

Responding to Catastrophe

HURBAN: *Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature.* By Alan Mintz. New York: Columbia University Press. xiv & 213 pp. \$24.00

AGAINST THE APOCALYPSE: *Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture.* By David G. Roskies. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press. xii & 374 pp. \$20.00

Several generations have now passed since Professor Salo W. Baron first inveighed against the "lachrymose" view of Jewish history, that Jewish history consists of "books and pogroms." In response to his call, the study of our history began to explore a far greater variety of aspects of Jewish life. The story of suffering came to be absorbed into a more complex tale of our successful self-integration into many cultures and societies. The picture of Gentiles as cloddish oppressors began to make way for a new understanding that sometimes our neighbors had been our collaborators in some of the most impressive cultural achievements of Western history.

But then came the Holocaust. Appalled by the suffering inflicted on them by a nation with which they had collaborated most enthusiastically, many Jews have returned to the notion that suffering is the material out of which the "golden chain" of Jewish heritage has been forged. Jewish history once again is widely seen as a chain of disasters. The study of Jewish history is once again widely conceived as the recitation of a tale of woe.

The two volumes reviewed here represent major contributions to a growing effort to arrest this tendency. While acknowledging the fact of Jewish suffering, they seek the key to Jewish history and survival in something else. It is true that Jews

have suffered, but it is also true that Jews have overcome that suffering. Is it not also true that Jewish survival is the result of our ability to respond to travails, and not merely to endure them? *Responses to catastrophe* (a phrase in the subtitle of each book), and not catastrophe as such, is truly the unifying theme of Jewish history. "Of all Jewish traditions," writes David Roskies (p. 10), "the response to catastrophe remains the most viable, coherent, and covenantal." Even if this claim is exaggerated, it is not altogether wrong.

Despite this common faith, however, the two books differ dramatically in their conceptions of the place of literary art in the life of the community. They reflect different responses—one ultimately accepting, the other rather more defiant—to the catastrophes they discuss.

Alan Mintz, as his subtitle carefully specifies, has written a rather focused study of a particular theme in the history of Hebrew literature. He distinguishes throughout between popular attitudes or values and the achievements of a more or less self-conscious intellectual elite. Although the events that called forth the texts he studies were disasters on a vast public scale, he is able to distinguish between "high imaginative literature which could claim importance by virtue of its achievements as art" and other material noted for "the special pathos of its subject" (p. 158). Elsewhere, with respect to the poems of Uri Zvi Greenberg, he notes with apparent regret that as a result of their being "transmuted into liturgy . . . their status as literary texts was undermined as they were appropriated into an awesome sacred discourse" (p. 173).

Roskies, on the other hand, means to write about "modern Jewish culture" in a much more comprehensive sense, and he sees such a transforma-

tion of literature into liturgy as the center of his interest. "What is of concern here," he writes, ". . . is not the elitist forms of cultural self-understanding, but the canonization of memory in the public and communally sanctioned domain. The concern of this book is with liturgy" (p. 41).

This difference is related to others as well. Where Mintz is "struck" by "how disconnected the literature of the Holocaust is from the classical traditions" (p. 269), David Roskies argues from the very beginning "for the vitality of traditions of Jewish response to catastrophe" (p. 9). Speaking of "the Jews" rather than literature, Roskies affirms that "the greater the catastrophe, the more the Jews have recalled the ancient archetypes" (p. 13). Mintz proclaims (p. 268f.) that

literary art has succeeded in stimulating a deeper encounter with [the Holocaust] and thereby put a brake on its premature absorption into a preexisting framework of meaning.

By contrast, Roskies celebrates (p. 259) the Jewish

neoclassical impulse: the greater the catastrophe, the more its victims reshape the ancient archetypes in its wake. Because most of us do not share the neoclassical point of view, we do not see the continuities. . . [But in case after case] the writer's earlier rebellion was modified and qualified in the face of national disaster.

Where one of the authors here sees the Holocaust as a great divide that writers have only now begun to bridge, the other sees the same disaster as having prompted a significant return to classical modes.

Finally, just as these authors propound differing views of the relationship between literary creation and popular consciousness, so too they differ in how they relate to their subject matter. One stands outside it, passing judgment while striving for comprehension, while the other con-

tributes from within to the very enterprise that he examines.

The root of this difference can be found in the lyrical, autobiographical prelude with which *Against the Apocalypse* begins. Recalling the keys to homes in Spain that Moroccan Jews are said to have kept for centuries, Roskies observes (p. 1) that

something like a key . . . must have been passed on from parents to children as part of the Jewish emigration during and after World War II. How else can I understand why the immediate but severed past exerted such an enormous claim on my loyalties? The Lithuanian city of Vilna . . . became something of a lost temple to me.

The word *loyalties* here is crucial. The purpose of Roskies's book is to demonstrate to the possibly skeptical reader that the cultural impulse which animated "the Jerusalem of Lithuania" has not been utterly destroyed. The book is the result of a "search for that which could be rescued from Vilna for future generations" (p. 2).

Writing in English, Alan Mintz studies Hebrew literature from the outside (though he has mastered it impressively), but Roskies wishes to enliven "modern Jewish culture" from within, to make his own contribution to its continuing history. He insists (p. 9) that "a book that on the surface deals with finality, endings, disruption, and desecration is really a study in continuities and internal transformation." His project is to defend the central commitment of his identity: despite all the changes ("internal transformation") that recent history has imposed on the Jews, we have saved as much from our past as we have been compelled to renounce. The very titles of these books express this contrast succinctly: Roskies battles the apocalyptic view that all has been lost, while the terse one-word *Hurban* ("Destruction") tells us it is already too late.

These remarks in no way imply the superiority of one or another of these

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approaches. Various readers will no doubt find one or the other more congenial. Each may be preferred for some particular situation or task, but both books are highly competent, full of rewarding insights and perceptive readings. Between them, they represent the range of choices—the possible "responses to catastrophe"—available to all thinking, committed Jews as we negotiate the tight corners of our current situation.

This choice has been before us from the start, and here perhaps one can quarrel with the author of *Hurban*. It seems to me that Mintz begins his story too starkly. His analysis of the classical Judaic texts (Bible, midrash, etc.) leans too heavily on the "conviction of sin" that he considers the key to the central, third chapter of the Book of Lamentations (see pp. 35, 52). True, that chapter offers the thought (Lam. 3:39) that our only legitimate complaint is against ourselves for having sinned. True, in that light we are urged (Lam. 3:40) to "search and examine our ways and turn back to the Lord."

Lamentations

All of this, however, strikes me as tentative, not conclusive—a possibility eventually left behind rather than the "restoring of a provisional equilibrium of spirit" (p. 37) that Mintz invites us to find. After all, in the verses immediately following, the writer of Lamentations rebukes God:

"You have clothed yourself in anger and pursued us. You have slain without pity, You have screened Yourself off with a cloud, that no prayer may pass through" (Lam. 3:43-44). When later in the chapter the poet does address God as champion of his cause and redeemer of his life (Lam. 3:58), the context has shifted to the possibility of revenge upon the heathen destroyers of Jerusalem (see Lam. 3:64-66), and questions of sin and punishment, penitence and retribution, have quite disappeared.

As Mintz himself notes, "nowhere in Lamentations is there the least trace of a divine response" (p. 41), and "one of the great problems of Lamentations as a whole is its elusiveness on the score of the precise nature of the sin for which Israel has been made the subject of such massive retribution" (p. 25). All this, it seems to me, expresses confusion far more than even provisional restoration of equilibrium, and when one moves past Chapter 3 to the important verse 5:7 ("Our fathers have sinned, but we bear their punishment"), then hardly anything of the sin/punishment paradigm is left. This is far closer to the sort of parody Roskies is fond of citing (pp. 20, 77).

The problem, in other words, did not arise later on; at every stage in our history, the authors of our classic texts have wavered between assimilating Jewish suffering into the received pieties of religious tradition, and expressing more or less guard-

edly the belief that no acceptable explanation of such suffering can be expected. Mintz sees clearly enough that rabbinic reactions to the destruction of the Second Temple were confused and ambiguous (see pp. 64, 79). I wish here only to emphasize that the same ambivalent uncertainty infects the biblical canon as well. The "Jewish response to catastrophe" has always consisted in mixed measure of the tendency to self-blame and the anxious knowledge that Jewish guilt could never adequately account for Jewish suffering.

The challenge in every generation has been to find the right mix, and both authors correctly sense that such a job is not, in the long run, a matter for scholars. In his recent book *Zakhor*, Y. H. Yerushalmi explores the relationship between "Jewish history and Jewish memory." A historian, Professor Yerushalmi recognizes that "history" of the sort he seeks to elucidate cannot serve as the basis of Jewish communal memory. Indeed, he suggests a link (p. 99) between "the rise of modern Jewish historiography and the decay of Jewish memory." He raises the possibility that "literature and ideology" have inherited that role in modern Jewish life (p. 95).

Roskies willingly accepts this last point, though without the imputation of "decay." He says that "the shaping and preserving of group memory is precisely what Jewish writers, artists, and intellectuals have been doing since the emancipation" (p. 259).

Some writers, artists, and intellectuals, however, have been more concerned to preserve collective memory,

while others have preferred to (re)shape it. This basic choice underlies the differences between the two books under review. We all face this choice; it is possible to rebuild or replace, but it is hard to do both at the same time with equal energy, hope, and dedication. One's preference—or at least one's decision as to which to attempt first—will determine everything. For writers, it de-

termines what to say. For critics and scholars, it determines what (and how) to read. For us all, it determines how we live.

—Robert Goldenberg

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Women and Halakhah

WOMEN AND JEWISH LAW: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources. By Rachel Biale. New York: Schocken Books. 293 pp. \$18.95 hc, \$8.95 pb.

Perhaps no issue provokes more controversy in Jewish life today than the role of women. The last hundred years have been witness to sweeping changes in women's lives both in the secular and Jewish worlds. We live in the midst of these changes; many questions are still being addressed, and some have yet to be formulated. The issues are diverse: women's roles vis-à-vis work, family, community leadership, sexuality, and spirituality.

How does halakhah treat these issues, which so affect women? This is the subject of Rachel Biale's work, *Women and Jewish Law*.

To judge the importance of this work for liberal Jews, we must ask: What is the nature of our interest in halakhah and its treatment of women? Is it purely academic, or do we live in an active relationship to

halakhah?

In fact, our interest has two dimensions. First, a knowledge of the treatment of women's issues in halakhah informs us of our past and grounds us as Jews.

Second, whether we consider ourselves religious or secular, liberal or traditional, we all stand in some kind of relationship to halakhah in the choices we make every day. We may live in conflict or in concert with our traditions. We may be more or less conscious of our relationship to halakhah. But by virtue of our being Jews, the *brit*, our people's covenant with God, has a claim on us all. Understanding halakhah and its development allows us to make better informed Jewish choices and to shape more authentically Jewish lives, whether or not our choices follow traditional lines. The study of halakhah on women's issues, as on other issues, enables us to have a better understanding of our past and a stronger hand in shaping our future.

Biale's work offers us great insight into the halakhic treatment of women. Most of the issues treated—marriage, divorce, contraception and procreation, homosexuality, and abortion—relate to sexuality and family. Biale also examines the larger question of women and *mitzvot* and the nature of women's duties in the areas of prayer, Torah reading, and

Operating Principles

(continued from page 31)

structionist congregation in any community to close its membership. Reconstructionist synagogues not only cannot turn their backs on these Jews. They must reach out to them. If in doing so,

the synagogue is faced with the challenge of remaining true to Reconstructionist principles, let us remember that the epitome of the Reconstructionist challenge is to change and evolve. ■