

David - I thought you'd be  
 EXPONENT EXTRA

## BOOKS

### ABRAHAM RZEPKOWICZ

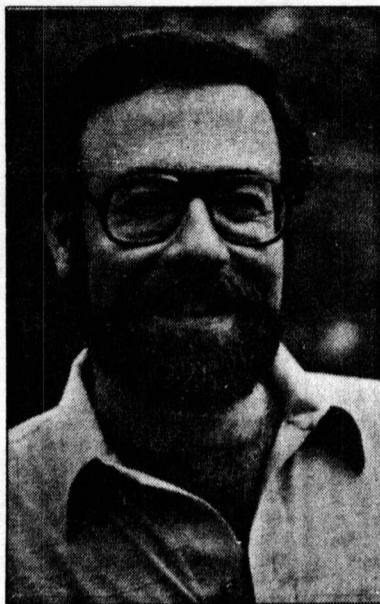
**THE LITERATURE OF DESTRUCTION: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe** edited by David G. Roskies. The Jewish Publication Society, 652 pages, \$34.95.

In the ancient world, a nation's success on the battlefield reflected the victory of one of its many gods over his or her adversary in the heavens. Homer's *Iliad* offers several examples of this belief, and the mythologies of other ancient peoples tell many tales of the wars of man and god. However, only the victor recounts his accomplishments; the defeated are ever silent.

The defeated have usually disappeared along with their gods — e.g., Carthage, Troy, Moab, Edom. National identity in the ancient world could not recognize or tolerate defeat, either on a human or a supernatural level.

Of the many contributions that Judaism has made to mankind, the primary one is the concept of one God, the sole creator of the universe, who can be seen to operate through human history. His rule of the world of nature is on a par with His direction of human affairs. If God is eternal, then His people are eternal.

The question must then arise regarding the mechanics of defeat and catastrophe in the history of the Jewish people. David G. Roskies has compiled sources from the Hebrew and the Yiddish spanning 3,500 years that address this problem, and he demonstrates how the answers have evolved in the course of the millennia.



DAVID G. ROSKIES

The primary source of the Jewish concept of calamity is the Bible. As Roskies points out, the primordial framework for conceptualizing the phenomenon is that of the "Rebuke," a list of curses that tell of the misfortunes which will befall the Israelites if they don't keep the covenant.

The "Rebuke" (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28) forms part of the eternal covenant between God and His people and sets up the cycle of sin, retribution and restoration. Through this perspective, all catastrophe is consequential to the pre-existing failure of the people to fulfill the covenant and its commandments. However, in light of the eternal covenant of the eternal God, the hope is eternal for forgiveness and restoration, once the proper repentance has taken place.

The cultural expression of the emotion engendered by such events have become embodied in archetype and ritual. Whether it is the destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temples in Lamentations and rabbinic homilies or the martyrdom of Isaac, the collective memory of the Jewish people expresses the immediacy of the catastrophe and keeps its memory alive. The people, thereby, reinterpret and reinforce the unbreakable covenantal relationship with God.

In the course of the past two centuries, the traditional formula was severely altered. Roskies points out that rage and complaints were no longer addressed inwardly alone. Restoration was sought from external sources, most recently by a figure like Elie Wiesel, rather than from the Almighty.

But though the perspective became more historical and sociological, the archetypes have persisted. Indeed, literary expression has expanded into other genres, including short stories, novels and epic poems. With these additional means, depiction of the breakdown of the Eastern European shtetl was presented.

With the apocalypse of World War II, Jewish expression was faced with a growing realization of a catastrophe of immense proportions. Through the legacy of writers, poets, memoirists and preachers, Roskies details an entirely new archetype embodying the Holocaust experience, with such accoutrements as cattle cars, death camps and gas chambers. Expressions of anguish were required that encompassed both tradition and humanism, extending along an entire gamut from prayer to art. Upon examination, this body of literature serves to dignify the community that was its wellspring, serving as a memorial for all the lives that were lost.

After the incredible destruction of the Holocaust, the surviving community has once again turned to expressions of consolation. The destruction, the martyrdom, the rage of suffering has turned to the archetypal restoration. Works in Israel and abroad addressed to the Almighty in liturgical forms seek a rapprochement.

Professor Stephen J. Whitfield comments in *American Space, Jewish Time* that each generation of Jews fears it may be the last. Each generation struggles to avert such a possibility. This collection of sensitive translations, aptly assembled and annotated, demonstrates the cultural results of such efforts for survival. For with the strength to memorialize catastrophe, there comes the strength to hope for survival and reassert the belief in the promised restoration. ■

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