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God the Implausible Kinsman

AGAINST THE APOCALYPSE
Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture.
By David G. Roskies.
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By Arthur A. Cohen

IMAGES of apocalyptic doom have been before mankind since ancient days, each immensity of destruction calling forth from its victims a literature of terror that prophesied the destruction would be total and civilization would perish from the earth. The archetypes of apocalypse were refurbished during the barbarian invasions at the end of the Roman Empire and acquired renewed potency in Christendom after the sack of Rome. They recurred again with the Moslem conquest of Christian Spain, the Black Death, the religious wars of the 16th century, even the Napoleonic era. During the Nazi hegemony, however, when apocalypse seemed most threatening, the literature of Christian nations hardly projected a vision of doom. Only among the Nazis themselves was there apocalypic clamor. Only among the Jews was the apocalypse realized. It is no wonder then that with Nazism destroyed, what remains of its apocalyptic dream is its ideological literature, which commends the world to the glory of the Reich or to its destruction. If not victory, then conflagration was Hitler's testamentary wish. And for Jews the issue has been no less ultimate — having been slaughtered, survive; having been once more ravaged by history, transform its evidence into the occasion for new beginnings.

Jewish survival has never been, however, a matter of sheer endurance. Survival in the face of disaster has always been a quasi-historical, quasi-metaphysical accommodation, enforced by a millennial religious tradition that assimilated and froze catastrophic occurrences into analogues of Biblical events and personalities, which were then incorporated into popular liturgies of commemoration. Long before a scientifically scrupulous historiography arose in the Jewish world as a complement to its cultural enfranchisement in the 19th century, Jews absorbed historical events into their religious mythology, making every miserable encounter with a hostile world an occasion for describing a new sacrifice by Abraham of his beloved son, another punishment wrought upon Israel by the God of Isaiah and Jeremiah, another burning of the Temple by Titus, another martyrology of saints massacred by Emperor Hadrian. In other words, history was made more vivid, more persuasive and instructive, and finally more redemptive by seeing in its episodes of massacre and destruction a lesson already dictated by ancient Scripture and liturgy. All this is the introductory background against which David Roskies sets his magisterial account of the literary models projected by a century of Yiddish and Hebrew writers to incite and transform the catastrophes that have befallen the Jewish people in the modern world.

During the last hundred years, dating from the early pogroms in Czarist Russia in 1881 and 1882, the fundamental scheme of liturgical and mythological transformation ended. Jews no longer maintained a passive docility before their fate; although they continued to be subject to massacre their response ceased to be a simple expansion of the ancient archetypes to accomodate new disaster. The classical theology no longer held. The new voices were for the first time liberated from the pious submission implicit in the doctrine of "for all our sins are we slain." David Roskies has devoted his eloquent and moving book "Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture" to the passage from a "liturgy of destruction" to an explosive modern literature that stripped pogrom and massacre of any and all providential significance. The double process — cutting away the dead skin of ancient doctrine while at the same time generating a new mythology of individual and collective heroism — is the constant theme of Mr. Roskies's inquiry.

If all the developments during the past century were of a single piece, Mr. Roskies's achievement would have been more limited. His work would have been one of defining a single literary language and the changes rung upon a single theme. But that has not been the case. The premodern Jewish world was undoubtedly marked by a defective historical sense and a rich compensatory liturgical life by which the unacceptable history of persecution was rationalized. However, the Enlightenment and emancipation did more than simply break down the insularity of the Jewish world. They compelled as well a seismic shift in the traditional categories of Jewish self-understanding, by introducing for the first time secular criteria into the interpretation of what had previously been received with almost fatalistic acquiescence. Moreover, by the late 19th century the Eastern European Jewries of Poland, Great Russia and the Ukraine were no longer the unanimous communities they had been before the Cossack massacres of 1648-49 and the emergence of the messianic heresy of Sabbatianism and the rise of Hasidism in their aftermath. The once spiritually unified Jewish world was now bitterly polarized between mystics and religious rationalists, educated and ignorant, rich and poor. It is no wonder then that the assaults of the secular imagination upon the conservative bastions of Jewish traditionalism should have had such a shattering effect.

THE single binding experience of all these contentious and unreconciled Jewries of Eastern Europe, Mr. Roskies makes abundantly clear, was the repetitious and increasingly powerful reality of persecution. What began as an affair of rampaging and looting soldiers and peasants, raped women, battered children — the themes of those Marc Chagall paintings whose imagery Mr. Roskies cites as evidence of Jewish response in painting to catastrophe — had acquired by the First World War massive proportions. Persecution joined German anti-Semitism to that of Poland and Russia, crushing the Jews caught between, expanded again during the Civil War that engulfed the Soviet Union in 1918-19 when Trotsky's Reds and Petlura's Whites were believed to have murdered 60,000 Jews in the Ukraine, and increased a hundredfold when Eastern European Jewry was destroyed forever a generation later.

The secular literary response to such disasters would have had little impact upon the general Jewish community had there not occurred after the accession of Czar Alexander II in 1856 a relaxation of censorship that made possible for the first time in the Jewish world the development of a Yiddish and Hebrew press. Moreover, freeing the serfs, granting permission to limited number of Jews to settle in Great Russia, containment of the impressment gangs that had forced Jewish children into 25-year terms of service in the Army, all combined to introduce during the 1860's a spirit of liberalism and hope into the Jewish world, and with them a philosophic and social agenda that criticized Jewish traditional life while at the same time encouraging its youth to desert it.

Such enthusiasm was cut short by the Odessa pogrom of 1871, which destroyed a vast amount of property, though without causing any loss of life. The literary response began with a somewhat prosaic pogrom novel by Yekutiel Berman. Rather more to the point, however, of Mr. Roskies's thesis is the allegorical fiction by S. Y. Abramovitsh, "The Mare, or Pity the Poor Animal," in which the pogrom is transformed into a metaphysical model Abramovitsh employs to instruct Jews about every form of social and political corruption and devastation.

The period from that early beginning after Odessa to the poetry of Abraham Sutzkever nearly a century later carries the weight of Mr. Roskies's daring and comprehensive study. Mr. Roskies demonstrates that in the modern world literature replaced liturgy, the Jews of Eastern Europe and the Yiddish-speaking enclaves of America turning to the prosodists and poets of Yiddish and Hebrew to provide them with new readings of their condition. What is from the outset remarkable is that although the leading figures of modern Jewish literature were for the most part antireligious, they nonetheless spoke of God as an inscrutable or implausible kinsman; the Bible, rabbinic commentaries, medieval poetry and philosophy constituted their national literature. Moreover, they were all minimally trilingual, with a knowledge of Yiddish and Hebrew as well as the language of the country in which they lived — Russian, Polish, German, or English. Such conditions of cultural secularization encouraged the new writers to suppress the traditional patterns of mythologizing disaster as a divine archetype in order that new forms of response could be matured. Clearly the new literature would never again supply Jews with a ready system for rationalizing and adjusting to catastrophe without a fight.


"The Martyr," by Marc Chagall, 1940.

The crucial pogrom for Jewish literature was the butchery of the community of Kishinev in Russia during Passover 1903. "Born under the sign of history," as Mr. Roskies puts it, Jewish writers and intellectuals gathered in Odessa during that spring and issued a Hebrew manifesto calling for self-defense and preparedness. National consciousness congealed and the politicization of Jewish life under the combative banner of Zionism and socialism began. Attending this gathering was the great poet of the Hebrew renaissance, Chaim Nahman Bialik (born 1873) whose poetry before and after Kishinev was to supply Jewry with a secular litany of rage and vengeance, directed not so much against the perpetrators as against the hangman divinity whose white garments are stained with the blood of his chosen people. No sacred history was left for Bialik and his generation; indeed, as Mr. Roskies sums up the matter, it was "Bialik's purpose . . . to desacralize history in God's name."

The program of desacralization, pressed forward by an astonishing variety of writers, required an ever more extraordinary and scarifying metaphor with which to document the frequent and brutal assaults upon Jewish life. It is a revelation to learn from Mr. Roskies's close inspection of each pogrom the literary and political response it evoked — to learn how Lamed Shapiro, living in New York and Chicago, could still find fresh language to invoke the impotent God of the Jews; or how a panic-stricken Isaac Babel could record his horror in "Red Cavalry" "at the great number of memorials still to be written"; or how Avrom Akselrod in the ghetto of Kovno in World War II composed in the style of the ancient psalmist a new Song of Ascent in which Jewish Councils and Jewish police were reviled in slangy jingle rhymes.

As Mr. Roskies's account reaches the Second World War, the literature becomes more painful, the poetry more desperate, the imagery almost scatologically brutal. Jewish poets have spoken about the Holocaust much more effectively than the novelists. In the case of Abraham Sutzkever (born 1913), the greatest poet of the Holocaust, who was also a leader of the Vilna ghetto and a partisan fighter, the achievement proves to be stunning, almost unbearable. In a lengthy chapter, Mr. Roskies examines each of Sutzkever's principal images and elicits the historical core that vivifies it. It would have been enough, he tells us, had Sutzkever been only "a symbol of hope and creative power for the powerless Jews of the ghetto," but he was much more. As "the foremost among Jewish poets" Sutzkever "made the memory of the dead the nexus of his artistic expression." In his major prose poem, "Green Aquarium," Sutzkever accomplishes the transcendence of the dead by proposing the victory of poetry over death, art over destruction, neo-classical form over chaos, and the beauty of what remains in the universe after barbarism has done its terrible work. Mr. Roskies's own translations of passages from many of Sutzkever's poems (along with those of his distinguished sister, Ruth Wisse) would have been sufficient to make his book indispensable. As it is, what Mr. Roskies has accomplished in "Against the Apocalypse" documents a virtually unknown chapter in the history of the refusal of Jews throughout the ages to surrender and call it quits. □