

Texts and Contexts

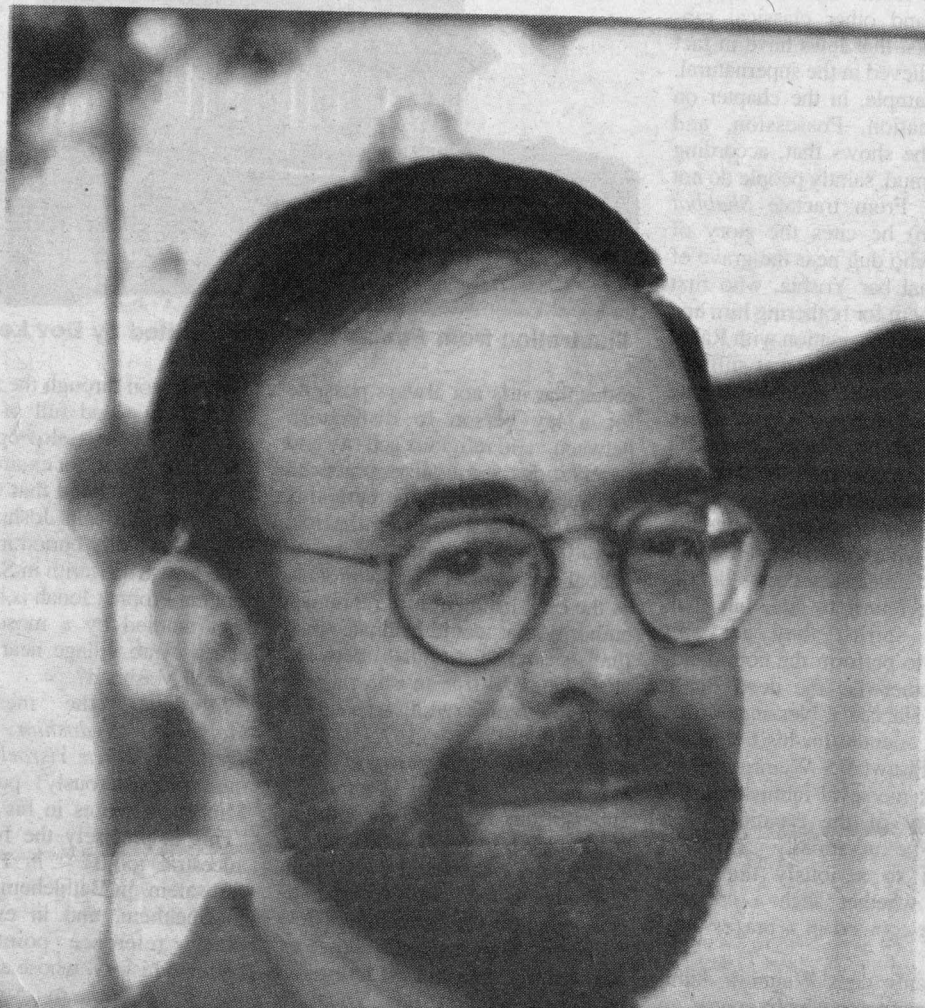
Can a poem be so powerful as to totally redefine the way we look at the world? According to David Roskies, this is precisely the achievement of Chaim Nahman Bialik's poem "*Ba'ir HaHareiga*" ("In the City of Slaughter"), based on what the young poet witnessed in the aftermath of the Kishinev massacre in the spring of 1903. "This poem," declares Roskies, "changed Jewish life and letters for good."

"Bialik had been sent by a group of Zionist intellectuals from Odessa to document the massacres. By today's standards the massacre seems small. 'Only' 49 Jews had been murdered, alongside a massive destruction of property. Bialik's mandate was to collect eyewitness accounts – itself a new approach to Jewish response to disasters. What made the impact was not the eyewitness account – which was published only a few years ago – but rather Bialik's poem, which was an all-out repudiation of the old style theology of suffering. The poem's 'narrator' is God Himself, who calls for the abrogation of His own throne and power. In the face of this disaster, God Himself is powerless."

"Prior to Bialik, Jews had traditionally responded to disaster by pointing an accusing finger at themselves: '*Mipne hata'enu*,' because of our sins we were exiled from our Land. This response not only typified the 'theology of suffering' but was canonized in the prayer books and thus fixed the outlook of Jewry from the time of the destruction of the Temple to the modern period."

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David Roskies talks to Mordechai Beck



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This also helps to explain Roskies's own deep involvement in Yiddish: "By an accident of history, I grew up in Montreal. The Eastern Europeans had set up a community there before the war. When the survivors came they were able to plug into an existing community, one in which they were able to express their memories in public. They created their own secular liturgy, a civil religion. No one told them to do this or that on such-and-such a day you shall do this and say that."

"Part of the suppressed rage and passion of my books is the realization that this extraordinary collective enterprise has been lost to us. I argue that the Holocaust is not an event that stands outside history, so that after Auschwitz there can be no poetry, no literature, that such a response is – to use a favorite phrase of the critics – 'incommensurate' with what happened. On the contrary, any number of literary responses are possible. What has happened is that the interpretative community was destroyed. The survivors are scattered and most had to learn another tongue, which is a very painful process."

One of the more upsetting phenomena of the recent upsurge in Holocaust memorials is what in his latest book, *A Bridge of Longing* (reviewed here on June 13, 1996), Roskies refers to as "fakelore." "In the USA there are phoney Holocaust diaries put out by the ultra-Orthodox community, many of them printed in Lakewood, full of stories of miraculous survival. This, too, is a form

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"Bialik's poem," observes Roskies, "attacked the victims for their passivity. No one had done this before. Even though we now know there was sporadic resistance, the poet recorded his impressions selectively, just as the rabbis had before him.

"The poem also ushered in a new world, which would look to artists and writers rather than rabbis for guidance. 'The City of Slaughter' was a catalytic work for young people, telling them that it was time to take history into their own hands, to fight back. There is a direct line from it to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Even before the war, in 1936, Mordechai Gebirtig's song, 'Es brent, Yidelech, es brent,' was a folk version of Bialik's poem. 'Unzer shtetl brenen.' Our town is burning. It's up to you to put out the fire."

Response to disaster has marked and helped define the Jewish community over the centuries. It was the subject for Roskies's prize-winning study, *Against the Apocalypse*, and has informed almost everything else he has done since.

A PROFESSOR of Jewish Literature at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary, Roskies recently wound up a semi-sabbatical at Tel Aviv University's Department of Hebrew Literature, where, surprisingly, he lectured on Yiddish literature. "This itself is not insignificant," he observes. "It means that Yiddish is now recognized in a way that was not possible up to a few years ago."

For Roskies, Yiddish is not only a nostalgic link with the past, it is tradition made flesh: "In writing their history, Jews draw on a deep memory, archetypes which refer to earlier events, so that even when reporting a recent disaster, there is already a remembrance of earlier events, a resonance." Response is thus also preservation, an elaboration of earlier themes.

"These archetypes are recycled again and again, particularly in the liturgy. They are the collective consciousness of



MORDECHAI BECK

the Jews. It no longer matters if you're a *shul*-goer. They are embedded in the culture. Jewish soldiers seeing devastated European towns in World War One were reminded of destroyed Jerusalem."

Yiddish in particular carries a bitter-sweet ambivalence in its very soul: "It was able to express both the tradition and the anti-tradition, the conventional and the novel."

Despite the revival of Hebrew (as witnessed in Bialik himself), Yiddish was still the major means of literary expression for the Jewish masses at the time of the Holocaust. And it was here that it met its greatest challenge: "The Shoah was so terrible that none of the traditional analogies worked – not the pogrom, the Expulsion, the Book of Job, the destruction of the Temple. By 1942 [the summer of the great deportation] the writers – Sutzkever in Vilna, Yitzhak Katznelson in Warsaw, Ringelbaum's Oneg Shabbes circle – realize that to chronicle is not enough. They're going to have to write

the great lament, since there is no one left.

"Elie Wiesel popularized the idea of One Generation After – that it took 25 years to come to terms with the event. That's not true. Between 1945 and 1970, the number of texts produced in Hebrew and Yiddish by the East European community was so vast that no one person could possibly read them. The bibliographies alone are volumes. It didn't take a generation. It didn't take a day! There's a man in Tel Aviv, Israel Kaplan, who must be in his 90s now. In the DP camps in Munich he began publishing a journal, *Fun Letz in Hurban*, the first scholarly journal devoted to the Holocaust. So there was no time lag. Various communities of survivors – *landsmanshafts* – published memorial volumes, 1,200 of them, to commemorate lost communities. It was a grass-roots phenomenon; no government support, no Holocaust museum. They did it themselves. They collected the material, edited it, and supplied the

"fakelore." "In the USA there are phoney Holocaust diaries put out by the ultra-Orthodox community, many of them printed in Lakewood, full of stories of miraculous survival. This, too, is a form of Holocaust denial. Survivors are now reclaiming their beliefs and want to retell their Holocaust story as a tale of faith."

Telling stories is of course a very Jewish thing to do, but it has to be done honestly and with taste: "In the USA today, we have a whole cadre of English-speaking 'Jewish' storytellers. Then along comes Roskies and says: 'Great, but we're missing a critical link here, the last 200 years of storytelling which was a transformative moment in Jewish history. Those Yiddish writers who went back to reclaim storytelling were the most alienated from the tradition.'

AMONG his many activities while he was here, Yiddishist Roskies, who also speaks perfect Hebrew (initially acquired on his junior year as a Near Eastern and Judaic Studies student at Brandeis) also "performed" some of his favorite stories to enraptured audiences. If any would-be storyteller wants to know how to deliver a Yiddish story, he should catch him live. Not without irony, his own book is subtitled "The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling."

"In the classroom," says the 48-year-old academic, "I try to recreate a multi-lingual Jewish culture which no longer exists. We call the course 'Sifrut Am Yisrael,' knowing full well that no such thing exists. It's a construct. But without it you won't be able to understand Jewish culture as a totality."

In the same vein Roskies, with his fellow academic Alan Mintz, have been publishing *Prooftexts: a Journal of Jewish Literary History* for 16 years. He describes it as "academic but aimed at the intelligent layperson. We didn't become a mass movement, but our readership is international. A few years ago we were running an annual deficit of \$6,000. Now we're breaking even. It's a modest achievement, but it reflects a gathering movement in what I think is the right direction." ■

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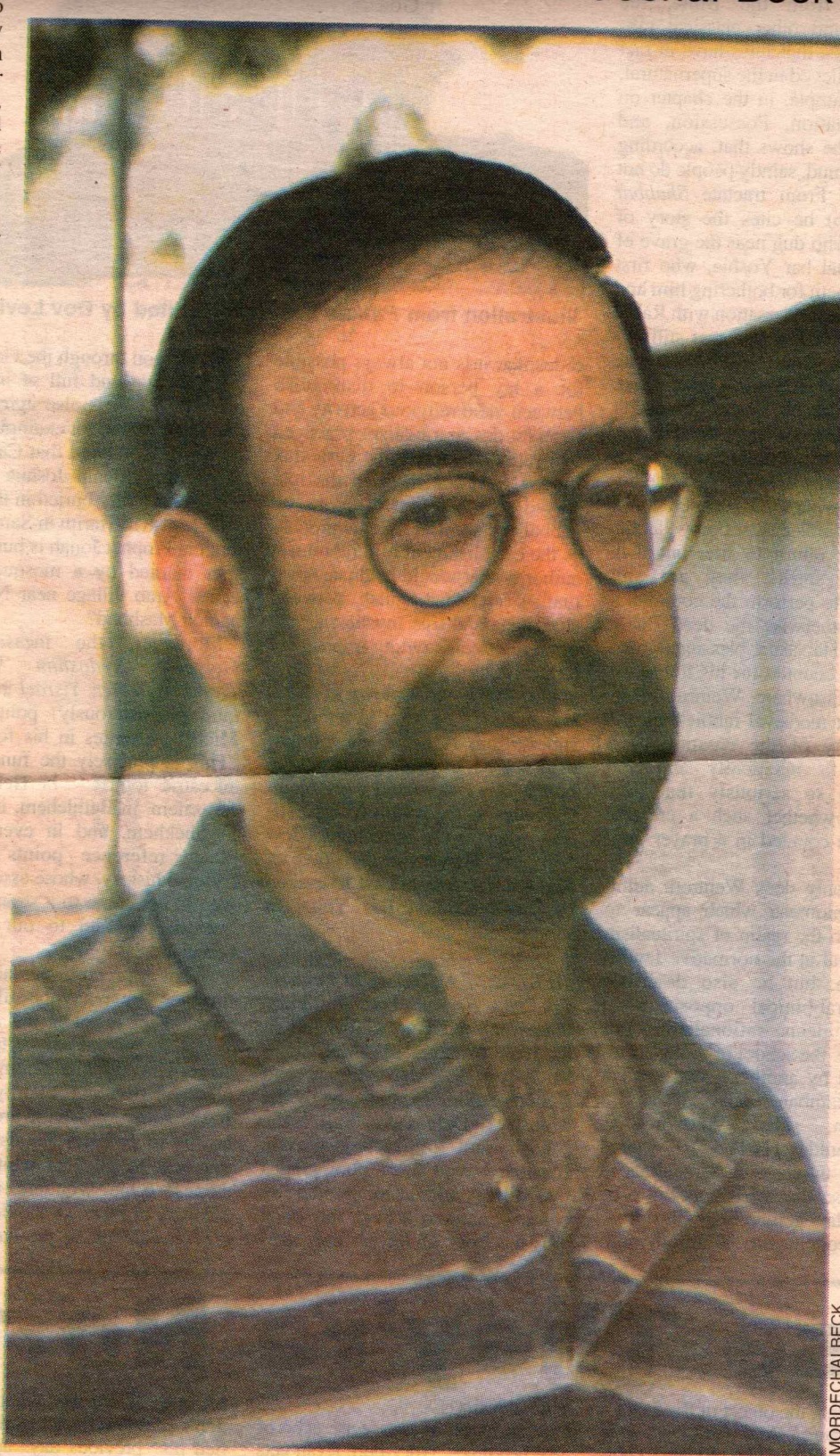
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