Bearing

the Unbearable
Yiddish and Polish Poetry
in the Ghettos and
Concentration Camps
Frieda W. Aaron
With a Foreword by
David G. Roskies

"...this book has singular importance as a study of poetry in relation to the Holocaust... [and] real merit as a resource in the burgeoning field of critical theory generally, poetics in particular."

— Terrence Des Pres 224 pp. • \$29.50 hardcover only ISBN 0-7914-0247-9

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individual parts but as a unified whole. A master conductor knows not only how to read each measure and phrase, but how to elicit the larger structures, the meaning of the entire work, indeed to foreshadow the sense of the work as a whole within the opening measures. There is no doubt that Rabbi Steinsaltz is such a master conductor, but there is more he might do to sensitize his readers to the broad perspective he surely possesses.

To continue the musical analogy for a moment, Gustav Mahler once said, "The symphony must be like the whole world. It must contain everything." Rabbi Steinsaltz would probably say the same for the Talmud. Indeed, this seems to be part of the Talmud's attraction for him: its elusive structure and wide-ranging mode of discourse. But the commentary sticks so closely to the text that we get very little sense of Rabbi Steinsaltz's personal perspective. His dazzling erudition, his playful yet profound style, his impishly penetrating aperçus-all of the personal qualities which make a conversation with him a genuine intellectual delight-are, for the most part, absent from the commentary, which always stays close to the surface of the text. Of course, the first duty of a commentary is to explain, but one would have liked to sense more of Steinsaltz in the Steinsaltz edition.

None of these quibbles, however, is meant to detract from the essential value of Rabbi Steinsaltz's achievement. He has indeed accomplished what he set out to do. He has made the Talmud accessible to us. He has put it on the top of our intellectual agenda. He has ensured that the Talmud will once again become a central vehicle of Jewish communication and self-understanding and has thereby made an inestimable contribution to fostering the elusive goal of Jewish unity. He has reintroduced the Talmud and its values to the world of general culture.

What we are to do with the tools that he has given us is, of course, up to us. As always among Jews, various factions will come along, pulling and tugging at the Talmud, claiming it as their own, claiming that ... but wait a moment, doesn't the Talmud itself discuss just such a case, with two people arguing about an object which each claims belongs to him alone? Bava Metzia, Chapter One.

Music Review

Irresistible Music

Norman Weinstein

Partisans of Vilna: The Songs of World War II Jewish Resistance by Henry Sapoznik, Adrienne Cooper, Michael Alpert et al. Flying Fish Compact Disc FF 70450.

Perhaps someday an enterprising record store owner will create a place among the shelves for music belonging to a category labeled "Resistance." I'm imagining a classification wide enough to include Pete Seeger

Norman Weinstein is a poet and critic. He recently won an ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for excellence in writing about contemporary music. and Shostakovich, Paul Robeson and this soundtrack recording connected to a documentary film about the Jewish underground in Vilna, Lithuania. Such speculation brought to mind the fleeting hype about "protest music" which filled the media in the early sixties. But "resistance" seems a more hearty, less whiny word to identify with music that defies horror, implying acts that follow cries of protest.

This music of resistance stirs defiance in listeners; it does not simply note injustice. The Black spirituals celebrated by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* channeled listener rage through coded instructions. Think

of the lyrics to "Follow the Drinking Gourd." Such songs made the underground railroad happen, breaking the chains of American slavery through lilting melody and wisely covert travel directions. If the song was moving, it literally moved thousands of slaves north of the Mason–Dixon line.

The songs of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust can be viewed in a like fashion. Many of the twelve selections in this outstanding collection are calls to action. "You Jewish Partisan," for example, features a traditional Eastern European folk melody (as do most of the minor-mode tunes here)—but Shmerke Kaczerginski's lyrics are anything but customary:

I carry a new rifle.
On the missions, my friend
Kisses me, throat and shoulder,
From this day I've become
Fast with the rifle.

Lest this sound like braggadocio, the last stanza adds power to this assertion by claiming, "No, we will never be 'Last of the Mohicans.'"

Utilizing an image that seems alchemical at first glance, Abraham Sutzkever's "The Lead Plates of Romm's Printing House" describes how Romm's printing plates were melted down into lead for bullets. "Hush, Hush" orders the listener to be silent in the face of new graves dug by the enemy. And in the album's tour de force, "By One, Two, Threes," listeners are instructed to do a victory march rather than a march of resignation.

You might expect musical expressions of such defiant militancy in the face of unspeakable horror to be relentlessly shrill, uniformly somber. I'm delighted to say that this is an album of many musical surprises.

The twelve selections pass in a little more than half an hour. Two are poems recited by Irena Klepfisz with a precise feel for the musicality inherent in Yiddish lyric poetry. Instrumental accompaniments are restrained but gently appropriate, with one exception. "Dugout" narrates the story of a resistance fighter talking to his accordion. Damned if I can begin to guess why Michael Alpert's singing is accompanied by ... a balalaika!

This would make an appropriate gift to anyone who ever bought the stereotype of Jews docilely letting the Nazis lead them to slaughter.

But most surprises here are rewarding. Be prepared for a shock when you hear the voice of the youngster David J. Waletsky. Thin, nasal, and of questionable pitch in spots, he is nevertheless absolutely winning in his rendition of "Yisrolik," a saga of an orphan turned street peddler. His presence, absolutely unexpected, beguiles with artless sincerity, much like the untrained child singer on the recording of Archie Shepp's "Attica Blues." He's outstanding because he's robust, reckless, rambunctious, like the adults on this recording, yet with a tinge of overwhelming tragedy lacing his vocals.

Of the others, let me pay particular

homage to the singing of Henry Sapoznik. An edgy urgency inflames his delivery, a grit and spunk which give his songs an unstoppable momentum. All performers are to be credited, even though Adrienne Cooper's operatic delivery was not always to my liking.

The programming successfully blends up-tempo martial anthems with moody and introspective ballads. Every song wears well on repeated listenings. One need not worry that this album is only of documentary value, or needs the video of the accompanying film in order to work.

Partisans of Vilna would make a highly appropriate gift to anyone who ever bought the stereotype of Jews docilely letting the Nazis lead them to slaughter. Historical texts to dissolve the stereotype can be suggested, but how much more dramatically efficacious is this rousing music in setting the historical record straight!

This song is written with blood and not with pencil lead, It's no song of a free-flying bird, A people among collapsing walls Sang this song with pistols in their hands.

-Hirsh Glik, "Never Say"

These are musical performances that speak to all souls in all ages and say "No" to evil.

LETTERS

(Continued from p. 5)

sensitivity to the pain of others, and if its leaders were chosen solely by the extent to which they embodied these values, there would be a massive return to Judaism. Such a transformation would strengthen the Jewish community—and far from losing money, the money would come pouring in without all the clever fund-raising techniques and gimmicks.

It is in these terms that we call the organized Jewish community conformist. The dominant values of material success and taking care of "number one" have been internalized in the American Jewish world to the extent that worrying about the poor and the oppressed is frequently dismissed as "not a Jewish issue." Those who raise these concerns are told that they are "always worrying about everybody else's

problems except for the Jews' problems." Yet the struggle for social justice is a primary command of Torah—it is a Jewish problem, the Jewish problem par excellence. To the extent that this has been forgotten, the organized Jewish community is correctly described as conformist—to the selfishness and celebration of material success that have dominated American culture in the era of Reagan and now of Bush.

An important word of caution here. It is not selfish to worry about oneself or one's own survival. We are strong supporters of Zionism. And we reject the kind of leftism that makes people feel guilty if they accumulate money or want to lead a good life, complete with good food, attractive clothes, good music, a nice house, a good car, and so on. There is nothing evil or fundamentally materialistic in those who seek material comforts for themselves. What becomes materialistic is when

they make choices to support a system that will provide those benefits only to themselves and not allow for sharing the good life with others. In that sense, there is a moral difference between those who live well but support a liberal agenda that includes economic redistribution and adequate health, safety, housing, and food for those in need, and those who struggle only for their own well-being and turn their backs and close their ears to the cries of the oppressed and the hungry and the homeless. The choice of being on the Right is not a choice like preferring strawberry ice cream to vanilla-it is a choice with deep moral implications, and in our estimation it is frequently an immoral choice.

We at *Tikkun* have continually criticized the failings of liberals and progressives, their insensitivity to psychological, spiritual, and ethical concerns, and their insensitivity to many of the prob-