

ELIE WIESEL claims that Holocaust literature is a unique genre, one that responds to experiences that are without historical analogy, and therefore defy the normal uses of language. David Roskies rejects this point of view, and presents 100 powerful selections from a 2,000-year-old tradition of Jewish literary responses to recurrent historical catastrophe.

With this anthology, Roskies tries to demonstrate the extent to which Jewish collective memory has remained a vital resource, even in the modern era. To Roskies, it is through a vast literature of destruction that Jews have come to understand the cyclical nature of violence. It is also through such literary works that Jews have succeeded in finding some measure of comfort in the repeatability of the unprecedented.

It is Roskies's hypothesis that throughout the centuries and across numerous dispersions, the Jewish response to catastrophe has been governed by the same four components: The Bible, in which the covenantal scheme was laid out for all time to come; a set of historical archetypes, some biblical, some post-biblical, that could be reapplied to all future events; sanctioned vehicles for expressing one's rage both against God and against the gentiles; and an evolving set of rituals designed to rehearse all future catastrophes and persecutions.

WHILE SUCH a hypothesis may be too all-inclusive, even a cursory overview will demonstrate that the Jewish literature of destruction has

## Three-way dialogue

**THE LITERATURE OF DESTRUCTION: Jewish Response to Catastrophe** edited by David G. Roskies. Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society. 652 pp. No price stated.

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been part of a three-way dialogue that engaged the writer, the people and God. At its base, from the exhortations of Moses and the Prophets to the writings of Primo Levi, is the conventional ideal that, if the Israelites observed the commandments, the land would yield its fruits; if they sinned the land would spew them forth. Exile, however, did not mean abandonment for, if Israel returned to the ways of God, He would return them to their land.

If ever there was a formal anthology of Jewish responses to catastrophe, it was the collection of *kinot* (dirges) for Tisha b'Av, the official date when the First and Second Temples were destroyed. In addition to the full text of Lamentations, these *kinot* included supplementary poems that reflected on later disasters in Jewish history. They ended with a cycle of poems on the Land of Israel, thus looking ahead to the abrogation of history with the coming of the Messiah. Roskies suggests that it is here, in these juxtaposi-

tions of mourning and celebration, of feasting and fasting, that one may find the operative principle of Jewish collective memory.

In support of this hypothesis, this unprecedented anthology chronicles remarkable continuities in the Jewish response to destruction, as rabbis and writers, religious and secular intellectuals have bridged the historical abyss across some 2,500 years.

The book presents biblical lamentations on exile, rabbinic *midrash* on martyrology, and chronicles of the Spanish Inquisition. This wide historical overview encompasses Jewish tragedy from the destruction of the Temple to the advent of the crematorium. Here are excerpts from diaries, short stories, sermons, poems, jokes, messianic omens, and even three novellas, all used to illustrate the extraordinary range of Jewish response, whether to Spanish torture chambers or the Nazi persecution.

Prose selections taken from such well-known modern voices as Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Babel, Ansky, Brenner, Singer and Agnon are here together with haunting verse from such great poets as Bialik, Halpern, Markish, Greenberg, Sutzkever and Alterman. No less stunning are numerous selections from writers previously untranslated into English and unknown to most modern readers.

THE DISTILLATION of experience in this collection is astonishing and often immensely moving. The book achieves many things - too many really to itemize. Here are writings about unimaginable hardships - pain, terror, hunger, weariness and exile. Through all of this, however, one never loses track of a sometimes subdued but nearly always present sense of commitment, hope and longing.

The book and its narrators probe slowly, often painfully, through historical fact and half-accurate memories, contradictory versions and equivocations, trying to establish and understand what happened and why. Never do any of the writers represented here lose sight of the goal of writing about human figures standing out against their tragic background. Whether we are reading about Polish pogroms, or about Auschwitz, we are made painfully aware that we are first and foremost observing a community of men and women, governed by unalterable instincts and formed by long-ingrained habits.

Some of these pieces are merely terse descriptions, almost anecdotal in form; some draw out the smallest details. Others, with sweeping, chaotic brilliance, more often poetry than prose, portray huge stretches of experience.

An anthology of astounding range and depth, based on immensely rich pieces of writing and packed with learned allusion, action and even humour, this book is a *tour de force*. □

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