Holocaust and Rebirth: 
Moshe Flinker, Nelly Sachs, and Abba Kovner

My subject is the link between the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel in the imaginative and spiritual life of the Jewish people, insofar as that life has been conveyed to us in modern literature. That these two events are the most important in modern Jewish history is unquestionable. It is likewise unquestionable that there is a causative link between them, and that, as Yehuda Bauer has written, “the Holocaust is the central factor not only in Jewish history in the twentieth century in general, but also . . . in the period of the struggle for a Jewish state in particular.” Yet it is noteworthy that in the 1973 Yad Vashem symposium on Holocaust and Rebirth, in which Professor Bauer’s statement appeared, there was no sustained attempt to deal with the superhistorical connection between Holocaust and Rebirth. The sole exception was J. L. Talmon, who, in his lecture “European History as the Seedbed of the Holocaust” expressed his horror at those who profess to see the Holocaust as the price exacted by the God of history for Jewish redemption; if there is “some terrible majesty and magnificence to the Holocaust,” he argued, it is in its dramatic symbolization of the conflict between the two permanently opposed world views of morality and paganism.  

Yet the sense of an intimate and mystical connection between holocaust and rebirth is deeply embedded in Jewish sacred literature and in Jewish historical consciousness. In the book of Ezekiel, the prospect that God will make “a full end of the remnant of Israel” is inseparable from the promise that “I will even gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where ye have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.” (Ezekiel 11:13, 16). The legend that the Messiah was born on
the very day that the Temple was destroyed is deeply embedded in Jewish tradition, as is the Talmudic notion that the Messiah will come only in a generation totally innocent or wholly guilty.

That the relation between the religious idea of redemption through catastrophe and actual historical events may take grotesque forms is well known. Long before 1492, Kabbalistic writers proclaimed that year as the one in which catastrophe would bring the redemption of the Jews; the catastrophe came, but where was the redemption? The attachment of a large part of the Jewish world to the false messiah Sabbatai Zevi in the seventeenth century arose from the desire to fathom the catastrophe of Chmielnicki's massacre of a very large part of the Jewish population of Poland in relation to the tradition of catastrophic apocalypse. But this plunge into mysticism led to a Jewish catastrophe as horrendous, in its own way, as the one it attempted to explain. The facile and even cruel "explanations" of the Holocaust, which have come from rabbis as well as priests, as God's punishment of Jews for deserting true religion, should serve to remind us that religion, like all other things that are potentially good (and perhaps more than most), is capable of being distorted to malignant usages. But they should not prevent us from listening to those whose imaginations have led them to ask, if not to answer, the question of whether there is a transcendent meaning in the relation between the destruction of the Jews of Europe and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

In 1938, Gershom Scholem, in the last of his famous series of lectures "Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism," spoke of "the mystical course which, in the great cataclysm now stirring the Jewish people more deeply than in the entire history of Exile, destiny may still have in store for us. . . . " At the time, Hitler's war against the Jews was well under way, but the "Final Solution," i.e., the plan to remove the Jews of Europe from the face of the earth, had not yet been conceived, much less implemented. I propose, in the following essay, to examine three of the writers who
have entered the dangerous area of imagining what this mystical course has been. My aim is not to define this mystical course, for this, as Scholem said in the same lecture, “is the task of prophets, not of professors.” But I hope to show that a rich vein of literary speculation has been opened into the relation between those tremendous events which have involved the entire world in the fate of the Jews.

Moshe Flinker

My first text expresses more passionately than any I shall touch the conviction that the rebirth of Israel from the ashes of the Holocaust represents a divine scheme of redemption. But it was written in 1942-43 by a sixteen-year-old Dutch boy who was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944, four years before the state was created. The diary of young Moshe Flinker, written in Hebrew and first published in 1958 at the recommendation of S. Y. Agnon, is perhaps the most intensely inward and spiritual of all the diaries written by victims of the Holocaust. Although Moshe was in hiding in Belgium with his parents, five sisters, and a brother, we learn very little indeed (barely the names) of the other members of the family and get little circumstantial detail about their lives or those of the Jews of Brussels. In the mind of this extraordinary boy, grief could not be merely personal or familial, but extended to the whole of the Jewish people. In his diary, therefore, we witness the internalization of the awful drama of the Holocaust in the form of a struggle of the religious will to keep alive the idea of a just and benevolent God in the face of a terrible evil.

Moshe felt that by his determination to find a divine meaning in the cataclysm that was befalling his people, he had so isolated himself from his family that he could express his thoughts only to his diary. The inability to speak of his quandary to those around him aggravated his sense of frustrating paralysis and inaction. He began the diary precisely because he hated “being idle.” Yet the diary is more than an anodyne; it is a spiritual diary, an account of the state of his soul. “The truth is that yesterday I hadn’t
the cheek to report to myself what I had done during the day, because I did nothing. By that I mean that I did nothing to better my soul or to elevate my spirit.” It is a measure of how far Moshe falls in spirit during the nine months of keeping the diary that by its end he is assailed by the suspicion that spiritual action is no action at all.

The diary’s most constant impulse is the passion for redemption. Moshe desires two things above all others: that he may, by imaginative sympathy and by killing all joy in his own heart, share in the sufferings of the Jewish people who have already been shipped to the East; and that messianic redemption may at last not only end the age-old suffering of the Jews but prove that the suffering had some meaning. Throughout the diary Moshe asks, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly: “If not now, when wilt Thou help Thy chosen people, O Lord?” “... What can God intend by all these calamities that are happening to us in this terrible period?” He senses, with a shrewdness that few adult Jews in Europe (or elsewhere) possessed in 1942, that the present calamity of the Jewish people is not merely the latest in the long series of afflictions of the Exile but has its unique enormity, universality, and finality: “I find it very hard to believe that what we are going through today is only a mere link in a long chain of suffering ... today it is quite possible to destroy the entire people of Israel.” Although Moshe never for a moment doubts God’s existence or the chosenness of the Jewish people, he is disturbed and infected by those around him who say that there is no God because, if He existed, he would not have allowed such calamities to befall His people.

Moshe’s answer to the question of God’s purpose in the unprecedented suffering of the Jews comes a few days later, in the form of a terrifying paradox that is one of the diary’s distinguishing characteristics. Moshe decides that messianic redemption, which assuredly is long overdue, is now being retarded only by the desire of the Jews and the Allies for a victory over the German scourge. If the war against the Jews marks the end of Jewish Exile, and it does, then the war and the horrible sufferings it brings are none other than the “birthpangs” of the Messiah. Salvation,
then, cannot possibly come from a victory by the Allies, which would merely preempt and delay the triumph of the Messiah. Those Jews, including Moshe’s family, whose highest hope is to return to the life they knew before Nazism naturally desire the victory of the Allies. Such Jews thereby prove to Moshe that what they seek is not salvation but merely a return to the Exile, from the Land and from God. Such Jews do not understand that the extremity of their physical plight represents also the extremity of their spiritual hope—for it is unthinkable that the Jews will ever be visited with a greater evil than that of Nazism. Their suffering has been so fearfully prolonged and horrible because “the prophet foretold that we would not return [to Eretz Israel] because of our righteousness but as a result of the evildoing of our enemies and our agony at their hands. . . .” The evil force of the world has not yet burned itself out, but for Moshe it is not conceivable that the force of evil or the magnitude of Jewish suffering will ever be greater than they are in Hitler’s Europe.

Moshe can never be easy with his paradoxical solution to the question of why the principle of evil is in the ascendancy in the world or with the practical consequence of his solution, which aligns him with the author of his people’s suffering in the war raging through Europe. But the possibility that God has no part in what is happening is to Moshe even more horrible than the possibility that He does. With that spiritual modesty which is one of the diary’s most poignant features, Moshe admits: “Obviously my outlook is a religious one. I hope to be excused for this, for had I not religion, I would never find any answer at all to the problems that confront me.” His explanation of the Holocaust is apocalyptic and cataclysmic in a distinctly religious way. But he does not attempt to hide the undercurrent of skepticism that always threatens this paradoxical faith. Thus he looks forward to Hanukkah as a likely occasion for redemption, yet on the eve of the holiday confesses, “I have the feeling that this Hanukkah will pass, as have so many others, without a miracle or anything resembling one.”

Moshe’s longing for redemption, for the end of the world
as we have known it, coexists in the diary with an ambition that is both a function of this hope and yet in conflict with it. This is his decision, “after much deliberation,” to prepare himself for a career as a Jewish statesman in the Land of Israel. “Even though it would take a miracle to free us now, the rest of my idea—living in our land—isn’t so far-fetched.” Although we may be tempted to smile condescendingly at Moshe’s belief that the success of the messianic era will be contingent on Jewish statesmanship in the New Jerusalem, it is also true that because normative Judaism never separated celestial from earthly Jerusalem, it made of Jerusalem a unique symbol of orderly civilized life. Moshe’s choice of career is also influenced by some practical concerns, such as the unavailability of books. “Statesmanship,” he remarks with his usual combination of innocence and perspicacity, “as opposed to science, does not demand systematic study, an activity which is impossible for me these days.”

Having chosen to prepare for the career of a Jewish statesman, Moshe undertakes to prove to himself the seriousness of his intentions by plunging into the study of Arabic, for the very good reason—one that had not occurred to all potential Palestinian statesmen in 1942—that “a large part of the inhabitants of the land of Israel and the surrounding countries speak it.” Moshe’s decision to study Arabic is one of many examples of the mysterious combination of the wildly messianic and the shrewdly practical in the character of this sixteen-year-old boy. Belgian Jews of a “practical” strain of mind believe that their salvation will come with an Allied victory, but Moshe sees with a lucidity that is wholly unempirical that the slogan of Allied propaganda—when the Allies decided not to extend help to the Jews of Europe—of “rescue through victory,” was a fraud. Thus, despite the apparent perversity of Moshe’s desire that the Germans win every battle short of absolute victory because only such an extremity would ignite redemption, he was entirely right in his expectation that the Jews of Europe were doomed unless rescue came from a source other than the Allies for whose victory they yearned.
The diary's turning point comes on 22 December 1942, when Moshe learns from his father that 100,000 Jews have already been murdered in the East. Hearing this, he wishes to join his brothers in death, and finds that the Bible, which formerly had soothed and consoled him, can offer sustenance only through the Book of Lamentations, that is, through evocations of Jewish agony, not Jewish glory. In spite of his deeply felt belief in cataclysm as the necessary antecedent to redemption, Moshe feels a rising anger toward God and a diminishing ability to draw nourishment from His word. "I have done what I said I would do—study the Bible each day—but I have found nothing in it."

As the sufferings of his people multiply and the tarrying of the Messiah entails ever more destruction, Moshe undergoes a spiritual agony whose causes are at once national and personal. It is not only that the God of history has abandoned His people but that the God of the heart has abandoned young Moshe. "During recent days an emptiness has formed inside me. Nothing motivates me to do anything or write anything, and no new ideas enter my mind; everything is as if asleep. . . . When I pray I feel as if I am praying to the wall and am not heard at all, and there is a voice inside me that says: 'What are you praying for? The Lord does not hear you.' . . . I think that the holy spark which I always felt within me has been taken from me, and here I am, without spirit, without thought, without anything, and all I have is my miserable body." This deeply felt sense of God's withdrawal from the soul into a region so distant that from it He can neither hear nor be heard has afflicted many religious people in the last century. But Moshe stands forth as the symbol of the hundreds of thousands, perhaps the millions, who during the Holocaust suffered the double affliction of the absenteeism or withdrawal of the God of history and the God of the heart, each withdrawal reenforcing the other to overwhelm the individual afflicted by both. For such people, Moshe thinks, "their spiritual anguish . . . may well be greater than their physical pain."

The intensity of Moshe's messianic longing is constantly threatened by the enormity of the afflictions of the Jews.
How much more pain, how many more victims, must be expended before redemption comes? The birth pangs of the Messiah have magnified to an "extent that I would almost say that the cure is worse than the disease." But throughout his agony, he doggedly and assiduously pursues his study of Arabic. He encounters enormous difficulties in obtaining books, which are anyhow in German, a language he does not know well. He reports to his diary his advancement to the "maza" verbs despite the fact that his efforts to obtain the requisite textbook—in French—have failed. Although he belittles his Arabic study as "merely an expression of idleness," it is clear that it is actually a token of his faith that he and the Jewish people both have a future, and that this future will have meaning only if it is a distinct break with the past.

Yet despite his study of Arabic in order to become a Jewish statesman in the land of Israel, Moshe's messianic longing is not, at first, translated into Zionism. In fact, in this very entry where he reports his progress in Arabic, he declares that "for me Zionism cannot now remedy our weakness. Only through the troubles that are now approaching can we attain complete salvation and redemption." But a few months later, when he feels that "the emptiness has spread within me and now fills me completely," he receives something like a revelation, a letter from God. This letter is in the form of a Palestine school almanac that he finds in a Hebrew library. Although he had read the book once before, in a less barren period of his life, it had made little impression on him. But now, in the depths of his loneliness and isolation "from all my brothers, from everything nationally Jewish," the almanac appears to him in a wholly different light. "It now seemed like a letter to me, as a sign of life of the rest of my people. I love it so much that I can hardly bring myself to return it to the library. The name of the almanac is 'My Homeland.' How many times have I not said this word to myself in the last week, and each time it comes into my mind I am filled with yearning for it, and my soul longs for my country that I have loved—and still love—so much."
This moving entry carries implications for the spiritual life of the Jewish people (and for the political life of the modern world) that are not adequately conveyed by the old quip that when a man is no longer capable of being a Jew, he becomes a Zionist. For it shows how, at the deepest level of Jewish religious experience, the will to create meaning out of the terror of history leads or is led to the idea of a national home that will end the Exile of the Jewish people, not only from the promised land but from God. It is not merely that Moshe feels, under the pressure of the genocidal campaign against the Jews, "how much we need a country in which we could live in peace as every people lives in its country." Such a passion, deriving from such a religious crisis, could hardly be satisfied by the Zionist ideal of "normalization." The Jewish homeland, as he conceives it, must redeem the terrible burden of Jewish history, of which Moshe has the fullest imaginative grasp. He sees the Holocaust as (what it is called in Yiddish) the khurbn, the culminating final event in "the chain linking the destruction of the Temple with the present day; I see the rivers of blood shed in the name of the sanctification of our holy faith. . . ."

The way in which the land of Israel is to represent an end to Jewish history as it has existed for two thousand years is not purely "spiritual." In Moshe's vision, the actual Jewish yishuv in Palestine is an integral part of the redemptive process. This comes out most clearly in the contrast that it poses in Moshe's mind to the Jews of Europe. Moshe, we recall, had begun his diary in order to overcome his sense of helpless inaction through spiritual means. But as the diary approaches its end, Moshe increasingly feels that purely spiritual action—prayers, beseechings, diaries—"cannot reestablish our continually violated honor. Action alone is of any use." He comments bitterly on the paradox of chosenness that the Jewish people has been chosen indeed—to be persecuted. "Is it a nation of soldiers or farmers? No—it is a nation of victims, and a people well suited to being victims. . . ." The powerlessness and inaction of the Jews of Europe threaten even Moshe's writing, for like them he feels "hemmed in on all sides, like a
bird in a cage,” and wonders “What use is thought without action. . . . ?” His thirst for action can be quenched only by the sole counter-example to the passive suffering of Europe’s Jews: namely, the Jews of Palestine. He learns from the papers how they, “when they suffer . . . will die as Jews who have defended themselves, as free Jews—and not like those of my brothers who are now suffering under the atrocious Germans, who lead them like sheep to be slaughtered.”

Moshe wrote these words on 3 September 1943. The very next words in the diary, written on 6 September, announce his intention “of emigrating to the Holy Land to help my brothers in their struggle.” In this, the last dated entry of the diary, Moshe expresses an unwonted confidence, not so much in his own future as in that of the Jewish people: for he is “absolutely sure that all the sufferings that we have undergone have given us certain rights, and by the general spiritual elevation of our people we have managed to raise the question of the Jews to the status of a problem for all mankind.” Thus what was to have been the first notebook of Moshe’s diary ends with an upsurge of national feeling, confirmed by the new will of the Jewish people to end its victimization and make its own destiny.

This feeling of confidence is not wrought into consistency with Moshe’s previously expressed feeling that it is not through human action that Jewish deliverance will come. Perhaps, if he had lived, Moshe would have seen in these human actions not denial of faith in the promise of deliverance but man’s acting out of the redemptive process. For the final (albeit undated) entries in the diary express simultaneously the belief that the Jewish disaster has attained a cosmic dimension, and that passionate desire to give at least a human meaning to this suffering by returning, with the remnant of his people, to rebuild the homeland.

As he contemplates (from afar, he thinks) the suffering of his people, Moshe envisions two ways in which this suffering may be related to something beyond itself and so given meaning. He sees from his window a blood-red sky,
and becomes convinced that these “bleeding clouds” are the cosmic reflection of the Jewish sea of blood in the European inferno. Presently, this sky is a reproach to him for having “forgotten” his people and their tragedy; but its future destiny is to intercede, for the very last time, with the Ruler of the Universe to redeem His people.

In a gigantic pathetic fallacy, Moshe imagines the blood-red clouds ascending to the throne of heaven and posing the accusatory questions that dominate his own mind: “How long will He vent his wrath upon the people He chose, who have been suffering for Him for two thousand years? . . . Two thousand years have we been persecuted. Two thousand years have we brought into this world children who are doomed to suffer. Lord our God is this still not enough?”

But the very final note of the diary is one not of accusation of God but of self-accusation. His anguished desire to join his fellow Jews as a victim or to go to Palestine as their avenger (“—the return of our beloved people to their homeland. That will be the greatest revenge that could ever happen.”) is thwarted. He therefore berates himself for withdrawing from his people and concludes the diary with an expression of a paralysis that feels to him like death itself.

Moshe’s agony of separation from his tortured brethren was soon to end, with his capture by the Gestapo and ultimate execution in Auschwitz. We may be sure the irony of his being arrested on the eve of Passover (7 April 1944) was not lost on Moshe Flinker. Would the loathsome Germans prove, after all, through the alchemy of tragedy, to be the instrument for realizing the promise of redemption celebrated on the holiday? Would he and his people indeed find themselves, as a result of this monstrous paradox, “next year in Jerusalem”? Who can doubt that Moshe asked himself these questions, perhaps continued to ask them throughout his deepest degradation and suffering.

Moshe Flinker’s is the purest example of the natural connection between the Jewish religious quandary caused by the Holocaust and the resolution offered by the establishment of a Jewish state. Passionately religious,
wholly innocent of politics and contemptuous of human action to bring redemption, Moshe was irresistibly driven by the plight of his people, whose terrible fate he was to share, to seek hope and meaning in Zion. In the passion with which he storms the heavens themselves, in his intense imaginative desire to break through the bonds of this world to a new one, Moshe stands forth as a figure of tragic intensity and dimension. He forces us to ask, as he himself did, whether such suffering, magnified six million times, can conceivably have been inflicted and endured without leaving its permanent mark in heaven and on earth.

Nelly Sachs

One of the most ambitious attempts to answer this question, and in a language that would have seemed perfectly natural to Moshe Flinker, is the poetry of Nelly Sachs. Her sense of the intimate relation between Exile and Return, degradation and exaltation, suffering and redemption, national destruction and national rebirth, is remarkably like Moshe’s. She too imagines the sufferings of the Jewish people to have been “constellated” in the heavens themselves. If Moshe sees the very sun turning “as red as blood” because it has been wounded with Jewish suffering, then Nelly Sachs says to the crying Job, symbol of the Jewish people, that “one day the constellation of your blood / shall make all rising suns blanch.” The final vision of Moshe’s diary, that of a blood-red sun about to set, is the vision that reigns at the outset of the imaginative drama that is enacted in Nelly Sachs’s poetry, when she sees the Germans marching across a red carpet that is “the setting sun of Sinai’s people.”

Although Nelly Sachs’s physical situation when she wrote her poems—that is to say, safely out of her native Germany and the inferno of Europe and looking back on the wreckage and carnage—was far different from Moshe’s, they were alike in their desperate quest to place themselves imaginatively within the suffering of their people. By the time Nelly Sachs came to compose her massive threnody,
Moshe was himself among those "dead brothers and sisters" to whom she dedicated all of her work.

The poetry of Nelly Sachs is one of the most elaborate and sustained attempts to assimilate the Holocaust into the poetic imagination and into Jewish history. Between 1946, when her first volume of poems—*In the Habitations of Death*—appeared, and her death in 1970, she published volume after volume in the attempt to penetrate what she called "a mystery that begins with night." She has been taken to task by some for illuminating this mystery too well and by others for illuminating it too feebly or not at all. On the one hand, it is charged that the themes and symbols of her poems so thoroughly integrate the Holocaust into the long history of the Jewish people that they "diminish the uniqueness of the horror and . . . turn the murderers into impersonal and abstract forces." On the other, she is faulted for never saying with adequate specificity what the mystery is or where, exactly, the resurrection toward which her heart and verse surge and strain is to be realized.

The first charge would be legitimate if, indeed, it had been Nelly Sachs's primary intention to convey, with the immediacy of an eyewitness or the concrete particularity of the novelist, the phenomenal reality of the destruction of European Jewry. But she assumes from the outset that this greatest of crimes has so disoriented the universe, of which the poet's vision is one part—she speaks of writing with one eye ripped out—that realistic description is the least likely way to capture its reality, which is, in truth, even beyond fantasy. Images of physical dismemberment, as in the poem "Ebb and Flood Strike a Chord," are as rife in her poetry as in Picasso's paintings; they are an aspect of that starting point in night which challenges the integrating power of her imagination. If, in her work, the German murderers are disembodied and without personal identity, it is because that is, in metaphysical (but not legal) justice, their due for turning millions of Jewish victims into smoke.

The second charge—that for all her stress on rebirth, the kind of resurrection she envisions is not fully articulated—seems to ignore an axiom of Holocaust literature: namely,
that in the aftermath of the most terrible event of modern, if not all, history, we must live and act without certainties. In seeking meaning in the Holocaust, especially in seeking, as Nelly Sachs does, a divine meaning, one is prohibited from confusing one's own certainty with absolute certainty. Browning's paradox—that in art perfect realization means spiritual stagnation—applies more forcefully here than anywhere else. A tentative resolution of theological doubts is the only resolution men will tolerate.  

I believe that in the imaginative universe that Nelly Sachs created the rebirth of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland played a crucial role, even if it never provided her with a conclusive answer to questions intrinsically unanswerable. In every volume, she wrestles with the paradoxical link between the destruction of the Jewish people in Europe and their rebirth, especially (though not exclusively) in Israel. This link never becomes an article of faith, but it is the sole recurring concrete expression of her faith in the possibility of resurrection.

The theme of resurrection—of flesh as well as spirit—is sounded in the very first poem of the first volume, but sounded with irony and bitterness. In “O the Chimneys” the poet collapses the massive physicality of millions of Jewish corpses into a collective image of “Israel’s body” drifting as smoke through the air, to be welcomed in heaven by a star turned black because it is now “a chimney sweep.” “Or,” asks the poet, “was it a ray of sun?” The chimneys of the death factories, through which the smoke that was all that was left of the Jewish people escaped, may from some transcendent point of view be seen as “Freedomway for Jeremiah and Job’s dust.” But the image (strikingly similar to images in the poetry of Glatstein and Zeitlin and Kovner) seems too spiritualized and etherealized to represent the calamity that is the poem’s subject. Even more upsetting is the question “Who devised you and laid stone upon stone / The road for refugees of smoke?” The skeptical reader is inclined to answer, “the Germans, of course.” But the poet does not answer. Here it would seem that the very attempt to place the Holocaust within the framework of
Jewish history leads to thoughts that frighten the poet herself, who ends with an exclamation, a cry of pain. The implied question of whether the physical resurrection of the flesh described in her epitaph from Job is possible to these “refugees of smoke” also remains unanswered in the concluding lament: “O you chimneys, / O you fingers / And Israel’s body as smoke through the air!”

The next poem, “To you that build the new house,” offers more concrete, material images of rebirth. It exhorts the survivors, in putting up their walls, not to “hang your tears for those who departed, / Who will not live with you then.” Memory will make not only building but sleep impossible. The poem’s many imperatives are summed up and generalized in its final one:

Build, when the hourglass trickles,
But do not weep away the minutes
Together with the dust
That obscures the light.

If read literally, this poem can seem an insensitive injunction to forget the victims lest that memory paralyze efforts of rebuilding and obscure the light that still exists behind the dust (an obsessive image in Nelly Sachs’s poems for the Jewish dead). The skeptical reader we imagined for “O the Chimneys” might also be tempted to remark about this injunction to the surviving Jews to ignore their stricken brethren that it is urging people to do more abundantly that which they already do excessively. But in fact, the poem is addressed by Nelly Sachs to herself and to all those burdened by their own inescapable immersion in the Holocaust. For her and for them, there is no question of forgetting; what they seek is the most useful expedient for keeping the dead alive and for rescuing an ancient people before “the hourglass trickles.” This expedient is not weeping but building. This is the true memorial because, as Rabbi Nachman said (in the epigraph to the poem): “There are stones like souls.”

To speak of stones, in such a context, is to think of Jerusalem, especially if we keep in mind that for Nelly Sachs stones are like “a satchel full of lived life.” But
historical Eretz Israel first appears in the poetry in the image of the sand of Sinai. This sand, originating in the distant past, has been carried by the Jewish people throughout its long history of transformations, has "Mingled with throats of nightingales, / Mingled with wings of butterflies," and was in the "deathly shoes" taken from the victims of Auschwitz. These victims were themselves turned to dust, which also will become sand, just as the murderers who turned them into dust "will be dust / In the shoes of those to come."

Such a poem as "But who emptied your shoes of sand?" illustrates the impregnation of Nelly Sachs's poetic imagery with the physicality of Eretz Israel. These images suggestively rather than discursively demonstrate that the Diaspora was not a mere rupture in Jewish historical continuity and that the Jews in Exile were still "Sinai's people," whose inherited memories of their homeland became an integral part of their life. The mystery of suffering attendant on the transformation of Jewish "dust" back into Sinai sand is as great as that by which the suffering of Philomela was transformed into the beautiful song of the nightingale referred to in the poem.

The Holy Land, endowed with a voice by Nelly Sachs, contemplates the fate of her children among the nations. The vessels of her holiness were squandered abroad, where Death "Painted Israel red on all the walls of the world." Now the Holy Land, much diminished in majesty, asks only:

What shall be the end of the little holiness
Which still dwells in my sand?

She receives from the voices of the dead the injunction not to seek revenge. But, unsatisfied with this merely negative counsel, she repeats her question. This time she is answered by the action of a single child, "murdered in sleep," who rises from the dead, "bends down the tree of ages / And pins the white breathing star / That was once called Israel to its topmost bough." By this act she retrieves from its depths of degradation the "badge of shame" that the Nazis
affixed to her in the ghetto, forcing the ancient tree of life to stoop to the realms of death so that it may renew itself through the grafting of this old-new branch called Israel. "Spring upright again, says the child, / To where tears mean eternity."

But it is one thing to observe the paradoxical relationship between degradation and exaltation, another to assert their necessary and causal link. To say that the end of the world of European Jewry brought about the rebirth of the Jewish people in Israel is not necessarily to assert that a higher power than man willingly presided over the death of European Jewry for the purpose of resurrecting the Jewish people in their homeland. Yet sometimes Nelly Sachs seems to assert precisely this. As the epigraph to one poem in this volume, she cites the statement from the Zohar that "the sinking occurs for the sake of the rising." In another she urges her audience to learn again "how to listen" so that "on the day of destruction" they will be able to hear "how in death / Life begins."

Ordinarily, to assert that life arises only from death (as when childbirth causes a mother's death) is to assert a gloomy view of existence. Our uneasiness with this conjunction in Nelly Sachs, however, arises from the fear that it is too sanguine. If we have forced ourselves to see the Holocaust in its full horror, we cannot blink the fact that for the Jews of Europe this calamity was indeed—as Hannah Arendt says—"the end of the world." The great, perhaps insuperable, challenge that Nelly Sachs took upon herself was to join a full recognition of this fact to a celebration, however hedged and tentative, of the birth she believed to have been caused by this death. In many ways, this was a more formidable task than that of the elegist who traditionally undertook to triumph over death through the power of language, perception, and poetic tradition; such triumphs cannot be gainsaid by historical events. What is so daring in Nelly Sachs's poems relating Holocaust to rebirth is that her elegiac response to the death of a people keeps straining toward a historical validation and will not rest content with the easy resolutions of what Irving Howe
calls “Geistesgeschichte: the encapsulation of an extremely complex group of historical events by a theory so nebulous-ly inclusive that it leaves no possibility for refutation.”

In some poems, the breakthrough to the new world of rebirth seems to depend not merely on catastrophe but on the extent of the catastrophe: had fewer been killed, “Chorus of the Wanderers” appears to imply, the enormous distance between Exile and Return could never have been encompassed. The homeless wanderers, “clad in the rags of the land / In which we rested,” trod the dust of Exile until it began “to stir our grandsons’ blood.” Then, by their death, they build a path to the new world: “Like measuring rods our bodies lie on the earth / And measure out the horizon—.” The wanderers died in the wilderness, but their corpses laid the road to the promised land: “Our death will lie like a threshold / Before your tight-shut doors.”

Eclipse of the Stars, published in 1949, a year after the establishment of the State of Israel, is the most explicitly “Zionist” of Nelly Sachs’s volumes. Here the hopes so tentatively set forth in the first volume are allowed to flourish, and the generalized theme of rebirth is vivified and particularized by the nourishment of a living reality.

The volume takes as a given the inability of the nations to accept the People Israel in their midst: “Why the black answer of hate to your existence, Israel?” This people, which always in the family of nations “sang / one note lower / or one note higher,” has, despite the unique blessing it brought to the world as “the source of the living God,” at last been abandoned by angels and mortals. The European survivors of this people, those who have not been “turned to ashes,” can never return to their former dwelling places. The nations who ask where the survivors plan to go do not see that “they are always going to their graves.” Terror creates a homelessness for which “all ways wither like cut flowers—.”

But, paradoxically, just because we inhabit an era when chaos and darkness have reestablished their empire more firmly than ever, “Time roars with our longing for home.” Exile is not eternal—that, after all, had been the definitive
prophecy of Jesus regarding the Jewish people—and there is still a way homeward that has not withered. In a recurring image, the sand of the hourglass has nearly run out for the Jewish people. But the sand actually runs not into the bottom of the hourglass but ultimately back to the desert from whence it came, and from whence the people of Israel came as well. In the astonishing metaphysical image that holds the meaning of “Women and girls of Israel,” the sand of the desert, accumulating through the centuries since Jewish expulsion, is also the sand of the hourglass that measures the little remaining time of the Jewish people. Paradoxically, this process of dissipation both resulted in, and was halted by, the blooming of the desert:

the desert, the great bend in the road to eternity,
which had already begun to fill with its sand
the hourglass of lunar time,
breathes above the filled-in footsteps
of those who go to God, and its parched veined springs
fill with fertility—

The transformation of Jewish existence in the Diaspora into Jewish existence in Israel is symbolized by the transformation of the “hourglass of dust” in which exiled time itself, the “homeless millennia,” has roamed since the destruction of the temple, into the sand of the desert from which both dust and glass were created.

Perhaps the most affirmative of the poems in this volume, and the one in which the feeling of imminent return is strongest, is “Now Abraham has seized the root of the winds”:

Now Abraham has seized the root of the winds
for home shall Israel come from dispersion.

It has gathered wounds and afflictions
in the courtyards of the world,
has bathed all locked doors with its tears.

Its elders, having almost outgrown their earthly garb
and extending their limbs like sea plants,

embalmed in the salt of despair
and the wailing wall night in their arms—
will sleep just a spell longer—
But youth has unfurled its flag of longing,
for a field yearns to be loved by them
and a desert watered
and the house shall be built
to face the sun: God
and evening again has the violet-shy word
that only grows so blue in the homeland:
Good night!

This poem is an encapsulated history of Jewish Exile in all
its bitterness, a poetic realization of the Zionist dream of
making the desert bloom, and a celebration of homecoming.
But, if read as a discrete unit, the poem’s affirmation
appears to come at the cost of keeping the Holocaust
decently out of view. It needs (as is often the case with
individual poems by Nelly Sachs) to be complemented by
another poem in this volume, which recalls that the
wonders of Abraham are inescapably those “which we with
our bodies must consummate.”

The overriding metaphysical premise of Nelly Sachs’s
poetic universe is a sense of the world’s unity and integrity,
in the sense of wholeness, oneness, a vast assemblage of
organic parts each one of which impinges on every other, so
that no part of the whole system can be removed or changed
without every other part being affected. Therefore, in
_Eclipse of the Stars_ as everywhere in Nelly Sachs’s poetry
the images of transformation, metamorphosis and resurrec-
tion abound. “Ending flows to beginning / like the cry of a
swan” and “the soul, folded, waits / to be born again /
under the ice of the death mask.” But here the images
are given a habitation and a name; the generalized desire
for rebirth is attached, albeit with full consciousness of the
risk of doing do, to a living, struggling reality.

“Land of Israel,” the first of two poems so titled in this
volume, pictures a people “seared by dying” moving back
into the valleys of Eretz Israel. Such a picture, the poet
believes, must surely evoke “the patriarchs’ blessing / for
those returning.” The image of the patriarchs, com-
plemented by the poem’s subsequent allusions to Elijah and
to the imminent appearance of “a new Ruth,” is meant to
remind us that the scheme of redemption in which disaster is the necessary prelude to apocalypse, is not the desperate invention of the poet responding to an otherwise meaningless modern history, but a scheme inherent in the ancient Covenant between God and His chosen people. The survivors of the Holocaust have “come home from the corners of the world with tear-stained eyes” not merely for the purpose of establishing themselves in a normal homeland such as all other people have but “to write the psalms of David anew” in a reconsecrated land.

To read such lines is to recognize at once that the poetic solace which Nelly Sachs offered her people, the poetic embrace in which she sought to enfold them, aspires to more than rescue and relief. She does indeed desire, as the second “Land of Israel” poem says, to “stanch the blood / and thaw out the tears / which froze in the death chambers.” But she instinctively recognized that to restore the human image to so tortured and humiliated a people as the Jewish survivors of Hitler’s Europe, more was required than merely to return them to the status of tolerated aliens that they had formerly held. They had, rather, to be returned to “the lost memories / which smell prophetically through the earth / and sleep on the stone” in the land of Israel, and only there. The restoration of the human status to the survivors could not, she knew, be achieved without the restoration of nationality; nor could the poet herself, speaking for the Jews who remained outside the land of Israel, be born again unless the national center of her people was reborn, and “out of the desert sand” Israel “thrust up ... trees again.”

These poems celebrating the idea of national redemption for a shattered people represent Nelly Sachs’s most determined effort to penetrate what in one poem she calls “the mystery overgrown with forgetting,” a mystery that contains the relationship between degradation and exaltation, and between an exiled people and its homeland. Yet the very title of her next volume—And No One Knows How to Go On (1957)—shows how fragile and tentative was her Zionist affirmation. Several poems return to the dark prospect that life, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, has
become impossible on this planet. If it is indeed the case that, as she says in one poem, “all lands are ready to rise / from the map,” then it can hardly matter whether the Jewish people resides in Israel or in Uganda.

Yet the volume does continue to explore the possible link between the great Jewish death in Europe and the great Jewish rebirth in Israel. The figure of Daniel becomes the symbol of the poet herself in his ability to recover “forgotten dreams even from behind the last slope of coal.” He gathers fragments and preserves what has been torn down. Nelly Sachs emulates Daniel’s own courage by entering the space “between hangman and victim” in order to retrieve the possibility of a new life. Her Israel is both the land and the people, the latter being nourished in Exile by its memories but also nourishing what is remembered by its remembering and suffering. “Israel,” she cries, “is not only land!” Its desert sand took wing in prophecy, and its “eternity-snor- ting mountains” were transmuted into “the milk-white foam / Of children’s prayers.” Yet the physicality of Israel has outlasted the Holocaust and now awaits that birth of its new self whose precondition has been the death of the old. By the intensity with which she perceives them, the bloodletting of the People Israel and the peeling of corpse-skin from the dead become for Nelly Sachs part of a homeward movement and enable the elegiac transformation of death into new life:

Late firstborn!
You have come home with the spade
into the unexcavated,
the unconstructed,
but into the line
that leads again
through the synagogue of longing
from death into birth.

_Death Still Celebrates Life_ (1965) makes clear in a number of ways that the healing process for the Jewish people cannot be a simple reversal of the process of destruction and Exile, “for entrance can never be / the same as exit where farewell and return are parted by the incurable wound
of life.” Biblical prophesy, which always points “from graves / into the next dawn,” does prepare us for the para­dox that a new dawn is always the gift of night. But Nelly Sachs could never rest comfortably in this paradox. Her work consistently yearns toward consolation and transcendence, but declines finally to lay hold of them, for fear that they may not be real. The image of an Israel reborn from ashes is her particular example—powerful as a symbol because it is first an actuality—of the more general desire, of a poet “on the track of my rights of domicile,” for a homeland that will offer refuge to those who were cast out—from country, from life, from the human status itself.

In Nelly Sachs’s poetry the land of Israel is both itself and the crossroads where the poet’s desire for, and disbelief in, redemption meet. In “I do not know the room,” she insists with certainty that nothing is lost, that somewhere “the smile of the child / who was thrown as in play / into the peeling flames is preserved.” In a poem explicitly labeled as one of mourning entitled “Everywhere Jerusalem,” she says that ultimately everything is, indeed, saved, but “saved for the devouring fire / of His absence—.” The Jerusalem that is said in the title to be everywhere is never mentioned in the body of the poem, for in the absence of God it has become the only enduring and universal presence in Jewish life.

Abba Kovner

My place of work is a wooden hut between the graveyard and the children’s house. There I am writing something that has no beginning and no end. But if there is a central thread that goes through the empty pages, it is the leitmotif of those who survived, those who were destroyed and those who come after them. (Abba Kovner, 7 March 1975)

Abba Kovner’s work and life have been attempts to join together what has been separated by history, especially by the Jewish history of expulsion, dispersion, oppression, Holocaust. He himself has located the source of his creative work in a tension between two loves, his love of the Jewish people and his love of the land of Israel. He has sought to
bring together, as completing counterparts, those Jews who attached themselves to the Jewish people but had no experience of the living reality of the land, and those Israelis who saw themselves "as the first of a new humankind—." During the first half of his life, he gained honor and fame as a resistance fighter in Vilna and the surrounding forests and then as a leader in the Brichah movement that brought the pitiful remnant of European Jewry to the homeland in Palestine. In this period, he sought to bring the Jewish people to the land of Israel. But in his work as a creative writer, he has initiated a vast backward movement of recovery that is intended to carry the imagination of his contemporaries in Israel back to the Jewish people, back to a buried life they thought they had forgotten or, perhaps, never even known.

To understand Kovner's poetry, we must recognize that it is based on the impulse to join people with land, matter with spirit, the living with the dead, past with present, life with literature. At any particular moment in his poems, we may be simultaneously at the foot of Sinai and at the edge of the shooting pits of Ponary, circling the walls of Jericho and the walls of a European convent or ghetto, defending Vilna (the "Jerusalem of Lithuania") and the Jerusalem of modern Israel, receiving the Covenant and giving it back. He is a writer whose imagination, like his life, may rise from the material to the spiritual, but may also return, for renewal, from the spiritual to the physical. Two examples of this forward and backward movement from Kovner's life may help to underscore its centrality in his poetry.

At the war's end, Kovner felt powerfully the need not only for rescue but for transformation of the Jewish people. He was shocked by the apathy of those small segments of the European Jewish population that had not suffered in the Holocaust, people who had lived through an event of biblical enormity without even noticing it. "There blew in our faces a chill cellar-wind of a community that goes on living as if nothing had happened, as it did before the deluge, as if there had been no deluge." His immediate goal was physical rescue, a task made difficult enough by allies as
well as enemies in Europe, and by the British Mandatory Government in Palestine; but he could not conceive of physical rescue apart from spiritual renewal. Physical rescue of European Jewry might perhaps take place if the survivors could be moved from the displaced persons camps to America, but spiritual renewal required their reunion with the Jewish land. Yet it was not only the European survivors who needed spiritual rebirth after the great catastrophe: “We want,” he said in a speech of 1945, “to come to the Land of Israel, to its people, and by the force of our conviction, of our inquietude, our sense of the danger that hovers over us and is also latent within us, to change its ways of thinking . . . which is also largely the outcome of detachment, distance and indifference.”  

If the Jewish people were one—and, Kovner believed, they were—then Palestinian Jewry could not achieve its mission unless it absorbed into its consciousness the central experience, grim and oppressive though it had been, of modern Jewish history. Just how true this was even Kovner could not know until the traumatic war of 1967 dramatically revealed how “young Israelis . . . in the most critical hours of their lives, found that their deepest feelings came into contact with that forgotten chapter . . . that seemingly repressed chapter, the destruction of our people in Europe.”

But sometimes it is important, even essential, that spirit renew itself at the source, that literature revitalize itself through contact with life. Kovner is fond of pointing out that in classical Hebrew there was no single word for literature; rather, literature was called hayim she-bi-khtav—life in writing. The rightness of this apparently cumbersome phrase was proved to Kovner by his experience in commanding resistance fighters in the Vilna ghetto. On 1 September 1943, the Germans surrounded the ghetto in order to remove the last thousands of Jews to the death camps. It was necessary to build defense positions with sandbags, but—irony of ironies—the people whose forefathers had for a thousand years built their homes of drifting sand could now find none with which to protect themselves against German bullets. Their salvation (temporary,
to be sure) lay in “the great volumes of the Talmud in their brown leather binding,” which were taken from the famous Jewish library of Vilna to serve in place of sandbags. The event has remained with Kovner as a revelation of the complex possibilities of renewal in the interactions between matter and spirit, life and literature. From one point of view, the Talmud was here degraded from a spiritual to a physical role; yet in the process it enabled a preservation of Jewish life through a transformation of the traditional Jewish passivity in the face of violent threat. “I propped up my rifle on the back of the books. Were the books a support for the rifle with its ten bullets? Or, at that hour, were they a support for something else?”

The desire to overcome geographical and chronological discontinuity by joining Israel with Diaspora, present with past, is apparent in Kovner’s account of the genesis of My Little Sister, published in 1967, that is, almost a quarter of a century after the events of the Holocaust that form its center. He was, he has said, walking late at night through the streets of a section of Tel Aviv when he heard the shrieks of a woman coming from a high window. Although his own attention was riveted on the terrible screams, neither the other passersby in the street nor the people behind the neighboring windows seemed to pay any attention. Kovner was at once carried back to the Holocaust years when the collective death rattle of the Jews of Europe failed to disturb the placidity or even attract the attention of the outside world.

A cloister’s wall is high.
A wall of silence
still higher.

(Section 8)*

This gave the first impulse toward recovery of the past. The second came from Kovner’s discovery of the truth behind the appearances. In actuality, he had been hearing the cries of a woman in labor coming from a maternity hospital; those who knew the neighborhood paid no attention

*Subsequent parenthetical references for verse quotations should be understood to be to section and not page numbers.
because they were familiar with such cries and knew their cause. Stirred by recollections of the past, of the sense of isolation and abandonment, by the particular memories of the agonies of mothers and children during the Holocaust—“I never thought a woman who had her child taken out of her arms had gone like a sheep to the slaughter”17—and by the paradoxical relation between torture and birth, Kovner set himself to what he has called “an enduring attempt to turn ashes into an eternal light.”18

The incident in Tel Aviv is specifically reflected in My Little Sister in several ways. The Dominican convent in which the little sister receives (temporary) shelter is shown to be out of touch with the true human actuality and the horrors raging through Europe among the Jews by virtue of the fact that here “No woman has crouched to give birth / on the floor.” (11) The convent’s mother is the Mother Superior, its ideal of motherhood the virginal mother of the infant Jesus, over whose image the nuns lovingly fuss. The contrasted ideas of motherhood give rise to the poem’s contrasts between the sanctified Christian image of the crucified Jesus and “my crucified memory / outside the fence!” (10), a memory of images themselves crying for sanctification: “ashes that speak” (5) and “heaps of small shoes.”(35)

The mother’s agony of which the cries from the lying-in hospital reminded Kovner is in My Little Sister illustrated in ways that, if considered logically, are mutually inconsistent; yet this inconsistency gives us a clue to the organizing idea of the poem. In the opening section of Part Four, the poet looks back “from the promised land” upon the carnage in Europe and searches among heaps of small shoes for his sister-bride. He then imagines all the little sisters who were killed, before their parents could say good-bye to them or explain to them that they had not really resented the extra burden of weight on the road to death. He wishes that he could have

    even in one word
    whispered
    that you were no burden to us.
On the way. Mother walked heavy.
I.
All your brothers.
And the desperate convoy.

(35)

In Part Five of the poem, however, the mother’s agony is not that she was separated from her child on the way to execution in the mass graves evoked in part iii of Section 35 but that her infant never survived the maternity hospital that was the starting point of Kovner’s imaginative journey:

The Bikur Ḥolim Hospital
walls soaked
with the smell of sour urine
and dying hopes.
In the old hospital
among walls of red brick
my sister died.
She was two hours old.

(45)

In the following section, the suffering mother is said to have mourned eight years (1940-48, when the State of Israel was established) “a daughter / who never came into the world.”

This factual inconsistency in the narrative indicates clearly enough that we are dealing not with a single sister-bride or a single mother but with a generalized account of the Holocaust. Kovner’s mode of generalizing is something like Milton’s; that is, he eschews abstract, generalized language and limits himself to specific images and concrete details, but says that the occurrence might have happened this way or that way or yet a third way; except that (unlike Milton) he omits the or. A hint of Kovner’s intention is given in the poem’s title itself. In grammatical strictness, the Hebrew title should be Ḥoti Ḥaktana rather than, as it is, Ḥoti Ktana; the grammatical anomaly indicates that it is not a single little sister we are recalling but all the little sisters, born and unborn, who were swallowed up by the Holocaust. Long before Kovner heard the shrieks from the Tel Aviv maternity ward, his imagination was captured by a little girl who had died, yet lived. She was one of the 47,000
Jews taken from Vilna to the shooting pits of Ponary. Incredibly, she managed to crawl out from among the thousands of dead and dying bodies to tell her story. Like a myriad of such survivor-witnesses whom we now know from the history and literature of the Holocaust, she was believed by no one—except for Abba Kovner, who proceeded to organize the armed resistance. "... The central fact in Kovner’s life," according to Shirley Kaufman, "is his confrontation with the half-dead, half-crazed girl from the mass grave at Ponar. Her face haunts every line he writes."¹⁹

The little sister of the narrative finds refuge in the convent but also "betrayal / —no island. / Only a folded sail in a storm." (15) Unlike the group that took her to the convent and was itself later shot by the mobile killing units of the Einsatzgruppen, the little sister was “not privileged to be condemned to death” and “did not enter a covenant of blood” (just as later she is said to be “not privileged to see / the light of the day!” [46] But Section 39 seems to say that she was turned over to the Germans by the nuns and eventually turned into ashes. Her “shorn head” (40) is both that of a nun and a death-camp inmate.

The little sister’s varied and contradictory fate is most fully explored in Section 28, which describes the preparations for her wedding. The brother-narrator here stresses her identity as the “sister-bride” of Song of Songs. Many of the central images and motifs of Kovner’s poem are to be found in Solomon’s song, especially in its eighth and concluding chapter, where the speaker wishes that the beloved could be “as my brother, / That sucked the breasts of my mother!” The speaker subsequently says of the sister that “thy mother was in travail with thee, / There was she in travail and brought thee forth.” Finally, he asks: “What shall we do for our sister / In the day when she shall be spoken for?” (a line quoted from in Section 36).

If, as traditional religious interpretation of Song of Songs holds, the sister-bride is no mere figure of romantic love poetry but a symbol of the people of Israel, then the little sister’s wedding would be a reaffirmation of the covenantal relationship between God and his Chosen People. Every
Jewish wedding, to be sure, is to some extent such a reaffirmation, since there is “No man without a wife, neither a woman without a husband, nor both of them without God” (Genesis Rabbah 8:9). Kovner describes many of the customary appurtenances of the wedding ceremony, including the braided challah, the dish of honey, and the golden chicken soup. But an anomalous element intervenes. “The whole world drinks / kosher chicken soup:” Chicken soup, however, is not supposed to be drunk until after the ceremony, and then only by the bride and groom. Yet the canopy, the covering that symbolizes the consummation of the marriage, is not present at all, and therefore the “whole world” would seem to be celebrating an event that has not taken place. The mystery of the world’s presence at the prematurely celebrated Jewish wedding is resolved in the following lines:

Our father took his bread, bless God,
forty years from one oven. He never imagined
a whole people could rise in the ovens
and the world, with God’s help, go on.

The world flocks to celebrate a Jewish marriage precisely because it is a marriage with death. The Covenant that was given at Sinai has been returned in Europe as the whole Jewish people returns—in smoke—to the God who did them the dubious favor of choosing them as his special people. The feeling at this point in Section 28 is similar to that in Glatstein’s famous poem “Dead Men Don’t Praise God”: “We received the Torah on Sinai / and in Lublin we gave it back.” But Kovner goes beyond Glatstein. Both feel the immediacy of the biblical past and its painful and paradoxical continuity with the Holocaust present, but Kovner feels, and indeed embodies, the future, as well; after the givingback in Lublin, there is to be a retrieval in Sinai. Although “the marriage contract will be written in stone” for multitudes of little sisters, the canopy missing from this wedding of death will again be raised, and raised in the very place from which the seemingly dissolved Covenant came, the desert of Sinai.

The marriage contracts are written in stone, the whole
vanished Jewish world has become “a choir of stones” (40), a huge cemetery. After such material and spiritual ravages, is it possible to rebuild,

to wipe from the lips
the taste.
To bring back
a world of innocence,
as if to its socket a bone
from the foot of the dead.

(32)

The contrast between the wholeness, unity, and coherence of the Dominican convent and the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” Vilna, “a city thrust on its back / like a horse in blood, jerking its hooves / unable to rise” (17), like the contrast in Canopy in the Desert between Saint Catherine’s Monastery with its 3,000 steps to Sinai and “the kind of stuff / Jacob’s ladder was made of” (Eighth Gate), is at first dispiriting to the poet. He stands amidst the ruins of his world and asks,

With what—
with what, little sister,
shall we weave and draw the dream
now?

(34)

The question faced by Kovner was not very different from the one put to Martin Buber in 1933 by a Christian polemicist who asked whether the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy that Jerusalem would be destroyed and never again come under Jewish rule did not prove that the Covenant between God and the Jews had been abrogated. Buber replied as follows:

I live not far from the city of Worms, to which I am bound by the tradition of my forefathers; and, from time to time, I go there. When I go, I first go to the cathedral. It is a visible harmony of members, a totality in which no part deviates from perfection. I walk about the cathedral with consummate joy, gazing at it. Then I go over to the Jewish cemetery consisting of crooked, cracked, shapeless, random stones. I station myself there, gaze upward from the jumble of a cemetery to that glorious harmony, and seem to be looking up from Israel to the Church.
Below, there is no jot of form; there are only the stones, and the dust lying beneath the stones. The dust is there, no matter how thinly scattered. There lies the corporeality of man, which has turned to this. There it is. There it is for me. There it is for me, not as corporeality within the space of this planet, but as corporeality within my own memory, far into the depths of history, as far back as Sinai.

I have stood there, have been united with the dust, and through it with the Patriarchs. That is a memory of the transaction with God which is given to all Jews. From this the perfection of the Christian house of God cannot separate me, nothing can separate me from the sacred history of Israel.

I have stood there and have experienced everything myself; with all this death has confronted me, all the dust, all the ruin, all the wordless misery is mine; but the covenant has not been withdrawn from me. I lie on the ground, fallen like these stones. But it has not been withdrawn from me.

The cathedral is as it is. The cemetery is as it is. But nothing has been withdrawn from us.²⁰

Kovner’s answer, albeit it in far more secular terms, is also that the Covenant has not been withdrawn from the People Israel; but the covenantal relationship must be held in abeyance until the remnant of the Jewish people returns, spiritually as well as physically, from the Diaspora to the original source and site of the Covenant.

There was no one with me there who spoke or understood my tongue cleaving to the roof of my mouth (if I forget thee Oh canyon! if I forget thee)

On all my roads I imagined I’d find the road to you

(69)

As this passage from A Canopy in the Desert suggests, the canopy missing from the little sister’s wedding is to be found only in the homeland. The feeling with which we are left at the conclusion of My Little Sister has much in common with what we feel near the end of the book of Leviticus, when God announces that although he will bring
his Chosen People to nearly total destruction in the lands of their enemies, while their own land "shall lie forsaken without them," he will not even then break his Covenant with them, or theirs with the land. They have rejected his ordinances and abhorred his statutes; "And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them. . . . " When Kovner returned to the liberated—and destroyed—Vilna, he found amidst the ruins only the eastern wall of the old synagogue, and on it an ancient inscription: "Lift up the miracle-banner for the ingathering of our exiles." 21 Already at the end of My Little Sister the poet seems to be embarking, with the imagined bier of his dead mother, on a ship that cracks through the ice floe of the vast cemetery of Europe on its journey south, out of exile and toward a renewal of life and the Covenant. The First Gate of A Canopy in the Desert, published three years later, is entitled "The Return to the South," suggesting both the trip to southern Israel, the Negev and Sinai, but also the larger return of the Jews of Europe from Exile to their homeland.

That the rebirth in the homeland is to be no clear and unambiguous resurrection of life and rediscovery of the Covenant is already implicit in My Little Sister. Part Four begins with the poet-survivor-brother calling from Israel to the unanswering corpse of his sister in Europe:

From the promised land I called you,
I looked for you
among heaps of small shoes.
At every approaching holiday.

Part Five concludes with the mother who both mourns her children and is herself mourned by the son who carries his mother’s bier away from the ice fields of the European cemetery. The mother figure here represents Rachel weeping for her children, the centuries-old pain of the Jewish mother who bled and suffered in childbirth so that murderers should be amply supplied with victims for their knives, the shrieking mother in the Tel-Aviv hospital, the Israeli mother who mourns her sons fallen in battle, and—
not least of all—the poet’s memory of his own mother, who when he ordered the headquarters of the Vilna resistance sealed off, fell against the gate and asked her son in terror whether she should remain in Vilna or flee with him into the forests: “And I, the commander of the ghetto fighters, could not look into her eyes as I answered, ‘Mother, I don’t know!’ And so to this very day I don’t know whether I am worthy of the honor of a ghetto resistance fighter, or the curse of a son who abandoned his mother and did not go with her on her last road.”

In Section 46 of My Little Sister the mother whose memorial candles “ran out in the ghetto” carries her memories of the little sister elsewhere, kindling her “on all the seas.” Her mourning continues until 1948, when the State of Israel is established. The speaker from the promised land asks her how she can mourn indiscriminately both her sons “who were cut down,” apparently in the War of Independence, and the daughter “who never came into the world.” Here “never came into the world” seems to mean not only never was born but never entered into history, died, that is to say, from the point of view of many native-born Israelis, a death both passive and meaningless because it was not an integral part of world history. In Canopy in the Desert, the poet himself speaks of the Sinai desert as “The one place in the world / where a man will not die alone” (79), presumably because here one fights and dies for the survival of the Jewish people. But here the mourning mother turns aside the accusatory question and repeats, with significantly altered words, her earlier reply: “my son—she was not privileged to see / the light of the day!” The little sister never saw either the literal light of the day or the light of the new dawn that emerged in 1948 after the darkest night in Jewish history; yet the mother insists that her aborted life and her many deaths in the Holocaust are inseparable from the life that seems to be starting ab initio in the homeland, in Israel.

In yet another story of mothers and sons disputing over the ashes of their destroyed past, Kovner has told of a great fire in the house of the parents of the Maggid of
Mezeritch, when he was only a child of ten. His father was not there. He saw his mother standing in the yard, wringing her hands as she watched the conflagration and weeping bitterly. “Mother,” he said to her, “do this wooden house and this wooden furniture deserve to have you weep over them?” “Son,” the mother replied, “it is not for the house or the furniture I am weeping. The scroll of our family pedigree has been left behind there in the fire.” “Don’t cry, mother,” said the ten-year-old boy. “I’ll write you a new pedigree, starting with me.”

It is said of the Maggid of Mezeritch that later when he was a grown man, he would hide his face in his hands, whenever he remembered what he had said to his mother.24

Part of Kovner’s poetic effort to reunite what time and history have separated has been his repudiation of what he calls the “infantile” Israeli myth of “It starts with me.” The creative reunion of the People Israel with the land of Israel toward which A Canopy in the Desert moves cannot be realized unless those memorial candles of Section 46 of My Little Sister are replanted in the new soil. The dead sister who in the earlier poem was berated for the “offense” of her “scalding silence” at holidays now speaks in the desert:

Don’t hand me over to a mute wall embalmed in the sounds of words—
I am the threshold of your holidays.
I am the candles in your forgotten candlesticks. . . .

Make me grow, my love, in soil as naked as it was created.

(94)

Thus the mother who insists on mourning not only her sons who were “cut down” but the daughter who never saw the light of day is vindicated. The continuity between the European past and the Israeli present and future proves to be stronger than the discontinuity. This is partly because the birth of Israel, like all birth, is inseparable from bloodshed and suffering: “Can there / be spring without the danger?” (93). Thus the little sister who in the earlier poem is pitied because “she was not privileged to see / the light of the day” is now congratulated for having been saved from a terrible knowledge because she was “privileged not to
know / a taste of return.” (10) The irony here flows from the recognition, present throughout the poem in its many references to the three wars Israel had already fought in the desert, that the pariah people has become the pariah nation, and that the Jews in Israel, like their Diaspora ancestors, are destined to be persecuted and to live, if at all, under constant threat of destruction.

Far from returning from darkness to “the light of day,” the clarity and elevation of the Commandments, the Jewish people’s return to Sinai to recover the Covenant involves a plunge into more darkness and ambiguity. When, in the Eighth Gate of Canopy, there is a disagreement between two visitors to Saint Catherine’s Monastery about the wisdom of making the traditional early morning ascent of Mount Sinai, the one who refuses to climb says:


(54)

The reason why God and his Covenant are said to reside only in darkness and mystery is that the Jewish people, having achieved its difficult return to the promised land, now finds itself “mixed up in an unfortunate / ambiguity” (58). Having carried the letters of the Covenant back to their source for validation and reconsecration, the Jewish people finds itself caught in a conflict between the Covenant and the historical necessity to survive within history, whose overriding commandment is an inversion of the Sinai injunction, saying to the Jews of a beleaguered Israel: “You may attack your brother / (shalt murder / shalt murder)” (63). The “unfortunate ambiguity” is in fact a horrible paradox whereby the price of Jewish survival may be the surrender of the very reason why Jewish survival was ever thought important.

The reaffirmation of the Covenant in the Sinai, like its abrogation in Lublin or Vilna, is sealed in blood. This wedding, like the abortive one in My Little Sister, requires death as the bride-price:

in sandstone still
red from the drop of the covenant
my voice is wrapped in a package of vows
on a land in its time of bleeding:
I will pay for a marriage contract with my best
my chosen from the land.

(73)

This very recognition of the dreadful continuity between Israeli experience and that of the Jews during the Holocaust compels the survivor to search in the sands of the desert for that buried life which is in truth his own and without which he cannot guarantee his own survival.

. . . I will dig with fingers
down to the flesh the blood
until I hear their voice a voice
tearing the desert coming back
split in long burrows
in the dry waste
that was not destroyed. That won’t be destroyed again

(27)

In the poem entitled “From Another Homeland,” an Israeli soldier fallen in battle in the Sinai makes his last act before death the carving of his mother’s name in the sand, with a gold tooth that is the sign of her murder and mutilation. His destruction transplants his destroyed mother from Europe to the promised land, where they share the common Jewish fate.

Canopy in the Desert yearns toward, but does not fully realize, the consummation of the marriage between past and present, Vilna and Sinai, the People Israel and the land of Israel. The section (82) in which the canopy missing from the wedding in My Little Sister is set up in the desert is entitled “A Canopy Fades.” The glass is shattered to commemorate the destruction of the temple—the original khurbn—but the discordant element of burning memorial candles is introduced because, as the groom says, “my love is not at my side.” The hope that the little sister expressed in Section 94 to be replanted “in soil as naked / as it was created” has not yet been fulfilled, but the poet himself, in his effort toward reconstruction, pledges in the last numbered section of Canopy in the Desert (96) to take “you,
my little sister, . . . on my back. To carry you beyond / my naked plot of soil.” She will at least be rescued for the imagination, a realm that exists beyond the plot of soil. In the coda with which he ends the poem, Kovner expresses both despair and determination. The eye of his mind beholds a dozen scenes that show forth, mysteriously, both “abyss within abyss” and “hidden canopies within canopies,” fire-destruction and fire-consummation. If there is, after all, “no voice divine / no king to find,” the poet wonders: “should I persist”? Within the order of nature he discerns a refuge, a plan, a map for all creatures, but “none for me.” What remains to him is “only the curse,” the inescapable fate that was assigned to him when it was assigned to the 600,000 slaves who 3,300 years earlier made the exodus from bondage into the promised land—and the new bondage of the Covenant. In the Second Gate of the poem, he had sought to evade this fate:

Before
I began my image was carved
in the bedrock. There must be
a way to get out
to break through! To make a shortcut.

But in the Eighth Gate, he had embraced, in preference to the alternative represented by the Christian monastery, the subjection of the Covenant that is the precondition of Jewish survival: “—will not die! / Will live enslaved” (56).

This subjection is again embraced in “A Returned Gate,” when the poet praises “Those who love / and don’t want to escape.” (93) Although not a religious writer like Moshe Flinker or Nelly Sachs, Kovner too is possessed of a mystical sense of the linkage between Holocaust and rebirth, a mystical sense of Jewish existence itself. That this sense can exist in Jewish writers of the most rationalist cast of mind is proved by the work of the Jewish historian, Simon Dubnow, who insisted that:

Jewry at all times . . . was preeminently a spiritual nation, and a spiritual nation it continues to be in our own days,
too. . . . Jewry, being a spiritual entity, cannot suffer anni­hilation: the body, the mould, may be destroyed, the spirit is immortal. Bereft of country and dispersed as it is, the Jewish nation lives, and will go on living, because a creative principle permeates it, a principle that is the root of its being and an indigenous product of its history.25

Kovner, sharing his view, believes that the return to Sinai must be spiritual as well as physical. It therefore entails not only the desire to embrace the homeland but the courage to reject what Cynthia Ozick has called “the Diaspora of freedom,” which tempts—the more thoroughly to obliterate—those who seek to escape the burden of Jewish fate.26 As the poem draws to an end, the curse and the enslavement of Jewish history are accepted as inseparable from the return to the land from what seemed the nethermost abyss of the Holocaust, and as the price of Jewish survival.

In The Seventh Day (1967), a book of conversations with soldiers about the then recently concluded Six-Day War, Kovner observed how Israel-born soldiers, who had thought nothing more foreign to themselves than the fate of European Jewry, kept associating themselves with it in the time of crisis. He came to the conclusion that the Six-Day War had been a turning point in history just because it demonstrated to Israelis that their own fate was continuous with that of the Jews of Europe, that they too must live with the paradox of chosenness, must commit themselves to life in defiance of the omnipresence of death. “In the Diaspora,” he wrote, “fathers didn’t bring up their sons to commit suicide, or to despair. No one brought up his sons to abandon Judaism. They taught them that it was their destiny to be persecuted; but, at the same time, they educated them to life.”27 Kovner, participant in the two most important (and wildly improbable) events of modern, perhaps of all, Jewish history, seeks to join the Holocaust and the return to the homeland by a prodigious feat of poetic imagination, which steps into the void left by the divine silence to affirm that the Jewish people shall not die, but live: “I speak to / myself I speak and speak I’ll return / I’ll return here alive.”

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2. Ibid., pp. 70-71.
4. Ibid.
9. Norma Rosen has argued that the desire to make "good art" out of the Holocaust is in a way sacrilegious because it implies that the time for "transcendence" of the horror has already arrived. See her essay, "The Holocaust and the American-Jewish Novelist," *Midstream* 20 (October 1974): 57.
16. MS of a speech prepared as an address to the PEN Club in New York in February 1975, trans. H. M. Daleski, but never delivered.
quotations from Kovner's poetry come from this volume, which contains Shirley Kaufman's translation of *My Little Sister, A Canopy in the Desert*, and other poems.

19. Ibid., p. xv.


Jewish history is dull, uninteresting. It has no glory or action, no heroes and conquerors, no rulers and masters of their fate, just a collection of wounded, hunted, groaning, and wailing wretches, always begging for mercy. You can see for yourselves that it can't be interesting. The least you can say is it's uninteresting. I would simply forbid teaching our children Jewish history. Why the devil teach them about their ancestors' shame? I would just say to them: "Boys, from the day we were driven out from our land we've been a people without a history. Class dismissed, Go out and play football."—“The Sermon,” by Haim Hazaz