



## Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture

by David Roskies

How limited was our understanding about what the Germans were capable of doing! We simply could not imagine that the entire inventory, worth tens, hundreds of millions—that all this would be set on fire on account of us!

This quotation from an unknown author of the Warsaw ghetto expresses the main problem for audiences today in understanding the Holocaust. It is without analogy or precedent, and for audiences outside Europe, the horror is clearly attenuated. But even, perhaps especially, for those who witnessed firsthand the atrocities of the Holocaust, comprehending it is nearly impossible. This is a well argued point in David Roskies' *Against the Apocalypse*. Many of the people that Roskies calls "scribes of the ghetto," such as the writer quoted above, were bewildered when contemplating literary responses. After all, how can literature transcend the destruction of a culture? As Roskies points out, destruction of a culture was clearly what the Nazis attempted. In places such as Vilna, "the Jerusalem of Lithuania," special brigades of scholars were organized to destroy Jewish libraries and archives. The response that Jewish writers and artists settled on, Roskies argues, was a return to, or parody of "literary use of themes and archetypes of destruction."

Though Roskies confines his arguments primarily to modern Eastern European Jewish writing, he starts with a description of the archetypes of destruction used in the Jewish liturgy. The liturgy, he argues, took on two apocalyptic themes starting with the Roman persecutions in Israel. One was the covenantal theme which interprets any communal catastrophe as proof of a breach in the covenant between the Jewish people and God. The catastrophe has been brought on because people have not kept the faith. The Mosaic curses are an example of this theme: "The Lord will make the rain of your land dust and sand shall drop on you from the sky until you are wiped out."

The other theme of destruction Roskies finds in the liturgy is messianic. According to this theme, The suffering of the Jewish people will be vindicated in the future by a warrior messiah or an angry God: "He will execute judgement on the nations and fill the world with corpses; he will shatter the enemy's head all over the wide earth."

Because "one notices and remembers what one is 'coded' to notice and remember" these themes were carried over into Jewish writing in Eastern Europe. Roskies documents responses to several historical threats to Jewish culture and community. Among these were pogroms, both spontaneous and state organized, the forced relocation and slaughter of Jews during World War I and the Ukrainian civil war and the so called "rape of the *shtetl*." There were of course, many responses literary and otherwise, to these catastrophes. Two which Roskies views as altogether modern responses are satires of the two original themes. The first of these is a humorous description of the destruction of pogroms. It could take the form either of prose description or poetry. In one poem by Chaim Bialik for example, the pogrom is described as a wedding dance:

Harp and song sound rhythmically—  
All are dancing, I dance too.  
Ho-lo-lo, ho-li, ho-li—  
They break the door down to the house,  
The window panes they smash to bits,  
Door and glass fly higgledy-piggledy—  
Ho-lo-lo, ho-li.

The other response is prose rendering of the effects of a pogrom in which the death and suffering are seen in dispassionate detail. Both of these are parodies of their scriptural models which no longer expressed the extent of the suffering felt by the modern writers. This is not to say that there is no other modern response. Indeed, both themes are given straight treatment. Some writers called angrily for retribution against the pogromists.

Recognition of the satirical and straight treatment of the themes of destruction forms the basis for Roskies' argument that literary responses to the Holocaust were similar to previous responses to catastrophe. Although the humorous portrayal of death and destruction drops out of the literature almost entirely, these are both flat, dispassionate descriptions of suffering and angry calls for retribution. One of the most confounding of the former is a father's description of the murder of his newborn child:



Yom Kippur—East River, Robert Frank (see article p.4)

They broke open the door and entered the room. When my wife heard that the door had been broken, she immediately ran to see what was happening to the child. She saw one German holding the baby and smearing something under its nose. Afterwards he threw it on the bed and laughed. When my wife picked up the child, there was something black under his nose. When I arrived at the hospital, I saw that my baby was dead. He was still warm.

The lyrical dispassion with which the author treats the subject is is horrifying in its own right but also echoes the treatment given pogroms by previous writers.

The recurrence of his form parallels the recurrence of what Roskies calls the ghetto poems of rage. These, he argues, are part of a "continuum of Jewish response to catastrophe." The "sense of *deja vu*" which came out of ghetto writing during World War II seems to show that the old forms were being used to describe the Holocaust. This argument, that "writers and artists managed to deal with the Holocaust by returning to the old archetypes undermines the claim that the Holocaust is unique." If the Holocaust was unprecedented, why didn't the artists who dealt with it use new forms to express themselves? Because the historical break of the Holocaust "was anticipated by the artistic process, especially during the decade following World War I." A few other answers to this question suggest themselves, particularly that there was at least one new form of expression which came out of the Holocaust, which Roskies even mentions. This was street singing in ghettos. One street singer wrote "there is no alternative but to imitate the troubadours of old. To become the carriers of our own song, the preachers who bring their sermons to the people." This is not a conclusive answer but Roskies does not show that such a form was not a legitimate new response.

In a sense this is just hairsplitting because in addressing the question of whether there was a unique response to the Holocaust, Roskies presents the various responses. This comes as close as possible to answering the question that underlies the work: how can one understand a catastrophe of such magnitude? By surveying the responses Roskies shows that the attempts to understand it took many forms, and lets the witnesses speak for themselves. In part it is his obviously wide-ranging scholarship which allows him to do this. Therefore, even if one is unable to evaluate Roskies' argument in an informed manner, his book is worth reading as a humane approach to the historical problem of the Holocaust.

by Bill Hanrahan