

**T**he essays constituting the fifth section are devoted to the ancient Near East. Cyrus Gordon's "War and Peace: The Theoretical Structure of Israelite Society" is most readable and useful. It shows how the Israelite society in the pre-monarchic period included an aristocratic, landed (through spoil) elite of warriors supported by priests which evidenced itself in war and peace (Judges vs. the Book of Ruth). He further shows how this structure came to be abandoned when holding it was dangerous (i.e., against irresistible foreign powers), though never forgotten (cf., the return of the aristocracy to its estates from Babylon). It ultimately mutated into an elitism of knowledge.

Savina Teubal does some propagandizing for the feminist cause in her "Women, the Law and the Ancient Near East." Teubal encapsulates many cultures of the ancient Near East (from c. 2900 BCE-c. 500 BCE) as "regressing" in regard to woman's civil status. The author reaches this conclusion, scans data — a remarkably small collection of data — to support this conclusion from contemporary society in the United States back to 2900 BCE, and then applies the findings from the ancient Near East directly to the contemporary society from which her prejudices flow.

Dorothy Zeligs closes out this section in an analysis of Moses' unconscious motives in striking the rock at Kadesh (Num. 20), an event which is generally taken as the sin for which Moses was denied entry to Eretz Israel. Without a mention that she is presenting what might have been the Bible community's psychology typified in Moses; with a total lack of regard for the process of composition of the bible as regards chronology; but filled with Freudian exuberance — "Moses, struggling with competitive feelings toward the Father-God, could not

take possession of the Mother-land" — she sets psychoanalytic readings of the Bible back to *Moses and Monotheism*.

Section six is not thematic, consisting of two articles which are alike in their having been written in Hebrew. But both pieces are very fine and worthy of the honor of being included in a work celebrating the endeavor of a great human being and scholar. My own favorite, which I retold at the Seder this year, was Tuvia Preschel's "A Strange Seder Custom and Its Origin." Preschel first presents several accounts of a Moroccan-Jewish custom of passing the Seder-plate over the heads of the male participants (with variations) for fortune in the coming year. I was happy to add this new custom to our Seder. But to have learned the custom's secondary origin in the "do something that will inspire the children to ask questions" tradition, the explanation of the custom as insuring good fortune throughout the year was heartwarming as it revealed the never-dry springs of Jewish creativity. But more. Preschel finds the custom's true origin. In the ancient Seder-tradition, freemen lolled about on their own couches. Each had his own little table and on it the sacra. These tables were overturned in order to stimulate the children's questions.

The title of the festschrift is in many ways fitting. Raphael Patai has made "offerings" in many fields and offers from those fields are here made to him. The phrase itself is a *crux interpretum* from which a great deal of creative commentary has arisen and continues to arise. Some see its origins in Canaanite myth and ritual (and compare Patai's explorations in that field); some see them in the continuation of that tradition in Israelite offerings. Work such as Patai has done keeps the gates open, unembarrassedly, to these possibilities and to our strivings to accommodate one another.

## Ka-Tzetnik's Star

MOSHE PELLI

**F**or years critics hesitated to discuss literary works depicting the Holocaust experience either on their literary merits or as literature of atrocity. Even in Israel, until recently, very little has been published on Holocaust literature. Yet there are unique features in works on the Holocaust originally written in Hebrew that merit attention.

I shall discuss one such work by a Hebrew writer, Yehiel Dinur, better known as "Ka-tzetnik" (concentration-camp inmate). Many of his works have been translated into English.

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Dinur may be remembered from his testimony at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961: overcome by his memories, he fainted in the courtroom. By his own definition: "I do not consider myself an author writing literature. It is chronicles [I write] from the planet Auschwitz."\*

Unfortunately, his critics have apparently followed his assessment of his own writings, and very little has been written about him. I think Ka-tzetnik deserves close attention. His most impressive work, *Kochav Ha'efer* (literally, Star of Ashes) was published in Hebrew in 1960 and in English translation, as *Star Eternal*

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\*Shammai Golan, ed. *Hasho'ah, Pirqei' Edut Vesifrut* (Tel Aviv, 1976), p. 177.

in 1971. It is centered in Auschwitz with a prologue and an epilogue concerning the narrator's city, referred to as Metropoli.

The story starts in the autumn of 1939, a few days before the war, and ends immediately after the war. In between the author relates his experience on the "other planet," Auschwitz. Emblems of the Holocaust appear in the prologue and the epilogue — the clock, the Hall of Justice, the statue of the Goddess of Justice. The before and after carry a terrifying message: he who returns from the other planet, Auschwitz, realizes, much to his horror, that "Here, nothing has changed." Similarly, the sun's light appears to shine before and after the war. The Hall of Justice is intact, the Goddess of Justice is still blindfolded, and the hands of the clock mark time as before, as if nothing has happened between 1939 and 1945.

The story is composed of loosely connected scenes: forced labor, transport of the old and the young, the last transport to Auschwitz, and life within Auschwitz. The days in Auschwitz begin — most appropriately — at night and end at the evening roll-call: the chapters concentrate on such scenes as going into Auschwitz, the bath-house, block curfew, cruelties, prayers, food, and ending in the last parade to the crematorium. Here the theological questions about God's attitude toward His people are raised. The narrator offers a note of hope about continuity in Israel. Liberation is then thrust on the narrator and reader as an act of *deus ex machina*.

**K**a-tzetnik's style is austere, with little imagery. Yet it is just this language — brief, laconic, almost impoverished — that is most appropriate. For example:

Earth.  
Fifteen men dig one pit in the earth. . . .  
They dig.

Ka-tzetnik's language lends itself to abrupt changes, jerks, and twists, like epileptic seizures. It is as though the author were struggling with words and their ability to translate the reality of atrocity into the medium of verbal expression. His struggle is seen in the abundance of exclamation points, generally considered a feeble device. Ka-tzetnik's statement "Words are no more" accords with George Steiner's view: "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason."<sup>\*</sup>

The structure of the book — chapters, paragraphs, as well as sentences — like the Holocaust experience itself, is fragmented: events and time do not flow, they occur with no logical sequence or order whatever. This is complemented by the lack of development of character, essential in any novel. Thus the reader experiences the distortions of the Holocaust reality.

Ka-tzetnik successfully employs the second-person

narrative. The opening line reads: "Behind you, in the spacious show-window. . . ." In this way Ka-tzetnik relates the experience of the Holocaust *directly* to the reader. The direct and constant reference to "You!" makes the reader not only a direct witness of the experience, but a participant in it. At times the narrator not only invites the reader into the scene, but indicates that the reader — "you" — precedes him. On the way in to Auschwitz, the narrator tells his reader: "I now follow in your steps." This switch in the roles played by narrator and reader necessitates the reader's involvement. It is as though the reader, too, is there, in Auschwitz.

In a similar vein, the reader is made by the narrator to witness the atrocities as they occur:

The cane rises: Everybody watch now — magic! Nothing up my sleeve! Take a good look! Here before you is a life. Right? In the twinkling of an eye you'll see — . . .  
See for yourselves . . .

The reader can no longer remain a passive outsider; he must somehow relate to the experience of the Holocaust. In Lawrence Langer's words, "The reader is temporarily an insider and permanently an outsider."<sup>\*\*</sup> Thus the reader is placed in the very same predicament, or at least in the frame of mind which states in effect: You could have been there . . . Another literary device is the use of the present tense in the narrative. Events are depicted under the illusion of a continuous present tense. As a result, the occurring scenes seem to take place in the reader's presence, right *now* and *here*. Combined with the second-person narrative, this technique intensifies the literary reality of the Holocaust.

**A**t a major turning-point in the story, the narrative is thrown from the present tense into the past. This occurs as the end draws near and the inmates are thrown into Isolation Blocks to await their final transport to the crematorium. It is as though they are already dead while still being alive; they are already in the realm of the past tense.

Here the narrator allows himself some dialogue, generally absent from the rest of the story so as to depict an uncivilized state of humanity. The dialogue, centering on the theological questions of the Holocaust, gives some hope for the doomed inmates and for Judaism that elsewhere, in the land of Israel, life goes on; life must go on in spite of the horrendous attempt to eradicate Jews and Jewish life in Europe.

Though such "transcendental" reasoning about the meaning of the Holocaust is, to be sure, understandable, it looks somewhat artificial as presented by the narrator. We are bound to conclude that rationalization about the Holocaust is less effective than depictions of the actual experience of the Holocaust. May I add that

<sup>\*</sup>George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York, 1967), p. 123.  
<sup>\*\*</sup>Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1977) p. 3.

what appears to be an accepted historical theory (the close connection between the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel), looks, in the context of relating an authentic Holocaust experience, like a "planted" rationalization:

"Rabbi of Shilev," Ferber asks, "for whose sake does Jacob wrestle with the Angel, if his children did not cross the river, but stayed here in the blackness of the night?"

"From the very blackness of this night Jacob will bring forth the name 'Israel.' Before that, the morning star will not rise."

Light of full understanding flashed within Ferber: his brothers, there, in the Land of Israel!

This chapter is not without its message. For the first time some of the Jewish inmates are identified by name. Previously, a total dehumanization and lack of identity prevailed in the book, a technique mimetic of concentration-camp existence. While the rest of the people are demanding "The ration!!!," Ferber, the faithful, is engaged in matters that transcend the immediate. While drawing heavily on the biblical myth of the struggle of Jacob with the angel, the revelation is no longer perceived in the domain of the divine. The emergence of Israel is totally engulfed by the secular — the national continuity of the people in the land of Israel. Significantly, the rabbi, religious authority of the Jewish people, is made the carrier of this secular revelation of the Holocaust experience.

Upon liberation, Ka-tzetnik arrives at his own conclusion on the whereabouts of the divine: "God abandoned this earth; the Devil, too, turned his back on it." It is not the death of God concept put forth here, but rather, abandonment of all supernatural powers. Even the Devil, supreme symbol of evil, would have no part of the Holocaust atrocities.

In spite of the secular setting, the author resorts to the mystical and the enigmatic as a catharsis. Ferber feels redeemed: "Roundabout him all was distillate, pure. No longer did he feel himself in his own skeleton. At that moment he was utterly oblivious of his body's existence. The Rabbi's eyes were like two open gates — He entered in unto them." Death is delineated as having not only the power of personal salvation, but as possessing some mystical powers of reuniting the individual with his national and historical past. Indeed, it is a very subtle way of attempting to give some meaning to the meaningless, illogical, and savage annihilation of the Jews. It brings to bear the historical dimension of the Holocaust, relating this calamity to the tragic fate of the Jewish people throughout its bloody history.

In an attempt to re-create the reality of the Holocaust, the narrator abolishes, at times, the borderline between the real and the unreal, between the physical and the metaphysical. He personifies death as an entity, as a concrete essence, in the Holocaust experience. Death is so ingrained in reality that it characterizes the act of living more than life itself does.

This paradox represents an overall tone of paradox that registers as a dominant feature of the Jewish catastrophe, wherein death becomes a symbol for life. "As long as your hands keep digging [your grave] — you live . . . 'Dig and stay alive! . . .'" People marching to their death know that "their going spells life for those left behind in the ghetto."

**K**a-tzetnik's second chapter, "The Men of Metropoli," depicts the first encounter with death, as a group of Jews is ordered to dig a pit that is nothing but a mass grave. Significantly, chapter subtitles in the original Hebrew are designated as phases in a numerical order, each chapter being a phase in the Holocaust. Phase one — the digging of the pit — occurs without any preparation. The omission of a detailed background is the author's way of representing the Holocaust as a sudden, illogical, senseless event.

Reality as presented by the narrator is selective; it is narrowed down to the elements, to the essentials of existence. The first word in this chapter is "earth." The lack of verbs here, as well as in many other sentences throughout the book, signifies the passivity of reality: "Naked march into the night"; "Backs. Backs and eyes —"; "A cataract of yellow, dried bones"; "Rows. Naked rows." Human experience is limited to the essentials: food, roll-call, curfew, cruel punishment, prayer, and death.

In the Auschwitz reality, the light source is merely "the naked skull of the sun," more than ever mirroring the state of the inmates at the concentration-camp. The sun sets as "the bottom strands of the barbed-wire dykes bathe in a pool of blood." "A day dies in Auschwitz." The transitory chapter on the narrator's city of Metropoli presents this notion as "a city sunk into the bottom of a luminous sea," a civilization in decline; a modern Atlantis. Only once more would the sun appear in all its glory and brightness; it happens as the end draws near, on the way to the crematorium. "It's bright out. Brilliant light. Suddenly you see a sky." The English translation loses the religious subtleties inherent in the Hebrew. For the author is using the word *zohar* (brightness) in the context of *Shamayim* (sky or heavens), thus alluding to the memorial prayer "*El Male Rahamin.*" The sun foreshadows their departure. Concurrently, this brightness, *zohar*, carries with it a transcendental revelation: "Until this moment nobody knew that in Auschwitz there is sky [or: Heavens]."

The dominant figure of the sun is replaced by the equally forceful image of the stars in the dominion of night as the "Night-of-Auschwitz" prevails. As conceptualized by the narrator, the stars, like the sun, reflect the down-to-earth reality in all its gruesomeness: "Over your head vaults a star-sprinkled sky, and before your eyes a smokestack thrusts skyward. Thick, fatty smoke gushes out. Sparks beyond count. Sparks scatter

and flash across the starry sky, mingle with the stars, and you cannot tell whose light is the brighter." Smoke, too, is a symbol of the Holocaust here and elsewhere in the literature. It is blue, like the Ka-tzet number on the narrator's forearm, resembling a blue river of Jewish experience during the Holocaust. The author's metaphor of the river may allude to the well-known episode told in *The Ethics of the Fathers* of Hillel's walking by a river. Seeing a skull floating on it, he said: "For drowning others thou wast drowned."

The scene of the stars and sparks, as cited above, evokes the biblical covenant between God and Abraham: "And He brought him forth abroad, and said: Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if thou be able to count them"; and He said unto him: "So shall thy seed be." (Genesis 15:5) In the reality of the Holocaust the numberless smoke sparks replace the numberless stars that symbolize the eternity of the Hebrew people. Ironically and painfully, these sparks symbolize the doom of the Jewish people in the Holocaust: "Sparks slip out of the smokestack." "Stars vanish."

The English title *Star Eternal* is an erroneous representation of the original *Kochav Ha'efer, Star of Ash[es]*. This symbol of ashes is enhanced as a major concept not only as part of the concentration-camp experience, which is used by other writers as well (by Elie Wiesel, for example), but indeed as a dominant feature of the post-Holocaust experience. Liberated after the war, the Ka-tzet faces the crematorium — and his past, saying:

No one inside, no one outside. All are here now —  
in the mound of ash.  
"Dear ones! My darlings! This is the liberation! —"  
He flung himself upon them. Took them in his arms.  
Held them tight. He was lying on the mound, his arms  
deep, deep in ash.

This mound of ash becomes a biblical archetypal guide intended "to point out his way." The use of the Hebrew

phrase "*Lanhoto hadarech*" in the original edition is a direct borrowing from the biblical reference to the divine guidance: "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way." (Exodus 13:21). To the survivor, the divine guidance is replaced by the memory of those exterminated in the concentration camps: "I vow on you[r] ash embraced in my arms, to be a voice unto you."

While not referred to directly, though existing in the backdrop as a subconscious phenomenon, the biblical covenant with the Hebrew people emerges through a variety of biblical allusions in their caustic contradiction. As previously seen, stars — the symbol of the covenant — become ashes in the Holocaust. The chapter title, "Covenant Between the Crumbs," a parody of the *Covenant Between the Pieces*, foretells both doom as well as a promised salvation. Yet in the context of the Holocaust, the ironic covenant is one of separation between the lover and his beloved.

**K**a-tzetnik's repetitious style reflects the monotony of life — and death in the Holocaust. The perception of reality and portrayal of people are also linear and limited. The narrator refers to people by citing parts of their body: eyes, legs, backs, and necks; there is no concept of the person as an individual or as a personality. Anyone who has seen the moving documentary film *Night and Fog* can never forget the visual trauma and emotional impact of such scenes as the piles of skulls or hair. Ka-tzetnik uses such scenes in the final chapter on reparations. They utterly distort reality as we know it and introduce us into the reality of *l'univers concentrationnaire*.

Ka-tzetnik's book offers fascinating study — if one may be permitted to use this term — of the art of atrocity. Ka-tzetnik struggles to apply words to an experience that defies the integrity of language. ■