

## Introduction

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“From . . . remorselessly accumulating cemeteries,” writes Benedict Anderson at the closure of his book *Imagined Communities*, “the nation’s biography snatches exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars and holocausts. But to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as ‘our own’.”<sup>1</sup> These words reverberate deep within the present book, which deals with the way the Israeli-Zionist nation’s biography in the course of the twentieth century gathered its catastrophes, wars, and victims, embraced them, remembered and forgot them, told their stories in its own way, endowed them with meaning, bequeathed them to its children, shaped its own image through them, viewing itself in them as if it were all these. This is a book about Israeli nation-ness and nationalism, about death in its national public sphere, and the fatal connection between them: about the memory of death and culture of death and the politics of death in the service of the nation. To the same degree, it is a book about collective memory, about memory as an agent of culture, shaping consciousness and identity and shaped by them in a constant reciprocal process;<sup>2</sup> about the way in which Israel’s collective memory of death and trauma was created and produced, and how it has been processed, coded, and put to use in Israel’s public space, particularly in the half-century which has lapsed since the destruction of European Jewry.

<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York 1983, p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> In the past few decades the question of collective memory has become a central issue in the work and discourse of historians and cultural scholars. A list of books and articles on memory published since Maurice Halbwachs’s *La mémoire collective (1950–1968)* and particularly since its publication in English (1980), encompasses thousands of items, which cannot be listed here. On the multi-cultural discourse on collective memory, see Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” *Representations*, 69, Winter 2000, pp. 127–150. The article, which analyses the development of research on memory and its relation to history, society, and culture, opens with the words: “Welcome to the memory industry.”

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To paraphrase Tolstoy, one could say that if prosperous and happy communities are all alike, every unhappy community is unhappy in its own way and each of its offspring is branded with the mark of that unhappiness. Victories and great achievements require neither explication nor sophisticated interpretative structures; self-explanatory, they speak for themselves. By contrast, the more devastating the national debacles and defeats and the more victims they claim, the more they are subject to processes of social taming and domestication, and produce complex edifices of memory and interpretation to enable their reception and comprehension and to overcome them. Thus, they shed one form and take on another form to become tales of empowerment, rituals of initiation, and displays of transcendence.

An essential stage in the formation and shaping of a national community is its perception as trauma-community, a "victim-community," and the creation of a pantheon to its dead martyrs, in whose images the nation's sons and daughters see the reflection of their ideal selves. Through the constitution of a martyrology specific to that community, namely, the community becoming a remembering collective that recollects and recounts itself through the unifying memory of catastrophes, suffering, and victimization, binding its members together by instilling in them a sense of common mission and destiny, a shared sense of nationhood is created and the nation is crystallized. These ordeals can yield an embracing sense of redemption and transcendence, when the shared moments of destruction are recounted and replicated by the victim-community through rituals of testimony and identification until those moments lose their historical substance, are enshrouded in sanctity, and become a model of heroic endeavor, a myth of rebirth.

"Victimization," wrote Martin Jaffee in his article on the victim-community and the Holocaust ritual, "is easily thematized in memory and story as a moment of victory. That is, when transformed by the religious imagination into myth, the experience of victimization can confer a kind of holiness and power upon the victim." In stories constructed around disaster and destruction, "the victim is always both victim and victor, always destroyed but always reborn in a form that overcomes the victimizer." The chief beneficiary of that empowerment, says Jaffee, is the community, which perceives itself as the historical witness to the degradation of the victim and his subsequent transcendence, as the historical body whose very existence preserves and relives the moment of degradation and transfiguration.

By telling and retelling the story of the victim, the community of victimization not only memorializes the victim and stands in solidarity with the victim's fate; it also

shares in the victim's triumph and transformation, bringing into its history the power of its myth, and mapping onto its own political and social reality the mythic plot through which it comes to self-understanding as a community of suffering.<sup>3</sup>

Death is never a closed matter. Like history, or as history, the dead do not belong solely to the past; they are a vital and active part of the present.<sup>4</sup> They belong to the present and play a part therein as long as they are recalled and spoken of by the living, who project their own lives on to the dead and draw their own lessons from their death. The living "exhume the dead," summoning them to a second life by giving meaning to their lives and death, a meaning that they themselves did not understand, as the French Revolution's historian, Jules Michelet, wrote.<sup>5</sup> Yet these dead are not the sum total of the dead, nor are they a random selection of them – just as history is not the sum total – or a random selection – of all the events that have occurred since the dawn of time. They are only those who have been chosen at various times by the living and transformed into historic dead or historic events, agents of meaning in the national sphere.

The Holocaust and its millions of dead have been ever-present in Israel from the day of its establishment and the link between the two events remains indissoluble. The Holocaust has always been present in Israel's speech and silences; in the lives and nightmares of hundreds of thousands of survivors who have settled in Israel, and in the crying absence of the victims; in legislation, orations, ceremonies, courtrooms, schools, in the press, poetry, gravestone inscriptions, monuments, memorial books. Through a dialectical process of appropriation and exclusion, remembering and forgetting, Israeli society has defined itself in relation to the Holocaust: it regarded itself as both the heir to the victims and their accuser, atoning for their sins and redeeming their death. The metaphorical bestowal of Israeli citizenship on the 6 million murdered Jews in the early days of statehood,<sup>6</sup> and their symbolic ingathering into the Israeli

<sup>3</sup> Martin S. Jaffee, "The Victim-Community in Myth and History: Holocaust Ritual, the Question of Palestine and the Rhetoric of Christian Witness," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 28, Spring 1991, pp. 230–231.

<sup>4</sup> An interesting claim, from a slightly different perspective, can be found in Lior Barshack's analysis of the way in which a constant production of death is crucial to the constitution of any political sphere. See Lior Barshack, "Death and the Political," *Free Associations*, 47, 2001, pp. 435–462.

<sup>5</sup> Jules Michelet, "Histoire du xix siècle," in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris 1982, vol. XXI, p. 268; Roland Barthes (ed.), *Michelet par lui-même*, Bourges 1954, p. 92; both are cited in Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore 1973, pp. 158–159.

<sup>6</sup> As early as 1950 it was proposed to the Prime Minister that symbolic citizenship be bestowed on Holocaust victims within the framework of the law. The proposal was examined by legal experts who recommended that it be accepted. It was extensively discussed but not implemented, yet the idea of granting retroactive citizenship was

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body politic, reflected that historical, material, political, psychological, and metaphysical presence in the Israeli collectivity.

According to circumstances of time and place, the Holocaust victims were brought to life again and again and became a central function in Israeli political deliberation, particularly in the context of the Israeli–Arab conflict, and especially at moments of crisis and conflagration, namely, in wartime. There has not been a war in Israel, from 1948 till the present ongoing outburst of violence which began in October 2000, that has not been perceived, defined, and conceptualized in terms of the Holocaust. This move, which initially, more than half a century ago, was goal-restricted and relatively purposeful, aimed at constructing Israeli power and consciousness of power out of the total Jewish powerlessness, became in due course, as the Israeli historical situation was further removed in time and circumstances from the Holocaust, a rather devalued cliché. Auschwitz – as the embodiment of the total, ultimate evil – was, and still is, summoned up for military and security issues and political dilemmas which Israeli society has refused to confront, resolve, and pay the price for, thus transmuting Israel into an ahistorical and apolitical twilight zone, where Auschwitz is not a past event but a threatening present and a constant option.

By means of Auschwitz – which has become over the years Israel's main reference in its relations with a world defined repeatedly as anti-Semitic and forever hostile – Israel rendered itself immune to criticism, and impervious to a rational dialogue with the world around her. Furthermore, while insisting, and rightly so, on the unique nature of the Holocaust in an epoch of genocide and vast-scale human catastrophes,<sup>7</sup> Israel, because of its wholesale and out-of-context use of the Holocaust, became a prime example of devaluation of the meaning and enormity of the Holocaust.

The investigation into the presence of the Holocaust and its dead in Israeli discourse, which constitutes the main part of this book, is flanked – as is the short Zionist century<sup>8</sup> – by two other dead individuals, who, unlike the anonymous mass of the Holocaust victims, are the most celebrated and renowned dead in the annals of Israeli Zionism, particularly because of the special circumstances of their death. The book opens

compatible with Ben-Gurion's decision at the time to claim reparations from Germany and his assertion that the State of Israel had the moral right to demand restitution from Germany on behalf of the victims.

<sup>7</sup> "It could be that in our century of genocide and mass criminality . . . the extermination of the Jews of Europe is perceived by many as the ultimate standard of evil, against which all degrees of evil may be measured," writes the historian of the Holocaust Saul Friedländer in his book, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, Vol. I: *The Years of Persecution 1933–1939*, New York 1997, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> I have borrowed the term from the subtitle of Eric Hobsbawm's book, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, London 1994.

with the death in battle of Yosef Trumpeldor on the country's northern border on 1 March 1920, an event which marked the dramatic initiation of the violent conflict over Palestine. It ends with the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli Jew, on 4 November 1995. Both traumatic events – which still reverberate, each in its own way and with its own degree of intensity, in Israel's public space – and their paradigmatic victims, are interpreted in this book not only within the context of the concept of collective memory and its link to nation-building project, but also in their relation – direct (in the case of the Rabin assassination) or oblique (in the case of Trumpeldor) – to the way in which, over the years, the political resource of the Holocaust has been instrumentalized and used in Israel.

The first chapter is a kind of platform for the paradigmatic assumptions examined in the rest of the book. Through three formative historical events in Jewish and Zionist history of the previous century – the battle of Tel-Hai and the death of Trumpeldor (1920), the ghetto uprisings (1943), and the *Exodus* affair (1947) – this chapter examines the discrepancy between the historical dimension of the events and the national memory molded upon them and the way in which historical defeats were transmuted into paragons of triumph and models of identification for a mobilized and combative nation. The mythical and processed story of Tel-Hai and its hero's death served as both a model of identification for the young Jewish ghetto fighters, and – together with Massada's myth – as the diametrical opposite to and reprehension of the death of the Jewish masses during the Holocaust. The two other events examined in the chapter testify to the onset of the process of selective appropriation of the Holocaust and its victims by the Zionist collective in the pre-state period.

The second chapter is devoted to the complex and multi-faceted construct of Holocaust remembering and forgetting in Israel's first decade of statehood. While Israeli society nationalized the memory of the Holocaust – through leaders and spokesmen who had not been “there” – and organized it, within its hegemonic public space, into a ritualized, didactic memory, bearing a national lesson in accord with its vision, it excluded the direct bearers of this memory – some quarter of a million Holocaust survivors who had immigrated to Israel, and altered the country's human landscape. Concurrently, alternative, subversive memories of the disaster<sup>9</sup> were formulated in other sites of the Israeli sphere. Among

<sup>9</sup> On individual and communal commemoration of the Holocaust in the first years of statehood, see Judith Baumel, “‘In Everlasting Memory’: Individual and Communal Holocaust Commemoration in Israel,” in Robert Wistrich and David Ohana (eds.), *The Shaping of Israeli Identity: Myth, Memory and Trauma*, London 1995, pp. 146–170.

these sites, on which the chapter dwells, were Israeli courtrooms, where Holocaust survivors were placed on trial in the fifties and early sixties. These Jews, defined as “collaborators” with the Nazis in the extermination of their brethren, were charged under the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law 1950. Memories of everyday facts of devastation and the routine of horror were recorded in those courtrooms through the defendants’ and witnesses’ testimonies, and the inhuman, utterly exceptional dilemmas of behaviour faced by ordinary people were raised. This was a memory, which the “new and pure” Israel<sup>10</sup> did not want and even nowadays rejects.

The third chapter, earlier versions of which were published in the journals *Representations*<sup>11</sup> and *Theory and Criticism*,<sup>12</sup> investigates the ways in which the organized, specific Holocaust discourse formulated at the trial of Adolf Eichmann (1961) affected the civilian and military Israeli elites and leadership and their perception of the crisis of May–June 1967. It also raises the question of the nature of the “Holocaust anxiety” which has swept Israel before the war and has been part of the complex of considerations leading eventually to the decision to launch a “pre-emptive attack” to prevent a new Holocaust. Finally, this chapter deals with the ways the Holocaust discourse shaped the perception of the swift military victory and intensified the sanctifying process of the territories captured by Israel during the war.

Ben-Gurion’s last great national project, the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the only Nazi to be charged under the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law after a series of Jewish survivors, was one of the most constitutive events in the annals of the state, and contributed to the shaping of the Holocaust memory in western culture. On the other hand, the trial inaugurated an era of critical, secular examination of the numinous event of the Holocaust, and the conduct of human beings, both perpetrators and victims, in the extreme situations it generated. The thinker who, to a large extent, launched this new discussion and formulated its first concepts was Hannah Arendt, the German-Jewish political philosopher, who wrote a series of articles on the trial in the *New Yorker*, later published in book form as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the*

<sup>10</sup> This term was used by the then Attorney General, Haim Cohen, later to become judge in Israel’s Supreme Court, in the context of the Grunewald–Kastner trial, which is discussed in chapters 1 and 2. Quoted by Yehiam Weitz, *Ha’ish She’nirtzah Paamayim: Hayav, Mishpat U’moto shel Dr. Israel Kastner (The Man Who Was Murdered Twice: The Life, Trial and Death of Dr. Israel Kastner)*, Jerusalem 1995, p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> *Representations*, 69, Winter 2000, pp. 96–126.

<sup>12</sup> *Theory and Criticism*, 15, Winter 2000, pp. 19–38 (Hebrew).

*Banality of Evil* (1963).<sup>13</sup> The articles and the book sparked off immediate intense controversy, and the debate raged throughout the sixties – and is still ongoing, though the tone has changed – with the author at the center of the storm. Both Jews and non-Jews took part in that controversy, particularly in the United States and Europe, and less so in Israel, for reasons which are debated in chapter 4. One of the most acrid documents in this polemic was a letter from the renowned Kabbala scholar Gershom Scholem to Arendt, accusing her of lacking “love of Israel” and of hatred of Zionism, a charge which clung to her for years. Arendt’s penetrating reply was never published in Hebrew,<sup>14</sup> although Scholem had assured her that his letter would be published, in whatever forum and language, together with her reply. The fourth chapter is thus devoted to the stormy confrontation between these two formidable figures on the event of the Holocaust, on the trial, and the way in which Israel conducted it. It also draws an intellectual and personal portrait of Arendt, and proposes thereby alternative options (other than the Jewish-Israeli) for Jewish identity in the twentieth century and for the conduct of independently minded, autonomous dissenters, in “dark times” of national unity/unanimity, and mass hysteria. To a large degree, the present book is a homage to Hannah Arendt, whose voice has been silenced in Israel for many years, and whose writings are indispensable for deciphering the twentieth century and the understanding of Israel.

The fifth and last chapter examines the evolvement of Holocaust discourse in Israel from an additional angle and in two central contexts: the building of Israel’s military strength and justification of its use, and the borders of the land. The assimilation of the organized Holocaust memory into the time-honored Zionist polemic concerning the ideal and longed-for borders of the Jewish state, and the representation of Israel’s international border – particularly since the 1967 war and the widespread Jewish settlement in the occupied territories – in terms of the Holocaust, have contributed to the expansion and justification of Israeli occupation of a land inhabited by another people. They also practically usurped the course of development of the State of Israel, expropriating it from its political and historical dimensions; and, at the end of the process which increasingly appears to mark the end of the Zionist century, have led to the assassination of an Israeli prime minister who had been trying to terminate the occupation and withdraw to agreed political borders.

<sup>13</sup> The book appeared in Hebrew translation some forty years later, in 2000.

<sup>14</sup> It exists now, in my translation into Hebrew, in the original version of my book, published in 2002 under the title *Ha’umah Ve’hamavet, Historia Zikaron Politika* (*Death and the Nation: History Memory Politics*).

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The English version of this book is being published in the summer of 2005, almost ten years after the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, and in the midst of a bloody political storm in Israel, caused by yet another dramatic effort to put an end, at least partially, to Israeli occupation and to disengage from some of the occupied territories. These are dark times for Israel. The ten bad years which have elapsed since Rabin's assassination, with which the book concludes, cast a gloomy light on the (wishful) statement of the assassin's judge that "the murder did not achieve its aim [and] has even created momentary rapprochement."<sup>15</sup> They also offer tragic, almost daily evidence of the impact of the active presence of Holocaust images on the lives and death of Israelis and of their neighbors, and on the perceptions of their lives and their deaths. As in the past, events of the present day would appear to demonstrate how the process of sanctification – which is itself a form of devaluation – of the Holocaust, coupled with the concept of holiness of the land, and the harnessing of the living to this two-fold theology, have converted a haven, a home and a homeland into a temple and an everlasting altar.

<sup>15</sup> Edmond Levi, *The State of Israel v. Yigal ben Shlomo Amir*, Severe Criminal File (SCF) (Tel Aviv and Jaffa) 498/95, Sentences, p. 5.



## 1 The sacrificed and the sanctified

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Where memory and national identity meet, there is a grave, there lies death. The killing fields of national ethnic conflicts, the graves of the fallen, are the building blocks of which modern nations are made, out of which the fabric of national sentiment grows. The moment of death for one's country, consecrated and rendered a moment of salvation, along with the unending ritual return to that moment and to its living-dead victim, fuse together the community of death, the national victim-community.<sup>1</sup> In this community, the living appropriate the dead, immortalize them, assign meaning to their deaths as they, the living, see fit, and thereby create the "common city," constituted, according to Jules Michelet,<sup>2</sup> out of the dead and the living, in which the dead serve as the highest authority for the deeds of the living. Ancient graves thus generate processes that create fresh graves. Old death is both the motive and the seal of approval for new death in the service of the nation, and death with death shall hold communion. Defeat in battles, those all too effective wholesale manufacturers of death on the altar of the nation, are a vital component in the creation of national identity, and their stories are threaded through national sagas from end to end, becoming in the process tales of triumph and valor, held up for the instruction of the nation's children-soldiers-victims, who learn from these images and imaginings to want to die.<sup>3</sup>

The tales of three constitutive Zionist defeats are the subject of the present chapter. The battle of Tel-Hai, the ghetto uprisings, and the *Exodus* affair – which occurred, respectively, in 1920, 1943, and 1947 – were transformed soon after they had occurred or even while they were still taking place, into mythological tales of heroism and winning

<sup>1</sup> Jaffee, "The Victim-Community," pp. 230–231.

<sup>2</sup> Jules Michelet, "Histoire du xix siècle," in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris 1982, vol. XXI, p. 268; Roland Barthes (ed.), *Michelet par lui-même*, Bourges 1954, p. 92, quoted in White, *Metahistory*.

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting and influential discussion of the component of death in modern nationalism, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (especially the two last chapters).

narratives. In these three cases, which differ markedly in scale, substance, and the long-term meanings assigned to them, the defeats were transmuted into tales of victory, although meticulous scrutiny of each event unearths no victory in any of them, definitely not in the immediate, concrete context. The fighters of the northern outpost of Tel-Hai were defeated, six of them were killed, and the site was abandoned; from the very outset, the ghetto uprisings had no chance whatsoever of achieving victory, and the Warsaw ghetto uprising, the most large-scale and dramatic among them, actually ended in an act of collective suicide by the surviving rebels. Moreover, "in terms of saving Jewish souls," as the Zionist poet laureate, Nathan Alterman, later put it,<sup>4</sup> the uprisings contributed nothing, and in fact endangered the lives of the other inhabitants of the ghetto; the passengers on the *Exodus*, most of them Holocaust survivors, who, in accordance with the proclaimed goals of the Zionist project, were to be brought clandestinely to Palestine, not only failed to reach shore, but were forced to return to Germany after a long and miserable journey, and arrived in Israel months, or even years, later. All three cases ended either in tragedy or in great chagrin. How is it then that they were changed into what Liddell Hart called "magnificent defeats"? How were they released from their historical bonds, from the materiality of their factual details, to be elevated to the rank of formative events which shape a new ethos and a new type of man?

Seven days after the Zionist-Jewish defeat at Tel-Hai and the death of its hero, Yosef Trumpeldor, in battle there, the Zionist-Revisionist leader, Zeev Jabotinsky, published a eulogy for the brave of the hour in the daily *Ha'aretz*. In this text he cited Trumpeldor's dying words as quoted by the doctor who treated him. "These were the last words of Yosef Trumpeldor as he witnessed his friends' grief at the enormous sacrifice," Jabotinsky wrote:

"it's nothing! It's good to die for our country" . . . "it's nothing." A profound concept, sublime logic and an all-encompassing philosophy are buried in these two words. Events are as nothing when the will prevails. The bitter brings forth sweetness, so long as the will lives on. The will is a living mound (*tel hai*), and as for all the rest – sacrifices, defeats, humiliations – "it's nothing!"

In a quasi-ritual, quasi-biblical requiem for the heroes slain in battle, Jabotinsky alluded to David's lament for Saul and Jonathan, rendering the biblical lament as a blessing, "Ye mountains of Galilee, Tel-Hai and

<sup>4</sup> Dan Laor (ed.), *Nathan Alterman Al Shtei Ha'drakhim, Dapim min Ha'pinkas* (Nathan Alterman's Two Paths, Pages from a Notebook), Tel Aviv 1989, pp. 13–20.