

Chapter Twelve

Ka-Tzetnik's Literary Portrayal of Holocaust Experience

A Study of "Kochav Ha'efer" (*Star of Ashes*) as a Model for Analysis of Holocaust Literature

Moshe Pelli

Critics of literature have long hesitated to discuss literary works on the Holocaust on their literary merits, as a special genre now referred to as literature of atrocity, or Holocaust literature. While sporadic reviews appeared in connection with the publication of books on the Holocaust, more serious discussions on the literary evaluation of such works have been a recent phenomenon.

In the previous decade, there appeared book-long works on the literature of the Holocaust. Irving Halperin published *Messengers from the Dead* (1970)¹ which contains, among other things, a discussion of Elie Wiesel's works. A more sophisticated literary discussion and a more impressive treatment of the literature of atrocity as a special form of literature was offered by Lawrence Langer in his *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (1975). Although the book contains a discussion of Elie Wiesel's writings, analysis of Judaic themes and allusions to biblical and post-biblical Jewish literature are not the strong points of this book.²

More recently, there was a surge of literary discussion on Holocaust literature. Edward Alexander published his *The Resonance of Dust* (1979), which examines a Holocaust diary (by Moshe Flinker), Jewish and Hebrew poetry (by Nelly Sachs and Abba Kovner), and Hebrew prose by Yehuda Amichai, Hanoch Bartov, Haim Gouri, and others.³ Two significant

contributions to the field were published by Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone* (1979), and by Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying* (1980).⁴

In 1984, two books were published which attempt to review the responses to catastrophe in Hebrew and Jewish literature. David Roskies examined "Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture," from the early liturgy to contemporary Yiddish literature, in his *Against the Apocalypse*.⁵ Alan Mintz, too, probed "Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature," from Lamentations to Midrash, from medieval literature to contemporary Hebrew letters, in *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*. Mintz studied such Hebrew poets and prose writers as Uri Zvi Greenberg, Aharon Appelfeld, Hanoach Bartov, Haim Gouri, and Yehuda Amichai.⁶

Observers of this field note the abundance of books, in addition to numerous articles, on Elie Wiesel many years before he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Among these many works, it is worthwhile mentioning, in the context of studies on Holocaust literature, the collection of essays entitled *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel* (1978), and Ellen Fine's *Legacy of Night, The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel*, among others.⁷

Concurrently, a number of critics concentrated on the Holocaust theme as found in American Jewish fiction (Alan Berger; Arthur Cohen), in women's literature (Marlene L. Heinemann), and in art (Stephen Lewis).⁸

The limited discussion of Holocaust literature written in Hebrew is, however, quite noticeable. Apart from several chapters or articles written by such critics as Robert Alter, Gershon Shaked, and Leon Yudkin, very little has been published in English during the 1960s and 1970s on the Holocaust as portrayed in modern Hebrew letters.⁹

The 1980s have witnessed a significant increase of published books on the theme of the Holocaust in modern Hebrew literature with Murray J. Kohn's volume on Hebrew poetry, *The Voice of My Blood Cries Out* (1979), and Alan J. Yuter's *The Holocaust in Hebrew Literature* (1983). Yuter examines Katzetnik briefly, but does not analyze the book under study here. The most recent work is a selection of Israeli fiction, *Facing the Holocaust*, with an introduction by Gila Ramras-Rauch and an afterword by Gershon Shaked.¹⁰

It is, however, curious to note that even in Israel very little has been published on the literary aspects of Holocaust literature, the exception being reviews of Aharon Appelfeld's prose, although several anthologies of texts and

analysis have been published in the last few years.¹¹ While many aspects of the literary study and critical analysis about non-Hebraic works do indeed pertain to works originally written in Hebrew, there are some unique features in Hebrew literature which merit the attention of any student of the literary expression of the Holocaust experience.

In the present article, I will examine one such work by a Hebrew and Yiddish writer, Yehiel Dinur, better known as Ka-tzetnik. He is considered one of the major spokesmen of the survivors. I hope that the ensuing analysis will contribute to a better understanding of the unique nature of Holocaust literature, and may serve as a model for similar probes of literary works on the Holocaust experience. Under the pen name of Ka-tzetnik, he has published widely on the universe of the Holocaust, and many of his works have been translated and are thus readily available.

Yehiel Dinur is remembered by many for his dramatic testimony at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, on which occasion he fainted overcome by his emotions and memories. Undoubtedly, both his emotions and memories are the foundation of his work. Yet his own definition of his literary endeavor may be of interest. He said, "I do not consider myself as an author writing literature. It is chronicles [that I write] out of the planet Auschwitz."¹² Some accepted this statement at face value. In 1972, an Israeli reviewer cited his early encounter with Ka-tzetnik's writings as a teenager and his shock of learning about the Holocaust. Yet, a few years later, that reviewer approached Ka-tzetnik's books more critically and concluded that "Ka-tzetnik's books are not literature."¹³ Since this short review of two or three columns is rather limited in scope, it seems to me that Ka-tzetnik deserves more serious attention. To this end, I will examine one of his most impressive works, a small volume which has the English title *Star Eternal*. It was originally published in Hebrew in 1960; the English translation appeared in 1971. It is a story of the Holocaust experience in Auschwitz, with a prologue and an epilogue both having the same locale, the narrator's city of Metropoli. The book ends with an editorial statement of great emotional impact on reparation, which, regardless of significance, seems to have been artificially attached to the book.

The structure of the story as such, having a prologue and an epilogue, is intended to achieve the "before and after" effect — that is, before the Holocaust and after this most horrendous event in history. The story unfolds in the autumn of 1939, a few days before the war, and ends immediately after the war. In

between the two dates, the narrator relates his experience at the “other planet,” Auschwitz. He uses many parallels in the prologue and the epilogue, such as the clock, the Hall of Justice, and the statue of the Goddess of Justice. Indeed, these parallels become symbols which epitomize the Holocaust experience. The clock showing the same time before and after the Holocaust evokes the notion that time stood still. Thus, one may deduce that either the Holocaust was unique in the history of mankind, or that nothing has really changed after the Holocaust. Also, Justice is blindfolded like its symbol, the goddess of Justice. Similarly, the sun’s light appears to shine before and after the war. The similarity, indeed the parallel, carries a terrifying message to the reader: He who returns from the other planet, Auschwitz, realizes, much to his horror, that “Here, nothing has changed.”¹⁴ It is the most agonizing conclusion that the author shares with the reader at the end of his depiction of the Holocaust reality, that nothing has changed after Auschwitz. The Hall of Justice has not changed; the goddess of Justice is still blindfolded — an obvious ironic allusion to the miscarriage of justice, and the hands of the clock continue to show the same time as before, as if nothing has happened between 1939 and 1945.

Although these symbols are not presented with a high degree of literary sophistication or subtlety, their impact on the reader is significant. One concludes that Ka-tzetnik is at his best when he does not editorialize on aspects of the Holocaust as in the subject of reparations. He is most effective when he lets his reader experience the “before and after” effect and reach his own conclusion.

The structure of the book is based on scenes, more often than not loosely connected to one another: forced labor, transport of the old and the young, and the last transport to Auschwitz. Subsequently, there are a number of chapters devoted to the actual experience of the Holocaust in Auschwitz. The chapters follow a rough course of a day, beginning most appropriately at night — the night of Auschwitz — and ending at the evening roll call. They concentrate on such scenes as entering Auschwitz, the bath house, block curfew, cruelties, prayers, and food. This experience ends in the last parade to the crematorium, at which occasion theological questions pertaining to God’s attitude towards His people are raised. This chapter ends in a note of hope about some Jewish continuity in Israel. Liberation is thereafter thrust upon the narrator and the reader as an act of *deus ex machina*, an unexpected salvation.

Upon examining this little book, the critical reader endeavors to look for Ka-tzetnik's unique way of depicting the Holocaust reality as he experienced it. His style is not the sort which would attract a sophisticated reader, for it is rather austere, containing little imagery. Nevertheless, it is this very language — brief, laconic, almost impoverished — that is most appropriate for Ka-tzetnik's subject matter. His language lends itself to abrupt changes, jerks and twists, resembling epileptic seizures. It is as though the author was struggling with words and their ability to translate the reality of atrocity into the medium of verbal expression. His struggle is discerned in the abundance of exclamation points, generally considered a weak literary device. The statement, "Words are no more" (p. 41), used in the context of Auschwitz, typifies the author's perception of post-Auschwitz language as well. This attitude towards language appears to be in concert with Steiner's view: "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason."¹⁵ Aware of the limitation of language, the author resorts to the bare linguistic minimum. For example:

"Earth.

"Fifteen men dig one pit in the earth.[...]

"They dig" (p. 17).

Typically, the structure of the individual sentence follows the pattern established in the paragraphs and the chapters. As depicted by Ka-tzetnik in the very structure of the book, the Holocaust experience is structurally fragmented; events and time do not flow, they just occur without any logical sequence or order whatsoever. Thus, there is an artistic attempt to present reality as distorted, lacking its normal components of time and space. There is no movement in time, in the normal sense, as there is no development of character, which is essential to any novel. The reader is made to experience the suspended time and space of the Holocaust reality. In spite of the apparent austerity in style, Ka-tzetnik does employ a variety of literary devices intended to enhance his message. The most effective of these devices is the second-person narrative pervading most of the book. The opening line reads: "Behind you, in the spacious show-window [...]" (p. 11).

Through the employment of the second-person voice — you! — Ka-tzetnik attempts in a most effective way to relate the experience of the Holocaust *directly* to the reader. The direct and constant reference to "You!" does have a

cumulative effect. It makes the reader not only a direct witness to the Holocaust experience, but indeed it forces him to experience that reality. The reader is unable to stay outside of this experience as he reads about “You” — being himself! He must become involved. He is there in Auschwitz, together with the author, or the narrator. At times the narrator will not only invite the reader into the scene, but will indicate that the reader — whom he has designated as “you” — precedes him. On the way to Auschwitz, the narrator tells his reader: “I now follow in your step” (p. 37). This subtle change in the roles played by the narrator and reader forces the reader to be completely involved in the story.

In a similar vein, the reader is made 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” [...] (p. 68). “Here in front of you lies a life” (p. 69).

This technique compels the reader to emerge from his normal role as a passive outsider and relate to the events described, thus getting close to becoming a temporary insider. In Langer’s words, “The reader is temporarily an insider and permanently an outsider.”¹⁶

This concept of the reader *being there* tends to shatter the reader’s security and his ostensible awareness that it is definitely a story told of past events. Thus, the employment of second-person voice places the reader in that very same predicament as though the literary convention of storytelling no longer shields him, or at least in the frame of mind that in effect leads him to conclude: “*You could have been there.*” And it is extremely frightening.¹⁷

Furthermore, by employing the pronoun “you,” the author shrewdly establishes an unusual rapport between the speaker-narrator and the addressed person, who turns out to be an Everyman figure. Thus, the narrative achieves a point which extends beyond the mere telling of a story. For it is in effect a loaded message, a call for humanity at large to experience the Holocaust and thus become a survivor.

Related to this technique is another which employs the present tense in the narrative. Events are described in the book under the illusion of a continuous present tense. As a result, scenes seem to occur in the reader’s presence, right *now* and *here*. Combined with the second person narrative, this technique intensifies the literary reality of the Holocaust, as it compels the reader to

experience the catastrophe in a literary way. The reality of the *Shoah* (Holocaust) is thus brought closer to home, while the reader experiences the possibility of his own person going through the catastrophe of the *Shoah* as a temporary insider, and as a result he may consider himself permanently a survivor.

Significantly, the present tense stops abruptly at a major turning point in the story, and the narrative is suddenly presented in past tense. It 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 life stopped for these inmates as well as for the reader. They are deemed dead while yet being alive; they are already in the realm of the past tense. The narrator explains this ironic phenomenon as follows: "Here there's no longer anyone to fear. Here you're already free of the rules that govern the normal blocks of Auschwitz" (p. 103). Death seems to bring an end to the reality of the Holocaust.

It is at this point that the narrator allows himself a dialogue, a feature omitted almost completely from the total text.¹⁸ The dialogue centers on the theological questions of the Holocaust and presents a note of hope for the doomed inmates and for Judaism. It is hoped — the dialogue stresses — that elsewhere, namely, in Israel, life goes on — in spite of the horrendous attempt to eradicate Jews and Jewish life in Europe.

It is important to note that while one does understand the necessity for such a "transcendental" reasoning about the meaning of the *Shoah*, it looks somewhat artificial in the way it is presented by the narrator. Ostensibly, it is a post-Holocaust concept that justifies the existence of Israel as a haven for Jews who might face future annihilation. While one is hesitant to set standards on what is authentic and what is not in the context of literary work on the Jewish catastrophe, one is indeed permitted to get cues from the author himself elsewhere in the story. Based on comparison, we may conclude that this rationalization about the Holocaust — namely, that life should go on elsewhere, as presented by Ka-tzetnik — is less effective than other segments of the book which depict the actual experience of the Holocaust. A more subtle way of introducing this notion — which is by itself significant — would have been much more convincing. It should be mentioned that what appears to be an accepted historical theory (that is, the close connection between the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel) — formulated after the Holocaust — may, in the context of relating an authentic Holocaust experience, look like an

anachronistically “planted” rationalization. It is exemplified in the following quotation:

“ ‘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?’ ”

The Rabbi answers:

“ ‘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! Revelation bared itself to him. For a split second only” (p. 108).

Nevertheless, this chapter, entitled “The Last Argument,” is not without its message and significance. 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 intended to present a mimetic aspect of concentration camp existence. As the rest of the people are demanding “The ration!!!” (p. 104), Ferber, the faithful, is engaged in matters which transcend the immediate time and place. He discusses the meaning of the destruction with the rabbi. While drawing heavily on the biblical paradigm of Jacob’s struggle with the angel, the revelation, let it be noted, is no longer perceived to be in the domain of the divine. The emergence of Israel is totally engulfed by the secular — namely, it is the national continuity of the people in the land of Israel (p. 108). It looks as though it is divorced from divine providence. Importantly, the religious authority of the Jewish people, the rabbi, is made to become the carrier of this secular revelation of the *Sho’ah* experience.

Upon liberation, the Ka-Tzet, the concentration camp inmate, arrives at his own conclusion on the whereabouts of the divine: “God abandoned this earth; Devil, too, turned his back on it” (p. 110). It is not the death of God concept which is promulgated here by Ka-tzetnik. Rather, it is an idea of abandonment by all supernatural powers. Even the Devil, supreme representation of evil, would not have any part in the atrocities of the *Sho’ah*.

In spite of the secular and somewhat realistic setting of “The Last Argument,” the author resorts to a mystical and enigmatic ending as a catharsis. As the end draws near, 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" (p. 108). Death is delineated as having not only the power of personal salvation, but as possessing some inexplicable mystical powers of uniting 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.

Some of Ka-tzetnik's other techniques are very effective as well. In an attempt to recreate the reality of the Holocaust for the reader, the narrator abolishes at times the borderline between the real and the unreal, between the physical and the metaphysical. He directs a question to 'Life': "Life! Life! Who are you?" (p. 69). More overwhelming, perhaps, is the personification of death as an entity, a concrete essence, in the Holocaust experience.

Death is so ingrained in reality that it characterizes the act of living more than does life itself. In this distorted reality, as conceptualized by Ka-tzetnik, death could be physically felt and spoken to: "Death prowls around you" (p. 20); "Death has eased his stranglehold" (p. 36); "Death holds your life between his hands" (p. 40); "Death, your master, is now taking you to his abode" (p. 40). This literary device of referring to death as an omnipresent entity — not merely as a literary personification — enhances the feeling of its immediacy and omnipotent presence.

In this device, it is the indirect reference to the essence of the Holocaust that makes a lasting impression. It is the overall tone of paradox that registers with the reader as one of the most dominant features of the Jewish catastrophe. Through an understanding of the centrality of paradox in the Holocaust, the reader is given a unique insight into the experience of atrocity where death has paradoxically become a symbol for life. The paradox abounds: "'As long as your hands keep digging [your grave] — you live... .

"Dig and stay alive!" (p. 23).

Or:

The old people marching to their death know that "their going spells life for those left behind in the ghetto" (p. 29).

Ka-tzetnik's particular style of portraying the Holocaust experience is best demonstrated in the second chapter, entitled "The Men of Metropoli." It depicts the first encounter with death as a group of Jews is ordered to dig a pit which is nothing else but a mass grave. Significantly, chapter subtitles in the original Hebrew version of the book are designated as phases in a numerical order, each chapter representing a phase in the Holocaust. The reader is impressed by the fact that phase one — the digging of the pit — occurs without any preparation. The omission of a detailed background being quite outstanding, it is indeed the author's way of representing the Holocaust as a sudden, illogical, senseless event. The literary components are so structured as to reflect a general concept of the historical Holocaust, namely, the fact that most Jews were totally unprepared to confront the situation.

Reality as presented by the narrator is selective; it is narrowed down to the elements, to the essentials of existence. Thus, the first word in this chapter is "earth." The sentence, too, is stripped to its bare essential, to the subject. 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" (p. 39); "Backs. Backs and eyes —" (p. 49); "A cataract of yellow, dried bones" (p. 71); "Rows. Naked rows" (p. 90). The tendency to deprive the scene of any unnecessary description — adjectives being a rarity in the book — helps in stripping reality as well. Similarly, human experience as depicted by the narrator is limited to the essentials: food, rollcall, curfew, cruel punishment, prayer, and death.

The tone employed here, as elsewhere, is ironic. The ground — "earth" — is the private property of a Jewish family; as it turns out, the pit dug in the earth epitomizes, at the outset, the common fate of the Jews in the Holocaust. The scenes depict the atrocity of extermination, showing the sadism, inhumaneness, the dishonesty of the Germans incorporated with their alleged cultural traits, namely, cleanliness, orderliness, mechanical performance of duty, and accuracy of reporting the results of their hideous acts. The atrocity is performed in broad daylight, as the sun shines unashamedly. The narrator enacts a symbolic struggle between the atrocity and the sun's shining: "With every thrust of your spade — you bury the sun in the earth. But with every shovelful of sod tossed away, the sun floats up once more — brighter than ever" (p. 17). For the citizens of Metropoli are silent witnesses to the atrocity carried out in broad daylight.

The narrator chooses the sun to function as a leitmotif, relating the prologue to the epilogue, and serving as a cementing bond between the prologue, the pre-Holocaust situation and the beginning of the war in chapter one. Subsequently, chapters two, three and four, depicting the transports of the old and the young, and later of all the inhabitants of the ghetto, have both day and night scenes in them. The sun is playing the same role as before. As the scene shifts to Auschwitz, night reigns supreme. It is cited as "Midnight silence of Auschwitz" (p. 39) or "Night-of-Auschwitz" (p. 52).

The sun reappears in the Auschwitz reality as "the naked skull of the sun" (p. 80), more than ever reflecting the state of the inmates at the concentration camp. The sun is portrayed in its setting, indeed, the sunset of humanity, as "the bottom strands of the barbed-wire dykes bathe in a pool of blood" (p. 80). "A day dies in Auschwitz" (p. 80). The transitory chapter on the narrator's city of Metropoli also presents this notion as "a city sunk into the bottom of a luminous sea" (p. 23), namely, a civilization in decline; a modern-day Atlantis. Only once more would the sun appear in all its glory and brightness; it happens, ironically, as the end draws near, in line to the crematorium. "It's bright out. Brilliant light. Suddenly you see a sky" (p. 91). The English translation loses the religious subtleties inherent in the original Hebrew text. For the author is using the *Zohar* — brilliance — in the context of *Shamayim* — sky — thus alluding to the memorial prayer, *El Male Rahamim*.¹⁹ The sun foreshadows their departure — and their demise... . Concurrently, this brightness, *Zohar* in Hebrew, carries with it a transcendental revelation. The narrator expounds: "Until this moment nobody knew that in Auschwitz there is sky" (Hebrew: *Shamayim*, meaning also heavens; p. 91).²⁰ And he goes on saying: "Only now, at final rollcall, it has disclosed itself to the eye. At the very last moment" (p. 91). Ironically, heavens reveal their existence in line to the crematorium... .

This heavenly body is employed as a powerful metaphor at the concluding scenes of liberation. The Ka-tzet summarizes the total image of the sun as symbol of the Holocaust and his experience at the concentration camp: "the eclipse of this world's sun [...] the eclipse of his life's sun" (p. 115).

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" (p. 52) prevails. As conceptualized by the narrator, the stars, like the sun, reflect the mundane, 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” (p. 40). Smoke, too, is a symbol of the Holocaust here and elsewhere in the literature. Its color is blue (p. 94) as is the color of the Ka-Tzet number on the narrator’s forearm (p. 118), which — we are told — resembles a blue river of Jewish experience during the Holocaust (p. 119). 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 [of a highway robber] floating on it, he said: “For drowning others thou wast drowned.” Of course, this phrase evokes the notion of retribution. Other Hebrew writers, such as Yehuda Amichai, so intensified this saying that it has become a major concept of the Holocaust experience.²¹

In the context of stars and sparks, one should note another significant literary device employed in Ka-tzetnik’s writings. It is especially discernible through his use of the Hebrew language in the original work. The narrator designates those stars and sparks, as described in the above scene, to serve as a leitmotif throughout the book, charged with meaningful biblical allusions. In so doing, the author adds historical and religious depths to the meaning and the significance of the *Shoah* in the history of the Jewish people. The depiction of the stars ostensibly refers to the biblical covenant between God and Abraham as follows: “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). The author portrays the reality of the Holocaust where the numberless smoke sparks replace the promised numberless stars, which symbolize the eternity of the Hebrew people. Ironically and quite painfully, these sparks represent the actual doom of the Jewish people in the Holocaust. As “Sparks slip out of the smokestack” — “Stars vanish” (p. 41). These two phenomena of the Holocaust are directly connected to the disappearance of “human language” (p. 41), as previously mentioned.

The Star which appears in the original title of the book and was given the English rendering of *Star Eternal* is an erroneous representation of the original *Kochav Ha’efer*, namely, *Star of Ash(es)*, a title which is more meaningful. For it is the author’s intention to enhance the symbol of the ashes as a major concept of the Holocaust not only as part of the concentration camp experience (which is also used by other writers),²² but indeed as a dominant feature of the post-Holocaust experience. Liberated after the war, the Ka-Tzet faces the crematorium — and his past, and he says:

"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" (p. 112).

This mound of ash becomes a biblical archetypal guide, which is intended "to point out his way" (p. 112). The use of the Hebrew phrase *Lanhoto hadarech* (to point out his way) in the original Hebrew 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. He says: "— I vow on you[r] ash embraced in my arms, to be a voice unto you" (p. 113). Similar vows appear in other writings on the Holocaust. One remembers Elie Wiesel's similar utterances in *Night*: "Never shall I forget."²³

Other biblical allusions abound in his writing and are related to Ka-tzetnik's conceptualization of the *Shoah*. While not referred to directly, yet 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. This major concept of the Jewish catastrophe, as presented from an historically meaningful point of view, is enhanced by a similar expression which becomes the title of a chapter. It is "Covenant Between the Crumbs," a parody of the Covenant Between the Pieces (Genesis ch. 15), which contains both doom and a promised salvation. It is related to the promise of land and people to Abraham. Yet in the context of the Holocaust, the ironic covenant is one of separation between the lover and his beloved, with nothing to hope for except the token expression of love. Under the circumstances, one notes the disappearance of the stars: "See! There are no stars twinkling above our heads. They are stray sparks from the crematorium chimney..." (p. 89). The star of ashes emerges as the most impressive symbol of the Holocaust.

Ka-tzetnik's style tends to be repetitious; thus it adds some poetic touch to the book. It looks as though the English edition, unlike the original Hebrew, was trying to capitalize on the poetic qualities of the book by having the text printed in uneven lines. By so doing, the editors of the English edition

ostensibly ignored Adorno's well-known statement: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."²⁴

More importantly, the continuous repetition seems to reflect the monotony of life... or rather, the monotony of death in the Holocaust experience. The monotonous rhythm reflects the narrator's struggle in an attempt to recapture events, situations, scenes, and places in order to make them look authentic. A repetitive phrase would be used a few times in a given chapter. For example, the phrase "Isolation Block" is repeated three times (pp. 102-103), or "Eyes" some five times (pp. 50-52).

This device of repetition becomes, at times, a very sophisticated way by which Ka-tzetnik conceptualizes and presents reality. Note the following examples:

"Backs.

"Backs and eyes —" (p. 49);

or:

"Rows.

"Naked rows.

"Naked yellow skeletons" (p. 90).

Through this use of repetition, the narrator presents a linear perception of reality, somewhat limited in scope, depth, and breadth. Field of vision, too, is narrow. Ability to grasp simultaneous or complex components is curtailed. It is a tired outlook, primitive in nature, which concentrates on the bare essentials as does the actual Holocaust experience itself.

Perception and portrayal of people are also linear and limited. The narrator refers to people by citing only parts of their bodies: eyes, legs, backs, and necks. There is no concept of the person as an individual or as a personality, but as a member of a group identified only by that body part which the group has in common. It is a very powerful way of delineating the experience of the *Shoah*. In a more subtle way, it is a cruel and sardonic, yet authentic, foreshadowing of the tragic fate of these people in the Holocaust. Viewers who saw a moving documentary film as *Night and Fog* will never forget the visual trauma and emotional impact of such scenes as the piles of skulls or hair displayed in a

macabre, satanic way. (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* (the reality of the concentration camp). It is a reality of a shopkeeper of human organs and life whose terrifying magnitude defies human imagination. It is, as Langer puts it, the disfiguration of empirical reality.²⁵

While Ka-tzetnik's book on the Holocaust does have its limitations and shortcomings, it is nevertheless very impressive for the general reader, for the Jewish reader, and for the student of the literary expression of the Holocaust. To the latter, this book serves as a fascinating study — if one is permitted to use this improper term — of the art of atrocity. Ka-tzetnik struggles with his own conceptualization of the Holocaust, and he perceives it and portrays it as only an author writing in Hebrew can.

¹Irving Halperin, *Messengers from the Dead* (Philadelphia, 1970).

²Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1975). Langer followed his work in related subjects in his book *The Age of Atrocity* (Boston, 1978) on the theme of death in modern literature. He continued his Holocaust literature pursuit with *Versions of Survival* [,] *The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany, 1982).

Several articles published in the 1970s reviewed Langer's work, and are indicative of some research and criticism under study; they are: Edward Alexander, "The Holocaust in American Jewish Fiction: A Slow Awakening," *Judaism*, XXV (No. 3, Summer 1976), pp. 320-330; Norma Rosen, "The Holocaust and the American Jewish Novelist," *Midstream*, XX (No. 8, October 1974), pp. 54-62; David Stern, "Imagining the Holocaust," *Commentary*, Vol. 62 (No. 1, July 1976), pp. 46-51.

³Edward Alexander, *The Resonance of Dust* (Columbus, 1979).

⁴Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, *By Word Alone* (Chicago, 1979); Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington, 1980). See also Rosenfeld's *Imagining Hitler* (Bloomington, 1985).

⁵David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* [,] *Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, 1984).

⁶Alan L. Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York, 1984).

⁷Alvin H. Rosenfeld & Irving Greenberg, ed., *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel* (Bloomington, 1978); Ellen Fine, *Legacy of Night, The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel* (Albany, 1982).

⁸Alan L. Berger, *Crisis and Covenant: The Holocaust in American Jewish Fiction* (Albany, 1985); see also Edward Alexander's article cited in note 2 above; Arthur Allen Cohen, *The American Imagination After the War: Notes on the Novel, Jews and Hope* (Syracuse, 1981); Marlene E. Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers on the Holocaust* (Westport, 1986); Stephen Lewis, *Art Out of Agony, The Holocaust Theme in Literature, Sculpture and Film* (Montreal & New York, 1984), which contains a conversation with Aharon Appelfeld.

⁹Robert Alter, *After the Tradition* (New York, 1960); Gershon Shaked, "Childhood Lost, Studies in the Holocaust Themes in Contemporary Israel Fiction," *Literature East and West*, XIV (No. 1, March 1970), pp. 90-108; Leon I. Yudkin, *Escape into Siege* (London & Boston, 1974). See also Alexander's book cited in note 3 above.

¹⁰Murray J. Kohn, *The Voice of My Blood Cries Out* (New York, 1979); Alan J. Yuter, *The Holocaust in Hebrew Literature, From Genocide to Rebirth* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1983), which has chapters on Ka-tzetnik, Kaniuk, Kovner, Greenberg, Pagis, Carmi, Appelfeld, Ben-Amotz, Amichai, Bartov, Oz, Shenhar, Hazaz, and Agnon; Gila Ramras-Rauch & Joseph Michman-Melkman, ed., *Facing the Holocaust* [:] *Selected Israeli Fiction*, with an introduction by G. Ramras-Rauch and afterword by Gershon Shaked (Philadelphia, 1985). See also Mintz's book cited in note 6 above.

¹¹Some of them are: Natan Gross, Itamar Yazo-Kest & Rina Klinov, ed., *Hasho'ah Bashirah Ha'ivrit* [Holocaust in Hebrew Poetry], with an introduction by Hillel Barzel (Tel Aviv, 1974) [Hebrew]; Shammai Golan, ed., *Hasho'ah, Pirkei 'Edut Vesifrut* [The Holocaust: Eye Witness and Literary Accounts] (Tel Aviv, 1976) [Hebrew].

¹²Golan, *Hasho'ah, Pirkei 'Edut Vesifrut*, p. 177.

¹³"K. Tzetnik," *Keshet*, XV (No. 1, Fall 1972), pp. 188-189, by H. B. [Hebrew]. A more favorable review by another Israeli critic appears in Mordechai Ovadyahu,

Besa'ar Uvidemamah [In Storm and Silence] (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 82-90 [Hebrew].

¹⁴Ka-tzetnik 135633, *Star Eternal* (New York, 1971), p. 119.

¹⁵George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York, 1967), p. 123.

¹⁶Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, p. 3.

¹⁷Compare, for example, Steiner's statement, "I am a kind of survivor," in *Language and Silence*, p. 145, originally published in *Commentary*, Vol. 39 (No. 2, February 1965), p. 32.

¹⁸The intentional omission of dialogue in order to depict an uncivilized state of humanity is a device used also in *The Painted Bird*. See Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird* (Boston, 1972), and his *Notes of the Author on The Painted Bird* (New York, 1967), p. 16. Cf. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, p. 168.

¹⁹The Memorial Prayer reads: "El male rahamim... kezohar haraki'a mazhrim," having *zohar* (brilliance) and *raki'a* (sky) in the same sentence.

²⁰Hebrew edition: *Kochav Ha'efer* [Star of Ashes] (Tel Aviv, 1966), p. 84.

²¹Yehuda Amichai uses this allusion in his novel *Not of This Time, Not of This Place* (1968).

²²Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York, 1969), p. 44.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur, Gesammelte Schriften*, II (Frankfurt A/M, 1974), s. 422: "Nach Auschwitz noch Lyric zu schreiben, sei barbarisch." Adorno's statement, quoted abundantly in the literature, has been discussed, disputed, and refuted since.

²⁵Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, pp. 2-3.