



AND THE BUSH וְהַסֵּבֶה
WAS NOT אֵינֶנּוּ
CONSUMED אָכַל

January 18, 2000

THE JEWISH
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY

Ms. Donna Rosenthal
CLAL

Dear Donna:

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Thank you for forwarding the letter from Prof. Bolkosky. Since his harsh criticisms are shared by other social scientists (I am thinking of Peter Novick, in particular), he and they deserve our careful consideration.

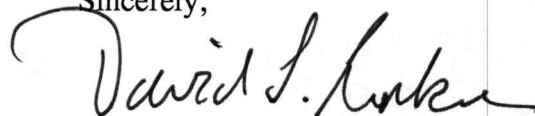
Prof. Bolkosky presents three possible responses to the Holocaust: (1) that of the traumatized survivor, who keeps his suitcase packed at all times; (2) that of the perpetrators, whose heirs are all the world's "bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, technicians, railroad employees, architects, plumbers," etc., etc. For these universal categories of humankind, the destruction of European Jewry can teach only the most attenuated possible lesson, such as to flee from evil, whenever, wherever. Finally, there is "mysterious emotion and bathos," the response he attributes to Elie Wiesel and Emil Fackenheim.

None of this, of course, has anything to do with Nightwords, a liturgical response to the Holocaust designed for communal recitation by Jews and members of other faith groups. The lone survivor with his suitcase packed will not find any solace here. The armies of bureaucrats and members of teachers' and plumbers' unions will not be gathering any day soon to pray or commemorate. And those looking for mystery and bathos will likewise find little of interest in a liturgy that brings together ancient, medieval, and modern accounts of individual and collective suffering in an attempt to wrestle with the single greatest historical catastrophe of our times.

Does Prof. Bolkosky believe that all attempts at commemoration are acts of bad faith? He readily accepts the need to study the Holocaust "intensely and deeply," yet denies the right of Jews to congregate once a year to mourn their losses, to protest against God's absence, to create a meaningful ritual. I would have thought that even social scientists look up from their data and statistics on occasion.

Nightwords does not purport to be the end-all and be-all of Holocaust commemoration. But it stands as a moral and creative bulwark against Prof. Bolkosky's dismal human landscape. *Nightwords*, in fact, is imperfection itself. As imperfect as the corner of the ceiling that Jews through centuries past left unpainted in their homes as a *zeykher lekhurban*, a memento to the Destruction of the Temple. We need, we desperately need such mementos, because we are barraged with banalities, are embarrassed to show grief, are confused about God, and because intellectuals like Prof. Bolkosky would cow us into silence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David G. Roskies". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "D" that loops back under the first name.

David G. Roskies
Professor of Jewish Literature
Jewish Theological Seminary