



# Jewish Books in Review

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the JWB Jewish Book Council  
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## Literary Responses to Catastrophe

Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture.  
By David G. Roskies. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 374 pages.  
\$20.00.

Hurban: Response to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature. By Alan Mintz. Columbia  
University Press, New York. xiv, 283 pages. \$26.00

Reviewed by Jacob Kabakoff

Some four years ago David R. Roskies and Alan Mintz collaborated in launching Prooftexts, a new journal devoted to Jewish literary creativity. It is noteworthy that the two editors have also shared similar research interests, which have now culminated in the two volumes under review.

Both Roskies' and Mintz's books discern a continuum of Jewish response to catastrophe beginning with the Bible and extending down to the modern period. Of the two works, that of Roskies is the more encompassing. While Mintz limits his discussion to Hebrew literature, Roskies surveys also the rich Yiddish cultural heritage of East European Jewry and includes within his purview folk songs and ghetto writings, and even the works of leading Jewish artists.

Roskies has provided a valid conceptual framework for his analysis of various literary texts that have responded to catastrophe. In these writings he finds not an evocation of blind faith or apocalyptic despair, but rather a search for meaning and a rationale for Jewish living. He indicates throughout how various authors have made use of specific archetypes to express their innermost reactions to suffering.

In ages gone by it was concepts like the covenant idea and martyrdom which were at the heart of many literary outpourings. With the advent of modernity and the outbreak of pogroms, writers like Mendele Mocher Seforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Bialik developed their own individualistic models of response. The reader is introduced not only to the world of these major writers, but also to that of numerous other authors who wrote in Yiddish and other languages. In no other recent critical work will the reader find such a mine of insights into a whole assemblage of writers, many of whom have hitherto received but scant treatment in English. The works of Ansky, Weissenberg, Olitky, Katzenelson, Shayevitch and Rabon, to mention but a few, are here illumined from the special vantage-point of the author.

During the modern period which saw the development of a secular literature, many writers refused to accept as explanations for catastrophe such traditional archetypes as guilt for sin and the hope for redemption. Beginning with Bialik, they were led to challenge the traditional bond between God and His people which they felt had been shattered by destruction. Such ancient archetypes as the akedah (binding of Isaac), the covenant, and even the crucifixion were given new application and were imbued with new relevance.

Of Roskies' special treatments of individual authors one may single out the chapter devoted to Abraham Sutzkever, the Yiddish partisan poet of Vilna, who today makes his home in Israel. Roskies traces the various stages in Sutzkever's writing on Holocaust themes in which the poet bears witness to many searing events. For Sutzkever, as for many of his colleagues, literary expression became a means for coping with the trauma of Jewish suffering. By viewing the totality of a century of Yiddish and Hebrew writing against the background of classic literary texts, Roskies has opened up new vistas for grasping the forces at work in modern Jewish literature.

The Hebrew term Hurban (destruction) has come to be applied to the literature of the Holocaust. Mintz has employed this term as the title of his book which focuses attention on the reaction to the Holocaust in Hebrew literature. In seeking paradigms of meaning in Hebrew writing he, too, is led to analyze the traditional responses of classical Hebrew literature. He contrasts, for example, the horror of destruction that is expressed in the Book of Lamentations with the midrashic interpretation of that book and of the events that precipitated the destruction of the Temple. The Rabbis of the Midrash made use of additional biblical texts, of parables, and hermeneutical methods to account for the destruction and to strengthen the hopes for ultimate redemption.

Moving to the medieval period, Mintz discusses various liturgical poems and chronicles which offer a rationale for martyrdom and Kiddush haShem. He contrasts their approach with that of the modern authors Mendele Mocher Seforim, Tchernichowsky, and Bialik who were no longer ready to view martyrdom as an explanation for suffering. His detailed readings of the poems, Baruch of Mayence by Tchernichowsky and In the City of Slaughter by Bialik underscore the new emphases of these leading poets of the Hebrew rebirth.

Regarding Israeli literature, Mintz points out that the Palmach generation of authors paid virtually no attention to the Holocaust during the fifties. It was only after the Eichmann trial that writers like Gouri, Bartov, and Amichai devoted major novels to this theme. Outstanding among the authors who did not fail to make the Holocaust their central concern were the Poet Uri Zvi Greenberg and the prose writer Aharon Appelfeld. Individual chapters are devoted to an analysis of the motifs in Greenberg's Streets of the River and to the literary language and technique of Appelfeld's short stories.

Mintz's volume ably supplements that of Roskies. Together they point up the role of our literature in making creative Jewish survival possible in the face of catastrophe.

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