

מיד האט מען אויפגעקאדעקעט אויף יידיש, עלעזיי כ' וואָלט
געבוירן געוואָרן ניט אין מאָנט־רעאַל, נאָר אין ווילנע; ניט נאָכן
חורבן-איראָפּע נאָר במשך דער בלי-תקופֿה פֿון דער יידישער קולטור
צווישן בידע וועלט-מלחמות.

והינכו אותנו ב-4 שפות, והמורים ליהדות, ציונים כולם,

הדגישו את הדולשוניות הפנימית של העם היהודי בגולה, ובקשו מאתנו
לנשום בְּשֵׁתִי הנחירית גם יחד, כדברי ש"י אברמוביץ. ונשמנו.

In short, I grew up in a transplanted immigrant community,
an island of yidishkayt within a marvelous sea of cultural
diversity -- the Quebecois of la Belle Province were also on
the verge of their own national reawakening. But lurking in
the shadows, behind the glitter of new institutions, new
neighborhoods, new vistas, was the Sitra Ahra, the Reshimu,
the monster that had just devoured one third of our people
in Europe. For us, the children of the second generation,
the loss was real, palpable, immediate. We had been robbed
of the homeland we would never know -- except through works
of literature, through songs and scattered memories. It was
that impossible tension -- between a vibrant present and a
severed past; between a vital remnant, a She'erit Hapeleilah
and the overflowing source that had suddenly gone dry; between
the optimism born of prosperity and the terror born of unfathomable evil -- it was that impossible tension that lived
inside me like a dybbuk until I was finally able to exorcise
it through my scholarly research.

So I wrote a book about the Eastern European Jewish community as it regrouped after the Holocaust and imparted its collective wisdom onto the children of the next generation. Growing up in Montreal was a unique experience but one that was also paradigmatic. What I argue in my book is that the strength of my teachers and parents to rebuild after the war derived from their ability to mourn in a collective setting; and that this ability to mourn drew, in turn, from the symbols and structures that had been created in Eastern Europe since the Emancipation; and that this modern secular Jewish culture was itself a radical revision of rabbinic traditions that had been passed on and transformed in medieval Ashkenaz.

This is a book about anger, Jewish anger at the vagaries of history which is anger couched in covenantal terms: Anger at God for having allowed the covenant to be broken while accepting His punishment as just; and anger at the Gentiles for being God's willing emissaries of destruction. It is about the explosive force of this anger once it would no longer be defused by the biblical doctrine of sin-retribution-and-exile. ~~I show how this new~~ ^{Once} liberated, ^{this} anger was expressed through the parody of Scripture, first in the wake of the tsarist pogroms of 1881-82 and then of 1903-6, ~~and how it~~ culminated ⁱⁿ in a full-blown apocalyptic school of response to catastrophe after World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. Most crucially of all, ~~I argue that~~ these radical repudiations of God and covenant, of destiny and duty, of Torah and theodicy, became a source of consolation in the Nazi ghettos when the Jews of Eastern Europe were faced with a destruction far more terrible than anyone had ever imagined.

This is a book about song, from the plaintive sounds of Eicha sung by the waters of Babylon ^{איכה | ישיבה בְּדָר / הַעֵי לַיָּם} to the equally conventional pogrom songs of the 1880s: ^{ה'יג' ב'ט' / ח'א'ג'}

אומגליק, שרעק און מוראוח
מיר ווייסן ניט פֿון וואָנען
אויך היינט און אין אלע דורות
זענען מיר אויסגעשטאָנען.

that finally gave way to a new resounding rhthym and a new demanding rhyme:

עס ברענט, ברידערלעך ס'ברענט!
די הילף איז נאָר אין אַיך אליין געווענדט!
ווען דאָס שטעטלט איז אַיך טייער
נעמט די פֿלים, לעשט דאָס פֿייער
לעשט מיט אַייער אייגן בלוט
באַווייזט אז זייר דאָס קענט!

Written by Mordkhe Gebirtig after the Przytyk pogrom of 1936, this call for self-defense marked the climax of Jewish political action in Eastern Europe during the previous four decades and marked the prelude to the desperate attempts at Jewish self-preservation ⁱⁿ ^{terrible} during the ~~seven years of genocide~~ that followed. ¶ Now it is precisely / the Jews' ability to go on singing Gebirtig's hymn under radically altered circumstances that cuts to the core of my thesis, for there are those who argue that our talent to roll with the punches, to fall back on patterned responses was the very trait that the Nazis exploited so diabolically; that we would have organized more effectively against the Nazi onslaught had we been able to perceive the discontinuities with past forms of persecution. I take the opposite position: that there is a Jewish dialectical response to catastrophe that always recognizes the unprecedented horror as something already experienced, that picks

out the familiar atrocities from the landscape of absolute extremity, and that this pervasive sense of deja-vu is what protects us from going mad and committing collective suicide.

My book is titled Against the Apocalypse because it is about the strategies that Jews have developed to fight apocalyptic despair. And it is so titled because it argues that the Holocaust should not be seen as an apocalyptic event standing outside of history. Jewish armed resistance to the Nazis, to cite the most obvious example, could not have taken place without ^{such} prior models as Gebirtig's hymn, Bialik's rage, the rediscovered legend of Masada, the modern debate about revolution and continuity in the Jewish response to catastrophe.

This is a book about language, or more precisely, about the interplay of Jewish languages in times of crisis. I see the work of Sholem Aleichem as expressing the communicability of human experience under all and any conditions. When one language fails, another enters the breach; Yiddish creates an increasingly ironic commentary on Hebrew; open speech gives way to cryptic codes. The rupture of language occurs only when the last living speaker dies. And even that is not the end, for there are still Jewish demons (á-là I. B. Singer) to continue the speech act, albeit in monologue form. Silence is never a viable choice, at least not among the Jews who are the subject of my book.

Primarily, of course, this is a book about Yiddish and Hebrew literature, my area of specialization. Due to my particular training, I have always viewed the two literatures

as forming a single enterprise, a view confirmed, time and again/ by my research. What I found was two diametrically opposite responses to catastrophe that flourished in both Yiddish and Hebrew letters: a neoclassical approach that S. Y. Abramovitsh inaugurated in response to the tsarist pogroms of the 1880s and an apocalyptic school launched in response to World War I by Moyshe-Leyb Halpern. The test case, once again, is the Jewish response in the Holocaust proper. While visions of apocalypse were born out of individual experience in and especially after the Holocaust, I see the normative response of the Jewish collective as being profoundly neoclassical, as the ~~epic~~^{ghetto} poems of Shayevitsh, Sutzkever and Katzenelson make eminently clear. The ~~case~~^{career} of Uri Zvi Greenberg, with whom I conclude my book, proves most dramatically what happens when an individual presumes to mourn for the collective. What happens is that the leading apocalypticist, the enfant terrible of the 1920s and 30s, becomes the supreme elegist of the Holocaust. As the last of the great bilingual writers, Greenberg also marks the end of the Eastern European era in Jewish literature.

On the most conceptual level, my book is about historical memory, which in the Jewish scheme of things has always been coded into myths, symbols and archetypes. The heroes of my book are the Rabbis, the Tannaim and Amoraim, who perfected the system of breaking history down into its archetypal components: Exile, Kiddush Hashem, Hurban; and the heroes are the writers and artists of the modern period who breathed new

life into the ancient archetypes and who ultimately gave birth to one of their own -- a new archetype of destruction which goes by the name of "Holocaust." My book is a tribute to the continued vigor of group memory in modern times. (Like the Memorial Foundation that provided my earliest source of funding, my ^{It is} book ~~(is)~~ predicated on the paradox of Jewish survival: our ability to build even as we mourn; to reaffirm even as we rage; to sing even as we suffer; to speak even as we face the void; to ^{remember} ~~recall~~ even as our world has already gone up in smoke.

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