
Memorializing the Holocaust in Israel: Diasporic Encounters

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore interpretations of Israeli museum representations of the Holocaust that prevail among diasporic Jews. I address such questions as how the Holocaust, an event that so marks Jewish contemporary history and identity, is represented in a Jewish state. To what does the movement from the sites of the Holocaust in Europe to the site of its memorialization in Israel gesture? What do diasporic Jews tell us of their visits to these sites of memorialization? I also address the significance of shifting the sites of memorialization from their geographical and historical sites. The perspective on public history used in this paper is concerned with the orientation and set of conceptual balancing acts adopted and applied when reading, interpreting or experiencing forms of public history. It is also focussed on diasporic identifications with a nationalist public and state history. Its reflexive orientation suggests that particularistic and universalistic (or cosmopolitan) histories and interpretations of the Holocaust are possible and even reconcilable.

Keywords: diaspora, Holocaust, identity, Israel, Jews, memorialization, museums, public history

Résumé : Dans cet article, j'explore les interprétations dominantes que font les Juifs de la diaspora des représentations de l'Holocauste dans les musées israéliens. Je m'intéresse notamment à la façon dont est représenté l'Holocauste dans l'État juif, événement qui a profondément marqué l'histoire et l'identité juives contemporaines. Que nous indique le déplacement des sites de l'Holocauste en Europe vers les sites de commémoration en Israël? Que disent les Juifs de la diaspora de leurs visites sur ces lieux de commémoration? Je me penche également sur ce que signifie le déplacement géographique et historique de ces lieux de commémoration. Le présent article adopte une approche de l'histoire publique qui s'attache à cerner l'orientation et l'ensemble des actes de mise en équilibre des concepts choisis et appliqués lorsque des formes de l'histoire publique sont lues, interprétées et ressenties. L'article focalise également sur les façons dont la diaspora s'identifie à une histoire étatique, publique et nationaliste. Par son point de vue réflexif, cet article suggère qu'une pluralité d'histoires et d'interprétations de l'Holocauste, qu'elles soient particulières ou universelles (ou cosmopolites), sont envisageables et même conciliables.

Mots-clés : diaspora, Holocauste, identité, Israël, Juifs, commémoration, musées, histoire publique

As new historiographic approaches have emerged in discussions that integrate Holocaust¹ history with cultural theory, scholars have come to recognize the importance of approaching the “facts” of history by considering questions that focus on the narrative structure in the ways those “facts” are presented as well as the aesthetics and ethics of representing the facts themselves (Barthes 1972; Lang 2000, 2005; Langer 1991; Lewis 1975; Novick 1988; White 1987). A recurring debate in the literature focuses on the dominant historiographic conventions that should be used in representations of the past (Lowenthal 1984; Novick 1988, 1999; White 1987). On one side of the debate there is the view that classical narrative history should be used. On the other side, there is the view that all historical narratives are situated histories, presenting certain interests and thus only partial versions of the past. In anthropology, this larger debate was prompted by Hobsbawm and Ranger's 1983 work, *The Invention of Tradition*. In the case of the history of the Holocaust and Holocaust studies, with few exceptions (e.g., Spiegelman 1973, 1986), literature on the Holocaust has largely remained situated within the established canon of classical narrative history (e.g., Browning 1992; Hilberg 2003; Maier 1997; Marrus 1987). I will argue here that a history and ethnography of the Holocaust should undertake more than an examination of texts in historical context. My argument is that historical understandings of the Holocaust and their texts surface out of a field of conflicting discourses that requires complex intra-textual and trans-textual “readings” or interpretations (Bruner and Gorfain 1984; de Certeau 1984, 1986).

In this paper, I explore diasporic Jews' interpretations of Israeli museum representations of the Holocaust. The essay emerges from a much larger ethnographic study in which I explore what I describe as “diasporic nationalism”: the practices and ideals of North American Jews who form cultural and political attachments and identifications to Israel (Habib 2000, 2004²). In under-

taking research for the larger study, I participated in tours throughout the State of Israel that were organized by a number of Jewish organizations. For the purposes of this paper, I will confine my discussion to an examination of visits to sites where the Holocaust was memorialized. The sites include *Yad Vashem* and the Museum of the Diaspora, where we were exposed to Israeli state-derived representations of the past. Following de Certeau (1984, 1986), I suggest that popular representations of history acquire new significance as the ground upon which our cultural geographies, memories and histories are formulated, articulated, negotiated and lived. At these sites I examine the narratives that are produced as well as their audience's receptions. Several key questions are raised by these visits and will be addressed. First, they raise the question of how an event that so marks Jewish contemporary history and identity is represented to a diasporic audience by a political entity officially defined as a Jewish state. Second, the visits raise the question of the implications of shifting the sites of memorialization from historical sites of the Holocaust in Europe to another site, to Israel. Another question raised by these visits is what do diasporic Jews tell us of their visits to these sites? My primary purpose in this paper is not to *compare* the practices of Holocaust memorialization which has been done, for example, in the work of James Young (1993), though I do make a brief comparison in my conclusion. It is to focus on one specific case of the practice of memorialization among diasporic Jews on tours in Israel. More than any other historical event commemorated in Israel, the Holocaust is represented as that last moment before the Jews would rise again. It is the moment when the Jews relinquished their impotence only to rise from the ashes to proceed into a sovereign and empowered future. More than any other theme, the enduring quality of the Jews' hope for—and recognition of—return to their place in Israel is recognized and memorialized at these sites (Young 1993). I argue that an exploration of reception at such sites will provide the context for understanding some of the many prisms through which diasporic attachments as national histories and identities are refracted and embodied by participants. Before turning to the narratives, I begin with some comments on public history and memorialization.

Public History and Memorialization

In the analyses of official and public history, there appears the resolve to separate the public from the private, the facts of the event from its memorialization and the private, or individual, experiences of these events. Public history and state memorialization are understood to be

practices conducive to making spaces and events into moments of collective significance (Boyarin 1994b; Handelman 1990; Mahler 1997; Young 1993; Zerubavel 1995a, 1995b). The perspective on public history depicted in this paper is not specifically concerned with representational style or aesthetic ideology. It is concerned with an orientation and set of conceptual balancing acts adopted and applied when reading, interpreting or experiencing forms of public history. Furthermore, it is concerned with presenting more than a discussion of the personal experience of memorializing (a) collective past(s). It in fact problematizes diasporic *identifications* with a nationalist public and state history. The reflexive orientation of the analytical framework used suggests that particularistic and universalistic (or cosmopolitan) histories and interpretations of the Holocaust are possible and even reconcilable, despite a range of arguments in scholarly journals that continue to insist on their distinctiveness (see especially the debates on functionalism and particularism).³

The definitions and experiences of what I will call here “memory–history” are somewhere between the public and private aspects of one's life. Memory–history derives from networks of associations within communities and culture, many of which are formal as well as informal.⁴ While the term “history” is usually associated with elite versions of the past, public or popular memorializations of history are cast somewhere in the middle—between formal history and collective memory. Tension appears to exist between the event as such and the memorialization of the event—the *popular representation* of that history—which, in turn, may be distinct from the more intimate and personal reflections of a lived past or personal memory of an event or, as in the following examples, personal experiences of memorialized events.

Considerable debate exists around the specific relationship of history to power in the engagement and writing of popular history. For some, popular history consists primarily of statist inventions (e.g., Ben-Yehuda 1995; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Zerubavel 1995a, 1995b) with public commemorations invented by elites who want to celebrate their own self-glorifying versions of history. While others, such as Handelman (1990) and Karp and Lavine (1991), take a more transactional and dialogical or dialectical form, following either a deconstructive–Deridean–Foucauldian or a Gramscian approach. Still, most analyses are “top-down.”

Following Bruner and Gorfain's dialogical account of their visit to Masada (1984), my approach is informed by an interpretive and ethnographic method. It seeks the meaning that visitors to such sites have given to past events and their place in present practices, rather than

focussing on “false” origins or “authorship.” Employing these interpretive strategies moves my discussion away from what it is that tour participants believe to be true to how they understand that truth to affect the present. I am less interested in establishing the objective or scientific fact about the Holocaust than attempting to discover its interpretive fluidity. In effect, this is an ethnographic reflection on the diasporic encounter with popular representations of the Holocaust and its memorialization. This then is memory–history and these reflections explore the “art-effects” of the past.

When history and memory are examined together, then, a dynamic emerges. Whereas history involves the interaction between civil society and the state, memory involves that experience that intersects the public and the private. Both are dynamic, in a state of a flux or tension. Memory depends on one’s experiences of the past, the everyday and the familiar. This quality may, however, be extended to include something that is less personally familiar and present. Historic commemorations like war memorials could hardly be excluded from the realm of memory for veterans, their families and citizens of the state. Indeed, every national calendar is replete with examples of official holidays—Veteran’s Day, Holocaust Memorial Day, Remembrance Day—when “private” observances are imbued with social and public import and infrastructure.

A central assertion in this essay is that productive opportunities for creating memory–history arise out of that conceptual divide created between structural and institutional power and the individual-in-community—one who recognizes and asserts her group affiliation. This creativity entails both knowing and interpreting the community’s interests, including all of its inherent tensions. Implicit in this is that “good” or “effective” memorial spaces cannot be manufactured on demand, as it were, without attending to coinciding favourable social and political conditions (much as the elitist models suggest). However, I would argue against seeing elite social, political and cultural institutions that present authoritative accounts—such as museums—as separate, or indeed separable, from popular institutions and public culture. In their totality it may also be the case that these institutions do not represent a point of view about public identity as a whole.

At the same time, such spaces of commemoration become public places where history and memory or art-effects are experienced through the very social processes that convert space into place (de Certeau 1984; Massey 1994). In this way, history and memory as experienced in these spaces further reinforce particular personal as well

as communal interpretations of the meanings of the same event—especially when the place in which that moment is commemorated becomes as “historical” as the event itself.

Literature describing Holocaust Memorial sites presents the central characteristics of a given site and thus necessarily represents an “ideal” interpretation of that site (see esp. Hornstein, Levitt and Silberstein 2003; Young 1993). Along several dimensions, these interpretations reveal that the conceptual spaces defining memorial sites are not independent of one another. This is not necessarily a problem but it does tend to exclude any interpretive variability by presenting only the narratives correspondent to a uniquely ideal instance of memory or interpretation or, for that matter, official history. In this paper, I present the dynamism and interpretive tensions that exist rather than focus on the dominant or curator’s interpretation. This is valuable as it moves us into and across conceptual dimensions. As others have argued before me, where history and memory intersect, interpretations change with time as do the interweaving processes by which a sense of place is produced socially (see Boyarin 1994a; Massey 1994).

While there has been a great deal of attention paid to memorial sites (Lilienthal 1997; Lowenthal 1984; Young 1993), less has been written about the narratives that are presented at such sites and the interpretations made by their visitors (Bruner and Gorfain 1984). This has narrowed the field of vision within which the analyses of these sites take form. Significantly, what is lost is an ethnographic analysis of the experience of visiting these sites. Moreover, the role of these findings is not so much that individuals and experiences of such places may differ from that intended by the memorial sites’ designer, architect or curator, but that these ethnographic findings add depth to our understanding of them. The point is to indicate the degree to which the experience is a multidimensional phenomenon that takes place against a richer horizon that previously dominant models of interpretation have not acknowledged.

Representing the Holocaust

The Holocaust has been described as an event so far beyond any ordinary experience, so heinous and so extreme in its outcome, as to have become unrepresentable (Flanzbaum 1999; Lang 2005; Lewin 1993). While it is argued that no narrative technique is adequate to express the horror, there seems a compulsion to testify to the horror as well as to commemorate the dead. As such, numerous books, articles, photo exhibits, films, museum exhibits and memorials make it perhaps the most represented historical event of the 20th century (Lilien-

thal 1997; Novick 1999). There is the impulse to remember and there is also the impulse to forget.

In my research, I found that all the guides and many of the tourists' interpretations of memorial sites emphasized the heroism of the Jews, and those non-Jews who risked their lives in order to assist them. The victimization and destruction of the Jews' communities in Europe were de-emphasized in favour of the Jews' heroism, their resistance, and their ultimate survival. As a nationalist gesture, this redemptive trope ties the foundation and legitimacy of the state of Israel to that "other"—European and Diasporic—moment in the history of the Jews (Boyarin 1994b; Habib 2000, 2004; Kimmerling 2001; Zerubavel 1995a).

Yad Vashem, or the Museum of the Holocaust and Heroism, was set up by a law of the Israeli Knesset in 1953, just five years after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, and before the Kastner and Eichmann trials (Yablonka 2003). One tour guide described what *Yad Vashem* means as follows: "*Yad*...[in Hebrew] is hand. It is also a memorial....It comes from the prophet Isaiah and he simply said, 'I will put on my home, I will put on my cities, and walls, a place and a name that shall never be forsaken, that you should never forget.'"

The tour guide went on to describe the site this way:

Yad Vashem is called the Hill of Remembrance...To the north we have our defenders of the modern State of Israel. On the top is the tomb of the visionary [and founder of modern Zionism] Dr. Theodore Herzl. And to the south is the *Yad Vashem*. Memorial Hill is all one mountain. It's physically connected. It is symbolically connected...This is not a museum. We'll be making that distinction as we go through *Yad Vashem* before we have our ceremony at the Valley of the Destroyed Communities. *Yad Vashem* is our national memorial site for the Holocaust victims and Heroes. It is called the Museum of Holocaust and Heroism. Unlike many Holocaust museums that we have in Washington...*Yad Vashem* is a dynamic experience...The personal part, the personal connections to the Holocaust makes everything important. We can say 6 million, we can say 8 million, we can say 12 million [died]. The numbers are cold. They are things that are difficult to relate to.

Situated on Jerusalem's Mount Herzl, the complex is part of what is called Remembrance Hill, site of not only the museum of the Holocaust and Heroism but of Israel's National Cemetery. Associated with the Museum of the Holocaust and Heroism are the Avenue of the Righteous Gentiles, the Warsaw Ghetto Plaza, the Valley of the Destroyed Communities and the Children's Memorial. It is for this reason that Mount Herzl and Remembrance

Hill are all "physically" and "symbolically connected," as the tour guide explained.

The presentations on the tours focussed on the heroism of those resisting the Nazis and the heroism of those who founded the state after the devastation of so many of their communities in Europe. Often it was implied that this celebration of heroism could only be appreciated in Israel, where Jews are the majority. As we stood along the path leading to the Warsaw Ghetto Plaza, one guide—an Israeli who in his twenties had emigrated to Israel from the United States—explained:

Unlike many Holocaust museums that we have in Washington, Los Angeles, Miami and maybe several in Canada, it has a different outlook.... It is the only place in the world where it is the Jewish people telling the story of what happened to the Jewish people from the Jewish standpoint. It is not a museum in a country where Jews are not the majority.

Implied here is that the museums of the Holocaust outside the state of Israel, in Washington, for example, are very much about the victimization of the Jews in Europe rather than a celebration of their survival and resistance. Our tour guide went on to say: "This is not a graveyard...This is a memorial made to respect the victims and honour the heroes....Poland [and Auschwitz in particular] is a cemetery and a graveyard."

In interpreting the sites for us, our guide emphasized not only the resistance by Jews and non-Jews during the Holocaust era, but the need for Israel, a nascent state in the 1950s, to create its own heroes (see also Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983). For example, at the Warsaw Ghetto Plaza, a guide pointed to two frescoes set into a wall. He explained that one of the frescos, which sunk back into the wall, represented a "weak period" in the Jews' history:

Nothing really honourable about it. Their heads down and that was Israel of the 1950s. The survivors themselves, who were still in mental shock from everything they [had undergone], [and] the younger generation who didn't know anything about their parents from that time period, in a young country looking for new heroes.

The other fresco in the same plaza, with its strong, rounded faces framed by long, flowing hair, represented the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Our guide explained that this fresco was built for the new state, an Israel that had a "Jewish army looking for new myths" in the 1950s (see also Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983; Kimmerling 2001; Segev 1993; Weitz 1997).

As we stood before a tall, stone column in the plaza overlooking Jerusalem, just in front of the Children's Memorial, our guide described its significance as follows:

This is the pillar of heroism. I told you this is Israel. The heroes are important to a young Jewish nation. They still are important to those who escaped from the camps, those who fought in the ghettos, those who blew up crematoriums in the camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau... And this pillar, straight up, represents strength... Again [this is for] a young country. This is a memorial to our heroes from that time period.

At Yad Vashem, the heroes of the period also include non-Jews. There are over six thousand dedication plaques and Carob trees planted, including one for the famous Oscar Schindler, along the Avenue of the Righteous Gentiles. Why Carob trees? Our guide explained: "You cut them down, take out the roots, they grow back. You can't get rid of a Carob tree. It's courage. It's strength." The visit to the Avenue of the Righteous Gentiles is also an opportunity to celebrate the strength of the human spirit—and of non-Jewish heroes at that—rather than the victimization of Jews by non-Jews.

While Jews' and non-Jews' heroism was the focus of the narratives, it was also the case that the Jews were presented as a population uniquely targeted by the Nazis (Goldhagen 1996).⁵ One guide argued that the word "Holocaust" could only refer to what had happened to the Jews. He explained it this way:

Holocaust...is [a] word [that] is sort of thrown around. Cambodian holocaust, a Rwandan holocaust,...ecological holocaust. [But], friends, Holocaust is a set period of time. Holocaust was only [targeted at] one people that were written down for a final death solution. Only one. There were gypsies who were killed and I've had homosexuals on groups and other people...who said, "Listen these people were killed..." True, I'm not playing that down at all, but only one people [and] only one ethnic group had a stamp of death, of annihilation and...that was the Jews...I don't want to cry about it. People say, "Well he's crying. The gypsies? You don't hear about them..." "Twelve million Russians died in the Second World War?" That's not the point. Only the Jews were put on an industrialized death machine, from the minute that [they] were fingered or taken out as a Jew, right up to those last moments. [The] Holocaust happened to the Jews and when you mix it in with tribal warfare, with ethnic cleansing—which are catastrophes and horrible—it loses [the meaning of]...that particular time period and what happened to our people.

While the emphasis was not on the victimization of the Jews per se, it was always about the uniqueness of the Jews' experience as a people. In the case of the Holocaust, it was the Jews who were targeted for annihilation in a way that no other human group has ever been.

Although none of the tour guides gave a detailed account of the war and the resulting Holocaust, (e.g., the rise of the Nazis in Germany or the Jews' displacement and transfer into labour and death camps which were part of the main Museum's exhibition), on one tour, the guide stopped the group as we were about to enter Yad Vashem's Children's Memorial to give some detail of the killing process at Treblinka:

In [one] camp...because the children were holding up the lines into the industrialized death machine, they were taken into a Red Cross building, [which] was a facade. There were nurses outside. There were flags hanging. [It] looked like a beautiful structure and...they were taken behind the building. As the lines went towards the gas chambers...[the children] were immediately killed and buried in large trenches. They were just holding up the production line.

In this way, the murder of the Jews is presented as well-planned and ruthlessly designed, one that not only targeted a human population, but targeted its most vulnerable members, the children. Narratives of Jewish children's experiences during the Holocaust, particularly in the camps, were the only moments when victimization was the essence of the narratives' theme.

The path leading to Yad Vashem's Children's Memorial is lined with what appear to be broken stone pillars which, we are told, have been cut so as to symbolize that no child honoured here ever reached adulthood. Walking through the Children's Memorial Museum is a moving experience. James Young asserts that a museum is designed to be walked through, and experienced in a particular way (1993). Among all the built spaces at Yad Vashem, the Children's Memorial is the one least designed to present "information" or "data." It seems designed for remembrance and unlike any other site on the Hill, built to evoke an emotional response by its visitors. There is little to see but mirrors reflecting hundreds of tiny white candles while a woman's voice calls out the names of those whose lives were lost. It is as if all of the silences of the space are filled with what can only be imagined as the chaos and noise of war. While it takes less than a minute to walk through the memorial, long after leaving the room, the voice continues to haunt. After exiting this site, a number of tourists are so overcome that rather than immediately entering the Museum, they

choose to return to the Warsaw Ghetto Plaza. Some choose to remain in the Plaza, never entering the darkness of the Museum at all.

The main Museum is housed in a large building. In the wall entrance to the museum is a four-panelled wall sculpture designed by Naftali Bezen. A tour guide describes and defines the significance of each of the panels as follows:

The skeletons, the walls of the Ghettos, and the frames of the people locked up. And interesting, a fish! A fish with wings of angels, the head cut off and its mouth open. A silent fish makes noises, an unheard cry with the smoke going up into the sky. Why the fish? I think traditionally fish or fish heads were used with some connection to intelligence... This is the beginning of the Holocaust, the camps. The second picture: Here you see Jewish resistance. You see a hand coming out of... a hole in the ground. Over here with a ladder, trying to get off street level, a fiery arrow which is supposed to have a butt of a rifle. Over here, small weapons, nothing large. The ghettos [are] in flames. All the flames are on the side [of the panel]. Destruction. And of course that figure upside down... crawling through whatever they could get through. The defence and the resistance inside the ghetto. With the opening of the camps you see a bewildered old gentleman inside a boat here. The leg out and the arrow was towards Palestine... They could move the clandestine immigrants over land, whether it be by boat or by vehicles or whatever this thing is here. Building roads through the forests. They escaped from Europe by moving people through the beaches in boats and getting them to what was then British Palestine. Once again, I call this, "from destruction to redemption." Here you see the Shabbat Canvas.

The Holocaust Museum itself houses a permanent exhibit, primarily of photographs and documents from the camps and from Germany during the 1930s and 1940s, chronicling the rise of the German Nazi regime and the resulting carnage. There are also photographs taken by a German soldier who served in the Warsaw Ghetto during the height of the German occupation of the area. The exhibit includes photos of begging, starving, dying and dead ghetto inhabitants. While the sign at the entrance of the exhibit, "Warning and Witness" hints at the ambience created within, what is immediately striking is that the presentation is so very different from the narratives of heroism and resistance presented to visitors prior to entering the Museum itself.

It is in this dark museum that the victimization of the Jews during the Holocaust is made clearest. All of its photos are black and white and the labels stark and plain:

pictures of the dead carried out of the ghettos; Nazi posters; Nazi marches; the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*. Interestingly, this is the only time that tour participants are ever left to wander on their own, without a guide. Once in the museum, the visitors walk around, taking different directions, reading some of the captions, and speaking to one another in hushed tones. There seems little that captures their attention for more than a few minutes. These pictures, these posters, these slogans seem so familiar. Perhaps it is because we have seen them all before (Zelizer 1998).

The Valley of the Destroyed Communities is the last of the areas visited at Yad Vashem. In a courtyard-like area, tour organizers hold a spiritual ceremony that includes the *Kaddish*, in addition to other readings, prayers and sombre classical music. The Valley of the Destroyed Communities is a 2.5-acre site. Large carved sections of Jerusalem stone have been "excavated" to form 107 chambers built of 25 to 30 foot walls. The area is designed to be traversed as a maze though the "map" of Europe and North Africa. Each chamber is engraved with the name of a region or country, and each wall is engraved with the names of those Jewish communities destroyed by the displacement and genocide of the Jews. Most of the walls are covered from top to bottom with the names of the communities. I watched as other tour participants searched for their parents or their own communities, and led by their example, I searched for my own. The number of destroyed communities engraved into those stones astonished us all.

The Valley of the Destroyed Communities is most evocative of what Handelman and Shamgar-Handelman (1997) call the "presence of absence." For here, as each participant stands looking at the walls engraved with lists of villages, towns, and cities, the images of the past are remembered and pieced together and their absence experienced.⁶ The large stones are imbued with meanings of the past as accounts of personal loss, museum images, and official and popular historical accounts are pieced together. One does not walk through an actual community's remains—this is not an archaeological site—yet the experience of reconstructing and commemorating history places that loss in Israel. As participants gather together thousands of miles away from the sites of destruction, Europe's disappearance of the Jews is *performed* in Israel. A territorial destruction is suddenly deterritorialized and reterritorialized in the same instant as the memorial puts the sites of the Holocaust's disaster (the destruction of the Jews' communities) within the territory of the state of Israel, the Jews' newly reconstructed state.

Not all of the tours included a visit to Yad Vashem. As part of the tour of the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, we are taken to a room simply marked "Remember." Our tour guide suggested that: "without understanding the need for such commemorations as Holocaust Remembrance Day, Israelis cannot understand what they are doing here." Labelled a "Memorial Column," the room has enormous, black, iron columns resembling large smokestacks suspended from the ceiling. The tour guide leads us under the columns, and as we follow her, we are instructed to look up and into the "stacks." Though very simple in design, these large, heavy structures represent models of industrial ingenuity (Bauman 1989) while simultaneously evoking a sense of overwhelming danger as they hang heavily from the ceiling. There are no photographs or other documents in the room. Our guide asks a young female participant to read the only label on the wall:

In the year one thousand nine hundred and thirty three of the Christian era, Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany. In his time the Germans and their accomplices murdered six million Jews, among them a million-and-a-half Jewish children. Imprisoned in ghettos, the victims fight [sic] desperately for their lives while the world stood by in silence.

As she reads to us, the participant breaks down and others begin to weep openly. While seemingly unmoved by the participants' emotional responses, at the end of the reading our guide tells us that the last sentence in the inscription is the only condemnation of any kind found in the entire museum: "This is not a second Yad Vashem," the guide tells us, explaining that the "Memorial Column" and the other exhibits in the museum are ultimately about a "nation fighting for its life." In other words, the Jews' identify their historical legacy as one of resistance and revival, and not of victimization.

While the emotional reactions to these sites are likely universal, I want to point out that the majority of participants on these guided tours of Israel were Ashkenaz Jews—Jews most affected by the tragedy in Europe. As such, these sites seemed personally meaningful and resonated for these participants in a way that other sites, for example Israeli war memorials, did not. Interpretations and reflections of experiences of the Holocaust and its memorialization arose in the context of discussing the important role that Israel has to play in contemporary North American Jews' lives. It is to these reflections that I now turn.

Diasporic Encounters

Josie

I met Josie on a tour in 1996. When we met, she was in her mid-thirties, and married with a child. She was working as the community liaison for one of the organizations with which I toured. Josie had become very committed to the organization she was working for and exuded her enthusiasm both on tour and when I met to interview her at her office. For Josie, the experience of memorializing the Holocaust was very important. She had visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington as well as Yad Vashem in Israel. This was how she compared those experiences:

Before that second momentous trip to Israel, the Holocaust Museum opened...in Washington. I went a couple of times with [my spouse] and the first time that I went I ended the trip in the Holocaust Museum,...and [I had] the overwhelming feeling that I wanted to have children. That was like how I felt coming out of the museum. It was a very intense understanding [of] what continuity was about. And then we left and [I] forgot about it. [I] went back to the museum a couple of months later and [I] felt that again after I left and [I] thought "Oh my God that's what I felt the first time I was here." And when I went to Israel and was actually pregnant it...was a closure for me of that feeling. It was a sense of, I understand there, [and]...I understand here what it really means to want to have children...I went to Yad Vashem my first trip and said "Oh, it's an old dusty museum. It's not particularly innovative and I don't understand it." And then when we went back on the second trip, I understood it. I understood what it meant to be at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem versus being at the Holocaust Museum in Washington...You know we grew up in an age where the Holocaust was discussed, there were Holocaust classes at my high school and college...So I feel like in some ways—and that's how I felt when I went to Yad Vashem the first time—I've seen this, I've done this. And since I didn't have the sensibility of Israel, the land...at that time...it wasn't moving. I mean it's always moving but it wasn't particularly moving to me. But that second time it really was. And the second time I went I didn't even go into the museum. We took the group and I sat out in one of the gardens and that was much more meaningful to me.

In Israel, Holocaust memorialization had become sacralized. On Josie's first trip she had noticed the museum's age and shabby appearance but after she had come to understand the meaningfulness of this commemoration for Jews in Israel, these characteristics were no longer important.

As she noted, she already knew the narrative of the Jews' destruction. What became and what remains important is Yad Vashem's location in the place of the Jews' renewal, return and re-birth in Israel. Interestingly then, it was only as her own ties to Israel grew stronger that Josie learned to make a stronger connection between the Holocaust, Jewish continuity and Israel. These ties and commitments were then reflected and literally embodied as she chose to symbolically identify and link her pregnancy with the continuity of the Jewish people, the revivalist theme that emerges with the end of the Holocaust era and with the founding of Israel.

Ozzy

Ozzy was born in Hungary during World War II. He described his trip to Yad Vashem in 1995 as particularly important for it allowed him to reconcile his own family's past with that of Israel's presence. Yad Vashem was not a place to memorialize death but a site that celebrated a liberating humanistic response—one man's ability to overcome racial hatred and altruistically risk his own life in order to save another. At the base of the Carob tree planted in the name of the righteous gentile who saved his family's life, Ozzy recounted the story of his family's rescue.

As the son of Holocaust survivors, Ozzy describes his family's survival as nothing less than "miraculous." Ozzy's father and five of his brothers and brothers-in-law were taken into the Hungarian Work Brigades, though only his father returned after the war. Ozzy tells us that the others had "perished under slave labour conditions" working in the mines at the Ukrainian front. His father, along with 120 other men, managed to avoid the front lines because a colonel in the Hungarian army who was a Hungarian aristocrat, a Christian, and "a gentleman" sent them to do "menial tasks" instead. Although the colonel's actions were discovered and he was court-martialed and sentenced to death for his deeds, the Soviet advance into the area saved his life. With some degree of irony, Ozzy tells us that the colonel was "'rewarded' for his courage by being demoted to night watchman in a shoe factory." Although he was only five or six years old at the time, Ozzy fondly remembers the colonel's visits to his parent's home, and the love shown by them for the man who called those he saved "his boys."

Ozzy was on his third trip to Israel when I met him. One of the reasons Ozzy had come to Israel was to complete a "mission" he had begun two years prior. He had come on this tour, and to Yad Vashem in particular, in order to "finish inscrib[ing] [the names of] the last of the fifty-one people in my family that perished" in the Holocaust.

Ozzy's identification with Israel, though recent, had quickly developed into a deep commitment to the economic and social development of the state.

Prior to his first trip to Israel in 1995, Ozzy recalled that he had "basically no relationship to Israel...Israel [was] a stranger to me other than the fact that there were Jewish people living here and some very distant relatives and some distant friends." Ozzy now describes Israel as the place of his own "awakening" and "fresh start." For him, the key to understanding his family's survival as well as the tragedy they had experienced lay somewhere in Israel. He described his relationship to Israel as follows:

Basically being a descendent of Holocaust survivors, the only identity I had was pain and my mother's denial of who we were all about and what we're all about...Perhaps the positive things that can be happening in Jewish life, that there is a good side to being a Jew, there's things that you can be proud of, things that can be accomplished...[when you] identify yourself a Jew. It was an option that has been given to me and it's an option that I grabbed onto with two hands. I feel...I'm more at peace with myself and [with] others.

Until Ozzy had travelled to Israel, and in particular, to Yad Vashem, Jewish history and identity had been associated with pain and tragedy. Yad Vashem had given him an opportunity to explore and reflect on a place where he could identify with Jewish accomplishments and empowerment. Israel is envisioned as a political space where Jews assert their own power after centuries of subjugation. Ozzy's Holocaust experiences and memorialization form the backdrop for his life's project: to find and secure a place of refuge for Jews.

Jeremy

Jeremy is a 30-something Jewish educator and community leader. We fast became friends on one of the tours and continued to talk long after the research period ended.

One evening after our tour of Yad Vashem, Jeremy invited me to take a late-evening walk through the Old City of Jerusalem where he insisted he was going to give me an "identity" lesson of sorts. He explained that it was the tour of Yad Vashem earlier in the day that prompted this peculiar invitation, which I accepted. We began to walk away from the Wailing Wall plaza and towards the Old City as the sun began to set. We walked in silence for a while, until Jeremy stopped me to say that he couldn't help but get angry each and every time he visited Yad Vashem and particularly the museum; that regardless of what he reads and what he hears about the period, it all comes down to one thing: the Jews have always been hated

and will always be hated. For Jeremy, Yad Vashem teaches that Jerusalem is a place that the Jews must never give up. It secures their survival and is their only place of refuge. Yad Vashem links all Jews to one history, a history that represented by only one other common link, the link to Jerusalem.

Warren and Sarah

I met Sarah and Warren on a tour in 1995. Both were active retirees. When it came time to discuss the trip, Warren and Sarah were excited to do so and invited me to their home one day where, after more than an hour, we had the following exchange about the place of Israel in relation to the Holocaust:

Sarah: You know what if there wasn't an Israel...and another Hitler rears its ugly head...where would we all run to?...It's very easy for another Hitler to come to be. The German Jews didn't think that there'd ever be a person, a dictator who would wipe them out, who would want to wipe them out and they stayed on. Many of them stayed on to get killed....[To Warren:] I'm surprised [you feel the way you do] because I'm still, I'm still young enough to remember what happened.

Warren angrily retorts: But I'm also old enough or young to remember! I remember what happened to my parents for instance. I'm a little kid who was on the Bloor streetcar and we were immigrants. I was just a little kid, oldest of three, and we're going downtown to visit our relatives way out in the east end of Toronto on Bloor Street. My parents were jabbering at each other in Yiddish and some old drunk says: "Hey speak English; you're in an English-speaking country or go back to where you came from" or something like that. That is important to me right, because when I say we don't belong just in Israel, where do we Jews belong? Because we got a homeland and we belong in it? I think we belong to the world...and I want Israel but I think we must all fight for the sense of saying we belong in Canada too. We can belong wherever we want. A lot of these barriers are being broken down...I like the idea of globalization. I just don't like to see a few corporations dominating that globe...The idea that we belong, the world is our oyster, it's ours, it's for everybody. Not just for Jews. The Palestinians...I think they should have their homeland. We need our homeland but that doesn't mean that the Palestinians don't belong in Canada as much as Jews do or anywhere else they choose to go. That is the thing that I think is worth fighting for. But we are...being distracted by it and I think this is why...I started out...being anti-Zionist. I like the Zionist mission but not if it's going to be in terms of the idea of having a homeland. Everybody has to have a place where they can call home, right, but I'd

like to be able to move where I'm not confined to our homes like they're jails. Israel is.

S: You can choose to be a Jew but you can still, you're still vulnerable to anti-Semitism [and]...you can still be subjected to, you can still be enslaved by a Nazi

Warren interjecting: And that will be whether there is or isn't an Israel.

S: By a dictator. You can still be wiped out. You and your people can still be wiped out.

W: You know what, that's true but at the . . .

S: At the whim of some crackpot.

Still, Warren insisted: Anti-Semitism is just one form of racism. What I'm saying is that racism will always be here....to some degree whether there is an Israel or not. My concern is that there should be less of it and my concern is that for certain people Israel means something that is more restrictive than I would like it to be...The racism will...always be there but it shouldn't be the force that it is and to many people, even Jews, the idea of a Palestinian State they say "alright that's a place for the Arabs, get them out of Israel, put them into Palestine" [and there] that goes again. The whole...whether you're Jews or Palestinians...Irish, Scottish or whatever. Yes, you got your homeland, you got Scotland, you got Ireland and we can all live in peace together in Ireland or wherever but you still can go anywhere. The Irish and Scots came to Canada and prospered here and they belong here even though they can still feel that Scotland is their homeland.

S: That's why I think Israel has to exist.

W: Well I'm not denying that, I said yes, but not to say that it's got to be a jail for us.

Here Sarah and Warren debated a fundamental issue of identification with Israel through the prism of history and memory of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. Sarah's fear was palpable. She had not been raised in a Zionist household, she had not been particularly active in any Zionist organizations and had been an educator within a Reform setting—in other words, hers was not an activist's position by any stretch of the imagination. For Sarah, Holocaust history teaches that the Jews will always be in danger, and any trusting relationships with non-Jews are difficult for her to imagine. Warren, on the other hand, goes so far as to "normalize" anti-Semitism and Nazism by placing it within the spectrum of racism and discrimination, rather than imbuing it with the particularity of the Jews' national experience of the world.

Conclusion

The chief limitations of the majority of attempts to theorize the effect of memorial sites is their emphasis on narratives or curatorial design to the virtual exclusion of how those narratives are culturally mediated or interpreted by their audiences. An attitude of scorn towards North American Jewish travel to Israel is popular among Jewish community members, especially towards the form of the organized guided tour. During my fieldwork, I often heard people in the Jewish community in North America decry the commodification of packaged tours and yet they looked back nostalgically upon their own travel experiences. If I had not travelled along with them, if I had only looked at the various travel itineraries, if I had only asked those I met “what do you think of such tours?” I too might have regarded these forms of travel as what sociologist Dean MacCannell calls a form of “alienated leisure” (1976, 1992). Yet, this critical perspective ignores the fact that the guided tour to Israel embodies the very elements of what “authentic” tourism seeks to accomplish: pursuing one’s “roots,” personal discovery, and even, at times, self-transformation.

In his work on Israeli educational youth tours, anthropologist Jackie Feldman writes: “The voyage to Poland [to visit Holocaust memorial sites] is not a study trip, but a rite of transformation designed to transmit understanding, not through intellectual analysis, but through identifications, embodiment and experience.” Further, Feldman writes:

The pilgrimage is constructed as a ritual reenactment of survival. The students leave the life world, the Land of Israel, for Poland, the land of the Shoah, where they ‘witness’ the destruction of the Jews of the Exile. But there they survive, to return with the triumphant survivor to Israel.... The students do not experience these transformations as biological descendants of survivors. Rather, *it is in their capacity as members and future defenders of the state of Israel that they become spiritual heirs to the legacy of the now-dead exilic past.* [Schorsch and Feldman 2001:169, emphasis added]

In another article, Feldman writes, “by experiencing what is not Israeli as mortally dangerous, Israel takes on mythical proportions, as the only place where Jews are secure. The Jewish people become the locus of identification by experiencing non-Jews as anti-Semites. Thus, a picture of the world is created in which impermeable boundaries separate ‘us’ from ‘them’” (2002:84). Further, Feldman writes that in the organization of the tours, “the Diaspora is portrayed as a place of hostile, strange surroundings, wandering and the inevitable end” (2002:95).

As such, Israeli youth experiences focus on “return” to Israel while those narratives presented to diaspora Jews emphasize survival. This is a necessary shift since most diaspora Jews will never take the step of moving to Israel. Thus the narrations of return are necessarily communal-national and not individual: the nation has returned to Israel even if every individual Jew has not.

The narratives on tour may appear to be neutral sources of historical truth but they have, and present, values: the marking of the land of Israel and the political and historical commentaries that narrate that marking (Zerubavel 1995a). Whatever the narration, each constructs a spectator whose position is located within a national history. Despite being overlaid with the gloss of objectivity gleaned from its status as “history,” its function is to induce feeling, thought, and action. As such, it seems to me that the tour itself is much more performative than any simple “reading” of a narrative form (e.g., books, newspaper and magazine articles).

In shifting the analysis from the site itself to its visitors, we begin to see the dynamic relationship of the object of vision to the subject of action, of view to viewer, and the degree to which the tour forms invoke performance within their audiences as much as within their objects. If performance and action are at the centre of tour practices then what is being projected is an ethnographic scene—an encounter in which observation becomes participation.

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Acknowledgments

I extend my gratitude to all of the participants in this study, who welcomed me on the tours and into their lives. They remain anonymous as a condition of research board ethical guidelines. I also thank Harvey Feit, Louis Greenspan and Ellen Badone who guided me through the initial stages of this research; Will Coleman for his comments on the paper in its first incarnation; Ellen Judd and Winnie Lem for encouraging me to submit to *Anthropologica*; Stephen Cain, Andrew Lyons, Harriet Lyons, Jim Novak and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions. All errors and omissions are my own.

Notes

- 1 Please note that in Israel, the Holocaust is often referred to as the Shoah. This distinction is rarely made in North American literature about the period. See Novick 1999; Segev 1993.

- 2 The field study was carried out in the mid to late 1990s. For the broader case, see Habib, 2000, 2004. Here I use some of the same ethnographic data to elaborate on the uses of history, the role of memory and the Holocaust.
- 3 For the broader argument from a sociological perspective, see especially Levy and Sznajder's *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, 2006.
- 4 My thinking here has been informed by Halbwach's distinction between social memory and collective memory (1980).
- 5 Heated discussions about the centrality of the role of anti-Semitism in the Holocaust have been the backdrop to a range of historical debates. One such debate arose in 1996 with the publication of Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. For a discussion of this debate see also Goldhagen 1998; Riemer and Markovits 1998; Shatz 1998.
- 6 This site at Yad Vashem led some participants to a kiosk at the site's entranceway to gather additional information about their family and friends from the museum's genealogical record holdings.

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