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Final Project

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Jewish Response to Catastrophe

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PREFACE

When I began to plan my final project I decided to take a selection from The Diary of Anne Frank and analyze it in terms of what I had learned in this class about Jewish responses to catastrophe. This passage is particularly meaningful to me and I thought that its unique quality would be emphasized by showing how different it is, in both tone and message, from what had been written as responses to prior catastrophes.

But once Professor Roskies showed me the diaries of Moshe Flinker and Yitskhok Rudashevsky, and after I had time to read them, my original goal for this project was obviously insufficient. To ignore these other two sources and present just Anne Frank's response would be both naive and misleading. Although Anne Frank's diary is clearly the most read, its universal quality is based on the fact that it is not uniquely Jewish. Her message is also not the only one that emerges out of the Holocaust. Moshe Flinker and Yitskhok Rudashevsky's diaries will add perspective, and hopefully they will all combine to serve as a three way comparison of response.

To me these adolescent diaries are very powerful responses to the Holocaust. The three journals are as unique as their authors. Yet, most of the impact that these works have on me is due to the fact that they are the subjective hopes, dreams, opinions, and views of ADOLESCENTS. Being only 18 years old myself, I am struck by how mature these three people were. These Jewish teenagers grew up incredibly fast. They performed acts of sensitivity and caring which amaze me (I know when I was 14 I was much more selfish and narrow-minded). Even though these adolescents were mature, they retained a certain virtuous hope and healthy idealism which combine to make these types of responses possible.

This paper could conceivably amount to a major research paper, and perhaps someday I will deal with it in that format. But for this project, the material lends itself to an extremely subjective approach. While working on the project, it became clear to me that I could break up the material into three chapters - one for each writer.

The chapters would discuss the adolescents themselves; as well as what I think characterizes their response, and the effect they have on me personally. Their differences would obviously come out in the discussion of their individual approaches.

ANNE FRANK

Anne Frank was born in 1929 and died in 1945. She was born in Frankfurt, Germany but was educated and spent most of her life in Holland. Her diary depicts her restricted life in hiding. Her family, especially her close relationship with her father, made life more bearable for Anne. In addition, dreams of romance and fantasies about movie stars made her life as similar to the lives of other young ^{women} ladies as possible given the extraordinary conditions Anne was experiencing.

Anne Frank has become a symbol of goodness for everyone. Her writing contains both an element of innocence and an element of cognizance. In addition, there are no references to traditional sources and little religious basis. Anne wrote more as a young lady rather than as a Jew. This is to be expected since she came from a very assimilated family.

To me "In Spite of Everything" is a most remarkable passage:

"It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build my hopes on a foundation of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness.

I hear the approaching thunder, I can feel the suffering of millions, and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come out right one of these days; that this cruelty will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals for perhaps the day will come when I shall be able to carry them out."

This passage shows Anne's hope and complete faith in humanity. It is amazing that she can sincerely believe that "people are still good at heart," given the fact that she was living through the effects caused by the dark side of humanity. I am convinced that these words are written in earnest and are not to be taken as sarcasm.

✓ A significant characteristic of Anne Frank's work is that she roots the meaning of life in this world. She does believe that this world will straighten itself out; therefore, she will hold onto her ideals and dreams. The traditional, biblical concept of sin - retribution - restoration has no basis in Anne Frank's writings. This concept's extension - restoration in the afterlife - also is not conveyed by Anne Frank. A statement, such as : "the King of the Universe will raise us up to everlasting life because we have died for his laws" (II Maccabees 7:9), does not fit at all into her framework. She didn't really see this catastrophe as coming from

God, and she certainly was not looking for redemption in the world to come. Anne came from a rather assimilated Jewish environment and was not expected to deal with the tragedy on a traditional theological level.

A traditional element of response that Anne Frank does utilize, as evidenced in this paragraph, is viewing the tragedy through motifs of nature. She sees the world, which represents order and justice, being turned into a wilderness, which represents chaos and fear. She understands the suffering of her people as she hears horrific thunder. Nature is a powerful tool in writers' efforts to deal with catastrophe and has been used throughout history from the Mosaic Curses/ *שנים* on.

I think that it is a great tribute to Anne that she can have such strong faith in humanity. This faith is definitely fueled by her youthful idealism. She had her whole life in front of her and she was not going to surrender all of her dreams so easily. This attitude is all but abandoned in the writings of adults. They virtually give up all such hope! They either look for redemption in the afterlife or just live day to day, giving up any big vision they might have held dear. Some even go so far as to believe that survival is an even worse fate than death. This is seen

in "A Mole" by Natan Alterman in which survivors are fated to relive the destruction, carrying the memory as a burden.

Her optimism and sensitive perceptions are almost novel ways to deal with catastrophe. Very few writers had such upbeat tones when faced with such adversity. Her credo of endurance, and meaningful endurance at that, is incredibly encouraging to those who face adversity of any kind.

MOSHE FLINKER

Moshe Ze'ev Flinker was born in The Hague, on October 9, 1926 and died along with his parents in Auschwitz. Moshe, an Orthodox adolescent, wrote his diary in Hebrew, one of the eight languages he studied. His entries are characterized by the usage of Jewish liturgy and history, as well as the Bible, as answers to the Jews' suffering. God plays an integral role in Moshe's response to the Holocaust.

Moshe was less concerned with the fate of individuals than with the fate of the Jewish people. He has a complete belief in the imminent return of the Jewish people to their homeland. He is consumed by his longing for Israel:

"My soul longs for my country that I have loved - and still love - so much. Even before the war my heart longed for my homeland, the Land of Israel, but now this love and yearning have greatly increased. For it is only now that I feel how much we need a country in which we could live in peace as every people lives in its country. Each time I stand to say the Eighteen Benedictions I direct my whole soul to my lovely land, and I see it before my eyes; I see the coast, I see Tel Aviv, Jaffa, and Haifa. Then I see Jerusalem,.... Several times

already I have asked myself whether I will ever get the chance to stand on its holy earth, if the Lord will permit me to walk about in my land, Oh, how my soul yearns for you, my homeland, how my eyes crave for the sight of you, my country, the Land of Israel."

But Moshe is not just dealing with his own salvation, but with that of all of his people. He explains the displacement of European Jewry as part of God's plan to make the Jews long for Israel. Out of the catastrophe, redemption will be reached. This idea has definite precedent in previous responses to catastrophe: out of the ashes will spring a new revived world - holier than before. Through this rationalization, Moshe can come to terms with the suffering of his people and his profound faith in the traditional notion of God.

Signs of his youth come through in Moshe's concept that redemption cannot come to the Jews through external intervention or aid. This seems to correspond with his other ideas, but he takes this notion ~~an added~~^{out} step farther. He advocates self-reliance and is convinced that salvation will come when the Allies give up hope for victory. He goes so far as to write about his admiration for the Nazis on the level of their devotion and discipline.

Moshe does deal with his own future, though never overlooking the Jewish people as a whole. He often makes personal pleas to

God. "I ask the Lord to pardon me, for He knows and understands me: despite the easy life I have, I can find in my heart no satisfaction at all. Every moment I say to myself: "You are here and your brothers are in such great trouble"; and I only have to begin to hear such things for my heart to fill with infinite longing for my brothers, the children of my people who are in such pain. The Lord knows that I do not rebel against Him nor dare do anything against Him, and He knows how thankful I am to Him that He protects my parents and my sisters and brother, but even so something devours my heart, a vast yearning to participate with my brothers in all that happens to them."

Moshe imposes restrictions on himself in order to feel at least part of the suffering which his people are undergoing. He gives up swimming and takes food only once a day - giving up his favorite food altogether.

I am incredibly impressed by his unselfishness and sense of unity with his people. Not every teenager is self-sacrificing enough to make these concepts work for him/her. He has created a vision, an ideal to strive for.

Moshe has managed to create a complete theology in his diary. Whether you believe his views or not, you are bound to be impressed by his accomplishment. You are also bound to be impressed by his high level of Jewish knowledge. Most of his ideas fit into a traditional framework and his way of expressing them are also traditional. He is constantly

calling on the Prophets and other Biblical sources to help make his case.

His faith is also something that moves the reader. He does not question God; he only tries to rationalize the catastrophe and figure out how it can benefit the Jews. His deep unswerving faith is something not every teenager is capable of having.

YITSKOHK RUDASHEVSKI

Yitskhok (Itsele) Rudashevski was born in 1927. He grew up in Vilna and wrote his diary when he was 14-15 years old. Rudashevski was a product of the Jewish youth movements in Poland. He, like the other Jewish communists, was totally integrated into the Yiddish cultural life of the city. He had mentors who were both party members (his teacher Mire Bernshteyn) and anti-communists (Avrom Sutzkever, whom we read in class this semester).

Yitskhok respected Jewish tradition even though he himself was not observant. "I am as far from religion now," he wrote, "as before the ghetto." Yet, he immersed himself in Jewish culture. He went to study and discussion groups and really enjoyed learning.

Yitskhok was incredibly self-disciplined. Not only did he continue to fulfill his familial obligations like his household chores, he remained committed to learning. He would sit himself down and read books and write papers. Yitskhok was a real budding literary talent. His manner of expressing his sensitive ideas is almost poetic. He, like others who respond to tragedy, use nature effectively. "The sky is blue. Spring is in the air. Spring bursts across the gray walls," he wrote, "comes into the ghetto and bears

on its caressing rays in the blue air the message that somewhere things are already greening, somewhere willows are blooming, somewhere birds are already twittering. And I revel in the spring breeze, catch the spring rays and and my heart is full of strange yearning..." Spring plays its common role as symbolizer of hope and better things to come. On his birthday Yitskhok wrote: "Today I become 15 years of age and I live confident in the future. I am not conflicted about it, and see before me sun and sun and sun..." The sun, like spring, is the light of optimism - hope for what the future will bring.

However, Yitskhok's world is not all rainbows and rose gardens and he does not begin to assume that it is. "I stand at the window," he wrote, "and feel a sense of rage. Tears come to my eyes: all our helplessness, all our loneliness laid out in the streets. There is no one to take our part. And we ourselves are so helpless! so helpless." Yitskhok, <like the Bund and Bialik,> hates the helpless state the Jews are in. Yitskhok places his faith in the Red Army and is confident in their swift victory over the Nazis. He wrote of his freedom being robbed from him. He portrays ~~the state they are in as being like~~ ^{the ghetto Jews as} animals ^{that} which are being pursued. "We are animals," he wrote, "surrounded by the hunter. The hunter on all sides: beneath us, above us, from the sides." These are incredible ways to convey such feelings.

But not only did Yitskhok write in a special style,

he also felt special feelings. He was intensely sensitive to beauty, especially nature, and showed amazing compassion for others. He tried hard to fight the despair, hunger, and death that seemed to be everywhere. He was disgusted by what humans could do to one another and tried hard to understand how the Jewish police could do what they were doing.

Just as speech helped a lot of survivors work through the trauma they had experienced (Yankel in Shalom Aleichem's "Tales of 1001 Nights" for example), this type of self-dialogue helped victims live from day to day. Not only did writing a diary help Yitskhok fulfill his intellectual need to record the history he was living through, it helped him face his emotions. A personal journal does not have to offer some intricate plan for redemption to be meaningful.

It is remarkable how Yitskhok managed to create such a meaningful day-to-day life. He exercised his mind and did not merely wallow in depression and despair. I know that at 14 I would not have had the strength of character to follow a sophisticated learning regiment under such conditions, even in "normal" times I didn't have the self-discipline he possessed.

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