

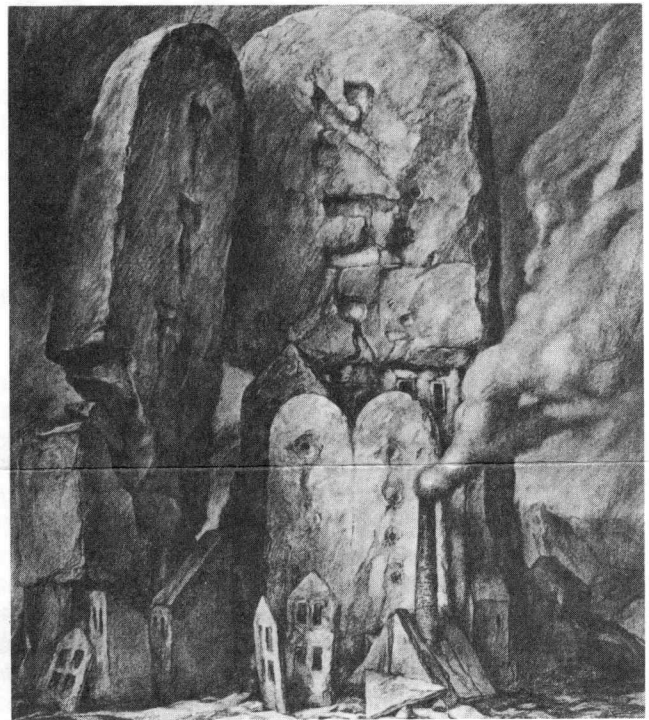
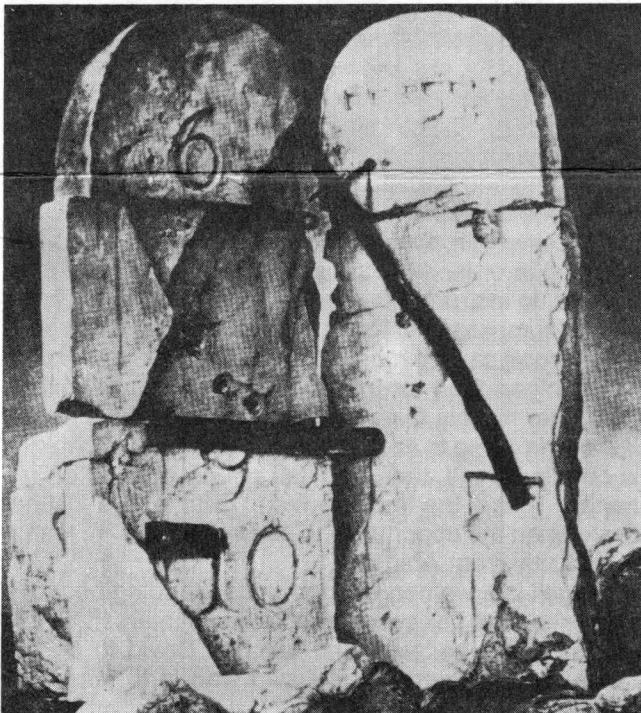
Bak's Shattered Tablets

The city of Vilna in Lithuania is renowned as a cradle of Jewish scholarship. It was also the birthplace of a highly original Jewish artist, whose haunting themes rivet the viewer's attention and provide food for analytical thought. David Roskies, in the award-winning *Against the Apocalypse*, takes up the subject of Samuel Bak as one example of a response to catastrophe in modern Jewish culture. Below, reprinted with permission of Harvard University Press, is an excerpt from Roskies' book.

By David G. Roskies

When, in 1965-1966, Samuel Bak rejected his newly acquired abstract style and returned from Paris and Rome to live in Israel, he decided no longer to neglect his experiences of the Holocaust. Gradually, through still lifes and allegorical symbols, he began to express what it meant to be a survivor.

In 1975 the memories of Vilna began to coalesce in Bak's *Landscapes of Jewish History*, which disassembled and reassembled the actual form of the ghetto, the yellow star and the Tablets of the Decalogue. "Proposal for a Monument" shows the tablets not as they were given to Moses but with only a few words still intact. Bak provides his own commentary: "The desecration of the laws has created a mass grave, causing the inscriptions to be obliterated and turning the Tablets into gravestones. Throughout their long history of violation and abuse, the Tablets have maintained their eternal power to re-emerge as a guide for those who choose to accept their covenant. Their power cannot be totally annihilated: out of their fragments new Tablets are being created."



These tablets, Bak proposes, could also form a new kind of monument: with metal bars holding the pieces together; with the middle section chipped away, leaving the outline of a six-pointed star; with bullet holes as a sign of the most recent onslaught. Of the original inscription, all that remains is *I am the Lord*, the number 6 (for the six million Jews murdered under the sign of the violated sixth commandment), half a 9 (*Thou shalt not bear false witness*), and 10 (*Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house*). The spectator is thus invited to create his own exegesis on the meaning of these commandments after the Holocaust and on the absence of the others. Then, for a final statement, Bak would place the monument on Mount Sinai.

Thirty years after the war, the landscapes of Jewish history suddenly appear in the mind of the survivor. Jewish Vilna—that is to say, its ghetto—emerges as the quintessential "city of Jews," a stone city united under God, a *Kehilla Kedosha*. Wrenched together with another landscape, that of Sinai, Vilna literally stands under the sign of the covenant; it "upholds" the tablets. Yet the desecration of the landscape is unmistakable. One set of tablets is smashed and barely standing; another set is blank, with bullet holes instead of commandments, resembling nothing so much as tombstones. Can Jews actually live in such a precarious and claustrophobic place? The only sign of life is a smoking chimney (factory smokestack? crematorium?).

And so Bak's midrash on Jewish history reads something like this: To live as Jews means to uphold the covenant even as it is desecrated. There is no return to the Decalogue except via Vilna. The tablets have been broken—in order that they may be pieced together again. One cannot rebuild other than on ruins.