

The will to survive

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DAVID G. ROSKIES

Against the Apocalypse: Responses to catastrophe in modern Jewish culture
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However odd it was of God to choose the Jews, Jewish survival down the millennia remains one of the world's great mysteries, compelling wonder and a kind of grudging admiration even among those who would prefer the Jews to disappear. David G. Roskies offers an explanation of how this was achieved. In *Against the Apocalypse*, he presents a literature (almost entirely unknown to non-Jews) that expresses the Jews' stubborn will to survive. In so doing, he plausibly shows how loss and destruction, uprooting and death (endlessly repeated in collective experience) were somehow accommodated within the Jewish psyche; expressed in the liturgy and commemorated in ritual they re-established continuity with the past and provided some hope for the future.

In his survey of Jewish literature, with special emphasis on works arising from the unique devastations of this century in Eastern Europe, Roskies initially analyses traditions of response to catastrophe embedded in liturgy, accessible and familiar to any Jew in the pre-modern era. With each disaster experienced as if it had predecessors and biblical analogues – a massacre or expulsion as if it were punishment visited by God on rebellious Israel, each destroyed community recalling the Roman destruction of Jerusalem – Jews were able to make some sense of calamity, drawing meaning and strength from repeated blows that might otherwise have utterly demoralized them. Historical events, Roskies reminds us, were felt and absorbed without regard to their actual details: the archetype for all destructions was the Destruction; the text for all mourning, the Book of Lamentations. For Jews still bound by their traditions, no events were random: even the direst catastrophe was part of a lesson that, despite its terrors, had redemptive implications. Going to their separate anguished deaths, Jews were sustained by specific instances of earlier martyrs, exemplars of piety and faith whose names and last words were intimately familiar from the prayer-book.

Devoting the largest part of his study to liter-

ature created mostly in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century and after, Roskies describes how the older Jewish tradition of almost fatalistic acceptance of apocalyptic events was shattered by secularism that deprived pogroms of their mythic character. With the exposure of the hermetic Jewish world to the currents of emancipation, new literary forms also appeared: satires, parodies, ironic arguments written in Hebrew, Yiddish and even European vernaculars that attempted to extrude God from Jewish history. Feeling themselves abandoned by even an angry God, Jewish writers were also bereft of the nourishing comforts of community: the Jewries of Russia, the Ukraine and Poland were riven by bitter antagonisms between Hasidim and rationalists, rich and poor, the educated and the ignorant. Most damaging to Jewish tradition perhaps was the liberal and then socialist ideology that harshly criticized ancient assumptions and encouraged disaffected youth, dazzled by European literature and philosophy, to desert the prayer-houses and Talmudical academies for the wider world. The only constant in these decades of social, religious and intellectual upheaval was the relentless persecution that seemed, despite all evidence of enlightenment and progress elsewhere, to re-enact, in Eastern Europe, patterns of ancient destruction.

The shock of successive and increasingly savage pogroms in Russia led to a new genre, the pogrom poem, written in Hebrew and Yiddish. Despite its consciously subversive programme (occasionally blasphemous, always shocking) it ironically remained very much within the form that subordinated particular details of time and place to timeless archetypes that would not have been unfamiliar to earlier rabbinic poets. The "sustaining values of redemption and retribution" may have been rejected, but the pogrom poem was still addressed solely to a Jewish audience, and was, by its very nature, part of the continuing tradition that its authors – Bialik, Leivick, Markish, Leyeles, to name the most prominent – aimed to jettison. Roskies traces the development of yet another form of literary response, which came into its own after events such as the Kishinev pogrom in 1903: an angry refusal to call on even an inscrutable God, but, instead, issuing a cry for vengeance, militant preparedness and self-defence. Jewish communities suffered unprecedented devastation during the Great War

and the Russian Revolution; when destruction had become universal, notions of sin, retribution and redemption seemed merely irrelevant. Isaac Babel, for whom the Red Cavalry was both symbol and vehicle of sustained, universal violence, represented the outstanding example of a radical break with the Jewish past. The ability to kill, cut off from all the communal ties and ancient inhibitions, became for him the touchstone of a full acceptance of life.

In the Nazi-created ghettos of the Second World War, writing – an act of faith, implying an audience to be addressed still in Hebrew, Yiddish or Polish – came to be the last testament for many writers, part of a survival strategy. Roskies sees the Holocaust itself as its own archetype when, in 1942, "they took away the children, because without the children there was no hope whatsoever". Abraham Sutzkever, a partisan fighter and leader of the Vilna ghetto, wrote within and about the Holocaust, and never ceased to insist that writing mattered, that creating art in the midst of destruction was imperative. He knew also that his audience and his culture were perishing about him. Roskies's discussion of Sutzkever's work, and translations of his poetry, will bring to a wider audience his stern message that suffering must somehow be transmuted into beauty.

In the graphic works of Samuel Bak and Yosif Bergner, with which Roskies concludes his book, we see the ultimate break with tradition, and the creation of a new vision of catastrophe: in a haunting canvas by Bergner entitled "Destination X", objects looted from Jewish homes – endless ranks of chairs, mirrors, wardrobes, and samovars – are seen marching into exile, disciplined though leaderless, without destination, under a lowering sky. With such works, Roskies contends, destruction has been fashioned "into a new set of tablets" and the apocalypse is thus not merely commemorated and mourned, but somehow transcended.

Roskies's work, densely argued, richly allusive, exemplary in its far-ranging scholarship, is itself a deeply felt response to the Holocaust and its memories; an affirmation of continuities as well as violent endings. It is none the less suffused with sadness, for, as he himself tells us, "as surely as this is a book written in English, the language of the most recent Jewish dispersion, it is just as certain that the culture described here is gone". David Roskies has drawn for us a map to a vanished continent.

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