

SEP 24 1987

# Was the Holocaust Unique in Jewish History?

By RABBI BERNARD RASKAS

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Was the Holocaust a unique event in Jewish history? It is now more than half a century since the Nazis began their war against the Jews. Jews have gone through stages of denial and repression, anger and rage, guilt and anguish

and, finally, remembrance and widespread monument-building. The time has come to study the event in a scholarly manner, but passionately and with commitment, against the backdrop of Jewish history.

This David Roskies has accomplished in *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Harvard University Press, 374 pp., \$9.95). It is a thorough, well-researched study that takes us through liturgy, stories, poetry, songs and the graphic arts.

Yet, this is not just another book about the Holocaust; rather it combines a wide range of knowledge of European Jewish and general culture with a deep personal concern. And it is written in a lively and creative manner. Its eloquent and moving words guarantee it a wide general audience beyond the academic and scholarly community.

The subliminal issue of the book can be found in the following questions: Was the Holocaust an event or the Event? Was it another catastrophe in Jewish history or was it an apocalypse almost signaling the end of history, but acted out on

Jews? Does it submit to analogy or was it an indescribable manifestation of history?

Let's consider the answers. One can be found in the story of Gershon Levin, a medic serving in the Czarist army in 1916. He came upon the ruins of the Jewish shtetl of Husiatyn, which straddled the border between Galicia and Poland. The Russians had destroyed it, house by house. Levin writes: "Only then did I grasp the Destruction of Jerusalem, for whenever I had read the Book of Lamentations in *cheder*, or heard *kinot* recited on the ninth of Av, the description seemed grossly exaggerated. But on seeing what the Russians did to Husiatyn in the twentieth century, I could easily imagine what the Romans might have done to Jerusalem some two thousand years ago."

Here we see an analogy that triggers a leap across history to the oldest record of Jewish disaster. In fact, the analogy could go further back to the destruction of the first Temple in 587 B.C.E., known as the *hurban* (devastation). Subsequent responses follow this same pattern; there is always the theme of the reporter, a witness, using the coded words *ani hagever*, (I am the survivor) (Lam. 3:1-2).



There are several points to be made here. The first is that the *urban* serves as the archetype for later catastrophes. The second is that a vision of restoration is found in Isaiah and Ezekiel, for if the Jews could transcend the destruction of a Temple, a culture and a land, they could survive anything. Finally, the rabbis through liturgy, the calendar, ritual and the creation of new institutions insured group memory of these events. Memory is an aggressive act.

It was the same way that the *harugei malhut* (10 martyrs) of the Hadrianic persecutions were remembered in the liturgy on Yom Kippur. The victims of the Crusades were enshrined in the *Av Harahamim* prayer to be said weekly in addition to reading their names in the services on certain set occasions. The Khelnitsky massacres were designated as *Tah ve Tat*

(1648-49) in the Jewish calendar. The Czarist pogroms of 1881-82 were recorded by the poet laureate of modern Hebrew, Bialik, in his "In the City of Slaughter". The Holocaust has yet to make a definitive, universally accepted statement whether in ritual or rhyme.

Each Jewish catastrophe seems to say, in the words of Rabbi Eliezer bar Nathan, the chronicler of the mass martyrdom of Jewish Mainz during the Crusades: "Ask now and see, was there ever such a Holocaust as this since the days of Adam? When were there ever a thousand sacrifices in one day?" The chroniclers of each catastrophe thought it was unique. Was it?

The Holocaust was different. The sheer weight of the numbers killed, the fiendish pseudoscientific experimentation, the length of time, the depth and the sadistic torture, the cruelty, the gleeful degradation, the use of science and technology in the killing, the bureaucracy of destruction, the complicity or at least silence of an entire continent, if not the whole world, pushed the survivors to the edge of madness and in some cases beyond. This enormity poses the question: Was this an apocalypse? Or, at minimum, the Holocaust challenges us to render its meaning in a manner that will be understandable and, therefore, memorable.

The Nazis sent Dr. Johannes Pohl to oversee the destruction of

Jewish culture in Vilna, after he trained for the task by studying three years at the Hebrew University, mastering classical Hebrew sources. By his order, the 40,000 volumes of the Strashum Library and all the sacred books in Vilna's 300 houses of prayer, some 100,000 in all, were located. Twenty thousand were dispatched to the Frankfurt Museum for the study of Oriental Peoples, and the remainder were consigned to pulp. Pohl's

successor, a former leather merchant, had 500 Torah scrolls made into boot linings.

In reaction to all of this, Strashum, the grandson of the founder of the library, hung himself with his phylacteries. This was a powerful accusation flung at the silent heavens. It recalls the classic Hebrew verse of lamentations, *r'ch mah hayah lanu*, (See what has become of us). On the other hand, the Radziner Rabbi called for armed resist-

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ance in Warsaw as early as 1940. Once the ghetto was established, he tried to organize partisan units to fight in the forests. When the Gestapo finally caught him, he spit in their faces—with Akiva-like resistance and defiance.

Emanuel Ringelbaum, the famous historian, was determined to chronicle the events. He hand-picked the men and women to staff an underground ghetto archive. The name for this project was, interestingly enough, *Oneg Shabbat* (the pleasure of the Sabbath). The intellectual Zelig Kalmenovitsh began to keep a journal and became an observant Jew. These men subscribed to the principle *vos vet zayn mit klal yisrael vet zayn mit reb yisrael* (Whatever happens to the people of Israel will happen to the person Israel). Here we have group identity and shared destiny.

The literary and other artistic expressions during and after the Holocaust took the usual forms of irony, satire, history, short story, novel, poetry and graphic arts ranging from the neoclassic to the surrealistic styles. For the theologians it was the challenge of God's pathos in a world gone mad. To some it was *Kiddush Hashem* (holy martyrdom) and to others it was total absurdity. To yet others, the treatment of the Jews by the gentiles defied all comparisons and so Jacob Glat-



A 5 mark note printed in the Litzmannstadt ghetto.



stein wrote in Yiddish, "Good night, wide world/Big stinking world!"

This gave rise to a new literary phenomenon of identifying the Holocaust with the cross. The Holocaust was simply nailing Jesus to the cross again, and the survivors emerged as Christ-like figures. The Jesus-taboo was broken when Chagall painted Jesus on the cross draped in a prayer shawl, with Hebrew writing above his head, set against the background of a burning shtetl.

Uri Zvi Greenberg, the poet and master of the apocalyptic vision, wrote: "Each morning I'm nailed anew on a burning red crucifix." The original printed layout of his work in Yiddish is actually in the form of a Russian cross.

Like so many other weighty words in the English language, "Holocaust" had its roots in Greek (burnt offering). Its use was resurrected at the end of the Second World War by the French, and it became a significant term for radical evil in the modern world. In Hebrew *shoah* is a biblical word that means ruin, calamity, desolation; and in modern Israel it has come to signify a unique transformational event that establishes a new relationship between God and history. In Yiddish the atrocity is simply known as *der dritter khurban* (the third destruction), thus placing it in the mainstream of Jewish history and tradition.

There is a direct connection between the Holocaust and Israel that has yet to be fully explored. Israel is a legitimate heir to the tradition of the Jews of Europe. The touchstone of reality is not merely the consideration of some disembodied Event, but the People—the Jews of flesh and blood who had perished and other Jews whose fate it was to live. A line links the medieval ghetto to the shtetl and to the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in Palestine-Israel). Each phase is expression of collective survival and each is built upon the other.

The meaning of the Holocaust still remains unresolved. The views range from those of Elie Wiesel and Isaac Bashevis Singer to Abraham Sutzkever and Greenberg. The former edited out the shared expressions of faith in order to highlight the terrifying isolation of the post-war individual. The latter downplayed anger in order to project a collective image of holiness and mainstream Jewishness. Perhaps for the time being, the judgment on the Holocaust might be the words of Mendele the Bookpeddler—"one great contradiction".

Enter Roskies, whose book goes a long way in placing the Holocaust within bounds of understanding and is itself an act of memory. It deserves wide and thoughtful reading.

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3080 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027  
February 8, 1988

Dr. Raymond Scheindlin  
Office of the Provost

Dear Ray,

The purpose of this letter is to put my name up for promotion to Full Professor. Here is why I believe that promotion is warranted at this time. Thanks to Against the Apocalypse, I have established an international reputation. Not only was the book awarded the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize from Phi Beta Kappa, but I was nominated for and then received a Guggenheim Fellowship on the strength of it. I have enclosed a complete set of reviews, some of them rather extensive, that the book has received over the years. The book is being translated into Russian by the Aliya Library in Israel and a Hebrew edition by Hakibbutz Hameuchad is apparently in the offing. Most recently, I was invited by the Alliance Israélite to a conference in Paris on "Facing Auschwitz" and was appointed to the Education Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council.

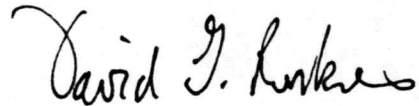
Since then, I have produced the following: (1) A 500-page companion volume titled The Literature of Destruction, to be published in December by JPS. The anthology, that took me two-and-a-half years to complete, brings together for the first time the full scope of Jewish literary responses to catastrophe from the Mosaic Curses until the War of Independence. All the translations were scrupulously edited and annotated with introductions written for each of the twenty chapters. It defines a completely new canon from the standard post-Holocaust anthologies published thus far. (2) I have published several preliminary chapters of my forthcoming book on Sholem Aleichem to be published by the NYU Press in their Modern Jewish Masters Series. This monograph-length book will present Sholem Aleichem's oeuvre as a Comedy of Dissolution, from the communal, to the familial to the individual realms of Jewish life, and will draw on the entire corpus of his writing in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. (3) I have laid the theoretical groundwork for my next major project on the "art of creative betrayal." Here I will argue that the school of stylized folk writers in Yiddish and in Hebrew that began with Peretz and Berdichewsky and peaked with Agnon and I. B. Singer exemplifies a major movement in Jewish cultural history that animated all the other Jewish arts as well. The crux of my thesis is that in every individual case and in each historical phase, the impetus to reclaim the Jewish past came from contact with European cultural trends; hence the "betrayal" of the sources. I will distinguish between two sub-schools, one radical and subversive, the other conservative and more "normative."

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Finally, (4) I am about to turn forty. You may laugh at this, but it was always my view that whatever one's achievements, one should wait until then to reap the full academic benefits.

I understand that you will be looking outside the institution for letters of endorsement. I would recommend that you write to Dan Miron, B2 Shlomo Hamelekh, Tel Aviv, and/or to Gershon Shaked, both of whom are fairly up to date on my work. I would be happy to provide copies of my work for their convenience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David G. Roskies".

David G. Roskies  
Associate Professor  
Dept. of Jewish  
Literature

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