

THE ETERNAL LIGHT

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"A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID ROSKIES"

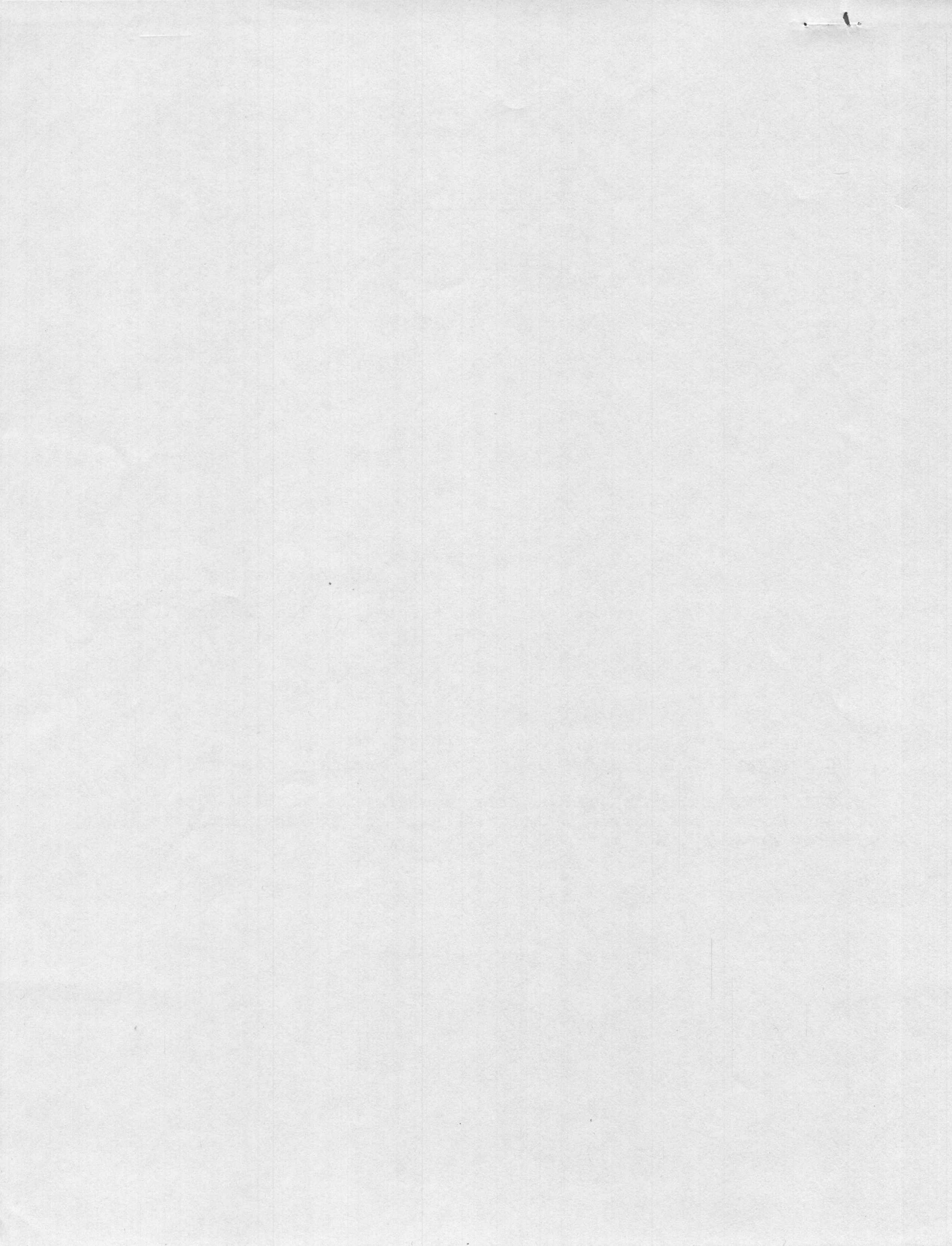
Host: Martin Bookspan

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ANNOUNCER:

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America presents THE ETERNAL LIGHT.

MUSIC.

Today's program is "A Conversation with David Roskies," author of the book Against the Apocalypse, Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture, and Associate Professor of Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Speaking with him will be Martin Bookspan, noted critic and commentator.

Mr. Bookspan.

MR. MARTIN BOOKSPAN:

David Roskies, the subtitle of your book is Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture. And buried in those few words is a whole thesis that in a sense revises one's concept of the response to catastrophe in modern Jewish culture.

How did you first determine that you were going to pursue this area of study and research?

MR. DAVID ROSKIES:

It began with my upbringing in Montreal, in fact. I grew up in a community of survivors of the Holocaust. My parents, who survived the Holocaust, who came out of Europe by a hairsbreadth in 1940 were not themselves survivors, but everyone that I grew up with after the war had gone through the experience.

So, it loomed very large in my own life and early childhood.

I think the most important development in my life, though, was being taken year-in and year-out to commemorative gatherings. Every spring, around April 19, Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day -- but in Montreal it was even more pluralistic than that, because people from various places in Eastern Europe would also commemorate the destruction, the liquidation of their respective ghettos: Bialystok and Vilna. So I could, in an average year, attend two or even three such memorial gatherings. And I think that it was in those early years growing up in a collective environment, a Jewish environment in Montreal, attending these new kinds of rituals, that the idea was born.

I began at the age of sixteen, while still in high school, to create my own liturgy and program, for Yom Hashoah. And every year subsequent to

ROSKIES: (CONT)

my sixteenth birthday in the spring I would organize a Yom Hashoah commemoration. For four years at Brandeis University, and then for a few years in Boston, and then in Jerusalem. And now in New York.

So, it's really a subject that I've lived with all my adult life.

BOOKSPAN:

I'd like to back up just a minute and pursue for a short time your attendance at these memorial gatherings when you were a very young child. Had you any concept of what had happened?

ROSKIES:

I did because I grew up in a Yiddish-speaking home in a transplanted immigrant culture. Our home was a salon for writers, in fact, for Yiddish writers and artists. And I grew up with a sense of the tremendous vitality of this culture. But I also knew that it had been destroyed, that only a few years prior to my being born there was a vibrant culture, a Yiddish-speaking life out there in Eastern Europe. So I had this profound sense of loss, personal loss, that I as a Jew, and as an individual had lost something very precious to me.

And that's really where the idea was born, that it was my personal mandate to remember.

What sharpened that focus for me was leaving Montreal, leaving that womb, that collective environment, and even in a place like Brandeis, which is -- there are a lot of Jews at Brandeis -- I discovered that most people were not concerned. Most people did not share with me that sense of overwhelming loss. They were going on with business as usual. There was a great deal of optimism. It was the 60's, the economy was booming, the Holocaust had not entered into popular consciousness. And I felt totally alone. And, in fact, that enraged me. It gave me a sense not only of purpose, but of anger that I had to prove to the world that something terrible had happened.

So, in fact, my earliest attempts at commemoration had a great deal of anger and protest. I would even say blasphemy. And, in fact, it was that new dimension that I was experiencing on a personal level that became the focal point of my own work on traditions of Jewish responses to catastrophe throughout the ages.

BOOKSPAN:

Before we get to that, I would like to stop and ask you about the blasphemous element of your protest. What form did it take?

ROSKIES:

Well, it eventually took the form of protest against God. And that was something that I only built up to very gradually because I myself grew up in a secular Yiddish environment. We learned about God, but not as someone -- not as a presence that was actually real for us.

And through my own reading, and through some kind of imbuing of cultural norms, I came to the point of adapting classical sources, Midrash, Bible, medieval sources, and searching out those expressions of anger which I then amplified in my own editing. And it was really not so much in my own language, but seeking through classical sources for examples of anger, the challenge towards God, the rejection of the Covenant. And as I began to piece these things together I realized that what I was doing as an individual was nothing new. That was really the shock of recognition, that I was really only recapitulating the steps that my forebears had gone through in the wake of the catastrophes that they had experienced.

BOOKSPAN:

Was the underlying protest, primal scream, how could God have allowed this to happen?

ROSKIES:

Yes, but more often than not, Jews didn't allow themselves to express that directly. And that is a very modern notion: to actually challenge God to his face.

What did happen instead, and this is really what the book is about in large measure, was to take Jewish texts which were sacred, like psalms, and twist them around, turn the words around, do violence to the words, to the sacred text, as a way of getting back at God. So that the classic example of that -- and this is something that I learned in high school -- I remember our teacher teaching it to us -- the famous phrase in the Bible:

Who is like you O Lord among the mighty?

And by a slight twist of a letter or two, the rabbi construed that as

Who is like unto you among the silent, oh, God? For you have seen the suffering

ROSKIES: (CONT)

of your children and have remained silent.

So it's just a word play; it's just switching two letters. In fact it's something that Midrash is full of, these word plays and puns. But there is anger there. There is -- that's as close as the rabbis themselves got to a blasphemous challenge to God. And that is something that appears and gathers momentum through the Middle Ages, especially after the Crusades. And becomes a central form of Jewish protest in the 20th century, in works of modern Yiddish and Hebrew poetry and prose.

BOOKSPAN:

You mentioned high school and then the fact that your teacher played this word game on the quote, from which obviously one has to assume that it was a Hebrew high school.

ROSKIES:

It was a very unique institution, a Yiddish, secular day school. Its ideology was Zionist, once upon a time had been socialist, but by the time I was growing up you never heard the word socialism mentioned. But it was a peculiar kind of Jewish secularism, deeply rooted in a knowledge of classical Jewish sources. And very much at home with Jewish history and the Jewish past. And in many ways a carry-over of Yiddish secularism in Eastern Europe. This phenomenal cultural renaissance that took place in Eastern Europe from the middle of the 19th century until the Holocaust. So, I was the heir of this tradition without even knowing it.

BOOKSPAN:

I'm intrigued by your description of Montreal. It's a city which is not that far from where we're sitting right now. And, yet, it might as well be thousands of miles away, as far as New Yorkers specifically, and the United States citizens generally know what life in Montreal is like.

Obviously a very strong Jewish community is represented in that city.

ROSKIES:

That's very true. And there's also a peculiar history to the community. It came -- the immigration was much later you have to remember. The major influx of immigrants only began around the First World War, which is a good forty years after the mass immigrations of this country began..

BOOKSPAN:

An uncle of mine spent about a year-and-a-half in Montreal before he was able to then enter the

BOOKSPAN: (CONT)

United States.

ROSKIES:

Right. And in addition, the ethnic make-up of the city and the province is very special. It's a Roman Catholic French-speaking province, with an English-Protestant minority. And Jews never found a place in either group. And so what happened -- and this has happened before in Jewish history. The Jews of Prague were another good example. Caught between two unfriendly inhospitable cultures, what Jews often do is to develop their own culture. And I think that explains in large measure why there was such a strong Jewish cultural life.

The third factor is that many of these Jewish immigrants were from Lithuania, were Litvaks, with their own indigenous tradition of education, building yeshivot and schools. A very, very strong consciousness of the importance of education.

So, I think all those three factors together created a very unique community.

BOOKSPAN:

And there's an on-going Jewish Canadian culture these days. I'm thinking of a writer like Mordecai Richler, who is a Montrealite, who in his work expresses the feelings of a particular kind of Jewish existence in Montreal.

ROSKIES:

That's right, and also came back home to live, which is very unusual for an Anglo-Jewish writers these days, to return to their point of origin.

BOOKSPAN:

We have already discovered that this has been a part of you almost from the first breath you drew, this kind of existing in the history of Jewish response to catastrophe. What really got you completely involved in the studies and the research that finally produced this book?

ROSKIES:

What clinched it for me was reading a book about World War I, a very important book called The Great War and Modern Memory by an English professor named Paul Fussill, or Fussell -- I'm not sure how he pronounces his name. And that was a study of British literary responses to the First World War. And I recognized a great deal in that book. A lot of it rang very true to me. And I thought, here's a subject that I would like to pursue from a Jewish angle. Was there

ROSKIES: (CONT)

a Jewish response to the First World War? A question that I had never asked myself, because the Holocaust for obvious reasons has eclipsed in our own minds all previous catastrophes.

So, I began to do research. And I unearthed a vast amount of literature which I had never heard about. Novels..

BOOKSPAN:

Hmm.

ROSKIES:

.. short stories, plays, poems, memoirs. A huge library of work in Yiddish and Hebrew -- these are the two languages that I can read. There are other works in Russian and Polish which I don't have access to.

And I began thinking that I was going to write a book about World War I. And that, in fact, is the genesis of this book, because much of the thesis revolves around World War I as a cultural, historical, political watershed in Jewish consciousness.

BOOKSPAN:

Was there any kind of common thread in the material that you read, the Jewish response to the catastrophe of World War I?

ROSKIES:

Well, what I discovered was that this was really a breaking point. All these themes, for instance, of blasphemy, of outrage, the apocalyptic mode of thinking came to the fore after this vast event, this vast destruction.

You have to remember also that in Jewish experience -- and we're talking here about Eastern European Jews -- World War I lasted a lot longer. There was vast destruction to Jewish life on the Eastern Front, in Galicia and in Poland. And then after the war was the Russian Revolution, and the civil war in the Ukraine. And bloody pogroms in 1918 and 1919.

BOOKSPAN:

You're anticipating what I was going to ask -- but first let me again reintroduce you, David G. Roskies, the author of Against the Apocalypse, Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture.

You said there was destruction of Jewish life in Galicia in World War I. Was that pogrom destruction, or just ordinary war consequence?

ROSKIES:

Well, that's precisely the point: That Jews experienced the First World War in a unique way. For them the destruction was timely, because it wasn't a matter simply of armies crossing over where they lived, but of pogroms on the part of the Russian Army, the Czarist Army, and in particular the Russians. And unlike the Western Front which remained frozen for four years, there were vast breakthroughs on the Eastern Front. Armies crossing and recrossing the same territory. Every time that happened, the Jewish population fell victim to terrible pogroms.

In fact, one of the classic works of that period which I refer to constantly in my book is a five-volume memoir by An-Ski. S. An-Ski, the one who wrote the famous play "The Dybbuk", and it's called Khurbm Galitsye. Khurbm is the Yiddish word for holocaust or destruction, the destruction of Galicia. And, so, for people who saw what had happened, it was a khurbm, a destruction of national significance.

And that was only intensified after the war in the Ukraine by the pogroms perpetrated, particularly by the Ukrainian nationalists, by Petlura's armies.

So it was as if nothing had changed. It was the same Cossacks, the same Russians, and Ukrainian peasants killing Jews. And it brought back memories of the 17th century of the Khmelnitsky massacres of 1648 and 1949. It awakened this sense of *deja vu*, that we've been here before. And that is what I discovered: I call it the Jewish dialectical response to catastrophe. That the greater the catastrophe, the more Jews recast the events in the light of earlier catastrophe. And that's very unusual and very special, because one would have expected the opposite. One would expect people living through something unprecedented to say: "My God, this is the end! History has ended, there will be no future." And, instead, over and over again, Jews say: "This event is so terrible. Nothing like it has happened since...." And they go back to the one before.

And I've been able to trace that, in fact, right back to the earliest khurbm, the destruction of the First Temple, Solomon's Temple in 587 BCE, where the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is invoked, as a recollection of an earlier catas-

ROSKIES: (CONT)

trophe.

BOOKSPAN:

Where will this chain end?

ROSKIES:

Well, let us hope that the chain of catastrophes has ended once and for all, but we also know in our own very recent memory that the enemy can still choose the holiest day of the Jewish calendar to launch his attacks. And, so, history has a way of repeating itself.

The real question, it seems to me, is: How are we going to respond? Are we going to lose sight of that historical chain? Will we allow ourselves to succumb to apocalyptic despair? And that's really why I wrote this book: To challenge what I think is an apocalyptic obsession with the Holocaust as the end all and be all of history. As if there were no history before it, as if the calendar has begun again, as if after Auschwitz there can be no faith and no communal solidarity.

This is a book that argues exactly the opposite. And in the last chapters of the book, I show how the survivors of the Holocaust themselves, people who went through the ghettos and the camps, were able to recast these events and create a new kind of archetype, giving it a new name, shoah, holocaust in English -- it's not a Jewish word -- but in viewing it with archetypal significance and treating it as they would any earlier cataclysmic event. And I show how this continuity works on many levels, in poetry, in song. And the last chapter, in particular, is about artistic responses, which is very important, particularly in a time when people have lost access to the written Jewish word, in Yiddish and in Hebrew. So art is very, very important in carrying on this phenomenon of collective memory.

That to me is the crucial question, whether we can retain and sustain that sense of group memory no matter what happens in the future.

BOOKSPAN:

But you don't intend in any way to downgrade the -- what -- the impact and that's such a tame word -- the impact that the Holocaust has had on Jewish existence?

ROSKIES:

No, not at all. That's why about a third of the book is devoted to this phenomenal incomprehensible event. What is different in my

ROSKIES: (CONT)

focus, in my emphasis, is that I tried to show how Jews living through the Holocaust tried to come to terms with it in terms of earlier models. And I traced a progression from the beginning, the beginning of the Nazi onslaught, where there was, once again, this profound sense of *deja vu*, we've been here before. We've seen these ghettos and these Yellow Stars and the Judenrat. We've been thrown back into the Middle Ages.

How that gave way to parody, to blasphemy, to anger, directed once again against the sources of greatest holiness, and against God. And only after that second stage had been passed through did the awareness grow that what we were living through was something new. Something unprecedented.

And, so, a new archetype was born. That doesn't happen very often. So, what I tried to argue is that the magnitude of the Holocaust gave birth to an archetype of tremendous power and scope. But it is an archetype and has to be understood as we would early archetypes like the exodus from Egypt, like the akedah the sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah.

It, too, must take its place on the chain of Jewish memory.

BOOKSPAN:

Aside from the literary responses to catastrophe in Jewish history, tell us about some of the responses in the other arts.

ROSKIES:

Well, in the graphic arts, what we see is something very parallel to the literature. Once again, I have to insist that what I'm talking about is Eastern European Jewish modes of response, because that is quite distinct.

So, what we have is from 1903 onward -- and 1903 is the year of the Kishinev pogrom, the attempt to enlist icons, symbols, archetypes, like the sacrifice of Isaac. And most surprisingly of all, the crucifixion of Jesus as ways of coping with historical disaster. And that new dimension of trying to appropriate non-Jewish symbols is particularly important. Because it's as if to say, our own symbols are insufficient. And I think that has a lot to do with the taboo against graven images.

ROSKIES: (CONT)

So, in the 20th century, in the period of modern art, Jewish artists have to seek elsewhere, often, for inspiration.

The best example of that, of course, is Chagall's Crucifixion series, which he began in 1938, even before -- around -- before Kristalnacht, in fact, he began to compose that. And all the way through the Holocaust you can see him return over and over again and personalizing the Crucifixion as his own Jewish way of dealing with the loss of Eastern European Jewish culture.

BOOKSPAN:

Has it also found a response in arts other than those that are immediately suggested? Literature, painting. What about music? Has there been a musical response to the kind of catastrophe that has been part of Jewish history?

ROSKIES:

There is -- unfortunately, I am not qualified to really speak on that subject. Music is an area that I love but can profess to no great expertise.

Film, I guess, would probably be the best example, and also the most difficult. And I decided in the end not to talk about responses in film because it's such a public medium. There's so little artistic control that a director has in the end on what gets shown. And, in a sense, trying to cater to a universal audience. And film is that medium which universalizes the Jewish experience, departicularizes it, I would even say deracinates it. And I have great difficulty with that. And so I decided not to get into that area at all.

BOOKSPAN:

I can in a sense give a partial answer to my own question: Yes, of course, there have been musical responses and there is in the planning stage right now an opera which will deal with the Dreyfus situation, which will be performed in Brooklyn, I think it is, next season.

And there have been many, many other musical responses over the period of history.

David Roskies, tell us, if you would, about your Brandeis years. Because I find that in coming from the cocoon of the Montreal environment and then being thrust into the Brandeis situation, which of course had some Jewish involvement, must have been like having cold water thrown in your

BOOKSPAN: (CONT)

face.

ROSKIES:

Yes and no. I mean, it certainly was a new environment, but that was precisely the challenge. To make this experience which I felt communicable to another group of people who did not necessarily share that commitment. And on the other hand, there was no limit to what I could do artistically. There was a lot of money and opportunity to experiment. And, so, I was able for four years consecutively to get a budget for some very elaborate kinds of commemoration.

By my senior year, we did a three-part commemoration. It lasted for three days, and included film and slides and a cabaret kind of theater and dramatic readings. It went on for three days. It was really quite an extraordinary feat, which I can't take sole responsibility for. There were many people involved in it. The turning point came, though, two years later. I was a member of a group called Havurat Shalom, kind of a religious community in Somerville. And it was there that I evolved a new kind of model which was liturgical. I felt that theater wasn't going to work. It was just too complicated, too cumbersome, too technical; what we needed was a mode that was more participatory.

And I wrote a liturgy called "Night Words, a Midrash on the Holocaust" which was published in 1971. And that was written for my community in Havurat Shalom, for people to sit around once a year and read from the text, and enact certain rituals which I invented as a way of trying to remember what happened.

BOOKSPAN:

What were some of those rituals?

ROSKIES:

Well, two in particular. One, at one point -- there's a ritual of reading numbers. And at a certain point, 36 people who are the readers in this dramatic event have numbers written on their arms...

BOOKSPAN:

I guess I'm going to have to warn you that we have something less than a minute left in the program..

ROSKIES:

Okay. So that is one idea that we came up with. And the second is that when everyone comes in, they have to take their shoes off, as a ritual of mourning, a standard custom.

ROSKIES: (CONT)

At the end, the ushers throw all these shoes in a huge heap in the middle of the room, and you're left facing that anonymous symbol.

BOOKSPAN:

Yes.

David G. Roskies, it's been a pleasure speaking with you today. Your book Against the Apocalypse has as its subtitle Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture.

Thank you so much.

ANNOUNCER:

You've been listening to "A Conversation with David Roskies," author of the book Against the Apocalypse, Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture.

Speaking with him was Martin Bookspan.

If you would like a transcript of the program, please send your name and address with one dollar to cover the cost of postage and handling, to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 3080 Broadway, New York, New York 10027.

We invite you to join us next week when THE ETERNAL LIGHT presents "A Conversation with Mark Talisman," the Director of the exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York City entitled "The Precious Legacy, Judaic Treasures from the Czechoslovak State Collection."

This is Don Pardo.

THE ETERNAL LIGHT is directed for NBC by Cassandra Pitter, with Michael Lawrence as engineer. For the Seminary Milton E. Krents Executive Producer, and Laura Pollack Program Coordinator.

NBC provides time and assistance to major faith groups to present religious views. Today's program was produced for the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

MUSIC

(END TRANSCRIPT)

Against the Apocalypse, Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture by David G. Roskies, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984