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The Covenant throughout time has been one of the most powerful living symbols of Jewish identity. Read in light of the whole of Jewish history, God's words to Abraham transcend any specific time or even place; the promise is a testament to the perceived immortality of the people. As the fulcrum of the relationship between God and man, the Covenant has demanded action of both: from God, justice; from man, belief in and commitment to the divine. To borrow a phrase of T S Eliot's, the Covenant is a constant reminder of "the present moment of the past." In itself a mere bit of poetry sprung from the imagination, the Covenant's place in history is of a tangible link embracing past and present--and future.

Yet the Covenant's durability depends less, perhaps, on its place in history than on its historical manifestations as covenant. There is an entire world that exists between the two, or rather several worlds; each generation must interpret the Covenant in its own way, and in doing so must wrestle with its own place in Judaism and in life. The literature of the pogroms and the shtetl written in the early part of this century is a literature of a world gone mad. This covenantal response, therefore, is strikingly dissimilar to the revered Covenant of Old. God is no longer looked upon to provide justice, for the ideal of justice has long been swept away, and the idea of God is as foreign as the hope for peace.

The outpouring of emotions from these writers is not a literature of longing, either for the world gone by or the world yet to come, both dominant themes of the old model of response. This is, rather, a literature of action, of conflict, of horror made all the more tragic because it comes from within the community. The patterns of response presented here are different from those of any other time or place; what fully binds them together as a new covenant, however, are the motivations behind the actions.

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In many ways, the circumstances of the times ushered in an age of immorality: the new covenant is enforced by a band of lawless, godless young people who in rebel almost indistinguishably against God, tradition (both religious and political) and their elders. The language they speak finds its voice in corruption, in prostitution (of the soul and mind as well as the body) and most especially in violence. Their new philosophy, however, is one based almost entirely on the need for survival. Consider,

for example, this exchange from Weissenberg's "A Shtetl"; in a few words much of the entire conflict is exemplified, and the use of the universal "A" is not likely to be accidental.

"Help! Arms!" screamed the rabbi, tearing himself by the hair.

"Help! Arms! There are no arms...only psalms! Psalms!"

"No psalms!" Yekl outshouted him, "only arms, real arms!" (243)

For Yekl, action—even action manifested in violence—rather than prayer is the means to an end. Rabbinic authority, furthermore, is no longer viable, for in man's necessary confrontation with his enemy that authority held not even the outer show of power. These qualities are significant features of the communal covenant. The death of the old world meant the birth of the new; the inability of each to coexist with the other is indicative of how widespread were both the conflicts and the solutions.

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The schism is vividly detailed in the relationship between Reb Simcha and his daughter Henya that underscores so much of Hazaz's "Revolutionary Chapters." The generational gap, for instance, is clearly evident as the father asks his child, "Do you rally think that since I never studied geography and Sherlock Holmes, I lack all understanding?" (449) Beneath the obvious humor of the line is a very serious element; a boundary once crossed can never be recovered. Henya is, despite her father, a child of the secular world, a child who finds the manifesto of Communism as sacred as another generation finds the biblical text. "...redemption has come to the proletariat!" (452) she triumphantly declares, and her vision of that redemption is an outgrowth of the new covenant, a covenant made and kept by man.

How strongly Henya's radical future contrasts with her father's past, which has ceased to be personal but has become solely the past of the Jewish people. He has forgotten his own childhood, yet he still remembers "the Garden Eden well, the angels singing, the Tree of Life in the garden, and the incorporeality of the Holy One blessed be He." (474) The dominating image of the all-powerful God has no place in the new covenantal scheme.

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In the absence of a covenant, old or new, existence rather than survival is the primary theme. "I have an impulse to wake Buzi. To let her know, even more urgently, that she is here. That she is mine," says Ayzik in Kipnis' "Months and Days" (553). The same notion, however, predominates: in a world without God, there is only man, and we have only each other.

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