

INTRODUCTION TO ZVI KOLITZ' "YOSSEL RAKOVER SPEAKS WITH GOD"

The context of this literary creation is one of the most frightful in all of history, one of despair and defiance, defeat and triumph. The time is April, 1943, in the midst of World War II. The scene is Warsaw, in one of the few houses that remained standing as the Jewish ghetto was about to go up in flames as the Nazi Wehrmacht brought in heavy artillery to put down the rebellion by a handful of impoverished, starving, diseased, poorly armed but determined Jewish survivors. The document purports to be that of Yossel Rakover, a Polish Hasidic Jew, who pens this incredible testament as he faces certain death.

All of this is, of course, a "story" by Zvi Kolitz, an Israeli Jew of distinguished Lithuanian ancestry, who lives in New York and is a journalist, producer, essayist, thinker, and a teacher at Yeshiva University. His relation to his creation is itself an interesting story. So powerful is the verisimilitude of his account that it was taken as a bona fide document salvaged from the ruins of the ghetto, and the work assumed a life of its own. It was written by Kolitz in English and published in 1947, and translated into Yiddish seven years later by an anonymous translator who presented it as an original text discovered in the rubble of the ghetto. This Yiddish version, which contained a number of additions to the original text by the translator who took considerable liberties with it, was then published in .f3

French translation in 1955; it is this version which was read by the distinguished Franco-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas and which occasioned his essay reprinted in this volume. A Hebrew version appeared in Israel in 1965. All the translations fail to mention the author, Zvi Kolitz.

Indeed, as the Kabbalah taught, "everything depends upon luck, even the Scroll of the Torah in the Ark" (Zohar III, 134a). Zvi Kolitz' ploy, speaking through the pseudonymous *Yossel Rakover*, almost succeeded in obliterating his own authorship but, ultimately, his "luck" smiled upon him, and his name will always be attached to this truly precious gem.

*Yossel Rakover* is one of the most inspired writings to emerge from the vast and growing Holocaust literature. It is not "history." It is not, strictly speaking, theology. It is not poetry. It is not even fiction--hence the remarkable amnesia that erased the real author's name and assumed that the testament and the story of its provenance were factual, rather than a brilliant literary construction by an inspired writer-thinker-feeler who had transmuted his deepest and mightiest reactions to the most horrendous cataclysm in centuries into a contemporary myth, i.e., a truth far beyond mere facticity.

But if it is neither history nor theology nor fiction, what then is it?

*Yossel Rakover* is a wrenching meditation of a naked, torment-

ed soul that refuses to surrender its innate dignity, a deeply gripping spiritual address to his Creator by a believing Jew who, in his indescribable suffering, is not ready to yield either his faith or his rationality and who speaks as a profoundly Jewish Jew. Like Jacob of old, "the choicest of the forefathers," he "strived with God and men and he prevailed" (Gen. 32:29). Kolitz' Yossel Rakover wrestles with his God but, unlike some of the literature to emerge from the Holocaust, he does not "put God in the dock" and presume to judge Him. Such fictional "trials" can be and sometimes are serious dialogues that commend themselves to the reader who, though far removed from the searing experience of the Holocaust both in time and in biography, seek a genuine encounter, even confrontation, with God; one can trace the history of such defiant challenges to Abraham pleading for Sodom and Job, and much later in the Hasidic accounts of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. But they run the risk of becoming quite maudlin and cheap in plucking the heart-strings of the victims in a manner that is spiritually unauthentic; the mock "trial" becomes an exercise in barely disguised atheism, exploiting the suffering of the protagonists as a way of denying rather than engaging God.

*Yossel Rakover* is nothing of the sort. It is at once subtle and direct, and constitutes a truly religious encounter because Yossel Rakover never questions the existence of a Creator. He does, as it were, defiantly declare that, in words borrowed from a great medieval story of suffering and faith, he will believe no matter how much God pushes him into disbelief. And his meditation



goes beyond the kind of catharsis that results from the justifiable but not necessarily enlightening dramatic tension of a trial with God as the accused.

A central theme of *Yossel Rakover* is *hester panim*, that of the "hiding of God's face," of the "veiling of God's countenance," the translation of the biblical idiom in Deuteronomy 31:17-18--

Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them, so that they will say in that day, "Are not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?"

And I will surely hide My face in that day for all the evil which they have wrought, in that they are turned to other gods.

Prof. Levinas, expands on this theme in his essay in this book, but there is much more that has been said and that remains to be said about it. Without mentioning the term itself--*hester Panim*--the Sages of the Midrash read the concept into the Song of Moses--"Who is like unto Thee amongst the mighty (*ba-elim*), O Lord" (Exodus 15:11)--slightly changing that verse to read, "Who is like unto thee amongst the silent (*ba-ilmim*), O Lord"--a remarkable anticipation of the anonymous inscription on the wall of a cellar in Cologne where Jews hid themselves during all of the Holocaust and which forms the epigraph to *Yossel Rakover*: "I believe in God even when He is silent."



Kolitz rightly rejects all those pseudo-prophets who presume to be privy to some secret divine knowledge when they describe the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust as punishment, and then proceed to define the "sins" which supposedly invited such "punishment." He angrily dismisses all the petty preachers of punishment who thereby compound the sufferings of the victims of such unprecedented magnitude by blaming them for their own pain and humiliation:

For saying that we deserve the blows we have received is to malign ourselves, to desecrate the Holy Name of God's children. And those that desecrate our name desecrate the name of the Lord; God is maligned by our self-deprecation.

The large themes which engage Kolitz are, obviously, universal, but that by no means obliterates or even overshadows the specific Jewish element. Yossel Rakover speaks as a "simple living person who had the great but tragic honor of being a Jew":

I am proud that I am a Jew not in spite of the world's treatment of us, but precisely because of this treatment. I should be ashamed to belong to the people who spawned and raised the criminals who are responsible for the deeds that have been perpetrated against us.

Kolitz here adds an interesting thought: "I am proud to be a Jew because it is an art to be a Jew." Jewishness is an inborn trait. "One is born a Jew exactly as one is born an artist." By means of this esthetic simile, Kolitz not only states explicitly that both art for the artist and Jewishness for the Jew are

inescapable, but also, by implication, both require expression, working at it.

Emmanuel Levinas, in his essay, says a great deal that is both true and engaging in focusing on a passage that was added by the Yiddish translator (who failed to mention Kolitz' name as the author!), "I love Him, but I love His Torah more, and even if I had deceived myself in His regard, I would nonetheless observe His Torah." There are those who have maintained that this spurious interpolation transforms Kolitz' Yossel Rakover from a pious Hasid into a crypto-secularist. But this argument is more clever than correct, for even though the original *Yossel Rakover* does not contain this sentence, the sentiment is clearly there and, moreover, it has deep roots in the classical Jewish tradition.

Thus, shortly after referring to the "art" of being Jewish, we read, in Kolitz' original text, "My relationship to You is not the relationship of a slave to his master, but rather that of a pupil to his teacher." That kind of magisterial relationship self-evidently requires a *teaching*, whether oral or written--and poignantly expresses the relationship of the Jew to his God through the medium of Torah which, quite literally, means "the Teaching." Yossel Rakover is a pious Jew, a Hasid; and even though Hasidism took a different view of the relative value of, on the one hand, study of the sacred texts and, on the other, conscious and emotional religious experience, Hasidism never denied the centrality of Torah and its significance as a, indeed *the*, medium for the encounter between God and man. Rabbi Israel

Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth century founder of the Hasidic movement, taught that divinity itself inheres in the very words of the sacred text.

Kolitz is on solid ground in identifying the relation between the Jew and his God as that of student and teacher. It was none less than the prophet Isaiah (54:13) who said, "and all thy children shall be taught of the Lord." God is the Teacher, Israel is the pupil, and the Torah is the text. The metaphor is more than a literary device; it informs us that even during those cold, dark, brutal days and years of *hester panim*--when God's face is hidden and He seems unreachable, infinitely remote and icily indifferent to our fate, frustrating our desire to experience His presence--the Text remains, and the bond between God and man holds.

The Rabbinic tradition developed and cherished this theme. Thus, on the verse in Jeremiah (16:11), "and they have forsaken Me and not kept My Torah," the Sages of the Midrash (Lam.R., Introduction, 3) paraphrased that to read, "Would that they forsake Me, [as long as] they kept My Torah (because its inner light will restore them to [the path of] righteousness)." Palpable darkness may reign in the world, but the promise of redemption, the seeds of divine illumination and spiritual enlightenment, are present in the holy text.

In a time of *hester panim*, when God "has sacrificed humankind to its wild instincts," as Kolitz writes, it is not God who re-



veals the Torah, but the Torah that reveals God. That is authentic Jewish doctrine; more, it is the distillate of millennial Jewish historical experience.

*Caveat lector!* The reader must know that in reading *Yossel Rakover*, he is not judging the story; it judges him or her. One who reads this testament without feeling shattered, or without at least experiencing a deep shudder--one that not only shakes his body but shakes up his prejudices, his sense of normalcy, the very premises on which he conducts the affairs of his daily life--is in deep psychic trouble, in need of therapy for ossified sensitivities and redemption from a hardening of the heart and paralysis of the spirit.

But there is more than profound sadness mingled with admiration for courage that this short piece evokes from the reader. It also engages the mind as it reveals the range of thoughts and existential reactions of an authentically religious personality confronting ultimate questions that are not so much "theological" as "spiritual"--the best or only way to describe profoundly *religious* ruminations of a man of faith facing the nadir of human depravity. *Yossel Rakover*/Zvi Kolitz speaks not as a philosopher but as a believer, not with theological sophistication but with an authentically human wisdom that is, at one and the same time, both assertive and humble. It is the reader who--far from the events here described and safe from the flames licking the imminent charnel of the ghetto house--must now translate these stirring ruminations and sentiments into a vocabulary more familiar

to his quotidian affairs. Something will no doubt be gained by this act of translation; unfortunately, much more will be lost. But the experience of "getting into" *Yossel Rakover Speaks with God* is an adventure well worth the effort.