

THE JEWISH WAY



Living the Holidays

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Summit Books

NEW YORK LONDON SYDNEY TORONTO TOKYO

1988

EVENING SERVICE: TOWARD A MEGILLAH FOR THE SHOAH

Beyond the candle lighting, the model of the evening commemoration has not yet been set. There have been two published attempts to create a major text that could serve as a Megillah, a scroll to retell the story, paralleling the Lamentations scroll that is read on Tisha B'Av. The first was created in 1971 by David Roskies (at the age of twenty-three!). It is called *Night Words* and was presented as "a midrash on the Holocaust" rather than as a scroll.* It might better be described as an order of service for the evening of Yom Hashoah. However, the material is drawn with such scope, integrity, and power that it can serve as a Megillah. *Night Words* requires a quorum of thirty-six men and women as readers. Of the thirty-six, three roles are extensive enough to require preparation. As participants enter, they line up in a row and relinquish their shoes to the ushers. Participants sit on the floor, and roles are distributed at random by the ushers. Then a stunning palimpsest is unfolded: excerpts from the Bible, modern Hebrew and Yiddish poetry, material culled from sources that include Kafka, Kazantzakis, and Kierkegaard, as well as a central, striking selection of Holocaust accounts.

The entire service is marked by extraordinary moments. Examples are the Ritual of the Number, in which one person inscribes numbers from A81173 to A81209 on the left arms of the participants—these are taken from the first thirty-six numbered prisoners sent to their deaths on March 19, 1945, in Auschwitz; the Reading of the Scroll, in which an account adapted from the chronicle of the Chemielnitsky massacres of the seventeenth century is almost seamlessly intertwined with accounts of Einsatzgruppen activity, underscoring the continuity of Jewish tragedy; the Ritual of Tearing, in which the *hazan* (cantor) rips an article of clothing, as is customary when mourning the dead; an "Amidah" prayer in which eighteen counter-blessings illuminate the shattering effect of the Holocaust on traditional affirmations; and the Halitsah, the Ritual of the Shoes, in which ancient sacred acts and rituals race after Holocaust events in a phantasmagoric parade of scenes that include the shoes of the victims by the thousands.

The effects of *Night Words* are frequently achieved by juxtaposition of a classical source and a Holocaust testimony that reverses—or deepens—the traditional model. Thus, the Akedah, Binding of Isaac, as hauntingly retold by Kierkegaard, is recited contrapuntally with the testimony of a nurse who survived the Einsatzgruppen shootings outside of Vilna, until the Akedah is finally overwhelmed by the account of the massacre at Ponar. In a section called "Mattan Torah: Revelation," the incomprehensibility and the cruelty of evil are revealed as the selection platform in Auschwitz is built (in words of testimony) to oppose the construction of the Tabernacle/Holy Temple. *Night Words* ends with a roll call of labor and death camps and ghettos in counterpoint to classical praises of God and, significantly, a final Kaddish.

*David Roskies, *Night Words: A Midrash on the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.; B'nai Brith Hillel Foundations, 1971).

NAMES AND LIVES

One of the most powerful rituals of Yom Hashoah commemoration was developed by the late Shragai Arian, a Jewish educator. Students collected thousands of names of Holocaust victims. Then, for an entire twenty-four hours, they read the names in relays. As Roskies writes in *Night Words* (page 48): "Count by ones to six million, a number each second. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7... You will be here [for four months]... 8, 9, 10, 11, 12... Not even naming names, each person a number... 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22..." The litany of names, all so evanescent, doing so little justice to the total life behind those brief words, is a stunning reminder of the dimensions of the Holocaust. A variation on this memorial ritual has been collecting the names of all the relatives lost in that community or known to the group. The names are printed and circulated to the congregation or posted on the walls, even as the names of countless Czech Jews sent to their deaths are permanently posted on the walls of the synagogue in Prague.

Similarly, there are traditions of special dress for various holy days. Roskies' ritual evokes the memory of the huge mounds of shoes in the Auschwitz storerooms, mute reminders of the millions who were stripped of everything before being killed. But it also reminds one of another halachic practice involving shoes: On Tisha B'Av, traditional Jews do not wear leather shoes, either as a form of deprivation (leather being luxurious) or, secondarily, as obedience to a commandment not to kill animals for their leather—a sanctification of life as a response to the many deaths in the destruction. Both motives would be appropriate for Yom Hashoah.