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ASHKENAZIC JEWRY AND CATASTROPHE

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When Simon Dubnow was invited to contribute to the first volume of the Yiddish-language *Historishe shriftn* (published in 1929), he submitted a piece on the 18th-century Jewish catastrophe in Uman. The article, an essay accompanying two annotated versions of Jewish folk chronicles on the massacre, was written in 1921 in the wake of the Ukrainian pogroms of the previous year that left as many as 70,000 Jews dead. The tone of Dubnow's essay was pained, passionate and uncompromising. He used his scholarly platform to minimize the importance of social, economic or political considerations in understanding the causes of any of the three major Ukrainian massacres of Jews, a puzzling stance for Dubnow since he was European Jewry's leading advocate of historicism. Yet he stated that the Khmelnitsky pogroms of 1648, the Uman massacre and the recent devastations following World War I were part of a continuous, seamless saga: 'When we look at these catastrophes, which have erupted one after the other every 120–150 years, one sees in them the same exact picture.' The tools of historical analysis, he seemed to be saying, are impotent when confronted with such unremitting horror. One is left merely to chronicle, mourn and rage.

Reactions to catastrophe such as Dubnow's, observes David G. Roskies in *Against the Apocalypse*, with their tendency to concentrate on the cyclical nature of horror, are harmful and yet very persuasive.[1] Indeed, the tendency to understand catastrophe along these lines is deeply embedded in the Jewish consciousness, he contends. Such responses may be traced back to rabbinical liturgical poetry and even earlier; they continue to shape Jewish literary reactions to catastrophe to the present day.

Roskies sets out to challenge this. In his ambitious, rich and profoundly engaged book, he proposes that running parallel to such trends in Jewish cultural life is an alternative tradition as embodied most vividly in the 'neo-classical' writings of Yiddish literature. These writings challenge, deny and transcend the apocalyptic vision of the Jewish past and future. The neo-

classicist writers, says Roskies, are engaged in the retrieval of a usable past for the sake of a reconstructed Jewry. In the Middle Ages the exponents of this orientation, or a rather early variation of it, emphasized contrition over horror in the face of catastrophe; when pious responses eventually proved inadequate, previously persuasive reactions were parodied in modern Jewish literature. Even these counter-traditional stances proved to re-inforce neo-classicist commitments.

Neo-classicists emerge, says Roskies, in the wake of crisis,'when the tablets are most clearly shattered, the letters most visibly struck out, and the people most widely dispersed' (p. 258). They extract from sacred texts those experiences, folk memories, and laments of the past that can be put to use in the present. Roskies explores how neo-classicists like S. Ansky, author of the famous play *The Dybbuk*, the masterly Yiddish writer S. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher Sforim) and Abraham Sutzkever, among others, construct out of the fragments of the past new affirmations and more resonant responses than the texts they build upon could ever have evoked.

The literary texts, primarily in Yiddish, that Roskies uses provide a key to understanding what he considers to be the best and worst reactions to Jewish *hurbn* or catastrophe. He argues for the need to maintain and revitalize the neo-classical tradition, particularly because Jewish reactions in recent decades have been so powerfully shaped by a preoccupation with apocalypse. Catastrophe has assumed in Jewish life an increasing importance since the 1967 Six-Day War, and the abominations of the distant past have been largely subsumed in the popular Jewish imagination by the technocratic horrors of Auschwitz. The Holocaust now helps shape, to an extent one would have thought impossible only a decade ago, public life in Israel and Jewish communal life elsewhere. It is one of the ironies of contemporary Jewish life that there seems so little connection between the relative comfort, affluence and apparent security of a Jewish community and its preoccupation with the Holocaust. Auschwitz has become for many Jews a key to the understanding of the most diverse issues, including Soviet policy toward Jews, Arab attitudes toward Israel, and the wages of American-Jewish wealth and influence.

Roskies challenges this state of affairs. 'The Jewish people', he writes,

> are at the point of turning the tables on themselves, of allowing the Holocaust to become the crucible of their culture. I have set out to challenge this apocalyptic tendency by arguing for the vitality of traditions of Jewish response to catastrophe, never as great as in the last hundred years. And responses to the Holocaust do not mark the end of the process. Elsewhere in the Jewish world, where the war still goes on, traditions of remembrance have been revived, and that too is part of my story (p.9).

Literary producers and consumers, élite and Jewish masses are bound together, Roskies believes, by persistent cultural archetypes that refer them back to ancient metaphors which continually gain new vitality through reassessment and even subversion. The study of literature can then help illuminate Jewry's deepest beliefs. Textual analysis for Roskies is inextricably wedded to tendentious ends. His goal is twofold: he sets out to analyse Jewish texts in an effort to reshape contemporary Jewish commitments. He sees no contradiction between the two goals. He draws on a Jewish historiographical tradition that, since its origins with the appearance of the 'Science of Judaism' school in the early 19th century, has been committed to using scrutiny of the Jewish past as a way of elucidating principles that might guide Jewry in the present. No recent work of Jewish scholarship has endeavoured to do this quite so explicitly and boldly.

There is much in this book that may grate on specialists. The author moves with dizzying speed from literary analysis to declamations about the modern Jewish consciousness; crucial terms such as 'archetype' or even 'consciousness' are never evaluated in any systematic way. Most puzzling is Roskies' insistence that sharp distinctions be drawn between 'neo-classicist' and 'apocalyptic' responses when they share in common, as he acknowledges, a tendency to de-contextualize historical events. Ideas are continually tested, half-tested, and then suddenly dropped by the author. (For example, what does Roskies mean when he says in the paragraph quoted above that 'the war still goes on'? And what 'process' is he referring to? Is it really useful to speak of the reactions of present-day Israelis and Warsaw ghetto fighters as part of one process?) Nonetheless, this is without doubt one of the most stimulating works on East European Jewish culture in recent memory.

The first text analysed by Roskies is Lamentations, written in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple (586 BC). In this text God's promises were affirmed by a subtle reinterpretation. Here, as in Deuteronomy, catastrophe testifies not to God's withdrawal from His covenant but to Israel's punishment. Embraced is a world view that sees God's role in linear rather than cyclical terms. This God-centred view of the world contrasts, according to Roskies, with mythical-cyclical views also evident in ancient Jewish literature but 'borrowed, lock, stock, and barrel, from Egypt and Mesopotamia' (p.20). The first, he suggests, is more fundamentally Jewish than the second, a rather mechanistic distinction that is largely rejected by recent biblical scholarship.

Rabbinic literature eventually emptied historical events of their concrete particulars. Basing himself on Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's sensitive historiographical essay, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (University of Washington Press, 1982), where the Columbia University historian observes that, once the *torah* was divided into portions read on consecutive weeks and year after year, history came to be experienced by

Jews 'cyclically, repetitively, and to that extent, at least, atemporarily' (pp.41–2), Roskies sees rabbinic sources as establishing patterns that would persist until the present day. The *kinot*, or liturgical dirges composed over the course of some 800 years from around AD 200, reinterpreted the biblical binding of Isaac as a metaphor for Jewish election and suffering. The binding of Isaac was utilized for the first time on a widespread scale as a justification for Jewish martyrdom by Franco-German Jewry in the Crusader period. Hence a paradigm that would seem at first glance to be thoroughly inadequate – particularly since Isaac was never put to death – was used effectively to shape expectations and actions. Martyrdom, in fact only one of several Jewish responses to crisis at the time of the Crusades, was thereby legitimized and even sanctified. Consequently martyrdom was linked with the story of Isaac's binding and mass martyrdom with the destruction of a sanctified place, likened, in other words, to the *hurbn* of the holy Temple. The most evocative liturgical texts, says Roskies, were generally those that were the most archetypical, conventional, and anonymous.

The bulk of this study treats modern responses, but even in its brief survey of Judaism's ancient and medieval literature an important, unresolved tension is apparent, a tension resulting from the author's effort to function as both a scholarly and moralistic explicator of texts, as an academic and a *Maggid*. Roskies, as a responsible and subtle reader of texts, is committed to reviewing the major examples of catastrophe literature; but since his primary goal seems to be to shape beliefs rather than merely literary tastes, he tends to stress not necessarily the most representative literature but rather those texts he feels to be exemplary and which might best serve as models for Jewish literary, ethical and political responses in the future. What this means is that while *Against the Apocalypse* is engaged in literary interpretation it is at the same time itself committed to performing tasks similar to those executed by the texts it analyses. Roskies' book is a work of literary criticism that sees itself – unabashedly and explicitly – as a primary text. The resulting tension lends the work considerable vigour. Yet, however impressed one may be with Roskies' intelligence, verve and industry, the tension between his book's scholarly and tendentious goals is neither successfully resolved nor even addressed.

This is made even clearer by the author when he comes to the 19th century. Here the fact that the texts that he uses are of a very different order as are the criteria he utilizes for their selection make the tendentious goals of this book all the more apparent. He seeks primarily to identify 'counter-traditional' responses to authority, a tradition 'with its own hallowed texts and radical authority' (p.207). He continues to argue that what interests him primarily is liturgy, and he consistently minimizes distinctions between popular and élitist responses in Jewish cultural life. The writers that most interest him are S. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher Sforim),

S. Ansky and Abraham Sutzkever, who tend to update and subvert rather than reject the old and who bring together in their work the 'sum total of past possibilities' and show this sum to constitute the beginning of a radical counter-tradition. Interestingly, Roskies almost entirely abandons the religiously traditional elements of the community whose penitential attitudes towards catastrophe, as he acknowledges, were repeatedly challenged by modernity's mounting horrors. It would have been fascinating to see their reactions compared with those of 'modernists'. This task is shunted aside, one suspects, because it would constitute a diversion from the book's larger goals. Roskies justifies the omission, rather unsatisfactorily I think, by saying that 'archetypes of destruction . . . were all alive in the minds of the common people and intellectuals alike, even those emancipated from religious practice, due to the folk and modern literary responses to catastrophes that had evolved since the 1840s' (p.197).

But his examination, based on the pioneering work of Dan Miron and others, of the development of the neo-classicist literary tradition in the 19th century is impressive. He shows that thanks to Abramovitsh, for instance, parody assumes a central role in responses to catastrophe. Particularly effective is Abramovitsh's story 'The Wishing Ring or the Vale of Tears', where he writes about Jewish refugees fleeing a devastated East European Jewish town that they visualize as a contemporary counterpart to those holy and martyred medieval communities levelled by the Crusaders. This miserable flock wanders in search of aid and calls on the sympathy of Jews by consciously evoking a host of metaphors culled from biblical and rabbinic liturgical literature. Their use of such hallowed metaphors is eventually challenged when it is revealed that their town burnt down because of their own poverty, irresponsibility and indolence. Abramovitsh also reveals that catastrophe unleashes unsavoury passions like fanaticism and exaggerated grief and that these challenge sanctified Jewish myths about the exalted victim. (For another recent and perceptive treatment of Abramovitsh's work on this theme see Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* [Columbia University Press, 1984], pp. 109–123.)

Roskies argues that the dominant conceptual structures that shaped Jewish responses to catastrophe in pre-modern times – premised as they were on a strategy of containment and contrition – broke down in the 19th century just as violence became increasingly pervasive and destructive. A series of 'pogrom poems' was written by Peretz Markish, Moyshe Leyb Halpern and, most significantly, Chaim Nachman Bialik, where all covenants, sacred and secular, were reviled. In these poems the Jews' powerlessness was a measure of God's and the poets accept without anguish (certainly Moyshe Leyb Halpern in 'A Night') a desanctified universe devoid of God. Yet, suggests Roskies, while these seemingly heretical pogrom poems reviled history, they contributed toward the commitment to memory, and by the fact that they enriched the Jewish languages, either Hebrew or Yiddish, in which they were written. The best known is Bialik's Hebrew masterpiece, 'On the City of Slaughter', inspired by the 1903 Kishinev pogrom which left 49 Jews dead. Here the young Hebrew poet, sent to Kishinev to collect data for possible litigation by an Odessa-based committee, abandoned his reportage for this violently anti-liturgical poem which, despite its heretical content, constituted an exercise in memory and affirmation.

Roskies justifiably focuses much attention on Jewry's perceptions of World War I and on the extraordinary memoirs of the Jewish ethnographer, dramatist and communal worker, S. Ansky. World War I provides a valuable perspective on attitudes to *hurbn*, and a conceptual framework for the study of perceptions of catastrophe generated by the European war is readily available in Paul Fussell's excellent, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975), which Roskies acknowledges has a major influence on his work. This examination of British reactions is surprisingly relevant since it analyses the ways in which horror is shaped and mediated by a profoundly literary people with a readily accessible canonized literature. Moreover, within East European Jewry premonitions of *hurbn*, such as the chillingly prescient visions of mechanized horror in the pre-war poetry of Zalman Schneour, were given special impetus during the war by the vandalism, expulsions, severe economic dislocations and officially sanctioned anti-semitism that it engendered. World War I provided the Jewish writer, perhaps to an even greater extent than non-Jews, with a unique window on horror; the prospect of *hurbn* was lent a new immediacy when entire *shtetls* were destroyed and emptied of their inhabitants by invading armies and marauders. In early 1915, it seemed to Ansky that an entire 'tribe of Israel', the Jews of Galicia, was threatened with destruction. Within a year, the scale of destruction had only widened and deepened.

Ansky's four-volume memoir *Hurbn Galitsye*, based on a diary he kept while he served as a relief worker in East Galicia, the Ukraine, Lithuania and elsewhere is, at one and the same time, a gruesome travelogue, a record of cultural retrieval and a literary recreation of a noble and now irredeemably threatened civilization. The prospect of *hurbn* was for Ansky a reality long before August 1914. Three years earlier he embarked on a well-staffed expedition that surveyed the townlets of south Russia with the clear intention of capturing what was in Ansky's view a world on the verge of ruin. In Ansky, Roskies sees the quintessential neo-classicist who combines an intimate knowledge of Jewish and European culture and who is uniquely equipped to engage in the retrieval of a usable past for the sake of a reconstructed Jewry.

Yet Roskies' use of *Hurbn Galitsye* as a reliable chronicle of folk responses to catastrophe and his perspective on Ansky himself, as a man engaged both in reflecting and refashioning Jewish cultural archetypes, is rather problematic. Roskies well understands that Ansky's responses to catastrophe owe much to Russian ethnographic (and political) influences along with certain Jewish nationalist assumptions about the nature of violence, gentiles and modernity. These are the products of a tradition of their own, which links Ansky more closely to pioneers of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature than necessarily to the deepest aspirations of the Jewish *folk*. Was it somewhat easier for a secular intellectual such as Ansky, who had long before lost his faith in the messianic promises of classical Judaism, to be persuaded that Jewry was faced with the horrors of *hurbn* than it was for the masses of Jews he so courageously aided during the war? Ansky, as Roskies readily admits, attempts to shape his memoir, in the tradition of the Jewish ethnographic autobiography, around the experiences of the collective rather than his own, but his presence is naturally felt throughout. The text, then, is a more opaque and elusive guide to Jewish attitudes toward catastrophe than Roskies allows for.

Whereas Fussell draws extensively on the work of 'amateur' British memoirists (as he calls them) along with the classical sources, Roskies seems uninterested either in middle-brow Jewish writers or in the many memoirs written by Jewish soldiers about the European war. Memoirs are cited in the book's footnotes but they are quickly passed over by Roskies in his eager rush to savour those texts he truly enjoys. His taste in Yiddish literature is informed and sophisticated. But the enormous popularity of several authors whom he shuns belies his rather sweeping generalizations about the ways in which the most innovative writers both shaped and reflected widespread Jewish perceptions. Surely, the idiosyncratic, self-consciously literary Abramovitsh was widely read, and much can be learned about folk assumptions from his work and from the ways in which it was understood by the masses. But no less popular was the prolific Sholem Asch, arguably the most widely read Yiddish novelist of his time, whose work is treated by Roskies with particular and undisguised condescension. Such treatment might be justifiable had *Against the Apocalypse* been devoted to the criticism of canonized literature. In an examination devoted to the 'consecration of memory', this seems rather inappropriate.

His most important and successful chapter shows how the young, iconoclastic poet Sutzkever assumed the 'burden of memory' in the doomed Wilno ghetto. It is curious that the best chapters of the book, despite Roskies' expressed desire to escape the narrow confines of Holocaust literature, are those that treat the Holocaust writings of Yitzhak Katzenelson, Zelig Kalmanovitsh, and Sutzkever. Here Roskies speaks with convincing authority and his sensitive explications of text consistently

illuminate rather than conflict with his more general speculations about the relationship between cultural artifact and consciousness. It is in his treatment of Sutzkever, in particular, that Roskies provides his clearest explanation for the conflict between history and memory and for the ways in which the preference of Jews for the latter leads to the suppression of the historical past. Sutzkever, who returned to a Wilno emptied of its Jews in 1944, consciously engaged in self-censorship by destroying Gestapo files on Jewish collaborationists and later by deleting from his poems written during and after the War any mention of guilt or reproach at his own people. Roskies writes:

> Sutzkever's poetry of and about the Holocaust offers Jews a choice: follow the route of the apocalyptists, who draw their authority from the mystique of destruction and from the unknowable terror that feeds inherent Jewish fears of personal and collective disaster; or follow the neoclassical norm, unbending, absolute, with its impossible demands of order and sublimation. Without Sutzkever's example, the choice would be a foregone conclusion. Though few are likely to follow his lead, especially now, with the death of his culture, he has this to say to all the others: the greater the loss, the greater one's need to transcend it with selective memory, emphatic rhyme, and natural beauty (p. 257).

This is, in effect, a call for the importance of myth and *midrash* over history, of sublimation over desperate rage, and of the need to dwell on past glories in the face of catastrophe even when this means that the inglorious must be minimized or even obliterated. Nathan Nata Hannover's famous 17th-century account of the Khmelnitsky massacres adhered to these requirements by closing its graphic description of Ukrainian horrors with a lyrical evocation of Polish Jewry's great achievements. Roskies acknowledges sadly that such precedents are unlikely to serve as persuasive guidelines for contemporary responses. But he is more hopeful than the paragraph quoted above suggests. It is for this reason that his book begins with a chapter devoted to the 'ruined cities' as they are preserved in the mind of one heir to the sober legacy of Wilno, Roskies himself. Here he establishes his credentials as a member of the Lithuanian-Jewish hierarchy, of the *sheyne yidn* replanted in Montreal but with the pretensions, classical training, linguistic dexterity, and communal commitments characteristic of this self-confident élite. His learned, complex, decorously passionate book is a call to his now scattered but, to his mind, still cohesive, constituency, to reaffirm the best East European Jewish values without turning their backs on a world so very different from that of Wilno of the 1880s or early 1940s. If this work points to a single positive image of Jewish life it is Wilno, not as centre of commerce or

artisanry but as a world filled with study houses, streets informally renamed after biblical sites, distinguished book publishers, simple Jews who spoke a language replete with midrashic allusions, and with poets like Sutzkever for whom the tensions between the idiosyncratic and the demands of the collective were dealt with naturally and with great dignity. As a mythical setting, grimly industrious Łódź, boisterous Odessa or culturally divisive Warsaw would not have served Roskies' needs quite so well. His book, like Ansky's *Hurbn Galitsye*, is something of a highly selective travelogue, and its brilliant portrait of East European Jewish culture in the face of adversity and horror is one that is disturbing, demanding, and of great contemporary importance.

NOTES

1 David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1984. Pp. xii, 374.