of meaning in life is attempted in the midst of a Todeswelt, death world. And yet the
diary lives. Hence we are faced with a phenomenological question: how do the collapse and recovery of life in the Holocaust diary implicate us in our own pursuit of life? But before we explore this huge question, we must consider other questions. Let us begin with the question concerning the critical contexts for the investigation.

**THE CRITICAL CONTEXTS FOR THE INVESTIGATION**

While the Shoah has invoked a great deal of research and even a great deal of genuine testimony, there has been very little embrace of the truth, very little response to the larger question before us, in the responses to these voices that arose from the very depths of the whirlwind. Renata Laqueur Weiss’s doctoral dissertation on concentration camp diaries is, to my knowledge, the only book-length study of Holocaust diaries. When the diaries do come under investigation in the occasional chapter or article, their consideration is usually combined with a discussion of Holocaust memoirs, as if there were no significant generic distinctions between the two. And they are rarely approached as Jewish texts that bear implications for an understanding of Jewish life and tradition, that is, of Jewish existence as a category of being. The scholarly contexts for this investigation, then, are sparse. But the spiritual context—the context of the truth and of the soul’s struggle for life—is immense, though little explored.

Before going into a critique of existing studies of the diaries, however, at least two exceptions to the claim that their truth has been ignored must be noted. While one comes soon after the Event, the is other much later, and both arise in reaction to the popular acclaim for Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*. In 1960 Bruno Bettelheim commented on the stage production of the diary by saying: “There is good reason why the enormously successful play ends with Anne stating her belief in the good in all men. . . . If all men are basically good . . . then indeed we can all go on with life as usual and forget about Auschwitz. . . . [Anne Frank’s dramatized diary] found wide acclaim because . . . it denies implicitly that Auschwitz ever existed. If all men are good, there was never an Auschwitz” (46). And if there was never an Auschwitz, there was never an Anne Frank, never the hiding or the capture, the despair or the death—in a word, never a diary.
More thoroughly developing Bettelheim’s position, Alvin Rosenfeld published a study of Anne Frank and her diary in 1991, where he argues: “In order to give the book this emphasis—one that urged readers to cherish its youthful author rather than to mourn her—one had to read the diary in such a way as to have it appear an uplifting and not a harrowing experience. The only way to do that, though, was to dehistoricize Anne Frank’s story: to see it, on the one hand, as emblematic of Jewish fate during the Nazi period, to be sure, but, on the other hand, as transcending that fate” (“Popularization” 250). Therefore: “Far from being remembered as one dead child among a million or more murdered Jewish children, she was instead to be taken up and cherished as a general symbol of martyred innocence, who stood for but also transcended the lot of suffering humanity” (260). Again, to dehistoricize the diary is to eliminate it, and to make Anne Frank into a symbol is to get rid of her, as a child and as a Jew. Thus, as Bettelheim and Rosenfeld rightly suggest, we settle a burning question and silence a disturbing voice.

Dehistoricizing the diary is a means of overcoming the Event and salving our soul with the illusion that these dead Jewish children have no bearing on our humanity. To be sure, once they are stripped of their humanity and made into a symbol, our illusion goes so far as to suppose that their spirit of innocence and optimism lives on (whatever that means); hence we are redeemed. Or at least we are let off the hook of responsibility. But, as Emil Fackenheim insists, this illusion cannot bear the weight of a reality that cannot be overcome. “The edification of our soul is disrupted by the cries of the children,” he maintains. “We therefore conclude: where the Holocaust is there is no overcoming; and where there is an overcoming the Holocaust is not. . . .” So long as no way is found to confront the Holocaust and yet endure, it has the power to render questionable all overcoming everywhere” (To Mend 135). The responses of Bettelheim and Rosenfeld show that the effort to transcend the truth of Anne Frank has failed; which, in turn, is evidence that we have not found a way to confront the Holocaust and yet endure.

Dehistoricizing the diary and making it into a false symbol, however, is not our only means of removing it from its reality and placing it at a safe distance from ourselves. Another method of overcoming
the Shoah is to bury it in history. Contrary to its elevation as a transcendent symbol, the diary is often reduced to a mere historical document or a piece of evidence. Here, lacking the courage of the diarists, we shrink from their diaries and regard them simply as eyewitness accounts and sources of information, as data, and not as the outcries of Jewish souls that might implicate us in any way. Albert Graeser, for example, omits these diaries from his study of the “literary diary” precisely because they are “documents” that arose from despair, rather than from Kunstwille, or the “will to art” (105). And yet to view them as art would be equally wrongheaded, since this would open the door to the false transcendence that occurred when Anne Frank’s diary was made into art, that is, into drama. How, then, should these diaries be approached?

In the area of Holocaust studies, James Young is perhaps the most prominent scholar to have undertaken any detailed examination of the Holocaust diary. He too, however, fabricates a distance between ourselves and the diaries by reducing them not only to documents, evidence, and sources of information but to problematic documents, evidence, and sources of information. He accomplishes this task in two ways: first he raises epistemological concerns that discredit the diarist, and then he assumes a phenomenological stance that renders suspect the diary itself. And the fact that the diaries are written by Jews in the midst of the annihilation of the Jews is all but incidental to both approaches. From an epistemological standpoint, Young argues that the diarists “necessarily convert experience into an organized, often ritualized, memory of experience.” Hence it is “difficult to distinguish between the archetypal patterns the ghetto diarist has brought to the events, those he perceived in or inferred from them, and those that exist in the narrative. As raw as they may have been at the moment, the ghetto and camp experiences were immediately refined and organized by witnesses within the terms of their Weltanschauungen” (“Interpreting” 414). Let us put aside for the moment our doubts as to whether Anne Frank or Dawid Rubinowicz can even have a Weltanschauung, at least in the same sense that Chaim Kaplan and Janusz Korczak may have one. There are more important issues to consider here. For example, if the ideological bias of the diarist stands between himself and any truth concerning the event, then it certainly stands between us
and the event: once again we are safe and do not have to answer for anything, since we cannot answer for what we cannot know. How we know that the Event took place Young does not explain; what we know, he insists, is corrupted by the outlook of witnesses who transmit that knowledge.

One comparison that Young makes in order to support his contention is between Anne Frank and Moshe Flinker, two adolescents who were very different in their Weltanschauungen; Anne was an assimilated Jew, Young notes, for instance, whereas Moshe was a religious Jew. Further, “at the end of her diary,” says Young, “Anne can declare that in spite of everything, she still believes in the goodness of humankind. In contrast, following his afternoon prayers on the last day of his diary, Moshe writes: ‘The sky is covered with bloody clouds, and I am frightened when I see it . . . They come from the seas of blood . . . brought about by the millions of Jews who have been captured.’ . . . Where Anne might have seen beauty and hope in a fiery sunset, Moshe ‘saw’ only apocalypse. The ‘vision’ of the events in these diaries depended on the languages, figures, and even religious training that ultimately framed these testimonies” (“Interpreting” 415). Therefore, one is led to ask, who can know anything about the truth of what these children “saw”? Underlying this question, from Young’s perspective, is not the horrendous nature of an event that thwarts the imagination and frustrates the understanding; rather, it is the tainted nature of the testimony that makes knowledge of the Event problematic, if not impossible.

Young’s epistemological flight from responsibility is mirrored, moreover, by his irresponsible handling of these examples; here his own intellectual and ideological bias shows itself. Regarding the remark that he attributes to Anne Frank, it is not at the end of her diary but at the end of the contrived stage production that “Anne” asserts her belief in the goodness of humankind. Although she has her moments of optimism, what the child Anne does write near the end of her diary, on 15 July 1944, is this: “That’s the difficulty in these times: ideals, dreams, and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered” (278). And is it the assimilated Anne who writes that, when gazing into the Sabbath candles, she senses “in the candle” the presence of her late grandmother, who “shelters and
protects” her (177–78)? As for Moshe Flinker, it is true that his diary is full of apocalyptic foreboding and religious fervor, but he too has his moments of optimism. On 26 November 1942, for example, he writes: “It seems to me that the time has come for our redemption” (26). And later he declares: “The Lord will not be able to forsake His people. Undoubtedly He will save us” (52). Is this affirmation of faith so diametrically opposed to Anne Frank’s assertion that “it is God that has made us as we are, but it will be God, too, who will raise us up again” (221)? Yes, these children come from different backgrounds and have different perspectives on the world. But far more significant to an understanding of their diaries are the things these Jewish children have in common: their struggle to respond to a world in ashes, their effort to recover some traces of life, and their questions concerning the dearness of life that implicate us all. This is precisely what Young overlooks.

Young takes up the phenomenological challenge to the validity of the diary itself in his book *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*. “Because the diarists wrote from within the whirlwind,” he maintains, “the degree of authority in their accounts is [mistakenly] perceived by readers to be stronger than that of the texts shaped through hindsight. Operating on the same phenomenological basis as print journalism, in which the perceived temporal proximity of a text to events reinforces the sense of its facticity, diaries can be far more convincing of their factual veracity than more retrospective accounts” (25). One dubious assumption behind this statement is that a reader’s primary interest in the diary lies with the facts that it conveys, and not with the questions that it may pose for the life of the soul; indeed, it is an assumption that insulates the soul from such questions and that ignores any internal aspect of the human being at work in the diary. And yet, as Wiesel has insisted, “the ultimate mystery of the Holocaust is that whatever happened took place in the soul” (*Against Silence* 1:239). If we are to find our way into these diaries, then we must find our way into our own souls. And to do this, we must begin by recognizing the difference between writing a document or a report, and keeping a diary.

Unlike Young, Alain Girard makes an important distinction between the phenomenological basis of diaries in general and print
journalism: “[In the diary] internal observation plays a role analogous to the plane of individual consciousness, allowing it to escape from appearances and to communicate with itself. One could not imagine two forms of writing more opposed in their manner, their aim, and their content than the journal of journalists and the journal of diarists” (xvi–xvii). As we shall see, there are significant differences between diaries in general and the unique aspects of the Holocaust diary, but in this instance, Girard correctly notes a distinguishing feature of the diary which Young ignores: in the diary, notes Girard, “the interior landscape reflects the variations of an exterior landscape” (xvi). When assessing the events reported by a journalist, we are interested in the factual nature of the report, not in the reporter’s strife of the spirit. While many Holocaust diaries include accounts of what is transpiring around the diarist, none of them can be reduced to mere reports or documentation of facts, for all of them harbor an internal, human aspect that, far from isolating us from the diarist, establishes for us an essential bond with him. And the diary is a mirror held up not only to the horror but also to ourselves.

Even when it looks as though Young is about to make a distinction between the internal and the external aspects of the diary, he deftly avoids it. For example, he says: “The diarists who participated in Ringelblum’s communal Oneg Shabbat archive were motivated to record events far different from those reported in a more personal record, like Mary Berg’s diary. . . . The reasons for which the diarists wrote and the focus of their witness inescapably regulate, and at times restrict, the diarist’s record. In the end, these formal and generic constraints contribute as much to the meaning and significance of these diaries as do the figures and selection of details in the diaries themselves” (Writing 25). There are certainly differences between Mary Berg’s diary and those kept by the members of the Oneg Shabbat circle. But, as in his comparison of Anne Frank and Moshe Flinker, in this contrast between the Oneg Shabbat diarists and Mary Berg, Young oversimplifies to the point of being misleading, since there are considerable religious and ideological differences among the Oneg Shabbat diarists themselves.

In the study at hand we shall examine some of the diaries found in the Oneg Shabbat archives; among them are those written by Rabbi
Shimon Huberband, Menahem Kon, Abraham Levin, S. Sheinkinder, Hersh Wasser, and, of course, Emmanuel Ringelblum. Although they stood not in the middle of a circle but in the midst of a maelstrom, these men exemplify a talmudic tradition that goes back to Choni the Circle Drawer, who declared to the Almighty: “I swear by Thy great name that I will not move from here until Thou hast mercy upon Thy children!” (Ta’anit 23a). Like Choni the Circle Drawer, these diarists, and Ringelblum in particular, refused to move from where they stood; for, like Choni, they sensed a profound link between themselves as Jews and their Jewish community. To be sure, the very title of this communal group distinguishes it from other archival circles of other times: Oneg Shabbat means “rejoicing in the Sabbath” and implies, if not a personal stake, a deeply Jewish, human, and spiritual responsibility that far transcends any ordinary keeping of records and reporting of facts. They gave their group this Jewish name because, as Jews, they were deeply aware that the Sabbath is “spirit in the form of time,” as Abraham Joshua Heschel states it (Sabbath 75), and that “what we are [as Jews] depends on what the Sabbath is to us” (Sabbath 89). Nor is it too much to assume that some of the members of the Oneg Shabbat, particularly Rabbi Huberband, were aware of the teaching in the Zohar that “the Community of Israel is also called ‘Sabbath’” (3:198–99). The question of who we are—and of what will become of us—as a Jewish community was central to the members of the Oneg Shabbat; it cannot be ignored—and Young ignores it—if one is to understand what they and their diaries were about.

To be sure, the centrality of this Jewish consciousness can be seen both among the diarists of the Oneg Shabbat and in the texts of other diarists. “Our purpose,” Abraham Levin explains the aim of the Oneg Shabbat, “is that our sufferings, ‘the pains before the coming of the Messiah,’ should be noted down for remembrance by future generations, for remembering by the whole world” (316). Mary Berg has a similar sense of purpose that goes well beyond the confines of personal interest; like the members of the Oneg Shabbat, she often exemplifies a sense of responsibility to others. For she is mindful of “an inner voice” that “urges” her—or rather “commands” her, which is a better translation of the Polish nakazuje (243)—“to write down all the terrible things” she has discovered about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising
Despite the differences between them, she and Ringelblum’s diarists have this much in common: they are all conscious of a deeper responsibility to a human community which does not leave them free \textit{not} to write. In its implications for the life of the soul, as well as for the life of humanity, this similarity surpasses the difference that Young regards as most decisive.

But even with respect to the difference that he emphasizes, there are problems with Young’s division between archival information and personal anguish. On 12 July 1940, for example, Mary Berg relates that “there are now a great number of illegal schools, and they are multiplying every day,” and that “two such schools were discovered by the Germans some time in June” (32). And in his archival “record” for 5 May 1942 Sheinkinder allows himself an expression of personal anguish. “Tomorrow will be the eve of \textit{Shavuot},” he writes, noting the observance of the Revelation at Sinai. “There is no sadder hour for me than when I finish my work and make my way home, where my hungry family is waiting for me. They have prepared no dinner for me. I did not leave them anything for lunch” (260). As for Ringelblum himself, like his comrades, he seldom uses the first-person singular when making his entries, but surely he includes himself in the “we” when he writes: “Despair and a sense of hopelessness are growing. There is the universal feeling that They are trying to starve us out, and we cannot escape, save through a miracle” (157). Ringelblum’s “we” extends throughout the community, to the children who attend the illegal schools and the hungry family awaiting the return of a tormented father. In these examples, then, one finds similarities that, despite all differences, lead Marie Syrkin to assert of the diaries: “The social historian trained in political thought and action [Emmanuel Ringelblum], the Orthodox Hebrew scholar [Chaim Kaplan], and the fifteen-year-old schoolgirl [Anne Frank] move from confused hopefulness to hopelessness in the same baffled progression. Though they differ in emotional intensity and intellectual resources, their basic responses are as tragically alike as the events they describe” (227). But there is an even more fundamental bond that ties Anne Frank and Mary Berg to Chaim Kaplan and Emmanuel Ringelblum, one that neither Young nor Syrkin addresses: \textit{they are Jews} and are therefore conscious of an essential, definitive interweaving of personal and
communal life. For “my soul is not by the side of my people,” Martin Buber expresses this crucial point. “My people is my soul” (Judaism 20). This relation lies at the heart of the sense of responsibility to current and future generations that we find in every Holocaust diary. A Jew cannot stand alone, in isolation from other Jews, any more than a word can stand alone, in isolation from the language. (As we shall see below, this Jewish feature of the Holocaust diary proves to be one that distinguishes it from other diaries.)

Yet there are linguistic differences among the diaries, which in this study originally appear in Dutch, German, Romanian, Hungarian, Russian, Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew. And, similar to David Roskies before him (199–212), Young makes much of these differences. “In choosing to write in Hebrew over Yiddish,” he explains, for instance, “Kaplan and Kalmanovitch may not have deliberately chosen every specific allusion and figure in Hebrew over those in Ringelblum’s Yiddish, but they did locate events within different linguistic realms all the same. . . . Where Hebrew tends to locate events in the sanctified linguistic sphere of Scripture, rabbinical disputation, and covenant, Yiddish (as the daily language and in many literal ways, the “mama-loshen,” or mother-tongue) often brought into sharper relief the details of daily life and its hardships. Community, politics, and organization had a vocabulary in Yiddish not developed at that time in Hebrew. Conversely, questions of theodicy, covenant, scriptural antecedent, and even the interpretation of events ‘as text’ had a lexicon in Hebrew they did not have in Yiddish” (“Interpretation” 415). But this distinction carries weight only for those who have little knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish. Although different languages certainly harbor different ways of organizing and conceptualizing the world, the mutual exclusion that Young ascribes to these particular languages is simply false. Bernard Martin, for example, points out that, through the work of Eliezer ben Yehudah (1858–1922) and Achad Ha-Am (1856–1927), Hebrew had become the vernacular of the Jewish community in Palestine by the early 1920s (344). It was the language of instruction and administration for the Technion, founded in Haifa in 1924, and for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, founded in 1925. When the Jewish Agency was established in 1929 to deal “with the practical task of financing and administering the settlement of
Jews” in Palestine, Hebrew was the language in which it conducted its communal, political, and organizational business (Martin 346). And that business extended to Jewish organizations throughout the Diaspora, such as the Hitachadut (United Zionist Labor Party), which “championed the revival of Hebrew” as part of its political activity (Heller 267).

With regard to Yiddish and its shortcomings when it comes to interpreting events “as text,” Young appears to overlook the massive Yiddish literature that eloquently explores all aspects, including the deeply religious and spiritual aspects, of East European Jewish life. As for the inappropriateness of Yiddish for delving into “theodicy” and rabbinical disputation, is it possible that Young is unaware of the fact that in Eastern Europe Yiddish was—and in some places remains—the language used for discussing and debating Torah and Talmud in the yeshivot? Reinforcing this point that undermines Young’s characterization of Yiddish, André Neher makes a telling observation on Franz Rosenzweig and the significance of Yiddish for Jewish religious thought: “Throughout his life of Jewish studies, over and above the anxiety which assailed him sometimes when faced with the slowness of his progress in mastering the Talmud and the vastness of the intellectual realm which he still had to unravel, Rosenzweig was haunted with another worry, which gradually began to appear like an unquestionable certitude: He lacked the linguistic instrument—the truly Jewish language [of Yiddish], which the Warsaw schoolboy imbibed with the air of the ghetto—which would allow him an intuitive penetration of Talmudic knowledge” (They 143). In the matter of linguistic difference, then, Young ignores essential aspects of Hebrew and Yiddish that render his distinctions invalid.

The more pressing issue, however, is not Young’s false generalizations concerning these differences among the diaries, but rather his ultimate aim in making these generalizations. Returning to our initial concern with his approach—namely, the reduction of the diaries to problematic evidence and dubious historical documents that pose no particular threat to spiritual life—we come to Young’s own statement of a serious consequence of his approach. “The words in a translated and reproduced Holocaust diary,” he argues, “are no longer traces of the crime, as they were for the writer who inscribed them; what was
evidence for the writer at the moment he wrote is now, after it leaves his hand, only a detached and free-floating sign, at the mercy of all who would read and misread it. Evidence of the witness’s experiences seems to have been supplanted—not delivered—by his text” (24). That there are problems with translations we readily admit; hence in this study we shall make use of the original texts for most of these diaries. But the soul and the humanity couched in the diary, the collapse and the recovery of a life reflected in it, can penetrate even the veils of a translation—if we do not decide beforehand that the diaries are “free-floating signs” or mere bodies of evidence and the diarists nothing more than reporters. Made into mere reports, the dairies are reduced to the status of “being there”; understood as human voices, they take on a capacity for calling forth, for calling me forth and announcing my responsibility. This is why Wiesel warns us: “Consideration for others must precede scholarship. Abstract erudition may turn into a futile game of the intellect. Words are links not only between words but also between human beings. The emphasis on the other is paramount in Judaism: Achrayut, responsibility, contains the word Akher (Acher), the Other. We are responsible for the other” (Sages 184). Thus the response to the diary—the Jewish response—must be one that endeavors to establish a link with the diarist.

Remember Mikhail Bakhtin’s insight: “The text as such never appears as a dead thing; beginning with any text—and sometimes passing through a lengthy series of mediating links—we always arrive, in the final analysis, at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being” (Dialogic 252–53). But coming up against these human beings, against these Jews, who collide with the extremity of the collapse of life and wrestle to recover it, is not just a difficult task—it is a terrifying task. For in the encounter with the human being, we encounter ourselves and there confront the questions of what we live and die for, of what we hold dear and what we fear. It is understandable, but not excusable, that Young would avoid the fearsome task of encountering the human being in the diary by getting rid of him. We can see why he invokes the free-floating sign in an eclipse of the human face: it is to flee, either knowingly or unknowingly, from a terrible responsibility. “Face and discourse are tied,” Levinas points out. “The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and
begins all discourse. I have just refused the notion of vision to describe the authentic relationship with the Other; it is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship” (Ethics 87–88). When the diaries are reduced to documents or signs, we do not respond to them; we examine, explain, and explicate them, but we do not respond to them. But then we betray the face that speaks from within and from beyond them. Chaim Kaplan’s question once again comes to mind: “What will become of my diary?” In Young’s approach to the diary we see what must not become of it.

But there are two other matters that must be considered before we launch our own attempt to respond to these diaries. First, in the existing approaches to the Holocaust diaries there is very little consideration of the generic features of the diary as such; as already indicated, when diaries get discussed or listed in bibliographies, they are often grouped together with memoirs and autobiographies. We shall proceed, then, to a brief discussion of the diary as a literary form. It will turn out, however, that, while it has some things in common with other diaries, the Holocaust diary is in a category by itself and cannot be neatly filed into the general genre of the diary. The matter of what distinguishes the Holocaust diary as Holocaust diary, then, is a second point that scholars thus far have not addressed and that must be addressed in these introductory remarks.

**Generic Features of the Diary**

According to P. A. Spalding, one distinguishing feature of the diary is that it arises from a “spontaneous impulse to record experience as such and preserve it” (12). A key term in this statement is the word experience. The video camera in the convenience store may record everything that transpires in the store throughout the day, but it experiences nothing. Experience belongs to the consciousness of a living soul; it arises in the encounter between world and mind. The diary, then, is not just the record of events; it is the record of a consciousness, of a sentient interaction with events. If the aim of this interaction recorded in the diary is the preservation of experience, then one might question Spalding’s claim that it arises from a spontaneous impulse, as if it were void of any thought or calculation; indeed, the de-
sire for preservation would seem to preclude spontaneity. We can come to Spalding’s assistance, perhaps, by noting that, if the diary does arise from such an impulse, it is not because it is pointless or a reflexive stream of consciousness, but rather because it is not intended for a reader other than the diarist. And yet the diarist’s reading of the diary is couched in the very process of writing it: the writing is itself a reading of the experience, and the diarist’s pen becomes an organ of insight. Thus Yitzhak Katznelson, for example, can say, “This pen of mine, wherewith I have written most of these notes, has become a living part of me” (187)—byichad im libiy biy, im nishmatiy biy, reads his Hebrew text, “one with my heart, one with my soul” (87): it is an essential part of me. For Katznelson, the pen that produced the diary was his soul’s link to whatever life he could retrieve from the ruins of the day.

Although most diarists do not see the day pass in destruction, they do see the day pass. The diarist’s “impulse” to preserve his experience, then, is an attempt to lay his hands—or his pen—on a moment and a life that may otherwise slip through his fingers. This he does by inscribing a word upon a page, as though the inscription were a net that could snare the experience, or a sieve through which he might filter some significance attached to the experience. Thus the word becomes a repository of time and experience; thus the word takes on meaning, even if the experience is negative, since to deem an experience as negative is to ascribe to it a value and therefore a meaning. As the moment fills the word to overflowing, the word overflows with the gravity of the moment. Hence the soul of the diarist takes on substance in a life that is otherwise emptiness, and his time—that is to say, his life-time—is regained. This is what it means for Katznelson to say that his pen is one with his soul: his soul draws its breath as his pen inscribes the word, even if that breath tastes of ashes. Keeping the diary, the diarist keeps a hold on his sense of being: the daily record is a means of seizing the day. The diary may in some sense arise from a “spontaneous impulse,” but the diarist’s stake in the diary can be very high indeed. The diary becomes a portal through which the diarist inserts himself into a life that is otherwise closed off to him by the horizon of time. It is a means of capturing a trace of presence by seeking a trace of significance in the midst of a time that is draining into the
void. It is a means of returning the sand to the empty hourglass. Or better: it is a means of filling the emptied glass with substance. How? Through the return of meaning to the words consigned to the pages of the diary. For where meaning is torn from words, a void appears, one that swallows up meaning. In order to fetch meaning from the void, the diarist returns meaning to words.

The diary’s attempted recovery of time and meaning is a primary point of interest for Karl J. Weintraub in his study of autobiographical literature. “The diurnal entries of the diarist,” he argues, “are governed by the very fact that a day has its end. Even if in the maturing diarist a sense of selection begins to be guided by the growing awareness of what this person values and does not value, the journal entry is the completed precipitate of each day. It has its very value in being the reflection of but a brief moment; it attributes prime significance to the segments of life” (827). In contrast to other literary genres, the significance of what the diarist records is definitively linked to the time when she records it: the entries in a diary are dated. If the diarist might emerge as a kind of protagonist, the antagonist is time itself; if the diarist does no more than establish a narrative point of view, time itself is narrated. And, whether we speak of protagonist and antagonist or of subject and object, the two confront each other not just in the word but in the written record. In contrast to other literary forms, the diarist does not simply write—she records; novels and poems, on the other hand, are not recorded—they are written. As “the completed precipitate of each day,” the diary is written, in a sense, by the day itself, even as the day derives its significance from the writing of the diary. Unlike the daily recording of, say, the high and low temperatures or levels of rainfall, the diary is an interweaving of the time, word, and meaning that constitute a life. Which is to say: the day takes on meaning because it is the day of a life, a day lived in the commentary upon life, where commentary is to be understood not as explication but as interrogation. And if the diary may be viewed as a commentary on the day, then the day may be viewed as a kind of text. From a Jewish standpoint, the day is a text of the creation that comes from the hand—or the mouth—of God. Unable to bear the silence of the day, the diarist inserts her voice into it so that she may hear it speak. The diary is a responding that is at once a hearing. The diarist does not first
hear and then comment; rather, her hearing transpires in the midst of her commentary.

To the extent that it is lived in commentary, the day assumes significance, not because it has been brought to a halt but because it has been made part of a process of becoming through the process of interrogation. If the “completed precipitate” of this day assumes significance, then it is oriented toward the next day; if the ordeal of the diarist has meaning, then it has direction, which implies a future where the diarist and the diary have yet to arrive. In the words of Adin Steinsaltz, “The never-ending conflict between the existent and not-yet-existent is at the root of man’s whole inner struggle” (Strife 6). As the expression of an inner struggle, the diary is the diarist’s response to the silence that frames the future. Recall once more Kaplan’s question: “What will become of my diary?” Thus the diarist participates in a universal, or at least a communal, questioning; he may write in solitude, but he does not write in isolation. It is through this relation to a community of others that the diary establishes a relation to the future; Kaplan raises the question concerning his diary in the light of a fate that awaits not just himself but his community as well. Time, then, as Levinas has said, “is the very relationship of the subject with the other” (Time 39). Why? Because, he explains, “the other is the future. The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future. It seems to me impossible to speak of time in a subject alone, or to speak of a purely personal duration” (Time 77). Time is contained in the word addressed to the other, inasmuch as the word seeks a hearing that is yet to happen, and the word is part of a public domain that implies the presence of another. Comprised of the word, the diary is an address to another, even if the other is the diarist herself. Hence many diaries are written in the form of letters, as in the case of Anne Frank’s “Dear Kitty” or Éva Heyman’s “Dear Diary.”

If the word, however, implies the presence of another—either actual or potential—to whom it is addressed, in the diary it may also imply an essential division within the diarist, a condition in which the diarist is “other” to himself. In his massive study of the diary, Girard makes this point by saying, “If the individual interrogates himself with such avidity, it is because his situation has been called into question, and he must recover the basis of a new equilibrium” (xi). The
peace that characterizes the soul’s equilibrium arises only where meaning imparts wholeness to life, and that wholeness is the wholeness of presence. And yet the very writing that seeks to recover the basis of a new equilibrium undermines it, so that, contrary to what is possible for other literary genres, the diary has no closure other than death. Though it may escape him, the diarist seeks meaning in the word not just because meaning is absent from life, but also because he is himself absent, living “only in the event’s reverberation,” as Edmond Jabès phrases it (Desert 41). The diarist may cast the net of the diary over the day, but he cannot live in that net, for the words that comprise the net increase what it would capture. And yet he cannot live otherwise.

This tension between the weight of the necessary and the longing for the needful comes out in one of the last entries in Emil Dorian’s diary; it is dated 1 September 1944. There he writes: “I really have no idea why I go on jotting down things as I used to in the days of silent waiting when these trite pages were my consolation. I no longer have time now for personal thoughts, for sitting and contemplating people and events. Carried along on the impetuous wave of changes toward the labor awaiting me, I ought to give up these flimsy notes once and for all. Nevertheless, I was drawn again to the typewriter: a breathing space, a need to look around me” (347). Here we see that the diary is not merely the record of experience but is an encounter between the soul and itself as the one who, in the light of an essential absence of meaning, both experiences and seeks significance in experience—not only in experience as such but in my experience. “Each person has a curriculum vitae that belongs only to himself,” says Girard. “In the same way, any action or work derives its meaning only to the extent that it is not anonymous but is signed” (xiii–xiv). In the diary, the man does not first inscribe his deeds and then sign his name; rather, signing his name, he inscribes the deeds and from that inscription derives his substance. Whereas novels, for instance, are novels by someone, diaries are diaries of someone, where of is followed both by a genetivus objectivus and by a genetivus subjectivus; it is both an object created by a living subject and a window looking into the soul of the subject. If the diary is generally self-centered, moreover, it is because the soul has lost its center. The diary, therefore, becomes a means of regaining a center, and this can often take the diarist outside himself.
In the Holocaust diary it always takes the diarist outside himself. Let us consider, then, those aspects of the Holocaust diary which place it in a category of its own.

THE DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF THE HOLOCAUST DIARY

In citing the Holocaust diaries to make a point about the generic distinctions of the diary, we have already implied that the Holocaust diary has certain things in common with the generically defined diary. And so it does. But, as we shall now demonstrate, the Holocaust diary bears certain characteristics that place it in a category of its own; to be sure, each of the chapters in this book deals with an aspect of the Holocaust diary that is peculiar to it. Still, some general remarks on the distinctive characteristics of the Holocaust diary should be made by way of introduction.

One of these distinctive features is the consciousness of a community of others to whom the diarist not only belongs but is accountable—a point touched upon earlier, in the discussion of the critical contexts for this project. In contrast to the generic aspects of other diaries, the Holocaust diary harbors a consciousness of accountability that is explicit and pronounced, not merely implied, and that situates the diarist before his or her community; this consciousness, indeed, is what imparts to the Holocaust diary a spirit of testimony. The Holocaust diary, then, contains a movement through the word and toward another who is other than oneself; generally speaking, such a movement is not a distinguishing feature of other diaries. Again, this movement toward another is a distinctively Jewish feature of the diary, and the Holocaust diary is above all a Jewish diary: this is the key to the diarist’s accountability to and for a community, past, present, and future. To be sure, the time measured by the Holocaust diary’s daily entry is made of this responsibility. For a Jew who stands alone, cut off from his fathers, neighbors, and children, is not a Jew. “Whoever sees himself as a severed branch becomes other,” writes Elie Wiesel. “Isolate yourself within time, and time itself becomes abstraction, and so do you. Time is a link, your ‘I’ a sum total. Your name has been borne
by others before you. Your fate is not yours alone” (One 217). Your fate is not yours alone because, from a Jewish standpoint, your blood is not yours alone.

Indeed, if the Holocaust diary is a record of the day’s “completed precipitate,” that precipitate consists of Jewish blood; in the Holocaust diary, time is made of blood, and this feature of the diary is also an important part of its Jewish aspect. That is why Avraham Tory, for example, writes on 6 April 1943, “Blood trickles into the huge cup of Jewish suffering” (280), and on 13 January 1943 Yitskhok Rudashevski laments, “The entire White Russian earth is soaked with Jewish blood” (122). Passages like these are reminders of the link between blood and time in the Jewish tradition, one that goes back at least to Abraham ibn Ezra’s twelfth-century commentary on the Book of Isaiah. Writing on the verse that reads, “Their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments” (Isaiah 63:3), he explains, “The blood is called netsach, literally ‘time,’ because through the blood man lives his time” (287). And because man lives his time through the blood, his time is inextricably tied to communal time: Jewish blood is an essential element of Jewish community. The Holocaust diary, then, characteristically includes not only the consciousness of personal experience but the consciousness of communal ordeal. “The people of Israel are compared to a lamb,” we read in the Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael. “What is the nature of the lamb? If it is hurt in one limb, all its limbs feel the pain” (2:205–6). As we shall see in the chapters that follow, the Holocaust diary, as a Jewish diary, is the chronicle both of a soul that has lost its equilibrium and of a community under assault, whether the diarist is Anne Frank or Emmanuel Ringelblum. For the internal condition of the Jewish soul—indeed, of the human soul, according to the testimony of the diaries—is tied to the fate of the other human being. Fathers such as Aryeh Klonicki-Klonymus are obsessed with the fate of their sons; daughters such as Sarra Gleykh are preoccupied with the fate of their parents; and men such as Adam Czerniakow, Chaim Kaplan, and Janusz Korczak dwell on the fate of the children.

If, as Barbara Foley maintains, the Holocaust diary “yields a surprisingly compelling depiction of character in the process of metamorphosis” (342), it is because the communal tradition that imparts life to that character faces an imposed “metamorphosis” that ends in
annihilation. Unlike Young, Foley is aware of this definitive connection between the Jewish diarist and the Jewish community, both of whom struggle to recover a collapsed connection with life. Distinguished from other diaries, “the extremity of experience recorded in the Holocaust diary,” she notes, “entails a profound readjustment of accustomed patterns of literary communication. Ordinarily serving to mediate between two aspects of the self—the one that performs, the other that records the performance in peace at the end of the day—the diary projects a self whose principal performance is the act of testimony and whose sense of identity hinges upon the recoverability of the text” (337). The act of testimony is an act of responsibility that situates the diarist and the diary within a relation to the community and its ebbing way of life—its tradition, its covenant, and its mission. God, for example, invariably finds His way into the Holocaust diary in its concern for prayer, holy days, and the sanctification of life; like the Jew himself, this Jewish diary cannot do without the relation to the God of Abraham, whether it manifests itself in Anne Frank’s observance of the Sabbath or in Moshe Flinker’s vision of a messianic age. What Foley sees as the effort to recover a text, moreover, is an effort to situate the Jewish text of the diary within the contexts that form the foundations of Jewish life. These contexts include a concern not only for the Holy One but for the human image, for the family, and for the tradition that, more than merely an accumulation of customs, is a history of the sacred. “Sacred history,” according to Heschel, “may be described as an attempt to overcome the dividing line of past and present, as an attempt to see the past in the present tense” (God 211–12). Only when the past may be seen in such terms—may be seen as tradition—can we generate any basis for a future.

For the Holocaust diarist, however, both the past as tradition and the future it makes possible are elsewhere. In her study of concentration camp diaries Renata Laqueur Weiss makes a similar observation, which, with an added word of explanation, may apply to Holocaust diaries in general. The diarists of the concentration camp, says this woman who was herself a concentration camp diarist, wanted “to escape the present and hold on to an ideal or a concept in order to survive” (8). Later she explains that these diarists tried not only to bear witness but “to write themselves out of the concentration camp world”
(22); Nathan Cohen, it is worth noting, offers a similar commentary on the diaries of the Sonderkommandos. “All [these] authors,” he says, “resort to writing as one of the means of preserving their sanity” (287). Far from being a flight from the world or from life, however, the “escape” of these diarists is a flight to the world from the antiworld, a flight to life from the kingdom of death. Their clinging to “an ideal or a concept” is not a clinging to some fantasy but to the reality of home and family, for instance, in the face of a radical unreality. This point is illustrated perfectly in Laqueur’s own Bergen-Belsen diary, where she writes: “Father, Mother, I implore you, think of me for a few intense seconds. I shall do the same of you, and our thoughts will meet and merge” (45). And, commenting on two parents in a sealed train, the Sonderkommando diarist Salmen Gradowski writes: “Not so long ago they had given to the world a child and thus have joined the circle of eternity, have become partners in the progress and construction of the world. Just when their first steps had led them on in the world they were told to go away, to leave the place where they had started building their nest. They are not thinking of themselves now. Only one thought predominates—what will happen to their tiny, dear beloved child” (79). While there are obvious and significant differences between the conditions endured in the ghettos and in the camps, this struggle to recover a trace of the sacred in life— as it once was or as it is now threatened— is a distinctive feature of the Holocaust diary.

Thus, while other diaries seek to record and preserve the experience of the world, the Holocaust diaries seeks to recover the world itself. While other diaries offer an account of life in the “completed precipitate of each day,” the Holocaust diary struggles to recover a life despite the day’s destruction. While other diaries are projected toward a future that is yet to be realized, Holocaust diaries are written in the shadow of a doom that is certain to come— indeed, that is already at hand. While other diaries contain the individual’s interrogation of himself in the pursuit of meaning, the Holocaust diary includes an interrogation of God and humanity after the loss of meaning. While other diaries are written for the diarist, the Holocaust diary is written for others, living, dead, and yet to be born. How can the dead be included in an audience? Through the diarist’s conscientious engagement in a testimony for the sake of a future.
Such are the distinctions that go into the why that distinguishes the Holocaust diary. Says Syrkin: “The diaries begin with ‘why’ and end with ‘why’ though the object of the query keeps changing. At the outset the writer tries to find rational explanations for the Nazi program which in the beginning is viewed not as a new mode, *sui generis*, but as an atavistic throwback to the familiar persecutions of the past. An ancient, much-enduring people can find comfort in historic parallels. . . . The first stage in the education of the diarists . . . is the recognition of the existence of motiveless evil. . . . They are reduced to the simplest formulation: he murders because he is a murderer” (234–35). Here too, in the initial search for explanations in precedents, the diarist’s ties to the community are revealed. But the seemingly motiveless evil of the Holocaust could not be accommodated by any established categories: it was, in fact, *sui generis*. And so is the Holocaust diary.

In order to acquire a better sense of these distinguishing features of the Holocaust diary, it may be helpful to consider a diary that is usually regarded as a Holocaust diary but which, in truth, is not. It is *An Interrupted Life* by Etty Hillesum. The point of this brief examination of Hillesum’s diary is not to discredit it or to make light of the author’s genuine suffering; rather, it is to show that not all diaries written by people who suffered during those years can be regarded as Holocaust diaries, as we have described them.

First of all, no why pervades Hillesum’s diary. The undoing of the human image, the eclipse of God, the obliteration of mother and father, of family and home, of children—none of this poses any particular difficulty for her. At times, just when it looks as though there may be a why that would link Hillesum to her community, this vision is immediately undermined. The entry dated 29 June 1942 is a good example: “The English radio has reported that 700,000 Jews perished last year alone, in Germany and the occupied territories. And even if we stay alive we shall carry the wounds with us throughout our lives. And yet I don’t think life is meaningless. And God is not accountable for the senseless harm we cause one another. We are accountable only to Him! I have already died a thousand deaths in a thousand concentration camps. I know about everything and am no longer appalled by the latest reports. In one way or another I know it all. And yet I find
life beautiful” (127). Invoking the “we” who do senseless harm to one another, she seems to include both Germans and Jews in this one category; she does not make the distinction between “we,” the Jews who are murdered, and “they,” the murderers who murder because they are murderers. Although the Holocaust diarists have a sense of an essential bond between themselves and their fellow Jews who have been sent to the camps, none of them presumes to know everything about the camps or the suffering of the Jews in the camps, and all of them are appalled by the reports. Underlying the why in the Holocaust diary, moreover, is a fundamental refusal to accept the unreality of the Nazis’ antiworld as real, that is, as viable or meaningful—a fact of life, yes, but not part of life’s meaning. And certainly none of these diarists can regard as beautiful a life that runs red with so much blood.

Hillesum, by contrast, writes: “They are out to destroy us completely, we must accept that and go on from there. . . . Even if we are consigned to hell, let us go there as gracefully as we can” (130). And three months later, on 10 October 1942, she repeats: “Of course, it is our complete destruction they want! But let us bear it with grace” (190). What can this “with grace” mean? Is she suggesting that the mothers of the Warsaw Ghetto should send their children to the flames of Treblinka with grace? Does she suppose that the women of Auschwitz who bore children only to have them drowned so that they themselves might stay alive for another day could act with grace? And how does the Muselmann—that living image of death created by the Nazis, who proves, in the words of Fackenheim, that “the divine image in man can be destroyed” (Jewish Return 246)—go to the gas chamber with grace? If this is her advice to these victims, it is because Hillesum operates as a severed branch: she does not understand herself to be standing in a relation of responsibility and testimony to a community or a tradition. Like many diarists, but unlike any Holocaust diarist, she is far too focused on herself alone to sense any accountability or care for another. For example, on 25 April 1942 she boasts: “I make my own rules and do as I like. In all this chaos and misery I follow my own rhythm. . . . God save me from one thing: don’t let me be sent to a camp with the people with whom I work every day” (162). And three days later she writes: “Ever-present in me is an almost demonic urge to watch everything that happens. A wish to see and to hear and to be
present, to worm out all of life’s secrets, to observe with *detachment* what people look like in their last convulsions” (166, italics added). While the Holocaust diarist responds to a horror in order to recover some shred of life, Hillesum voyeuristically and vicariously experiences this or that as part of a strictly internal structure of her self. Therefore, as long as she merely looks on from the safe distance of self-centeredness, she has no sense of a life of humanity torn to shreds.

Hence the *other* who is of primary significance for the Holocaust diarist—as parent or child, friend or sibling, God or community—is of very little significance to Hillesum. Although it is written by a Jew, hers is not a Jewish diary, since for the Jew, as Leo Baeck states it, “‘fellow man’ is inseparable from ‘man’” (190). When we find her asserting, “I so love being with people,” we might think that this assessment of Hillesum is too harsh. But look at her next sentence: “It is as if my own intensity draws what is best and deepest right out of them” (191)—as if they owed the emergence of their best and their deepest to *me*. Only a radical blindness to the other and an extreme preoccupation with the self, could lead Hillesum to comment on her work at a community center by saying: “Whenever yet another poor woman broke down at one of our registration tables, or a hungry child started crying, I would go over to them and stand beside them protectively, arms folded across my chest, force a smile for those huddled shattered scraps of humanity and tell myself, ‘Things aren’t all that bad, they really aren’t all that bad’” (192). If she stands there protectively, it is herself that she is protecting: her arms are folded across her own chest, not extended in an embrace of these others. And how bad do things have to become before they are all that bad? After all, “knowing everything,” Hillesum must know that these mothers and children are undergoing registration for one thing: to be murdered. Even her confinement in Westerbork fails to draw Hillesum out of the confines of her self and into some relation of concern for others, for on 2 October 1942 she writes: “I prayed, ‘Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks.’ And that is what I want to be again. The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp. . . . Happen what may, it is bound to be for the good” (191). Such a sentiment is utterly alien to all other Holocaust diarists; indeed, it is not the sentiment of a Holocaust diarist but of a diarist who is so focused on herself as the center of all that she
would make herself into the center of a concentration camp! As for
the statement that whatever happens is for the good, it is precisely be-
cause, in the ghetto and in the camp, nothing happens for the good—
because the good has been annihilated—that the Holocaust diarist
takes up the diary.

If whatever happened was for the best, if things were not all that
bad, and if Jews slated for murder were to go to theirs deaths with
grace, then there is indeed no being appalled at the reports of those
days of destruction. And if we need not be appalled, then Bettelheim’s
complaint about the stage production of Anne Frank’s diary applies
even more so to Hillesum’s diary: we can forget about Auschwitz. It
never happened. We are safe. These diaries can be ignored. But these
are the lies that ooze from Hillesum’s diary, and, in that sense at least,
her diary is inauthentic. Hers, therefore, is not a Holocaust diary. For
Hillesum has no notion of anything that might be called a Holocaust:
things are not all that bad, she says, it is all for the good. The Holocaust
diary, on the other hand, is defined by its pervasive awareness of Holo-
caust—Holocaust of children, mothers, fathers, home, God, commu-
nity, meaning, sanctity, humanity. In the Holocaust diary things are
not that bad—they are infinitely worse. In the Holocaust diary things
are for the good—of the Nazis, at the utter expense of the Jews. The
absolute enigma confronting the Holocaust diarist is how to respond
to this annihilation, how to recover a human life from a realm that ab-
solutely negates humanity. Yet, in a place void of humanity, to para-
phrase Rabbi Hillel’s remark in the Talmud, one must be a human
being (Avot 2:6). But how?

Let us now set out on the long road ahead to explore this how
that issues from the diarists’ why.