

THE ETERNAL LIGHT

Chapter 1279

"A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID ROSKIES"

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ANNOUNCER:

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America presents THE ETERNAL LIGHT.

Today we bring you "A Conversation with David Roskies," Assistant Professor in Jewish Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and co-author of The Shtetl Book.

Speaking with Dr. Roskies is critic and commentator Martin Bookspan.

Mr. Bookspan.

MARTIN BOOKSPAN:

Dr. Roskies, one of the first things that strikes me in the brief biographical information that I have before me is that you're a native of Montreal. And I say that strikes me, because one of the salient characteristics of American Jewish life is the tremendous input that has been given by Canadian Jews. To what do you attribute this?

DAVID ROSKIES:

I attribute it to the fact that Montreal Jewry grew up and thrived between two cultures -- between the French on the one hand, and the English on the other -- never feeling itself quite at home in either culture.

French nationalism, of course, has come to a head quite recently with the victory of the Partie Quebecoise. Therefore, Jews tended to assimilate far less in Montreal, and particularly in Quebec, than elsewhere.

The other important factor, if you'll allow me a little bit of local patriotism, is that our community is Lithuanian, Litvak, and Lithuanian Jews have been known for their support for education. The two large Lithuanian Jewish communities, one in Johannesburg and the other in Montreal, both have very strong Jewish school movements.

I, for instance, benefited from a Jewish education in a Yiddish secular day school, and most of my friends went to one form or another of a Jewish day school in Montreal.

BOOKSPAN:

Now, you've zeroed in on Montreal, and I made it more general than that. Broadly, Canadian, because I know some extraordinarily well educated and really "on fire" Canadian Jews from places like Winnipeg. So that I think it transcends just the Montreal locale.

Now we have before us a joint effort by you and your wife, Diane, called The Shtetl Book, and then alongside it is a midrash on the Holocaust that you compiled.

I think I'd like to begin asking you about that latter work first, which you told me was a product of your years at Brandeis.

ROSKIES:

That's correct. Actually, the genesis of the work dates a little earlier, in Montreal, when as a high school student, my parents would take me to the yearly commemoration gatherings for the

Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on April 19, or I felt even then that these commemoration programs were inadequate. Inadequate, because the only people who went to them were themselves survivors. Inadequate, because they were mass phenomena, three thousand, five thousand Jews coming together, listening to a hazzan recite , and sing some ghetto songs.

As a senior in high school, I tried to generate my own type of program, one that I and some high school students performed.

BOOKSPAN: Aimed primarily at young people?

ROSKIES: Aimed primarily at young people, and trying to convey the experience of young people during the Holocaust. That was the original theme of that commemoration program, talking about what young people did, in the ghettos and in the camps.

Then, when I came to Brandeis in 1965, I felt that I wanted to continue that tradition. And I must say, I was the first to institute it, and I think it's continued since then. The programs became more and more elaborate as time went on.

Originally we had readings of six actors. By my last year at Brandeis, we were doing a three-day production, complete with music and film, and dance.

BOOKSPAN: And the textual material was created by you and your colleagues?

ROSKIES: That's correct.

Then what happened was that upon graduating from Brandeis, I became involved in the Havurah movement, in Boston. Havurat-Shalom to be specific. And there I found a completely different model of Jewish expression.

BOOKSPAN: We've heard about the Havurah groups around the country from various guests here on THE ETERNAL LIGHT. Groups of young people who band together, out of a need for common, shared Jewish experience. And that pretty well was the Havurah experience in Boston, was it?

ROSKIES: That's correct. And I'm the type of person who could thrive in that closed environment, because I was rather outgoing, and I had a lot to give. And one of the things that I wanted to contribute was a commemoration program, a ritual, something that we could all do together, that wouldn't be a performance of actors, wouldn't involve a passive audience, but that everyone could participate in.

And that's exactly how "Night Words" came into being.

As you can see, the book is put together as if it were a script,

with thirty-six parts, but the idea is that thirty-six is the basic minimum for participation. And everyone who comes is involved in one way or another, because he has the script in front of him.

BOOKSPAN: Let me just stop you for a moment. Is there any chai connection to the number thirty-six? Twice chai, or does that just happen coincidentally?

ROSKIES: It connects with the legend of the thirty-six Just Men, which is one of the most compelling Holocaust images after the work of André Schwarzbart. That's where the number comes from.

BOOKSPAN: But it's not twice the number eighteen, which in Hebrew numerology means life.

ROSKIES: If you wish, you can interpret it that way.

BOOKSPAN: Okay.

ROSKIES: The idea of "Night Words" was to bring the Holocaust into a completely different focus, by viewing it through the prism of the Biblical narrative, and of Jewish liturgy.

BOOKSPAN: Now, if I may, let me just ask you -- let's go back to the Montreal observances of the Holocaust Memorial, which you say were attended by survivors and their offspring. Were your parents in fact survivors?

ROSKIES: Not literally. They escaped from Europe in 1940 -- they got out by the skin of their teeth.

But I grew up feeling myself to be a survivor, in a very deep sense, although biologically it wasn't so.

And I felt at the time that what differentiated Jews from their Christian neighbors was that we -- I and all my friends, was that none of us had grandparents. This really drove home the message that we had lost an entire generation in Europe.

Now the approach of "Night Words" is not an historical one. It's not informative. It's designed for people who know something about the Holocaust, who have already read some of the major books, but need a way of expressing what they feel in a ritual framework.

What I tried to do was devise new types of rituals.

So, for instance, when we say in the Kriyat Shema:

"You shall tie it as a sign on your arms," and that became the proof text for tfillin, for phylacteries; for me that came to mean one thing. It meant the six-digit number, that Jews had inscribed on their left arms, when they came to the camps.

And that was something that I tried to build into the ritual. In other words, the reinterpretation of the Biblical promise, in the light of the Holocaust experience.

Another ritual was that of Halitsah, a very obscure ritual mentioned in the Bible, which involves taking off your left sandal, and spitting in the face of your husband's brother.

I took that to mean that we all have to take our shoes off, when we commemorate the Holocaust. We have to be barefooted, and at the end of the entire ceremony, all the shoes that have been taken off are brought in by the ushers, and piled, heaped in a huge pile, in the center of the auditorium. And there you are, left looking at that pile of shoes, which of course, is all that is left of millions upon millions of Jews.

BOOKSPAN:

Now just from the brief sections from "Night Words" that you've described, one would think that it's a grim, depressing ritual.

It is hardly that, though.

There's a sense of ennoblement, and of fulfillment that one gets out of reading it. And I can imagine what a tremendous dramatic impact it must have when staged, when there is a group participating and in fact going through all these things.

ROSKIES:

I might add that it becomes even more meaningful when it's done by a group of people who know each other. Because seeing your friends and your relatives reading different types of parts, reading the part of Isaac, during the sacrifice of Isaac, or reading the part of a prosecuting attorney, allows you to vicariously imagine what would happen if you and your family and your friends, were thrown back into that world.

BOOKSPAN:

In fact, are there performances of "Night Words" going on, not only as part of a memorialization of the Holocaust, but just in general as a means of Jewish identity?

ROSKIES:

There are two contexts in which "Night Words" is being performed. One is during the week of commemoration. And I'm very gratified that every year I receive letters from all sorts of places, congregations and Hillels, that the script is being used.

In addition, the Ramah camps use it for Tisha b'Av in the middle of the summer because they connect Tisha b'Av with the commemoration of the Holocaust. And they've put this script to use in that context as well.

BOOKSPAN:

If there are any in the audience listening to us now, who would like to at least examine the script, they can secure a copy through the Seminary, I presume.

- ROSKIES: Or better yet, through B'nai B'rith Hillel.
- BOOKSPAN: Now you say that it was the work in Hillel, at Brandeis, that was perhaps among the most satisfying experiences of your college years.
- ROSKIES: We had a very active group at the time, and one that generated all sorts of creative enterprises, mine being just one of many.
- BOOKSPAN: You came there, of course, predisposed toward a deep involvement, and a deep commitment.
- Did you find similarly inclined colleagues in the student body?
- ROSKIES: Well, when I came to Brandeis in 1965, I was a major in NEJS, Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, which at the time was the smallest undergraduate department.
- BOOKSPAN: That's rather ironic, isn't it, for Brandeis University to have that department the smallest?
- ROSKIES: That's true, but by the time I got my doctorate at Brandeis in 1975, the NEJS department was the second largest after English literature.
- So a lot had changed. And the whole consciousness movement, the ethnic revival had made its mark upon Brandeis as well.
- BOOKSPAN: Now there was a time, I presume after your graduation from Brandeis, and I would guess fairly recently, when you and your wife lived in Israel.
- ROSKIES: That's correct. We moved to Israel, I believe in 1973. I don't remember my life in the form of dates.
- We were there for two and a half years.
- And it was at that time that we began to work on the second book, on The Shtetl Book. Somehow or other, it made sense for us, as Diaspora Jews, to leave our memorial for the experience of Diaspora Jewry in Eastern Europe, as we were living in Israel. I think that's how we defined our task at the time.
- BOOKSPAN: Now The Shtetl Book recreates the Eastern European milieu of the nineteenth, early part of the twentieth century, that aspect of Jewish life with which probably most listeners are familiar through "Fiddler on the Roof." But it creates it in, certainly in loving terms, and in terms that transcend what one immediately feels, or may be predisposed toward, toward the shtetl. It creates the life, it puts us as readers right at the center of it, and makes us participants in it.
- Most successfully.

And I congratulate you and your wife on having done so.

How were you able to do it?

ROSKIES:

The model that we were working with was a negative model. As a matter of fact, what we were trying to do was to combat the stereotype of such performances as "Fiddler on the Roof." The ghetto stereotype of what shtetl Jews were, namely, cut off from the rest of the world in some kind of provincial backwater, spending their days and nights praying, and studying the Talmud. A very idealized, and sentimentalized picture.

Now I've always felt that as soon as we, as Jews, and as individuals begin to sentimentalize our past, it means that we cease to take it seriously. We cease to be challenged by it. It doesn't mean the same thing to us anymore, because we have a convenient category.

What we tried to do was to bring together primary and secondary sources about the shtetl and show it in its dynamic relationship with its own past and with the outside world.

So, for instance, we have a whole chapter devoted to Jews and Gentiles. An absolutely essential part of Jewish life was the weekly market. That was the whole basis of the shtetl economy. Jews came into contact every week with the Gentiles. They bought from them, and they sold to them. And, obviously, they had to have been influenced by them. And that's one of the aspects we tried to show.

The Jews were not isolated, they influenced the Gentile world just as the Gentiles influenced them. And you can see that in folklore, and in song, and in customs.

As for the piety of the shtetl Jews, it's true, shtetl Jews were a traditional culture. And Judaism was the same as Yiddishkayt. The performance of ritual was the same as celebration and life.

But life is a multi-variegated thing. It involves Purim plays. It involve's children's games, in the heder. It involves card games, gambling, all sorts of non-sanctioned, and semi-sanctioned activities. So we have a whole chapter called "The Shtetl After Dark," about what Jews did in their leisure time.

Another misunderstood aspect of the shtetl, is that we see it as a monolithic group of people, happily living together. If you ever speak to anyone who grew up in a shtetl, you know that this is not true.

It was divided, and divided along class lines. It was a medieval society, where the rich maintained their control over the poor.

And the middle class was somewhere, as usual, in between.

We tried to show the various class aspects. We didn't give it a Marxist slant, but we tried to show that there were poor Jews, artisans, tailors, and they had a life of their own. There was a merchant class in the middle and, of course, the rabbinic class on top.

But there were a lot of tensions between the three groups. And that, too, has to be understood.

BOOKSPAN:

We're talking with David G. Roskies, who is Assistant Professor of Jewish Literature at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. And we're talking about several of his publications, right now, The Shtetl Book that he and his wife, Diane, compiled.

You say if you speak to a resident of the shtetl, he will tell you thus and so. And work on this book took place in Israel. Were there in fact former shtetl residents readily available to you?

ROSKIES:

There were, as I discovered, back in my hometown in Montreal. Through The Shtetl Book I rediscovered the resources of my native community.

The book centers on one town in Lublin Province, not far from the City of Lublin, called Tishevits. Tishevits, we discovered -- I'd never heard of it before I started work on this book -- has more written about it than any other shtetl in Eastern Europe. And that's because of one family, the Zipper-Shtern family of Montreal, people whom I knew only vaguely as a child.

Yehkiel Shtern wrote an excellent monograph on heder, elementary education, and besmedresh, the house of study, based exclusively on his experiences in Tishevits before the First World War.

His brother, Jacob Zipper, whose real name is Shtern, wrote a semi-fictional novel about Tishevits, called Tsvishn taykhn un Vasern, "Between Rivers and Waters," which is also about Tishevits, where he describes in loving detail the various bridges, leading in and out of the city, and the various aspects of the town.

BOOKSPAN:

There are extraordinary photos of those various bridges in the book.

ROSKIES:

Unfortunately, none of them are of Tishevits itself.

BOOKSPAN:

Oh!

ROSKIES:

There is not one extant photograph of the town.

BOOKSPAN:

Really!

ROSKIES:

All the other photographs are of various places throughout Eastern Europe and not of Tishevits itself. That's the strange paradox.

So, in addition to the written sources, of these two gentlemen, I was able to interview each of them separately, as well as a third brother who also grew up in Tishevits.

That way I put together a map of the town, which they reconstructed from memory. And I discovered that memory is an extremely selective thing. The questions I asked they weren't so willing to answer. I wanted to know about Gentiles. I wanted to know where the Gentiles lived. How many were there? When they came into contact with Jews?

They had blocked most of this out of their memory. It was only with great difficulty that I was able to add that aspect of it into the picture.

So you see, their selective memory actually jibes with what our preoccupation of the shtetl is.

BOOKSPAN:

Not with mine, though, because my mother used to tell me stories of when her father used to go to the yarid, to the market, to deal once a week, and to engage in commerce, and I grew up feeling very strongly that there was a very regular and sometimes very deeply intimate contact between the two societies.

ROSKIES:

Well, the best example, I think, of selective memory, or selective amnesia, is Sholom Aleichem. I think that we draw the stereotypes and images of the shtetl from him most of all.

Now Sholom Aleichem wrote his autobiography, called The Great Fair in English, actually in Yiddish.

There he describes the shtetl that he grew up in, Voronko. And he describes the market, and the town, and the cemetery, and the bathhouse, and the synagogues, and the hadorim. Everything. And you really think this is a total picture of the town he grew in. And he makes the claim that this was in fact the model for his legendary town of Kasrilevke.

So your normal reaction is to read the Kasrilevke stories then as an anthropological document about the shtetl.

Interestingly enough, Sholom Aleichem's brother published his memoirs in 1939, in Kiev in the Soviet Union. In the very first chapter, recalling their childhood, in Voronko, he says that they lived on a street called Church Street. And everyday on the way to heder, his brother Sholemke enjoyed throwing stones into the courtyard of the church. And they passed the church every single

day on their way back and forth from school. The church was the largest and most imposing building in the town that they grew up.

BOOKSPAN: And it doesn't occur anywhere in . . .

ROSKIES: It does not appear in any of the major works of Sholom Aleichem.

BOOKSPAN: Yes. Selective, or amnesiac recall.

ROSKIES: But, of course, that has to do with the literary image. Sholom Aleichem wasn't trying to recreate the shtetl as it was in history, but was creating an artistic construct. And that's one of the things that we, as modern Jews, and modern readers have to keep in mind, when we read literary accounts.

BOOKSPAN: Now I can understand, and you have pretty well defined why it was that the work on this Shtetl Book was accomplished in Israel.

But, was it not, and it is perhaps not still, a paradox?

ROSKIES: That we should have been working on this sitting in Israel?

BOOKSPAN: Yes.

ROSKIES: I suppose so, except that at the time we were living in Israel, and apparently this trend has become more pronounced in recent years, there was a reawakened interest in roots, as we now call it, in the Jewish past.

In Hebrew they call it, _____, Jewish consciousness.

And educators, writers were beginning to alarm the public to the problem of a new generation of Israelis who were completely cut off from their past.

We, in fact, hoped that a Hebrew edition of The Shtetl Book would appear. Perhaps it will one day.

As it is, of course, there's a much larger audience for such works in America than there is in Israel.

I might add -- and this is not readily apparent from the book -- that The Shtetl Book is a textbook. It was written and designed for use in senior high schools, and junior colleges.

It's divided into units, as one would discuss various subjects in the classroom. It is accompanied by a reader's guide, which supplements the text with bibliography and questions, and ideas for classroom exercises.

BOOKSPAN: Is it in fact used as a text?

ROSKIES: I'm happy to say that it is.

BOOKSPAN: Yes, yes.

How much of a dent has it made in Israel?

ROSKIES: Oh, no dent whatsoever.

BOOKSPAN: Yes.

ROSKIES: I'd be very surprised if it's sold in one bookstore in all of Israel.

BOOKSPAN: Really?

Well, there's some tilling of soil to be done in that regard.

Tell me, Dr. Roskies, as the Assistant Professor of Jewish Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, do you find that the young students, most of whom in fact -- the great majority of whom are headed toward careers in the rabbinate -- are interested in the Jewish roots -- the past, the shtetl life. And what came before?

ROSKIES: I think they are, because Yiddish is the best kept secret of American Jewry.

Most of the student I teach now heard Yiddish spoken in the home as the language of secrets. And now they want to crack the secret.

In the broader sense, it means that they don't have contact with their immediate past, with the world of their parents and their grandparents. The world of folklore, which exists only in Yiddish.

I would call it the underside of Jewish history, which never comes through in the official accounts. There is much interest now in studying Yiddish literature, Yiddish folklore, and the anthropology and cultural history of Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

BOOKSPAN: We've mentioned Sholom Aleichem several times. Are some of the other great figures of that era, Mendel, and some of the others, equally interesting to the current, young Jewish students, scholars, and just plain interested people?

ROSKIES: Yes. As a matter of fact, my own interest is in the modernist trends in Yiddish literature, and I've been able to expose my students to some of the great modern writers, who lived mostly right here in New York, writers like Jacob Glatstein and A. Glanz-Leyeles, who reshaped the Jewish experience in light of modern life. In light of psychology, Freudian psychology, in

light of political pressures.

In their work, one sees how terribly difficult it is to live as a Jew in the modern world. And that comes through in their poetry, and in their prose.

This is a development that came out of Yiddish literature since the First World War, and it involves lesser known writers, but writers that I think have as much or even more to tell us than the classicists.

BOOKSPAN: How about Hayim Greenberg? Does he figure in there at all?

ROSKIES: If you said Chaim Grade, I would say yes.

Hayim Greenberg is on the fringes of ideology and literature. So I have not, up to the present, taught his work.

BOOKSPAN: I say Hayim Greenberg because he happened to have been a friend of my family's.

And I knew him peripherally as I was growing up, a man of extraordinary knowledge, and great intellect I thought.

ROSKIES: Allow me to put in a plug for my work in our department.

Something is changing in the Seminary. There are new developments in relationship to Yiddish literature. In the Fall of 1978 we will be inaugurating a graduate program in Yiddish literature. No such program exists in North America.

The only other place you can get a degree of that kind is in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University.

This will be a part of the Department of Jewish Literature. Students will be expected to have learned Yiddish already, probably at Columbia next door, and then they will study literature with us.

In addition, undergraduate students, as of next year, will be taking for the very first time, an introductory course in Yiddish literature, in Hebrew translation. All our undergraduate courses are taught in Hebrew, and so will this. Now they will be able to study the Yiddish roots of modern Hebrew culture.

BOOKSPAN: I think that's a very worthwhile and a most welcome development. I would be interested five years from now to know how many have gone through that sort of graduate work, and what they have done with it.

I'm sure you'd be interested in that, too.

ROSKIES: I'd be glad to report back to you five years from now.

BOOKSPAN: That's a date.

Thank you very much Dr. David G. Roskies. It's been a pleasure speaking with you and hearing about this at the very end of our conversation, this exciting new development at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

ROSKIES: Thank you.

ANNOUNCER: Today's program was "A Conversation with David Roskies," Assistant Professor of Jewish Literature at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, whose works include The Shtetl Book and "Night Words," a Midrash on the Holocaust.

Speaking with Dr. Roskies was Martin Bookspan, critic and commentator.

If you would like a copy of today's program, please send your name and address, with fifty cents to cover the cost of postage and handling to The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 3080 Broadway, New York, New York 10027.

We invite you to join us again next week when THE ETERNAL LIGHT will present "A Conversation with Dan Rottenberg," author of Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy.

This is Vic Roby. THE ETERNAL LIGHT is produced for NBC by Rhoda Grady, and was directed by Joan Starr. For the Seminary, Milton E. Krents, Executive Producer; Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser, Program Editor; and Karen Kaitz, Program Coordinator.

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