YAAKOV CAHAN'S TRILOGY BINETIV HAYESURIN

An Analysis of Three Plays on the Problem of Suffering

by

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
for the Master of Arts in Hebrew Literature Degree
and Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

New York, N. Y.

March 21, 1964

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Two years ago I was privileged to take an elective in Jewish Religious Thought with Dr. Henry Slonimsky. As part of the course, the class read a poetic drama הזעקה השלישית (The Third Cry), by Yaakov Cahan. It was the first time I had heard of this playwright and was absolutely intrigued by the play. Unlike many Israeli authors I had read, Yaakov Cahan, at least in this play, was concerned with Jewish religious problems, presenting them in a most dramatic way.

Later on in the year, I took another elective with Dr. Eugene Borowitz on the image of man in contemporary plays and novels. As a direct upshot of the course, I began to consider a study of some of Cahan's plays as a subject for my rabbinic thesis. I was immediately encouraged by Dr. Slonimsky and by Dr. Shaul Mareli to choose the trilogy בנתיב היסורין (In the Path of Suffering) for study with Dr. Borowitz as sponsor.

I am, therefore, deeply indebted to these professors for their interest and helpful suggestions. It is especially to Dr. Borowitz, with whom I worked very closely and whose patience and guidance never wore thin, that I shall be eternally grateful.

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PREFACE

Yaakov Cahan is a playwright and not a systematic philosopher who states his beliefs in an ordered system. He writes in the introduction to the trilogy that he desires to create a dramatic symphony with themes played in harmony and discord, contrapuntally and simultaneously. Cahan's ideas, therefore, lap over one another throughout the three plays. For the sake of intellectual clarity, however, the attempt has been made to separate and categorize the ideas, fully realizing the injustice one does to the art of a fine playwright.

After reading the plays, one is immediately convinced of Cahan's reverence for Jewish tradition and finds that he is most conversant with its literature. The material of the thesis, therefore, is divided into three chapters. The first contains a precis of the three plays and a translation of the critical utterances. The second chapter is divided into two parts: the first is a summary of the major answers of Jewish tradition to the problem of suffering; the second is a demonstration of how Cahan makes use of these answers. In the final chapter, Cahan's views are analyzed showing what he accepts, rejects, or reshapes from the answers of Jewish tradition.

Who is this fine poetic dramatist almost totally unknown on the American Jewish scene? Born in the province of Minsk, Russia in 1881, Yaakov Cahan grew up in Poland and was later educated at the University of Bern in Switzerland. He was very active in organizations for the advancement of Hebrew letters, founding Ivriah in Bern, becoming secretary of the Society for Hebrew Language and Culture in Berlin, and a leader of Tarbut (a similar organization) in Poland.

Cahan served as supervisor of the Hebrew High School in Poland (1924-27) and was lecturer at the Institute for Jewish Learning in Warsaw (1927-33). A member of the Central Committee of the Revisionist-Zionist Organization, Cahan settled in Palestine in 1934.[1] For years after one would find him writing and editing literary magazines while spending much time in the outdoor cafes of Tel Aviv until his death in November of 1960.[2]

The first collection of his poetic works appeared in 1903 (Warsaw) with subsequent works appearing in 1905, 1913 (Odessa), and many later on, especially in Palestine. He received the Bialik Prize for his poetic drama, Leyad Hapyramidot, and the Tschernichowski Prize for his well-known translations of Goethe.[3] Cahan is a poet of many guises; he is lyrical, romantic, and dramatic. His poems of the fighters for freedom are famous in Israel as are his lyrics extolling the beauty and freedom of Helvetia. His romanticism is a yearning to commune with Nature and is full of a description of the great capabilities inherent in man.[4] Religious and Zionist notes are also to be found in his poetry as well as in his plays.[5] If the trilogy, which is the subject of this thesis, is an example of his other dramas and poetry, then Cahan is worthy of the eulogy he received in Moznaim: לעולם תהא תרומתו צרורה בצרור התפארת של היצירה העברית. "His contribution will forever be bound up in the bond of the glory of Hebrew creativity."[6]

CHAPTER ONE

A Summary of Three Plays

THE MARTYRS

Three souls, a merchant, a butcher, and a teacher, open their eyes on a pitch black scene. Each wonders where he is and expresses amazement at the depth of the darkness. The three realize they are without feeling and that they must no longer be on earth nor yet in heaven. They do not know what sort of existence they are leading until the butcher explains, "we are dead," with which the others dejectedly concur.[1]

On the top of a peak in the distance appears the bowed head of Mother Rachel with Gabriel the archangel seeming to block her path. Gabriel asks where she is going and she answers, "to my children! Don't you know? Again the knife has waved in the hand of Esau.... Oh, all the terrors of the Almighty have come upon me! My children are fair game for all the wickedness of man."[2] The archangel counsels her to overcome her sorrow and be strong. Rachel, however, has exhausted her strength because it has been spent in her tears and melted in her sighs. The balm which she drops on the hearts of her children continually wears off for the drawn-out hope of redemption has become frustrated.[3] She can only cry with them. Gabriel reminds her to look at the Fathers and see how they retain their strength. But how can she compare herself to them, those spiritual giants who are able to bow their hoary heads before the judgment of God? Every time she was told of Jewish sacrifice, she would run to the throne of God and bow before Him quietly demanding, "I shall not move until an answer comes." And Gabriel adds, "no answer came!"

That is why she must now go to her children, perhaps to save a remnant, to ameliorate some pain. Gabriel says she must not as yet go until one more bitter wound be felt.[4]

The first three souls are now joined by an old sexton, a young girl whose dress is torn and hair unkempt, and a student.[5] Each tells his story of how the massacre took place on earth. The merchant relates that when they looted his store, his only thought was to protect his wife. He threw a burning look of superiority at the two drunkards who brandished their knives. The merchant rushed at their legs hoping that in the interim his wife would escape, but to no avail. The teacher and the student interject, "and God did not bring down His lightning on their heads!"[6]

The old sexton says he forgot his wife and children and ran to the Holy Ark to protect it while pleading with the assassins. They laughed unnaturally and plunged into the Ark ripping apart the Sefer Torah. Then they struck him and he died as the blood spilled over its columns. All of the characters cry in anguish at this desecration, the student repeating his former remark.[7]

The butcher recounts his gruesome experience. He admits, "I am but a simple man, a butcher in a line of butchers. I cannot properly read from a book, but I nevertheless am a Jew with Jewish blood in me, and anyone who dares to touch one of my brothers will not get away with it."[8] His hands are his only interpreters. When he heard the cry, "kill the Jews," he hurried from the abbatoir with his friends. In his hands he carried a small meat-ax, and dispersing the crowd, saw Jewish blood flowing in the street, the blood of the merchant as well as that

of the old sexton. The butcher slashed with his ax, chopping off the heads of the wild beasts until his hand grew too weary and he too fell. The old sexton then adds, "if God were not our refuge, what would have happened to us!" A tremendous sense of resignation is displayed by the line, "we must travel on our road now toward the Almighty who calls us."[9]

In answer to the sexton, the student utters more than just a derogatory remark. He blatantly asks the critical questions.

> Where, where — God calls us, why?
> Your words are like riddles to me, I don't
> understand them.
> If God is our fortress, where is His shelter?
> Hasn't He made us prey to wild beasts?
> Every leprous dog licks our blood,
> Every ass tramples our honor.[10]

He draws back, subsides slightly, and in another tone tells his own story. For a long time he did not associate with his people, nor when he went to fight did he realize it was for them. But when he came to the spot of the calamity and saw bloodshed, something rising from the abyss of his soul forced him to strike out as if in atonement for his sins. Everything he had held to be sacred and dear now seemed deceitful to him. And so, he fought furiously for his people until a bullet finally pierced him.

In common accord, the rest cry out "אחינו! אתה, you are truly our brother!" The student continues. He now knows he could not forever flee from his people. He is not bitter over his death. Like his people, alienated from God, the student feels himself sinking into the hell of destruction. The old sexton, symbol of pious tradition, warns him not to believe such things. "This is not hell! God implanted His Presence

in us from of old and there will come a day when we, as a spark of His splendor, will shine."[11]

> If God chastises us, it is because we have sinned.
> Like a father with his children, He chastises
> with great mercy.
> He will abate and have pity on us as before....
> Is there a jewel which at first is not covered by dust?[12]

The beloved of the student appears from behind a rock. She is ashamed of what happened to her and remains silent. When the student sees her, he cries out in even more disgust and vehemently builds up to a climax of nihilism.

> How is it that all the worlds do not mourn?
> How can men still live, human beings with a sense
> of honor!
> How can a man eat his meal in enjoyment, smoke his
> pipe, even hug his wife as before,
> After the fist of the base has grabbed hold of the
> breast of your virginity?
> You stand in quiet shame -- as a symbol of the
> people, the insult of a whole people....
> Let the poets of every country come, the professors
> in the universities, all who speak such lofty words
> about man and the greatness of his worth and deeds,
> Let them come and stand before you and listen to the
> dead silence within you, let them see your pallid
> cheeks,
> Let them observe your affliction, the afflictions of
> the whole people.[13]

The others, even the old sexton, join in with a resounding, "why, why!" And as if heaven could no longer stand the accusation, a Heavenly Voice cries out, "You are marytrs, holy martyrs!"

Each one subsides and in disbelief searches his own soul for the right to be called a martyr. The butcher was a simple man, perhaps a boor, who did not keep the commandments. The merchant gives the same argument. He cheated on the scales and gave empty promises. How could the teacher be a martyr seeing that he died as an animal, hiding behind

outhouses and among dirty pigs. In one way or another, they reject martyrdom and want to live again.[14] The young girl, ravished and ashamed, exclaims that she never fulfilled herself as a woman. The student adds that the two wanted to live together, a life full of passion and love. The merchant worries that there is no one to feed his children or care for his wife. What was their sin? The butcher wants so much to live especially because he is in the prime of life. The teacher, even though he knows he had been dying of an incurable disease, was taken suddenly before he had a chance to prepare his pupils or make his soul ready since he was storm-tossed his whole life.[15]

The old sexton, now pushed to doubt as well, exclaims that he submitted himself to God and saw in his death a pure light (בלהר הטהור). He acknowledges that both life and death are in the hands of God -- "but, the books, the Torah, how have they sinned? How can God allow the glory of His Name to be trampled by asses?" The emotion of the scene again reaches a crescendo as the student deepens the accusation.[16] "I have stopped murmuring against You and do not mention You. But wherever You are and whatever You are.... the dead speak to You.... We have seen Your power, Your great awe, but Your righteousness we have not seen.... where is Your righteousness?"[17] The storm and lightning crash frighteningly almost shaking the foundations of the universe as everyone falls beneath it except the student. In his last scathing attack on heaven, the student cries out, "is this not Your one and only answer!.... They are now completely snuffed out and silenced -- but are You right?" He then falls as well.[18]

Complete blackness covers everything, but slowly the light appears seeming to portray paradise. Choirs of angels sing, "the storm has ended;

the final rebellion has been overcome, rest to the weary." Rachel appears as a queen in royal garb saying, "what am I, being a simple woman, that I should probe?.... Is not His word a pledge to me?.... Support me, O Lord, and forgive a suffering mother."[19]

Through the medium of Rachel and the angels, Cahan seems to imply an answer to the injustice of suffering. The words of God are a pledge to the living, and after death, man's suffering will be made up to him. The characters hear, see, and listen to things they cannot believe: such beauty, such serenity, such purity. Rachel continues as Cahan writes for her a magnificent speech, one that clearly states a belief that in spite of everything, the nation goes on and that the death of the martyrs was not in vain.

> You who have suffered because of the sins of the past
> You will become a fountain of strength and purity and
> a new splendor, a splendor of holiness to your
> children.
> So the nation will live through all the eternal
> vicissitudes and still be one
> The generations are responsible for one another.[20]

The old man delights in paradise. Through him, Cahan underlines the thesis that even though man dies, death is an entry to eternal life. They enjoy heavenly bliss and give hope to the future.

> How wonderful are the ways of the Creator.
> How silly is man to think his life consists only
> of a journey of some years on earth.
> All of life is one flowing river in which death is
> a part of life![21]

The choir of angels completes the argument.

> Happy is the man who redeems himself at death
> And especially if he pays the price with his blood.
> In one hour he lives his life completely
> And in one hour he acquires his world.
> A man does not die, but his soul soars upward, and
> together with the stars hovers over the face of

the earth,
In order to light up the earth and enrich it,
And then to live with all true life till the end
of time.[22]

The student does not quite understand or give in. His fiancee convinces him that what they had dreamed about on earth, flying bodiless, giving light, they can do now. He is a martyr and assured of paradise. Mother Rachel adds, "whether or not you understand the path of the star, the star nevertheless moves on its path and does not waver." The choir of angels finishes, "the storm has abated, the last rebellion has been driven away -- redemption to the humble!"[23]

TOWARD THE MESSIAH

A young mystic stands in a forest yearning and waiting for the messiah. He is soon joined by two others: a penitent who knows that there is no hope for man without a messiah, and a hidden saint (one of thirty-six, a lamed-vavnik) who has searched every corner of the earth for the messiah.

The mystic, supported by a tree and with eyes half-closed, exclaims that "of all man's thinking, perhaps one in a thousand will understand the secret of the heavenly spheres. The messiah is needed."[24] The hidden saint has looked for the messiah to be a downtrodden, afflicted man sitting among beggars at the gates of the city of Rome, binding and unbinding a wound (just as a rabbinic tradition dictates). He did not find him. The penitent exclaims, "perhaps he is not born yet."[25] To this the hidden saint retorts, "do not say such a thing. Is it not written that if he tarries, wait for his coming? This means he exists and is prepared to come at any moment, but we in our sins impede the redemption."[26] The

penitent asks how people are to cleanse themselves in order to hurry his coming. The hidden saint answers, "we must direct our hearts to him, our thoughts and actions too.... he will come from us." The mystic, off to a side, adds, "we must still pray to God for an acceptable time."[27] The penitent (who we assume left his people and came back) says that man cannot bring him alone and that "for everything there must be divine grace." The hidden saint agrees but adds that the "acceptable time" is the readiness to strengthen our desires and our hopes toward the redeemer.[28]

A company of beggars suddenly appears, each with his staff and knapsack; a man whose house has been burned, a blind man holding on to a hunchback, a lame man with his crutch, an old woman fortune-teller, and a deserted wife clasping the hand of her six year old child. Overhearing the discussion about the messiah, the beggars become excited about his coming. Each one sees the messiah as appearing to cure his own ills. Reacting to their selfish reasons, the hidden saint realizes the messiah cannot be expected to come from among these beggars.[29] Not only do they desire an immediate rectification of their plight, but they want more: a three-story stone house and fruit trees, a handful of diamonds, a milch-cow and chicken coops, beautiful carriages and pockets full of gold and silver rings. And the blind man adds to the hunchback, "so you can steal everything which belongs to me."[30]

The hidden saint can tolerate this discussion no longer and begs the penitent to talk with them. The penitent explains to the beggars that the messiah will come <u>first</u> to <u>all</u> Israel and then to individuals. "Listen to the vehemence of the storm, the groan of the trees.... Are you not

Jews? Don't you feel the sorrow of the people which is your sorrow as well?"[31] They answer in the affirmative, assuring him they will go make way for the messiah. Even though the storm worsens, they declare it shall not stop them. "The light of our hope alone will be the light for our path."[32]

The group continues through an unrelenting tempest. The beggars can tolerate it no longer and blame the hidden saint and the penitent for keeping them out in such weather while they could have reached a resting-place in the city and have had a glass of wine to warm their bones.[33] The storm subsides but leaves a pitch black darkness behind. The beggars spread themselves out on the ground and sleep. The hidden saint, seeing that the beggars have no strength even to hope, prays to God that He, knowing their plight, quickly send the messiah.[34] The penitent, though feeling he has little right to ask anything from God, pleads that he just hear the footsteps of the messiah or even be trampled by him. The mystic thanks God for having invigorated his spirit and for having permitted him to see the secrets of heaven. But, he continues, "one more bit of grace give to me, O God. Allow me to see with my own eyes, before I die, the face of the messiah who is coming to redeem the world and to redeem the people of Israel from all its troubles."[35] Both the hidden saint and the penitent also have become weary, the one due to his wanderings and the other due to his senses. Now they are all asleep.

Suddenly voices herald the coming of the messiah and he appears bound in golden chains saying:

> Voices have pulled at me, weak longing voices
> From the frozenness of my hoary sadness they have
> awakened me.

> Shall this handful of poor people receive me,
> Will those shrunken hands break my chains?
> Dreamers, feeble, lame, torn of men
> They have no more spirit within them to rebel --
> Oh, they have surely forgotten freedom.
> Unfortunate are they who seek my help
> Who do not know that perhaps I am more unfortunate
> than they.
> I know how to break the fetters of a large exiled
> people but my own chains I cannot break.
> Nor can I redeem myself, they must redeem me first.
> How will the people be strong without redemption?
> And how will they find redemption without being
> strong?[36]

What a lamentable paradox it is! The messiah cannot redeem his people until they redeem him.

The climax of the play has been reached. The messiah has stated the problem, and the irony is that the characters did not hear him. Now they awake. In his sleep the hidden saint had experienced a taste of paradise; the penitent had seen a heavenly light; the mystic had perceived the shadow of the messiah. It is the young boy, however, who actually beheld him. The mystic very poignantly exclaims, "the messiah was here and we were sleeping."[37] They ask the boy how the messiah looked. The boy describes him as completely bedecked with light and surrounded by light. How interesting it is that the intelligent and sincere seekers of the messiah beheld but a glimpse of him, while the young boy, a symbol of the hope that future generations will see the redemption, is the only one to behold him in his splendor.

The hidden saint and the penitent decide that since the messiah presently revealed himself, he would surely come again soon.[38] They must continue seeking him. The others refuse to be disturbed. The boy asks his mother for some bread to eat, and one or two of the others chime in with the same desire. Again the hidden saint grows impatient. "A piece

of bread looms so large, a resting place for the weary is so important -- what can you expect from these poor people?.... The redemption will not begin with them. They will not go out to greet the messiah. We together will go meet him."[39] The penitent asks, "who will go first?" The answer is "anyone whose heart beckons him, who can forget his own selfish words, who will not be afraid of hunger nor ask for rest, but will go wherever his heart commands him." As far as the boy is concerned, "he will never forget he saw the face of the messiah.... Perhaps he will immediately merit being one of his attendants."[40]

The hidden saint and the penitent go their own ways seeking the messiah and will meet someday at an appropriate time. The mystic remains where he is waiting for divine grace to reveal the messiah.[41] Voices then beckon to the mystic, voices of the Fathers who also have waited for the messiah. It is time for the mystic to die. He refuses to do so before seeing the messiah. The voices answer that they too wanted to see him, but by now they have learned two qualities, patience and humility. The mystic has learned the first and must now learn the second. As far as the boy is concerned, the messiah does sometimes reveal himself to little children, but as they get older it will seem only like a vision in a dream, and they with all Israel, all the world, and all generations will grieve. Cahan, through the voices of the past, enunciates his belief that every generation waits and hopes and "like the flame of a candle before it dies, opens its large bright eye more than ever before and lights up the world." And Cahan continues, "happy is the people which directs its sons toward him, for on that road every burden is lightened; and even in death, they continue to live by it forever."[42]

THE THIRD CRY

In Jewish literature, it is difficult to find a man more passionate in his love for Israel than Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. Known in Hasidic lore as the "lover of Israel" and as the man who repeatedly challenged God to justify Israel's continued suffering, the figure of Levi Yitzhak is used by Cahan to further probe the perplexing question of Israel's suffering.

The play in part is based upon the story related in the Midrash of the Ten Martyrs. The ten are famous Tannaim who were condemned by the Romans to torture and death for propagating the study of Torah. Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest ascended to heaven to learn if the sentence was issued by God or the Emperor Hadrian. In heaven, he sees an altar close to the Throne of Glory and is told by the archangel Gabriel that "the souls of the righteous are sacrificed on it daily" by the archangel Michael. Rabbi Ishmael returns to earth and tells his colleagues their fate has been written, issued and sealed, and they must resign themselves to sacrificial death.

Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel was the first to die. Rabbi Ishmael was so moved as to cry out to God a loud and bitter cry: "a tongue that has interpreted Torah in seventy tongues now wallows in the dust!" Then Rabbi Ishmael himself went to the torture. As the skin was slowly drawn off his face, he remained silent. Then the executioner reached his forehead where the phylactery rested. Rabbi Ishmael could not accept the desecration of Torah (verses of Scripture written inside the phylactery) and cried out a second time. The Throne of Glory shook and the angels around it remonstrated with God. "Is such a saint, to whom You have shown the

treasures of the upper world and the mysteries of the lower, to suffer unnatural death at the hands of an evildoer? Is this the reward of sacred scholarship?" After half-hearted attempts by God to vindicate the cruel act, a heavenly voice was heard, "If I hear another sound, I shall reduce the universe to primeval chaos." Rabbi Ishmael relented.[43]

Cahen begins the play, setting it on the eve of the Ninth of Av. It is the anniversary of the destruction of the first Jewish commonwealth and, by analogy, the symbol of Jewish exile and degradation through the ages. Levi Yitzhak, at his study window, is suddenly transformed, as it were, into another world where he poses the question of the day which is to follow: why should Israel, God's chosen people, suffer such humiliation?

> Every head is bowed because the crown has long
> been taken from us.
> Every heart a pile of ashes from the ashes of the
> holocaust of the temple,
> And the ancient hope,
> A hope of near redemption whispers in the embers.
> And again I stand, a poor pastor of lost sheep,
> Waiting and hoping for a sign to come, a sign of
> redemption.
> .... Do I surely wait in vain year after year
> As my fathers' fathers waited, the whole people in
> vain,
> Hundreds of hundreds of years --
> Can mountains be uprooted from their place or rivers
> change their course?[44]

Now that he has stated the problem, Levi Yitzhak refuses to accept the surface answer of history. This man of faith, however, is so troubled that he asks the questions men have been told never to ask. It is true the prophet has told Israel its punishment is to be more than that of the other nations since it alone has a covenant with God. But Levi Yitzhak raises the question that even though Israel is <u>primus inter pares</u> can it be that they have so sinned as to merit such punishment? Can a father be

so cruel to his children while they carry His name throughout history?

> You have driven us from land to land, from nation
> to nation
> And have consumed us in fire and water and thrown
> us before wild beasts of men.
> Is it possible for a father to chastise his children
> and never forgive their sin?[45]

He carries the argument further. The terms of the covenant are spelled out in the Torah. But, argues Levi Yitzhak, in effect the Jew is told the Torah is a תורת חיים and he knows that the world was not created to be chaotic but rather to be lived in. If the purpose of Torah is to build a world according to God's Will and the desire of man's heart (if they are to be co-workers), how can man accomplish it seeing that the world is fenced off from him? In a very moving statement, Levi Yitzhak says:

> .... You have commanded us:
> 'Make wise the downtrodden and support the forlorn,
> Have pity on the widow in her poverty' --
> Who is more a bereaved widow than Zion on her ruins?
> Who is like Your people Israel, a downtrodden and
> persecuted nation, left to suffer in the world,
> How is it that you do not have pity on them nor
> heal their calamity?
> .... You who have it in Your power to heal and to
> save![46]

Reaching a climax of emotion, Levi Yitzhak calls God to trial. After all, the only faith man can have is that the values he cherishes, God cherishes as well. And since there should be but one manner of law for God and man, the rabbi accuses Him of being a jealous and vengeful God solely on Israel and a merciful and compassionate God on everyone else. Levi Yitzhak then turns to the heroes of the past for their testimony and also to inquire why they did nothing to call a halt to this eternal suffering. Jacob who wrestled with the deity and prevailed, Moses to whom the

tablets of the Law were given and who could abate the anger of the Almighty, Rachel and Jeremiah, all the great heroes could have done something.[47]

The Hasid next turns to every Jew who has carried the insult and the injury of his people from every corner of the earth to help him by raising their voice in so loud a protest that the path of the heavenly bodies could be disrupted. They answer that they have no more strength to plead. The old people say that they had uttered enough when they cried שמע ישראל as they were murdered. The women who saved themselves from rape by offering the ultimate sacrifice felt they likewise had done enough. The little children can do nothing since they were killed before they could understand the facts of life.[48] Levi Yitzhak then hopes that perhaps this great silence of the common folk will force the hand of the Almighty. But Samael the devil, a symbol of all the satanic foes of Israel, laughs mockingly: "שתיקה גדולה שתיקה, it will only be the silence of ghosts confronting the silence of heaven."[49]

Levi Yitzhak refuses to accept this conclusion and so he turns for some kind of rebuttal to the Ten Martyrs. The answers they give are the traditional ones. Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel says that since he was the Nasi, he must be bearing (נשא) the sins of his people. Rabbi Akiba affirms הצור תמים פעלו, "the Rock His work is perfect," and that he must have suffered for the errors of his youth. Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon finds comfort in being consumed with his Torah. When vengeance will be taken for the Torah, it will be taken for him as well. Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest writhed in pain only when the flames hit the place of the תגלין של שם with God's Name in it. He cried once and all the heavens shook. He cried again and the foundations of the universe shook. A

heavenly voice then warned him that with a third cry of anguish the world would revert to its primordial state.[50]

Levi Yitzhak cannot accept Samuel's philosophy of indifference nor can he accept a tradition of blind waiting and suffering with stoic calm. And so with all the daring he can muster, the rabbi warns heaven that he himself will utter the third cry if immediate redemption does not come. The People of Israel, central to the continuation of humanity and the universe, "shall not give up the right anymore to live in the world because of its love for the world."[51] At this stirring moment, the angels on high who have been silent and the souls of the righteous who were hushed finally speak up in a last ditch effort to save the universe.

> This is the punishment of a human being who
> trusted only in his reason,
> And desired to jump even past his capacity.

The souls of the righteous cry out in despair:

> Have we toiled for nought all the days of our
> lives,
> Have we borne our souls to heaven in vain?
> Are all our sacrifices as nothing,
> Shall now suddenly the world be destroyed?[52]

The souls of the righteous, interceding on behalf of mankind, plead that God send healing to the rabbi. And, in the form of three archangels, Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel, balm comes to him.

How do they instruct him? Raphael pours a few drops from his vial of oil on Levi Yitzhak's head. The rabbi opens his eyes and sees a new world. Gabriel instructs him, "It is great to trust in God, who is All-Powerful, who will return your captivity." Michael stands holding a Sefer Torah and exclaims that "all of life is hope" and "the Torah is a way of life." Of course Michael is pale and worn because he has suffered

exile along with his people. He says that the Jews must trust God even though His paths are inscrutable, and that the Torah makes living easier in a difficult world.[53] And in a final impassioned speech, Michael enunciates Cahan's beliefs:

When the heavy shadow of death approaches the Jew, when his whole world darkens and he loses his way as if the earth has opened before him, he stands and turns his heart to God in heaven, and cries יתגדל! Ah, for every Jew -- century after century -- has said Kaddish. Day after day he says Kaddish, out of his ancient destruction, and his recent disasters as well. And when the cataclysm hits like the tempest, this prayer rises on high like a searing flame; it is heard as a cry of love, the love of the faithful -- which cannot be reversed, and will never weaken. The rims of heaven will be scorched by the searing flame, and the song of the seraphim (the fiery angels) will pale before the power of the cry.

The Kaddish melody is heard and becomes stronger as the sexton, knocking on the study door, calls Levi Yitzhak to the Lamentations. With eyes aglow and with inspiration and devotion, the rabbi sings[54] יתגדל ויתקדש.

CHAPTER TWO

A. Major Answers of Tradition for Suffering

The Jewish tradition is a tradition of partial answers. There are no all-inclusive and monolithic attitudes to the problem of theodicy. There are varied and sometimes contradictory outlooks held in Jewish literature. One can, however, discern a general line in answering this most perplexing problem. By and large, the answers of Jewish tradition have been in terms of the nation and not in terms of the individual.

SIN

On the whole, the attitude of the Bible stresses the belief that suffering or low estate is a result of sin. Prosperity is evidence of righteousness and vice versa. Rabbinic theology, in part, also held "measure for measure," though it was quick to add that God's punitive justice was tempered by His love.[1] This position had been attacked by the Book of Job in probing the question איוב ט"ו, the just seem to suffer and the wicked prosper.

ESCHATOLOGY

The rabbis, in response to Job's problem, also developed the notion of "sufferings of grace" to account for the misfortunes of the righteous. Rav Huna declared, "in whom God delights, He crushes with suffering."[2] To further compensate for this suffering, the rabbis created an eschatology. The doctrines of immortality and world-to-come, messiah and resurrection loom large in Jewish tradition, and individual salvation is indissolubly linked with the salvation of the people as a whole.[3] The question of Job, therefore, is answered on a national level and not on a personal one.

OLAM HABA

In the Bible, it seems that death is not an evil in itself, except if it come prematurely. After death, a certain type of existence continued in Sheol and the dead were considered to possess certain powers of communication with the living. In the Talmud, the doctrine of immortality and world-to-come had two different meanings. One opinion held that world-to-come meant the eternal world of the spirit for the soul after death. Another opinion stated that the whole personality had an after-life. In this connection existence in Olam Haba (world-to-come), as implied on occasion by aggadic literature, meant that the righteous would be adorned with crowns on their heads and revel in the glory of the Divine Presence. Various rabbinic legends continue to convey a belief that the dead carry on some connection with the living and take an interest in their affairs.[5] In this way, the sufferings of the righteous on earth would be made up to them in an afterlife.

MESSIAH

The belief in Olam Haba was bound up with the notion of the coming of the messiah. When the messiah, in most cases a scion of the House of David, would come, the alien yoke on Israel would be broken and the ingathering of world Jewry would take place. The messiah would usher in an ethereal age of peace and prosperity, justice and brotherly love, as Israel would be restored to her golden era under the Davidic dynasty. This age, by whatever name it was called, and however it was imagined, was a stage of human history on this earth. The nation clung to this faith even in its direst catastrophies, and when the worse that could happen

seemed to have befallen it, the nation believed redemption to be the next act in the world drama.[6] When the messiah would come to Israel, he would vindicate those who suffered for their belief.

The question arose as to who the person of the messiah will be. There is a tradition that God created the messiah at the very beginning of creation. The preponderant view, however, is that of an earthly messiah. This view says he leads a hidden life and then steps forth suddenly. He is born but not yet revealed and he may be found living in concealment among beggars at the gates of Rome.[7]

The question as to when he will come also has diverse answers. One answer states that when the Jewish People makes itself worthy to receive him, he will come. It is sin which delays the inauguration of the golden age. Another answer says flatly that when the decadence of religion and morals reaches its lowest point, divine intervention in the person of the messiah will be necessary.[8]

RESURRECTION

Beginning with Book of Daniel, and becoming basic to pharisaic Judaism is the doctrine of resurrection. This would occur, together with Judgment Day, at the end of the messianic era. The dead, regardless of where and how they were buried, will roll from their graves toward the New Jerusalem and be resurrected in body to life eternal. Another view holds that resurrection will take place after a terrible last war between Gog and Magog, signalling the advent of the messiah, either Messiah ben David or Messiah ben Joseph.

OTHER ANSWERS

In addition to the classic eschatological answers, there are other

isolated ones which Jewish tradition has given, repeated, and underlined. Martyrdom has been forwarded as an answer to suffering on behalf of the nation.[9] Then too, there are citations that Torah can have prophylactic power against suffering.[10] The Merit of the Fathers (זכות אבות) can help to secure protection and salvation for their descendants, though there seems to be a controversy as to when this kind of help ceases in Jewish history.[11] Another tradition holds that children are a surety for the future and often called "the messiahs of mankind."[12] And finally, there is the classic simile used by Judah Halevi in comparing the Jewish People to the human heart. When there is joy in the world, the heart pumps with vigor, full of happiness. But when there is pain and sadness, the heart feels it first and, being most sensitive, suffers the most. As long as there is humanity, the Jewish People will be its heart.[13]

The above answers for Jewish suffering are attempts to explain the workings of God. Ultimately, however, the believing Jew knew that if his reason could not satisfy the inquiry, his faith in God's justice would carry him through life and beyond. The verse הצור תמים פעלו, the Rock His work is perfect, first found in the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 32, verse 4, has been recited down to our own time at the grave as the first verse in the צדוק הדין, the justification of the decree.

These, in effect, are the preponderant Jewish attitudes toward the suffering of the righteous. Yaakov Cahan probes these attitudes in the three plays, accepting some in part, rejecting others, and adding his own in endeavoring to find another partial answer for his time.

B. How Cahan Uses the Traditional Answers

In writing the three plays, Yaakov Cahan makes use of the major traditional Jewish attitudes surrounding the problem of Israel's suffering. In the main, Cahan is more concerned with the nation and discusses the individual only insofar as his destiny is linked with that of the Jewish People. Cahan's characters, therefore, are stereotypes and show little color or depth of personality. On the whole, each stands for a particular view or expresses a traditional idea either in harmony or in discord, setting up the climax for the playwright's answers. But more important, Cahan struggles with the answers and reasons of his characters in creating some modern religious answer to the problems of Jewish existence. It will be the purpose of this section to demonstrate the extent to which Cahan makes use of the traditional views in treating the theme of suffering.

SIN

In the plays, Cahan acknowledges the traditional reasons for suffering. "Sin delays the redemption," says the hidden saint to the penitent in Towards the Messiah.[14] The old sexton justifies suffering to the student in The Martyrs, but is quick to add that God does show mercy to his children and will not give them more than they can bear.[15] It is, however, in The Third Cry that Cahan attacks this justification through the words of Levi Yitzhak. The rabbi cries out poignantly to the effect that God's anger has not abated. Can Israel have sinned so much that it suffers so horribly for seventeen hundred years?

HEART OF THE NATIONS

The author explores another answer: that Israel suffers because it

is the heart of mankind. In The Martyrs and in Toward the Messiah, this answer is more or less implied rather than actually stated. In the former, the student who defies heaven is answered by the tottering of the foundation of earth, implying that to deny purpose to Jewish existence is to disrupt the universe.[17] In the latter, the whole question of the messiah coming to Israel is bound up with the salvation of the world. The penitent says to the beggars that the messiah will first come to the Jews and then to the whole world.[18] In The Third Cry, however, the point is clearly made when Levi Yitzhak refuses to be silenced. In effect he angrily states that Israel will not give up its place in the world because of its love for the world. And if by his cry, the cry of a pious and devoted Jew, can destroy the universe, then it may be concluded that Israel is the heart of the nations.[19]

TORAH

Is there a way for Israel to suffer with dignity and not be snuffed out? We have already seen that Judaism forwards a positive answer to the question. Tradition tells us that Torah has prophylactic power, and therefore, Cahan explores this avenue. Such a direct answer cannot, however, be found in Toward the Messiah. What is important, though, is if we take Torah to mean the whole of Jewish literature and tradition, then it becomes the basis for the play. Torah tells us the messiah will come and where he may be found.[20] The hidden saint has made use of the information and, though temporarily frustrated, continues his search. In The Martyrs, Cahan asks how the Torah can be of help seeing that the old sexton could not even save its pages from ruin.[21] In The Third Cry, Levi Yitzhak seems to deny any value to Torah since the Jews have been

stoned and butchered because of it.[22] Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon suffered a holocaust with it.[23]

ZEKHUT AVOT

What about the merit of the Fathers? Can זכות אבות have a mitigating effect? The objection Cahan raises to this view is manifest blatantly in both The Martyrs and in The Third Cry. In the first instance, Mother Rachel tries to help her children by pleading in a loud silence before the Heavenly Throne. She receives no answer. The Fathers, however, do no pleading at all but sit by able to accept any divine decree.[24] In the second instance, Levi Yitshak despairs because the Fathers and their merit are impotent to help. They do not even react to his plea.[25]

OLAM HABA

Aside from answers given for suffering and for aid in living with it, tradition also has eschatology. In this way, suffering not due to sin, and elixirs which in instances give no help, can be rectified. Cahan probes this answer especially in the play The Martyrs. The characters bewail their lot, recounting how each died in the great pogrom. When the student unleashes his glaring attack on God's justice, the answer comes in the form of a bat-kol, "You are martyrs."[26] The characters stand in amazement for they cannot believe the holy death of martyrdom applies to them, seeing that in life they were not saints. In one way or another they refuse to accept this answer as a justification for death. Each wants to recapture life rather than accept death with martyrdom and assured immortality.[27]

MESSIAH

Another eschatological answer is found in the form of messiah:

either divine intervention in history in combination with man's readiness, or the other switch in emphasis, man's readiness with God's grace. The play Toward the Messiah deals with this answer. The three main characters express the two sides of the coin. The hidden saint says the messiah will come when man is ready to produce him.[28] The mystic quietly adds that he will come when God wishes it.[29] The penitent straddles both sides.[30] And in either case, the tragedy is that when the messiah does reveal himself, neither side is awake to see him.[31] Cahan introduces, in addition, the element of personal suffering as a separate problem from the malaise of the nation. The beggars understand the messiah as coming to cure their own selfish ills.[32] They give lip service to looking for him but because of their downtrodden, destitute situation, they quickly give up.[33]

RESIGNATION

The ultimate cry of faith is הצור תמים פעלו. Cahan discusses this verse with such ardent passion that Rabbi Akiba actually proclaims the words to Levi Yitzhak.[34] All the questioning, all the pondering, all of man's efforts to explain ultimately return to the words of Deuteronomy. The old sexton, in effect, repeats the same argument. "If God had not been our refuge, how much worse it would have been."[35] The mystic, by waiting for חסד עליון implies complete resignation.[36] In each play the protagonist questions and cross-examines the verse for some merit. Levi Yitzhak cannot sit quietly by. The hidden saint must continue to look for the messiah. The student even denies there is a just God, let alone His work being perfect.

SUMMARY

Cahan knows the tradition well and is very positive towards it. He

carefully considers every side of every answer given for suffering. He presents them; he criticizes them; he reshapes them. Cahan, however, never discusses resurrection, for it appears he does not believe in it. Above all, he is the traditional Jew, a believer who questions, an artist who intellectualizes, a liberal who is reverent.

CHAPTER THREE

Cahan's Answers for Jewish Suffering

To more fully understand Jewish existence vis a vis suffering and degradation, Yaakov Cahan raises two dual-sided problems. In one, the silence of heaven to the plight of Israel is contrasted by the complete resignation of Israel to its fate. In the other, there is a kind of overweaning pride of wanting immediate answers and acts together with its complement of humility in accepting what cannot be understood. The protagonists, in their pride, accuse heaven of silence. If there is a God who acts justly and with mercy, how is it that He does not manifest these qualities in Jewish history? And if on the other hand we are told He works "in His mysterious ways," how can human beings, resigned to them, be expected to create a better world? These are the questions plaguing Cahan, to which he addresses himself in the plays.

SILENCE OF HEAVEN

We are told by tradition that redemption will come, ואפילו מעוכב. We are told that God is merciful and compassionate חנון ורחום. We are told that because of our sins we were exiled, ומפני חטאינו גלינו מארצנו. But no matter who demands to know when suffering will end, or prays that redemption immediately come, or asks why evil is victorious in the world, the answer of heaven is silence. Mother Rachel prostrates herself before the Throne of Glory, and Gabriel adds, "no answer came!"[1] After each martyr tells his story of death, the student adds, "and God did not bring down His lightning on their heads."[2] The student poignantly underlines the problem by saying, in effect, that God is not asked to do what He has not promised. He must answer and act else

why believe in a God who is silent. Compare the statements of the non-believing student with that of the devout believer Levi Yitzhak. The Hasidic rabbi complains, "must I wait in vain year after year....[3] while You have it in Your power to heal and to save?"[4] There is, however, an answer which comes to both from heaven. The answer is Power as was the answer in Job. The student, smarting under the effects of lightning and thunder, cries out, "we have already seen Your power, but what we want to see now is Your righteousness."[5] Levi Yitzhak, standing dauntless as the foundations of earth shake, vociferates, "but I will shriek the third cry and turn all to primordial chaos."[6] There is silence that comes to the hidden saint, for he has not found the ___אין___. And to deepen the effect, the penitent interjects, "perhaps he is not yet born."[7]

Why does Cahan raise the problem of God being silent? When there is exile, suffering, degradation, then man knows he is being punished. God does answer even if it is not to man's liking. But when the only answer is silence, it would mean God is neutral, inclining neither to good nor evil, or worse, that perhaps God has vanished. If this is so, then the problem of the age is not man's alienation from God but God's alienation from man.

PRIDE OF MAN

In all these cases, Cahan dramatizes the one side of the coin, that perhaps there is silence from heaven. God does not answer man all the time, or maybe He does but man cannot understand. The frustration is to be found in man's daring to believe he must completely grasp all, and if not, he can force God's hand. The protagonists are not meek men. They want answers; they want an end to suffering; they want immediate

redemption; they want to be assured that evil will not forever be victorious. Unfortunately they think they are especially entitled to it, while the heroes of the past were content to accept His decrees. Mother Rachel counsels the student, "even if you do not understand the path of the star, it continues on its way and will not waver on its circuit."[8] There is a higher destiny for Israel, however fraught with suffering, though a Jew cannot always understand or even wish to accept it. When Levi Yitzhak threatens heaven with a third cry, the angels bemoan his lot. "This is the punishment of a human being who trusted only in his reason, and desired to jump even past his capacity."[9] Man must not destroy his world because he finds evil too much to bear. He must learn to accept that suffering is sewn into the fibre of Jewish history and is part of the role Israel will play as martyr until its redemption. The mystic is cautioned by the voices of the past, "we have learned two things, patience and humility. You have learned the first, now learn the second."[10] Redemption will not immediately come though it seems Jewish existence can no longer contain itself with such suffering and degradation. Like the generations of the past, the modern Jew must also wait and bear his lot in the complete assurance that he will be vindicated.

SILENCE OF MAN

On the other hand, Cahan does not leave the problem in God's hands alone. The playwright is most aware of man's laziness and passivity to his condition. While there seems to be silence from heaven, there is also silence from earth. What is man doing to fulfill his part in bringing the kingdom of God to earth? The student bewails the fact that poets and

professors speak such lofty words about man which turn out to be empty. What are universal ethics if they do not apply to the Jewish people? Why does not someone come to vindicate the shame of the young girl, the symbol of her people? "How can men still eat in peace and hug their wives,"[11] while others are deprived of the same pleasures? Cahan castigates the mystic who is content to leave it all to God's divine grace.[12] What is He doing to alleviate Jewish suffering? Levi Yitzhak despairs because silence is the only answer of the common people. They said _____ and that was enough.[13] But is it enough? How can they still remain silent when they can intercede in heaven on man's behalf? Or is it that once enjoying Olam Haba they are content to remain passive? Raising the problem to its zenith, Samael laughs mockingly, "the silence of earth matches the silence of heaven."[14] Cahan rejects this evaluation of man. How can there be history, hope, redemption if both man and God are silent? But they are not. Levi Yitzhak, the devout believer, speaks up and he gets answers.

SELFISHNESS

As far as the protagonists are concerned, the religious leaders and the enlightened assimilated ones, they want answers and are not content to sit idly by. But what about the people they lead, the mass of Jews who have suffered and wallowed in shame? Cahan finds that these frightened and lowly can think only of themselves and their private selfish needs. They are not interested in the nation Israel so much as they are concerned with their own existence. The martyrs refuse to accept death with immortality. They want to be returned to life and family. Being Jewish concerns them only insofar as having to constantly live in a precarious situation. The butcher was in the prime of life; the

young girl never fulfilled herself as a woman; the merchant wants to care for his wife and children; the student wants to recapture that love and passion lost to him.[15] They do not want the role assigned to them as Jews. The beggars want the messiah to cure their own ills -- and they want even more, luxury and wealth.[16] Their selfishness becomes all-inclusive, even to aping the complaints of the ancient Israelites against Moses. When it comes time to go find the messiah, the storm with its cold, thunder and lightning so wearies them that they rebel against their leaders.[17] They have lost all hope of redemption, which is tantamount to saying there is no purpose to Jewish existence. Cahan despairs because the beggars are not able to transcend their situation. "The messiah will not come from them."[18]

The question of selfishness is a two-sided one. Even as the martyrs, the beggars, the common-folk are self-centered, so too are the leaders but on a higher plane. The student, because he was denied a good and full life with his fiancee, wants an answer.[19] Levi Yitzhak can no longer urge his people to maintain their trust unless some answer comes.[20] The hidden saint has been denied the privilege of seeing the messiah and so must continue his travels.[21] The penitent, though from one side of his mouth expressing undeserts, just wants to hear the footsteps or even be trampled by the messiah.[22] The mystic, although a believer in immortality and heavenly reward, still refuses to acknowledge death before he gazes into the eyes of the messiah.[23] To be sure, each wants redemption for the people of Israel. But selfishness still is apparent, as each believes himself to have special prerogatives to merit redemption in his lifetime.

Individual Jews, according to Cahan, are lazy and ego-centered. They are no better or worse than other people. They have a higher destiny but they are content to forget it. Their leaders, moreover, who are there to educate and to inspire, also fall prey to selfishness. The hidden saint is quickly frustrated when the beggars complain. Levi Yitzhak refuses to comfort and console his people any longer. The martyrs do not even have leaders to guide them, or perhaps, the leaders have already forsaken them for their own problems. It is not a rosy picture Cahan paints of the Jewish People. But he is not pessimistic. Just as there were heroes of the past who advanced Israel great notches, there are those now like Levi Yitzhak and the penitent who have the possibility of enabling the Jewish People to transcend itself. But whether or not its individuals accept or reject, the people have a divine role to fulfill in history which goes beyond the particular situation of its adherents.

TORAH and the CENTRALITY of ISRAEL

How can Israel fulfill a divine destiny and still continue to exist in so difficult a world? It is inconceivable for Yankov Cahan to dream of a world without Torah. The statements of his characters, in effect, seem to paraphrase the midrash of God creating and destroying worlds until He looked into the Torah, and created our world. What Levi Yitzhak is doing by threatening to utter the third cry is destroying a world because he feels Torah is insufficient in carrying on a modicum of existence. Michael, however, explains to the rabbi that Torah does lighten the burden of exile and suffering.[24] It is the pattern a Jew must follow in order to live in a difficult world. At no time does Cahan say exactly what he means by Torah. It does not seem that he is

an orthodox Jew with a program of ___, nor is he a nineteenth century Reform Jew who understands Torah as ethics. What does seem to be apparent is that Torah is a way of living as a Jew, without which existence would be meaningless. Cahan, however, does not believe Torah to be the only binding answer, for it too is sometimes destroyed. Hanina ben Teradyon was consumed with it and the old sexton's blood was spilled over its torn pages.

What Cahan does believe and clearly says is that if Jews reject the Torah as a pattern, then the whole world crumbles.[25] In this connection and in connection with the messiah, the playwright perceives the place of the Jewish People as central to mankind. Unlike Halevi, Cahan does not describe the relationship in philosophic or biologic terms. He does not deal with divine essences or with blood relationships. He describes the centrality of Israel in another fashion. When Cahan speaks of messiah, it can only mean he comes to Israel first and then to the world.[26] When Cahan speaks of Torah, it is the possession of Israel alone. The centrality of Israel is basic for him. He allows no other thought to enter his mind. Cahan further believes that if Israel rejects Torah, the whole universe will shatter to bits.[27] Religion, therefore, for Cahan is something more than an institution of humanity. Religion concerns itself not only with man but with the whole of the physical universe as well. "It is the spring whence life and all its blessings flow." The Jewish People is the eye of the spring, the heart of the matter. Without Israel, there is no glue to hold the universe together. It is the role which the Jewish People have been chosen to fill.

With what is the playwright left? He remains with discomfited

leaders and lame followers. As a Jew who refuses to accept defeat, who refuses to accept Samael's judgment of Jewish history[28] and who, like the student, cannot accept universal ethics which fizzle out in crisis moments for the Jew,[29] Cahan turns to eschatology hoping to find more answers for Jewish suffering.

MESSIAH

Yaakov Cahan maintains that a belief in the coming of the messiah is a necessary part of Jewish belief. The messiah, in fact, is ready to come at any moment if only Israel be ready to "break his chains."[30] This presents man with a great paradox. "The messiah will be sent from God,"[31] says Cahan in affirming divine providence to the Jewish People, but it takes Israel to redeem him. What Cahan is doing is recapitulating the bipolar attitude of tradition. Israel has been promised the messiah will come to vindicate its suffering. On the other hand, Israel must be worthy of vindication by helping to break his chains.

What frustrates Cahan is that the beggars have no strength to free the messiah. Like the penitent, Cahan cannot understand Jewish existence without messiah, but he also knows the Jewish People now are not able to hurry his coming. The mystic, at the end of the play, is not told by the voices that his passivity is wrong. The only advice they give him is not to expect the messiah but, like the giants of the past, to accept the fact he is reserved for another generation.[32] The little boy, symbol of hope in the next generation, may be among those who are able to break the chains and vindicate the suffering of the Jew.

MARTYRDOM

In answer to the student's question, "where is your righteousness," Cahan answers that those who cannot see God's ____ on earth will

find it in heaven. The Lord is אל גבור ונורא but also a מקים אמונה לישני עפר. The old sexton, rewarded with paradise, exclaims that death is a part of life. How foolish it is for man to hold that existence is limited solely to his days on earth.[33] As Jews who suffered because of their identity, they are rewarded with eternal life. Cahan maintains that martyrdom is not exclusive. It can be the province of all Jews: the simple and the poor, the ignorant and the learned, the pious and the assimilated. Again, Cahan refuses to stamp any one answer as the ultimate one. "You are martyrs," calls the voice from heaven, but no one cares to accept the reward. In his own way, each desires life even if it be difficult to lead.

IMMORTALITY

Our prayer book reads ברוך אתה ה' נטע בתוכנו חיי עולם. To Yaakov Cahan, this verse would be perhaps the most important rubric for his plays. Unstintingly and with great faith, he professes belief in the immortality of the Jewish People. Though the bulk of tradition gives answers in terms of the nation rather than in terms of the individual, Cahan nevertheless understands individual suffering to be bound up with national suffering. The penitent states categorically that the messiah will come to the people as a whole and then to individuals.[34] The angels proclaim that the individual who suffers will become a spark of holiness to future generations as the nation continues to live on in history. If a man redeems himself at death with his blood, his soul lights up the earth (in keeping with the words of the אל מלא רחמים), and stimulates it to more abundant life.[35] When Levi Yitzhak threatens to utter the third cry, the voices of the

Fathers, silent until then, exhort him to desist. If the universe is destroyed, then all their good deeds, all they had struggled for in life, all whom they had influenced, everything they had contributed to the future, would go up in flame.[36] No, the generations are responsible one for the other and no man has the right to declare all null and void. The voices of the past, in beckoning to the mystic, praise the nation which directs its sons toward the messiah and in every generation waits and hopes.[37]

HOPE

What is the hope meant by Cahan? It is the hope in the ultimate redemption of the Jewish People. It is hope in the coming of the messiah, vindicating the sufferings of Israel. It is hope that Jews have been right all the time and on Judgment Day they will not be embarrassed. It is hope that martyrdom has not been in vain, and it is hope that Torah, a way of life, will have been the correct way -- and that those who have held fast to it will be rewarded for their efforts.

What does hope of this sort imply? Cahan does not know how redemption will come about or even why God does what He does. Yes, the Lord moves in His mysterious ways and Cahan finds it difficult to explain them. The hope he describes, therefore, lays stress on man and how he can live, suffer, and die with dignity in the assurance all will be made up to him -- and that he with his people will triumph in the end.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Unlike many modern Hebrew writers whose weltanschauung is basically similar, Yaakov Cahan has treated the subject of Jewish existence and suffering in a most religious way. Unlike Zalman Shneeor who accused

religion of being the destroyer of beauty, and unlike Saul Tschernichowski who inclined back to paganism, or unlike Chaim Nachman Bialik who reproached God for His impotence to protect the chosen people, Yaakov Cahan displays a positive reverence toward the Author of all being.[38] The only time atheism is even implied, it is to be found within a religious framework. The assimilated student, who returns to his people but not to his God, is the only instance of a non-religious attitude in the three plays — and even there he is conquered.[39] It is true that Levi Yitzhak's arguments and denunciations are very similar to those of the student. The difference is that the student is defeated and never answered in this world while God sends the archangels to Levi Yitzhak in this life explaining to him the role of Jewish existence. What Cahan says, therefore, is that atheism or a philosophy of limiting God's power has very little if nothing to say about the design of the universe. The only people who can quarrel with God are the believers, those who know Him to be the only truth in life.

Cahan's understanding of life seems to be a post-modern one. He is not the die-hard liberal who believes in the ultimate perfection of man and that his reason must answer the ultimate question, nor is he the passive pious Jew of the ghetto. There is a certain resignation and humility in the plays, but there is a glimmer of something more. Though a man is not what the nineteenth century thought he was, he still must live according to Torah, and like the religious protagonists must still question why. He must guard that the universe be maintained, and he must have reverence for his God. The religion in which Cahan believes seeks to humble man, making him conscious of his limitations, yet exalting his

actions. The playwright is a religious Jew, for after all is said and done, הצור תמים פעלו.

FOOTNOTES

PREFACE

1. Ahron Opher, "Jacob Cohen," Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, III, p. 246.
2. From a conversation with Dr. Shaul Harell, Professor of Hebrew Literature, Hebrew Union College, New York, N. Y.
3. Abraham Shaman, Milon Hasifrut Hahadashah, p. 385 ff.
4. Reuben Wallenrod, Literature of Modern Israel, p. 129.
5. Meyer Waxman, History of Jewish Literature (IV), p. 298.
6. "Cahan," Moznaim, XII (December, 1960), p. 1

CHAPTER I

1. Yaakov Cahan, Collected Writings (IV) p. 209.
2. Idem.
3. Ibid., p. 210
4. Ibid., p. 211
5. Ibid., p. 212
6. Ibid., p. 213
7. Ibid., p. 214
8. Ibid., p. 215
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