

December 11, 1980

Dear Alvin,

Somehow conferences, even in beautiful Bloomington, militate against closeness. It's all so theatrical: the actors taking their places on stage or in the audience; the papers delivered, the questions asked; the passing of notes and of significant glances. Throughout the proceedings I was waiting for someone to say: Would that we weren't here today! If the hadn't unleashed their murder, we might be at our desks now, playing with our children, dreaming our dreams. But here we are instead, nursing our wounds, talking through the trauma again and yet again. Which leads me to wonder what a "successful" Holocaust conference might be like. An exorcism that worked? A seance that brought back the dead? No, I didn't leave satisfied, nor will I ever be satisfied.

The marriage of Holocaust studies with theology is my immediate cause for concern. I can see the value for ecumenicism and am always impressed by the seriousness of Christian thinkers on the subject. But in a scholars conference on the Holocaust we should have limited ourselves to systematic theology rather than allow theology to spill over into all the other disciplines. Literature is a case in point. There is much to be said on literary studies of the Holocaust and you were the one to say it. Katzenelson cannot say it for you. As for the historians, with notable exceptions they were drawn from left field which again has value if our purpose is ecumenical, rather than soberly analytical. Despite my better instincts, I found myself drawn to the Columbia Contingent, only because they wore their ambivalence openly, even proclaiming (in Stanislawski's case) that they had no intention of ever studying the Holocaust! Perhaps this tension is endemic to the whole endeavor.

Anyway, the study I referred to is by Yechiel Szeintuck, Yiddish and Hebrew Literature Under the Nazi Rule in Eastern Europe, Hebrew Univ. 1978. I'm including it in my review for PROOFTEXTS which will be launched -- next week! You are, of course, going to write for us, if not for the sake of spreading wisdom, then at least to have your name appear in such a handsome Jewish periodical. We may not be the best, but we aim to be the most beautiful. A legacy of the Age of Aquarius...

All the best,