Today’s Israelis and the Shoah or the Role of the “Third Generation” in the Development of New Memory Practices

Guila Sylvie Nakache
Today’s Israelis and the Shoah or the Role of the “Third Generation” in the Development of New Memory Practices

Guila Sylvie NAKACHE*

Grant holder, Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem

While looking into general issues of contemporary historical memory, Pierre Nora brought to light a new object of history: the “place of memory,” to which he grants the faculty of generating “another history.”¹ In his 1992 article, “The age of commemoration,” Pierre Nora reflects on “the strange fate of these places of memory: by their approach, their method, their very name, they sought to be a kind of counter-commemorative history, but

---

* Guila Sylvie NAKACHE is a PhD student at the Paris-I-Sorbonne under the supervision of Pr. Anne Grynberg. She has a grant from the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah (FMS). Her research deals with the representations of the Shoah in Israel society: a study of political discourse and cultural debates from 1973 to the present days. Sylvie.Nakache@malix.univ-paris1.fr

¹ The “places of memory” draw this capacity from simultaneously belonging to memory and to history.

commemoration has caught up with them”. These “places of memory,” which yearned to be a counter-commemorative history, instead became instruments of commemoration.

That monumental work which is the *Lieux de mémoire* constitutes an essential aid to grasp the internal transformations in the concepts of history, memory and commemoration. The perception of memory issues within a national setting has long been considered through the “places of memory”, to the detriment of any consideration of the plurality of those voices, which live in the collective and individual memories. Yet there are other “objects of history,” individual fates whose histories have faded away, temporarily or forever, by the representatives of official memory. The “places of memory” have frozen time. They exist because there is no spontaneous memory anymore.

Faced with the institutionalised narration of the “places of memory,” the development of an alternative relating has coalesced in “communities of memory.” A “community of memory” assumes a memory, which is carried by living groups. Memory in a “community of memory”, as opposed to a “place of memory,” can update and live within history. The emergence of so-called “memory” subgroups occurs when a redefinition of the group’s identity becomes necessary. The existence of these “communities of memory” forces us to rethink the relation between the historiographical project, which aims to orchestrate the past and the fragmented, amputee, interrupted collective memory.

The State of Israel, a space with multiple narrative “memories,” long overlooked, ignored or marginalised in the name of national construction, seems to be a privileged land in which to re-examine the questions which arise regarding the relation between history and memory.

I. The origins of a memory reconstruction

Zionism, originally an East European nationalism tied to a linguistic demand and rebirth, differs from French nationalism, which finds its expression in institutions, the State, and the history of the State as such. It is a nationalism,

---

which can exist regardless of the State.\textsuperscript{3} The distinctiveness of “ben-
gurionism” lay in educating the people through a unique history, an almost
Jacobin history of the State. After the success of the \textit{Kibbutz Galuiot} (the
gathering of the exiles), the State had to meet the challenge of merging the
exiles. A rather difficult task for this State, which welcomes Jews from all
sources. The State of Israel soon had to “manage” the historic reunion
between the two major branches of Judaism (Ashkenazi and Sephardic),
confiscating the many memories of the exile, so as to place them back within
the setting of a national memory.

One of the most striking examples of this Israeli normative model is the
subordination of the memory of the Jews of Iraq to the supra-Zionist
narration. The \textit{Farhud}\textsuperscript{4} became the historiographical reference point which
overwhelmed the long, rich history of Iraqi Judaism in Iraq. \textsuperscript{5} Researchers
agree that this event was exceptional in the relationship between Jews and
Muslims in Iraq.\textsuperscript{6} Despite historical testimony, the \textit{Farhud} was integrated to
the national Zionist narration \textit{me-Shoah le-Tekumah} (“From the Shoah to
Independence”). Jews in the land of Islam had a pivotal demographic role.
From 1942 onwards, David Ben-Gurion presented \textit{Yishuv} leaders the famous
“million program”, which sought to have Jews come in from the Arab
States, and started after the creation of the State.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{3} This form of “ethnic” nationalism brings to mind the many different cultural and
linguistic determinations which define a people historically: memory, religion,
language. On nationalism and ethnic nationalism. A. D, Smith, \textit{The Ethnic Origins of

\textsuperscript{4} The 1941 pogrom against Baghdad Jews occurred a few hours before the British
marched in. The “pro-Nazi” Prime Minister, Rachid Ali Kilani, fled Iraq. As a result
of this political anarchy, 160 Jews and an indeterminate number of Muslims were
murdered.

\textsuperscript{5} Y. Shenhav, “Jews from land of Islam in Israel: The fragmented identity of
\textit{Mizrahim} in national places of memory”, in \textit{Mizrahim in Israel: A critical observation
into Israel’s Ethnicity}. H. Hever, Y. Shenhav and P. Motzafi-Haller, ed., Jerusalem,

\textsuperscript{6} H. Cohen, “The anti-Jewish Farhud in Baghdad 1941,” \textit{Middle Eastern Studies}, n° 3,
1996, pp. 2-17.

\textsuperscript{7} 1948-1952: mass immigration of Jews to Israel from the Arabian and European
countries: operation “Flying Carpet” in Yemen and operation “Ezra and Nehemiah” in
Iraq.
The relation to Jews in the Land of Islam was included in a mixed process of homogenization and differentiation.\(^8\) The State of Israel tried to amalgamate the communities in the unique setting of a modern national society, while fighting against “the Eastern mind” which Ben-Gurion thought “destructive of individuals and societies”.\(^9\) The Arabian past of Oriental Jews threatened to shake the coherence of a “homogenised” Israeli nation and to garble the division between Jews and Arabs. In this contradictory reality, Israeli Orientals devised their own integration practices: scorning their Arab heritage, accepting the fundamental values of Ashkenazi hegemony, and constantly attempting to integrate into the “Israeli culture” which reflected the image of this hegemony. The collective memory of Jews from Arab countries submitted to a Zionist approach, which was part of a movement rejecting the Diaspora (Shlilat ha-Gola). The argument of Oriental communities, which spoke against the Alyah’s policy of absorption during the 50’s, the contempt for their traditions and the attempt to “blend” them into the Israeli normative model is not unlike the demands of Shoah survivors. The State of Israel’s first years of existence are characterised by two simultaneous and contradictory processes: develop a collective memory of the Shoah, and celebrate the heroism while disguising the reality of the victims. In 1949, the young State, faced with an immense Alyah, is mostly concerned with building the country. Of course, the extermination of the Europe’s Jews is seen as a terrible disaster, but one which is also inexplicable, incomprehensible. The collective rhetoric puts the Shoah to ideological ends, and buries individual memory.

With the Six-Day War comes a new phase in the perception of the Shoah. The fear that the “multiple Arabian and Palestinian verbal threats”\(^10\) generate is lessened by the sense of security provided by a sovereign State and a powerful army capable of protect its people. The Israeli army has just foiled an attempt at extermination. Such is the nature of the “lessons of the Shoah” and of the pedagogic concept on which the young generation is

---


weaned. The politicians debate the future of the Territories and security issues. Many, both religious and secular, see this new situation as the sign of a return to ancestral lands, particularly Jerusalem. The political will to carry out the “conquest of the land” program based on historical biblical rights stimulates an Israeli public whom the now-possible access to certain territories allows, among other things, to visit the reunified Jerusalem.11

Starting in March 1969, Nasser begins a war of attrition over the Suez Canal. This date marks the first stage of a process, which will eventually lead to total war.12 This war of attrition is a real conflict, causing nearly as many casualties as the Six-Day War.13 Acceptance of the ceasefire signifies the end of the Labour-led national union government. Begin and the right, arguing in favour of outright annexation of the Occupied Territories, quit the coalition government. Likud, Religious and Nationalists, with the support of the neo-Zionist movement, gain strength. On 15 March 1972, a massive vote in the Knesset reaffirms “the historic rights of the Jewish people over the Land of Israel,” including Transjordan and Gaza.14

Many historians and sociologists consider the Yom Kippur War to be a breaking point in Israel’s collective conscience. For Anita Shapira,15 the television broadcast of images of Israeli captives during the Yom Kippur War fosters the recognition of the victim. Suddenly, the tracked and persecuted Jew became a part of the Israeli experience. This time, Israelis feel understanding and compassion for Europe’s Jews. The Yom Kippur War results in a profound change in the perception of the Shoah, as a public theme, and especially as a pedagogic one. The fact that this attack took place on the day of Yom Kippur, seen by the Jewish people as one of the holiest days, amplifies the attack’s dramatic aspect and impact on Israelis. The

12 Ibid., p. 268.
13 Ibid., p. 272.
14 Only the extreme left has taken a stand in favour of a total withdrawal from the Territories and against any implantation, whether military or agricultural.
gravity of the situation, followed by the uncertainty of the first weeks of battle, and the population’s sense of isolation, left an indelible mark on Israeli conscience. Fear of extermination was stronger than ever. Certain theses crumpled: that the existence of the State of Israel should guarantee against hostile threats was no longer obvious. In May 1974, popular protest movements demanded the government’s resignation and the creation of a commission of inquiry. The military and civil leadership has failed.

Under Yitzhak Rabin’s 1974–1977 government, Israeli politics evolve. Labour accepts the creation of colonies in Transjordan and the Gaza Strip. The rise of a new form of Zionism, in which the religious element takes on a crucial role, weakens the doctrine of a purely secular Zionism. With the resurgence of extremist religious movements since 1967, some religious parties merge into the Gush Emunim (the Block of the Faithful) and call for a return to “territorial messianism.” The Block of the Faithful (1976) and Rabbi Meir Kahane’s Jewish Defence League (1977) organise marches and create wild settlements, which remain illegal until Menachem Begin’s rise to power.16

The 1977 political upheaval sees new elites come to power, elites which lend legitimacy to their own culture, representing another form of Israelism. Anti-socialist, anti-elitist messages, laden with religious significance, are now complemented by the almost systematic denunciation of a world, which “allowed the worse to happen.” Under the Begin government, the Shoah lies at the core of national identity, and especially of a new language, which reinterprets even the meaning of good and evil. During the first War of Lebanon, the Israeli army’s offensive, which reaches the Litani river on 6 June 1982, far exceeds the government’s original intention when operation “Peace in Galilee” was launched. Begin allows Tsahal to invade Lebanon to dislodge the PLO which has been shelling Galilee from the Israel’s northern border. At the time, he writes, in a letter to President Ronald Reagan, that Israeli troops are being sent to Beirut to arrest “Adolf Hitler in his Bunker.” 17 To justify this action in the Knesset, Begin returns to his strategic vision, which consists in viewing any alternative to war as the tangible risk of a new extermination:

16 O. Carré, op. cit. note 10, p. 104.
17 Manipulating the memory of the Shoah is not exclusive of Begin or the right. In 1998, Tsahal proposed that elite units swear their oath in the camps of Majdanek and Birkenau. Quoted in Ha’aretz, April 21, 1998, 6A (in Hebrew).
Since World War II, the world has lost the right to call Israel to account for its actions.\textsuperscript{18}

Begin courts the most conservative and religious fringes of Israeli society,\textsuperscript{19} by fostering Jewish settlements and granting subsidies to religious parties, notably to \textit{Agudat Israel}, which obtains, among other things, the interdiction for the El Al Israeli airline to fly on Shabbat. The erosion of the “status quo”\textsuperscript{20} in favour of religious parties marks a first break in the “supra-Zionist” discourse.

In the context of a media-response-meter culture, the impulse and interest focused on what is “different” have brought pent-up feelings to centre-stage. Narrative “memories” emerge from oblivion to compete with the elites in power, creating substitution myths, which are more in accordance with their personal identity. Collective ethics no longer exist. Each group has its own idea of what Israelism is, \textit{i.e.} borders, the role of the State, the educational system and the relation between State and religion.

As did the Oriental Jewish communities, the descendants of survivors have brought their roots and origins to centre-stage. The memory of the Shoah is an essential part of the definition of their identity and personality. The expression “children of Shoah survivors” became an epithet tied to a genealogy, an ancestry.

But as these children grew, so did the survivors. A feeling of urgency took hold, then: to speak out, question, bear witness, clarify all the questions which had remained without answers, and those which had never been made or had been repressed, before it is too late… These descendants felt that their identity was also anchored in the “biographical” memory of their parents and grandparents.

The relationship with religion and Judaism evolves. Judaism caught up by the Diaspora sees the birth of new memory practices.

\textbf{II. An identity built on traditional memory}

\textsuperscript{18} Speech by Menachem Begin on 29 June 1982. \textit{Cf.} Reports of parliamentary proceedings of the tenth \textit{Knesset}, Volume II, p. 2973 (in Hebrew.)

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Likud} allied itself with the NRP (National Religious Party) and \textit{Agudat Israel} (an ultra-orthodox Ashkenazi party.)

\textsuperscript{20} Refers to a letter sent by David Ben-Gurion, in June 1947, to the orthodox \textit{Agudat Israel} political party, the so-called “status quo” letter, which spells out the basis for peaceful collaboration between secular and religious forces in the young Jewish State.
Today’s Israelis and the Shoah

The Arachim movement is founded in 1979 by a handful of devout teachers who came from Academe and the Yeshivot and wished to put a stop to the alienating process Israeli society had gone through, a process which they believed had produced a generation which was divorced from its ancestral traditions and the richness of its heritage. The idea of academic seminaries was born from the search for a way to transmit the foundations of Judaism in a clear and modern language to a secular public anxious to reconquer its Jewish identity. The Lectures cover various subjects, where religion and science coexist. Lectures in which the question of transmitting Jewish history is omnipresent.

On October 12 2006, during a four-day “intensive” academic seminary in Jerusalem, Yaakov Estreicher, spokesperson for the Arachim movement, gives a lecture on “passing the torch.” On that day, he questions the testimony-transmission in Judaism.

There is a fundamental difference between a legend and a history based on the transmission of testimony. The legend is an unverified story, without – or with few – witnesses. The reliability of a historical narration depends on the number of witnesses who were at the event.

All religions which rely on a certain kind of revelation are based on the same model: a person meditates in solitude, comes back to his/her people and announces that he/she has experienced a personal revelation. This kind of assertion, which by its very nature cannot be verified, relies on the model of faith. Judaism is not based on this model, but on one of testimony:

When I tell my son the story of the Exodus from Egypt, it is not because I read it in the Old Testament, but because my father transmitted this story to me. Jews all over the world tell the story of the Exodus in the same way. It is a chain of transmission, from father to son, going back to the first witness. Israel didn’t believe in Moses because of the miracles he accomplished, but

21 “Values” in English.
22 “The meaning of life,” “The enigma of the existence,” “The accomplished prophecies,” “The transmigration of souls,” “Israel and other peoples”, etc. See the list of topics on the Internet site, in Hebrew: www.Arachim.co.il.
23 From –3760 B.C.E. to our days.
24 Conference recorded in Jerusalem on October 12 2006. The transcript proposed below is a personal translation of Yaacov Estreicher worlds’. A number of conferences of the Arachim movement can be accessed on their Internet site, in audio or video, listed by theme or by lecturer.
because of the Revelation on Mount Sinai, when the people saw with their own eyes and heard.

Judaism is the only religion in the annals of history, which claims to have experienced a National Revelation. No people has ever laid claim to such a National Revelation. According to Yaakov Estreicher, an event as significant as the Exodus and the Revelation on Mount Sinai, involving a large number of witnesses, can therefore not be transformed into a swindle.

After having demonstrated “the uniqueness of Judaism’s transmission model” and “its tamper-proof character,” Yaakov Estreicher discusses the problem of negationism, but not without first revealing to the public the reasons for his dismay:

I am just like any Shoah survivor, but for the blue number tattooed on my arm. Nightmares, fear of going without food. I even catch myself at night hugging the walls...

Grandfather survived the Shoah, my father comes from a large family which was annihilated during the Second World War. Grandfather never spoke of it. He was 30 when he came to Eretz Israel. For ten years, he didn’t get married, he couldn’t do anything but eat and breathe. And then, slowly, he recovered. At 40, he decided to get married, to carry on the fight on behalf of his loved ones. He got married, my father was born, and he told him nothing... My father knew nearly nothing of what had happened to my grandfather during the war.

I am the one to whom grandfather told everything. He had come to understand that if he didn’t tell this story, no one would ever know it, and he would be unable later on to regret the fact that no one knew. At the age of 12, I used to spend all my Shabbat at my grandparents’ place in Nataniya, to keep them company. One day, grandfather opened the album: “This is my mother, this is my father, this is my little sister, who took the train for Auschwitz. This is my brother, who went back to the Yeshiva because there was a war on. If he had not gone back there, he would have survived.

And in 1944, they take the Auschwitz train going into Birkenau II and stopping at the Crematorium. This is where they get off and undergo the “selection,” to which Mengele takes part. “Right”, “left”, “right”, “left.”

25 During most of the camp’s operations, deportees would arrive at the former Auschwitz merchandise station (the Judenrampe) and walk to Birkenau. The track was extended in the spring of 1944 to end inside Birkenau itself, as near as possible to the gassing devices. Hardly had they left the train when prisoners were “selected.” To one side, the weak, the elderly, the sick, pregnant women, children, whose fate was immediate gassing. To the other side, the strongest adults (in theory, 16 years and
And all of them end up on the left except for me and my sister, who were sent to the right, I don’t know why. The last words I remember were my father’s: “Samuel, we are going to die. Samuel, live! Marry, have children, tell them you are a Jew and tell them what it is to be a Jew.” Those were his last words.

And grandfather crossed the seven circles of hell… and for those who know what I am talking about, grandfather crossed the seven circles of hell long after the Shoah. The seven circles… Then he married… Then he decided to tell… He told all he had kept quiet all those years. I lived that moment intensely. Since then, I have nightmares where I am over there, and everything happens to me.

There is no book on the Shoah I haven’t read, no movie I haven’t seen. There are books and movies I’ve seen dozens of times. And again and always, I find myself back in Poland, in Auschwitz, in Majdanek, in Treblinka… And there I am, again and always, asking myself: but why am I here? I can’t stand these places, so why am I here? And there I am, crying like a child again.

As most Shoah survivors’ children and grandchildren, Yaacov Estreicher is still haunted by his family history. He has lived for his childhood a double life: his own and the remembrances of the camps. Worried by the future, he is wondering at these extreme right new erroneous interpretations of Nazism history and Collaboration, at the “confusion of meaning,” more and more pronounced in the left and extreme left referential links about the Shoah, and their way of reading the Israeli-Arab conflict. Yaacov Estreicher, preoccupied by seeing the neo-Nazism and the revisionism revived by professors at the University, discusses the question of the falsification of history. The question of Henri Roques who, in 1985, at the university of Nantes, defended a doctoral thesis in which not only did he question the Jewish genocide, he also tried to rehabilitate Nazism, with the abeyance of a jury of teachers who were favourable to his theses. But the main concern of Yaakov Estreicher is not France, nor the rest of Europe, but rather what is happening, what might happen in the future, in Israel itself:

I fear that, in 200 or 300 years, here, in Israel, you will be able to get research papers denying the truth of the Shoah in the name of pluralism, in the name of science and in the name of a history that lacks accurateness.

above,) whom the SS meant to work to death. Often, Dr. Josef Mengele would choose the subjects of his experiments from among the newcomers.

26 Cancelled in 1986 by Minister Alain Devaquet.
In order to thwart the projects of the history falsifiers, Yaakov Estreicher proposes a “Jewish method” to “immortalise the historical event.” Considering the Exodus and other traditions in the Old Testament, Yaakov Estreicher analyses the commemoration of the past. Indeed, the text of Exodus is punctuated with explicit references to memory and commemoration. Yaakov Estreicher supports his reasoning by calling on biblical references. He comes back to the circumstances of the Mount Sinai’ Revelation before exposing the first part of his project: the gathering of the survivors.

We will gather all Shoah survivors who are still lucid and in good health, (some 20,000) in an immense amphitheatre, along with their children and grandchildren. The Prime Minister, the President of the State and the Chief Rabbi will take the stage. The President of the State will turn to the survivors and tell them: you are the witnesses because you saw, with your own eyes, the horrors of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek. You were there. Future generations must know what happened there, and that is why you must transmit your testimony to these future generations.

This project is largely drawn from the Sinai Covenant story. The idea of a “gathering of survivors” calls to mind the narration of the Revelation of Mount Sinai. The Covenant concept is the dominant metaphor in the Hebrew Bible for the relationship between God and the Israelites. According to the Torah, the entire Jewish People heard God speak on Mount Sinai, thus experiencing a National Revelation (Deuteronomy 5:1-4.)

This unique feature of the Sinai Covenant emerges as an important aspect of the relationship between Israel and God. The Ten Statements (asseret hadibrot) came to play a central role in Israelite and Jewish society: they are formulated to provide a set of values. The Decalogue contains foundational precepts, which provide the community’s statutory basis and common (case) regulations. This set of precepts has also a mnemonic value. It can be easily remembered. The Ten Commandments are the Covenant document’s essence. They would have been recited or repeated whenever Israelites gathered to express their allegiance to God and their acceptance of a Covenant relationship with their deity. They have a role in Israel’s community existence. Yaakov Estreicher proposes to draw one’s inspiration from the Old Testament to the contemporary history in order to immortalize the memory of the Shoah. As the Thora has been transcribed in her foundational aspects, the President’s words are also. The idea of a “document” refers to the story of Moses, who gave a copy of the Sefer Torah to each of the 12 Tribes of Israel (another Sefer Torah was kept in the Ark of
the Covenant.) Yaacov Estreicher proposes to give each Survivor (some 20,000) a copy of the “document.”

The proposed manuscript includes the gathering of the survivors, the direct testimony (those who saw and heard,) the transmission to future generations, the signature and distribution of the document:

The President’s words will be transcribed. Once the speech is written, it will become a document which the President himself will verify one last time before it is signed by the Chief Rabbi, the Prime Minister and him.” An addition to the document will state that it can’t be modified, and that 20,000 copies will be made. A copy will be distributed to each survivor. The 20,000 copies will be produced on site, plastic-coated, and locked in boxes bearing the words “you will not forget, and you will not forgive.”

According to Yaakov Estreicher, such a document could not be falsified, nor could it be disputed, as it is handed to the original group, who must transmit to future generations the event and the text, a text which validates the surrender of a copy of the document to each survivor.

As a case in point, Yaakov Estreicher takes a page out of English history. The Magna Carta, a 63-article charter wrung by an English baronage on June 15 1215, weary of the king’s military and financial demands, limited royal high-handedness and established in law the concept of habeas corpus, which, among other things, forbids arbitrary arrests. To this day, says he, there is no challenge to this period of England’s history, to which a document was appended.

Yaakov Estreicher takes his demonstration to the limit by imagining “a club to perpetuate the memory,” magnifying the Judaism’s “unique” testimony-transmission model. In order to avoid any possibility of misunderstanding, we have to make clear that the following words are deliberately excessive. Nonetheless, the referential link to the biblical traditions, coupled with an analogical link, is questionable... When Yaacov Estreicher makes a connexion between the Jewish circumcision ritual (Genesis 17, 1-14) and the blue number written on the survivor’s arms, does he not override some limits?

---

A procedure which has been honed and strengthened is part of England’s legal procedures, and whose origins go back to the Middle Ages. It requires that a judge declare whether a person’s arrest is legal or not and, in the later case, that he/she order the prisoner’s release, thus offering real and effective guarantees against arbitrary arrest.
A group of witnesses (20,000 survivors, their children and grandchildren) will marry only among themselves, in order to perpetuate this memory. Each member of the club must, when his son is one month old, write his ancestors’ blue number on the arm.

He also refers to the mezuzah which is found in every Jewish home, and which recalls that a home must be a sanctuary. This small scroll which Jews fix to the right lintel of each room of the house contains two passages from the Bible which mention this command (Deut: 6: 4-9; 11: 13-21):

Every member of the club will place, at the entrance of his house, on the door lintel, a small case containing a scroll summarising the history of the Shoah, which he must touch while thrice repeating: we will not forget, and we will not forgive.

The reference to the tefillin recalls the oath of allegiance to God. By strapping the tefillin on the arm first and around the head afterwards, Jews repeat their oath of allegiance to God each day. Each morning, members of the club will have but a single objective, perpetuating the memory:

The members of the club will gather each morning at their district youth center with two small cubic boxes containing a small parchment on which has been written a summary of the events of the Shoah and the reasons for creating the club. They will strap the first case on the forehead and the second on the arm, near the heart, and will thrice repeat: we will not forget, and we will not forgive.

The Jewish Passover is a “founder memory” for the Jewish people. Passover is daily reminded in the Jewish prayers and Jewish People dedicates every year eight days in order to remember and pass on to the youngest the story of the Exodus from Egypt. No festival of the Hebrew Bible better optimizes the ritualization of the past in order to shape and preserve group identity than does the Passover in relation to the memory of Exodus. The narrative of Exodus represents the characteristic way in which the traditional Jewish society remembers her past. Yaacov Estreicher appropriates the Seder meal ritual practices to the celebration of the final German capitulation in May 1945:

On 9 May, they will celebrate the day of liberation. They will prepare this day two weeks in advance, and will purge the house of any German product. On the day of the feast of liberation, everybody will sit down at a table with dry bread. The son will ask his father “how is this evening different from all other evenings? Why do we eat dry bread”? And the father will answer: “Because your father ate it, as did the first of our forebears who ate this bread in the camps”. He will also remind his son why he bears carries a blue number on the arm.
The feast of Succoth is the most flamboyant of the seven fests mentioned in Leviticus 23. It is also called the “Feast of Tabernacles”, or the “Feast of Booths”. “Booth” and “Tabernacle” are attempts to translate the Hebrew word *sukkah*, which means a makeshift shelter, or a hut. The Hebrews were commanded by God through Moses to commemorate this festival by “living in booths” (Leviticus 23:43) because God protected them as they wandered in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. As Passover commemorates the coming out of Egypt, Succoth commemorates the journey itself and God’s watchful protection over his wandering people. The “feast of the nomads”, as the feast of Succoth, is characterised by rituals recalling the life of the Jews during their wandering, until came to Palestine:

The feast of the nomads will recall the upheaval the Jews of Europe lived through until their arrival in Palestine. During this feast, survivors will be required to live, eat, even sleep in a boat-shaped cabin, to remember the clandestine immigrants who came by boat to Palestine. The whole family will begin start construction of the boat, in an open area, with a joyous frame of mind. When the child asks “why do we spend the evening in a boat?”, the father will explain that his ancestors traveled in these clandestine boats to reach Palestine.

Yaacov Estreicher tries to reason with his listeners by propinquity, shift and proximities with the “ancient times.” The biblical Judaism, in that case, is a great data source in order to revive very old intellectuals’ patterns. In accordance with the Jewish thought, the ancient man (i.e. the old doctors of the Law [*talmide chachamim* or *sofrim*] who have interpreted the biblical dictates – as Hillel, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Yossi the Galilean,) spiritually highly developed, knew how to set a Jewish method, through orders and precepts. The handling on process that accompanied the Jewish people through ages is one of the most singular aspect of his history. Under this “method,” the oral *Torah* has been passed on during thousand years from generation to generation and has been applied to the most varied civilizations without any modification of its basic structure. This is the method that Yaacov Estreicher proposed to apply in order to protect the Shoah memory.

Who are these new actors, anxious to transmit or bear witness, these heirs concerned with their roots, the wondering spectators to these academic seminars? Instrumentalisation of the memory of the Shoah serving a religious discourse used to demonstrate the truthfulness of ancient texts, or peculiar example of the various forms and contents of the memory of the
Shoah in a transmuting society? The public\(^{28}\) attending these seminars in ever-growing numbers is both deeply vulnerable and extremely demanding. In no way is the third generation seeking a guru; it is looking for values, which it knows, exists, and which it wants transmitted to it. The Torah, which religious Jews consider historical, current and perennial, is the founding support of a generation which is concerned with building its identity through traditional memory.

### III. Between transmitted memory and acquired memory\(^{29}\)

It is in the early 1990’s that begins an intensive analysis of the issue of the Shoah’s traumatism and its influence on Israeli society.\(^{30}\) The ranks of Israelis descendants of survivors are joined by young Israelis who, while not “biographical” descendants of survivors, grew “under the shadow of Auschwitz,” as Israeli historian Gulie Ne’eman Arad\(^ {31}\) puts it. Faced by the “institutionalised ritual” of visits to the camps and by the “cultural market” of the Shoah, which has filtered into a number of spaces of Israeli popular culture, the younger generation is facing an unprecedented memory crisis.\(^{32}\)

In an article published by the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz* on October 13 1996, Mooli Brog, a sociologist at the Hebrew university, condemned the state-controlled domination over the ideological interpretation of the Shoah, and called on Israeli political leaders to “privatise” the memory by breaking the State’s monolithic commemorations practices and consider the recent ideological and political changes occurring in Israeli society.\(^{33}\) Among these

---

\(^{28}\) A public consisting mostly of non-religious people, people who have ceased to practise, or simply people in search of identity.

\(^{29}\) Walter Benjamin makes the distinction between transmitted memory and acquired memory — which he calls “lived” memory. Transmitted memory is everything which one generation passes on to the other, including history and its teaching. Acquired memory is everything which happened to you alone, or which you perceive as such. It is obvious that, in the modern world, there is less transmitted memory and more and more acquired memory.


recent changes is the very recent appearance in Israel of alternative Shoah ceremonies.

For the eighth straight year, artists, intellectuals and men of letters, meet to discuss the manner in which each of them, as individuals and not as a group, faced the question of the Shoah.

This year, the ceremony took place in a room next to the Tmuna theatre. The black walls and iron ceiling contributed to the heavy atmosphere that weighed over the place. Young actors dressed in rags, made up as the living dead, move slowly among the public sitting on the floor. This ceremony has become a true memory platform for hundreds of Tel-Avivians. All have chosen this place to commune with a past which obsesses them, and which they have come to “update.” This ceremony seeks to connect the Shoah to the current context, more critical than ever.

Shaharah Blau, the founder of the ceremony, was born and grew in Bnei Brak, a town in the northeast suburb of Tel-Aviv housing the world’s largest concentration of orthodox Jews after Jerusalem. Aged 29, Shaharah, a devout Jew, still lives in Bnei Brak in an ultra-orthodox district of the city. Her first grandfather died in Buchenwald. The second one lost his wife and both children in the camps. Yet she did not grow up listening to these stories. As with many such families, the Shoah was not a topic for discussion. It was her hiloni friends from Tel-Aviv who, having confessed they would rather see a movie than go to the official ceremonies, encouraged her to design a different kind of ceremony.

The alternative ceremony Shaharah Blau has designed is not a ceremony aimed at “the Jewish people who remembers the six millions,” but at the individual who remembers the six millions: We have to deal with the Shoah today, with issues that connect the Shoah to our present life. Talk of private, personal things. Not the Jewish people who remembers the 6 millions, but me, Shai; me, Gili; me Shaul; focus the spotlight on a specific point.

Each participant expresses himself in whatever manner he desires. There is no longer any need to glorify collective interests. You can remember otherwise.

The proofs, the data, the numbers, none of these have changed. What changed

---

34 The alternative ceremony on April 24 2006.
35 Non-religious.
36 The transcript proposed below is a personal translation of the participants’ worlds.
is us, our conception of the memory, what we choose to focus, which characters, which events, what we choose to train the spotlight on.

When it began, the alternative ceremony was seen as an event bordering clandestinely; over the years, it has become a kind of tradition attracting ever increasing audiences. Each year, the public hastens its steps to bring back an event, which, as it recedes in time, has taken on the value of a symbol, going beyond the event itself. In 2006, ten participants joined in the ceremony, each one bringing a different, personal outlook on the Shoah.

The Israeli dancer and choreographer, Renana Raz, recalled how she journeyed to Germany for the show, “They told us to leave.” As a “third generation” child, Renana thought herself free of the victim’s syndrome and of a world, which, she thought, belonged to her grandparents. She tells how, while she was teaching Germans volunteered to join in the final scene of her show - an Israeli folk dance to the song Veshuv Itchem (“And again with you”) – how, “the Jewish unconscious” rose and engulfed her:

I wondered: where were they during the war? And while I taught them that oh-so-Israeli exclamation, “Hopa Hey”, I couldn’t help imagining them crying: “Heil Hitler.”

In Berlin, I saw how Germans sorted the garbage. Paper, plastic, glass. In any other country in the world, I would have seen this as an ecological action. But there, in Germany, I thought “selection.” I understood to what degree the manner in which I associated ideas was far from inoffensive. Everyday acts took on a new meaning. Suddenly, they belonged to another time, a tragic time.

The resurgence of this memory collides with the words of the popular Zionist song that quite suddenly take on another meaning…

And again with you
we’ll go out to see the light
And again with you
we’ll dance all night long
Because of you
we wanted to come back
And again with you
with the evening we will wake up
And again with you we’ll rejoice,
all of us together and to your song

37 In 2006, some 1,000 people met at the Tmuna theatre.
38 Her show broaches the question of Israeli ceremonies and myths.
we will repeat the chorus
And again with you
and may peace be on you and on us all
And again with you
we are yours, and all songs are ours.

In a pamphlet, theatre writer Amir Urien rejects Israel’s status as legitimate vector of the memory of the Shoah:

A State with closed military zones making up 48% of its surface area,
a State where hundreds of people are detained without being charged and without any time limit,
a State in which a Palestinian whose companion is an Israeli citizen cannot enter Israel,
such a State, the State of Israel, has lost all right to speak of the Shoah.

Amir Urien then discusses the Jewish State’s Charter of Independence:
The State of Israel, whose Charter of Independence promised; a state founded on the principles of liberty, justice and peace taught by the prophets of Israel; to ensure complete social and political to all its citizens, regardless of creed, race or sex; to guarantee full liberty of conscience, religion, education and culture; to preserve and guarantee the inviolability of the Holy Places and sanctuaries of all religions and to respect the principles of the United Nations’ Charter; this State, the State of Israel, has kept none of its promises.

The journalist Shai Golden told of the final break between God and the Jewish people in a metaphor concerning the tumultuous relations of a couple and those of the Jewish people with God:

When God saw whom he had fallen in love with, he sought to retract himself and chose, as is usual, to give notice by deeds. He started by mistreating us with expulsions and inquisitions, but we wouldn’t understand. In Christianity, he then found another woman, and gave her the land and the kingdom. But there again, we didn’t understand.

He found in Islam a concubine, to whom he gave strength and fortune. Then he went on with the expulsion from Spain and the pogroms. But we carried on, as if nothing was amiss… In 1939, when he could stand it no longer, he asked the Germans to put an end to it all. When you resort to a murderer, he generally does his work. But just before the task was finished, God decided that the message had gone through clearly enough. But, here again, we didn’t understand, and we set to putting the tefillin, building synagogues, and creating the State of Israel…

And what could be clearer than the War of 1973? When the Arab countries decided to wipe us out on Yom Kippur? But we refused to understand.

Today, I hear that the Iranian project is moving along at a satisfactory pace…

As for journalist Shaul Bibi, himself no “biographical” descendant, but one whose childhood in Israel was inevitably marked by the telling of the
tragic tale, he chose to speak of his own relation with the Shoah. Bibi sees himself as a “sociological child”, or what Iris Milner calls the “second adopted generation”.\(^{39}\) The intense involvement of this “adopted generation” in the Shoah issue expresses a cognitive and emotional identification with the descendants of survivors, and permits seeing the concept of “children of the second and third generations” as a vast cultural concept, one which departs from the category-based definitions of a specific population group.

Since the early 80’s, the memory of the Shoah has been institutionalised and ritualised in official Israeli speech, whether through the organisation of mass journeys to Poland, to the sites of the death camps, or by post- and neo-Zionist movements’ appropriation of the symbols of the Shoah.\(^{40}\) These events have become a part of Israel’s civil religion. The memory of the Shoah acquired the status of a dogma, protected by the 1981 law forbidding its denial. However, in this society, which was shaped by the memory of the Shoah, Shai Nahon, an Israeli behavioural sciences student, went up on stage at the Tmuna theatre as part of the 2004 alternative ceremony to show the blue number his grandmother bore, and which he had tattooed on his arm… Marginal action or unknown individualities won over to this latent “cult of death” which seems to flood official Israeli culture. We voluntarily beg the question.

The alternative ceremony at the Tmuna theatre, organised by Avi Gibson Barel and Shaharah Blau, seeks to become one more of those “memory tasks” which started in the 80’s within the education system, in the elementary and high schools, and not to challenge them. « You will tell your children… » is a crucial Torah precept. In the Jewish tradition, each parent must pass on to their children their family’s and people’s story.

Yaakov Estreicher and Shaharah Blau are not trying merely to comply with the injunction of memory: “you will tell to your children.” Each, in his or her way, tries to initiate discussion around a real issue: how will you tell to your children?

This new generation, whose projects and questionings appear at the same

---


Today’s Israelis and the Shoah

time as the events, which the country has gone through since the Six-Day War, is looking for new ways to shape its identity. Faced with an increasingly violent struggle with its neighbours, it grants a fundamental importance to the story of its origins. Today, the question of Israeli Jewish identity is defined in an extraordinarily complex and evolving manner, which interlocks with a collective identity based on the Shoah. These memory reconstructions within Israeli society raise major questions regarding the intergenerational transmission and the weight of politics: over the mid- to long-term, do they not risk generating competition between national identity and fundamentalist religious identity?

41 A generation which was marked by the first “War of Lebanon” (1982) and the first Intifada, wars which were seen as “dirty” at the same time, because of conflicts with a civilian population.