



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE מכון
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The Politics of Memory: Jewish Values and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Orange County iEngage Initiative

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The Shalom Hartman Institute is one of the leading centers of Jewish thought and education, serving Israel and North America. Our mission is to strengthen Jewish peoplehood, identity and pluralism and ensure that Judaism is a compelling force for good in the 21st century.

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I. Personal Memory

1. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, 1962, p. 3

The basic hypotheses I wish to state are as follows:

1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance.
2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance.

2. Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*, Columbia University Press, 2015, p. 93

Discerning truths and transmitting facts are both important aspects of world building; they help to establish a shared world and set forth standards of judgment by which we hold ourselves and others accountable. But if we think that facts and truths fill out the vessel of communication, or that when we communicate facts and truths transparent understanding always ensues, we will not be able to explain why conflicting facts and truths always emerge – unless we content ourselves with saying that wherever truths conflict, only one of them is true. In many situations – especially those of postconflict transition and reconciliation – meaningful experience will not bear out that conclusion. Indeed, every reconciliation rests on a fragile consensus – a new definition of past, present, and future – that can be won only slowly, painfully, and cooperatively and will never succeed in erasing or redefining every resistant narrative. In every transitional situation, people make hard choices about where to compromise and where to hold fast to principles of justice or recovery. Some voices get heard and others do not. Individual victims, whether or not they feel heard, will also face the inevitable disparities between what is good for the group and what is good for the self. And it won't only be calculations of rational self-interest governing how these changes come into being. People will be swept along by what Stewart calls "rogue intensities": "all the lived, yet unassimilated, impacts of things, all the fragments of experience left hanging. Everything left unframed by the stories of what makes a life pulses at the edges of things. All the excesses and extra effects unwittingly propagated by plans and projects and routines of all kinds surge, experiment, meander. They pull things in their wake." Beings who communicate, as we do, through various channels, many of them neither willed nor fully controllable, will need rules, reasoned discourse, and formal equality to keep things fair. But they will need a lot more than that.

II. Collective Memory

3. Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, University of Washington Press, 1982, p. 25

As for the sages themselves – they salvaged what they felt to be relevant to them, and that meant, in effect, what was relevant to the ongoing religious and communal (hence also the “national”) life of the Jewish people...True, they also ignored the battles of the Maccabees in favor of the cruse of oil that burned for eight days, but their recognition of this particular miracle should not be passed over lightly. Hanukkah alone, be it noted, was a post-Biblical Jewish holiday, and the miracle, unlike others, did not have behind it the weight of Biblical authority. The very acceptance of such a miracle was therefore a reaffirmation of faith in the continuing intervention of God in history. Indeed, we may well ponder the audacity with which the Rabbis fixed the formal Hanukkah benediction as: “Blessed be Thou O Lord our God...*who has commanded us* to kindle the Hanukkah light.”

4. Hannah Arendt, *The Eichmann Case and the Germans: An Interview with Thilo Koch*, *The Jewish Writings*, Schocken Books, 2007, pp. 487-488

Koch: And is that why you think it is so important to remove Eichmann and the Eichmann case from the realm of the demonic?

Arendt: In my opinion I haven't done that with Eichmann, he took care of that himself, and so fundamentally that it bordered on truly comical. I merely wanted to point out what being “demonic” is all about when you get a close look at it. I learned a good many things myself from all this, and in fact I think it might be important if others were to learn from it as well. For instance, the idea that evil is demonic, which, moreover, sees its precedence in the tale of the fallen angel Lucifer, is extraordinarily appealing to people. (Perhaps you recall the lines from Stefan George's poem “The Culprit”: “Who never has measured the spot where the dagger should pierce, how paltry his life, how frail the train of his thought.”) Precisely because these criminals were not driven by the evil and murderous motives that we're familiar with – they murdered not to murder, but simply as a part of their career – it seemed only too obvious to us all that we need to demonize the catastrophe in order to find some historical meaning in it. And I admit, it is easier to bear the thought that the victim is the victim of the devil in human disguise – or as the prosecutor in the Eichmann trial put it, of a historical principle stretching from Pharaoh to Haman – the victim of a metaphysical principle, rather than the victim of some average man on the street who is not even crazy or particularly evil. What all of us cannot cope with about the recent past is not the number of victims, but the shabbiness of these mass murderers lacking any sense of guilt and the mindless shoddiness of their so-called ideals. “Our idealism was abused” is a statement one hears not infrequently from former Nazis who have now had second thoughts. Yes, indeed, but what a shoddy affair that idealism had always been.

5. Ruth R. Wisse, *How Not to Remember & How Not to Forget*, *Commentary Magazine*, Jan. 1, 2008

Two approaches to memorializing the Holocaust might have yielded a worthier universal lesson. Were the “story” told from a Jewish perspective, it could function like the Passover text I described above. Jews, it might say, lived in Europe for over two millennia in such and such places, conducting themselves in such and such ways and achieving such and such things. In the late 19th century, a period of emerging nation-states, they too began their recovery of their national homeland, then under the rule of the Ottoman empire and later of Great Britain. But before they could secure their place of refuge, catastrophe overtook them in such and such a fashion and subjected them to such and such horrors; at the lowest point in European civilization, Jews were almost wiped off the continent. During the war, they responded in such and such ways. After it, they emerged with even greater national resolve.

This is the way I myself experienced my life as a Jew, and the way I would have preferred it to be known by others.

A second approach might be subsumed under the motto “Never Again.” Here the emphasis would fall on the political process through which the Holocaust came about. Thus: anti-Semitism, an anti-liberal, anti-Jewish ideology and political movement, began in Germany in the 1870’s, tapping sources in Christian and other anti-Jewish notions from the European past. In the 1920’s, under such and such conditions, Hitler grabbed hold of this ideology and, in the name of protecting the institutions of society from the Jews, imposed his total control over those same institutions. The spread of anti-Semitism in many other countries of Europe created a common political bond among nations otherwise opposed to Hitler’s aggressive aims. The war against the Jews escalated, blended into, and was subsumed by the war of the Third Reich.

One key element in such an exhibit would be the wartime alliance struck between Adolf Hitler and the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, marking the point at which modern European anti-Semitism effected its entry into the Middle East. The last part of the exhibit would then move forward to today, illustrating how anti-liberal and anti-Jewish ideologies and movements continued to function, with variations, throughout the contemporary Arab and Muslim world. So documented, “Never Again” would be grasped not as some quasi-religious invocation but rather as simple political necessity, founded on the careful weighing of historical precedent and performance.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the largest and most important of such structures outside Israel, follows neither of these approaches. Its representation of the Jewish catastrophe is like a Passover Haggadah stuck in the section on slavery, recounting in great detail how many infant Jewish boys were drowned in the Nile, how many slaves were killed while building the cities of Pithom and Rameses, what cruelties were practiced against Jewish women, and so forth. In this dark telling, Jews are rescued in the end—by Americans, mostly—but there is no Jewish national resurgence, no emphasis on Jewish sovereignty, resilience, or self-defense. The theme song is not Hatikvah—the Jewish hope—but, if anything, “Over There,”

George M. Cohan's immortal American song from World War I, with its thrilling promise that "the Yanks are coming." Indeed, they came. Along the way, unfortunately, the effect of the museum's historical reconstruction of the Jewish side of the story is to make American visitors more comfortable with the idea of Jewish corpses than with the idea either of great rabbis or of Israeli soldiers.

Several years ago I watched an interview on public television with one of the museum's curators. When the phone lines were opened to viewers, one of the first to call was a self-identified Arab who asked why the museum did not document the "Israeli holocaust of the Palestinians." Looking out at the camera, the curator replied: "The museum only covers the years 1933-1945." She not only allowed the slander of Israel to go unchallenged but, like the museum itself, abrogated the responsibility to demonstrate the replicable features of anti-Semitism that had inspired not only her Arab caller but millions upon millions like him. That the museum "only covers the years 1933-1945" is precisely its moral and educational undoing.

When I was growing up I was certain that the worst was behind us, not because political evil had disappeared from the earth but because, through dreadful experience, Jews, Americans, and even Europeans had necessarily learned to guard against it. I believed that memorializing meant learning from history, and that the lessons of history were self-evident. I never imagined that, in the manner of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, one could re-present history in such a way as to resurrect its most vicious patterns, bringing about yet another generation of perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders, and potential victims. I never imagined the possibility that political forces in the world could threaten a catastrophe as great as the one the museum now records.

III. Political Difference and Moral Community

6. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, Pantheon Books, 2012, p. 317

Morality binds and blinds. This is not just something that happens to people on the other side. We all get sucked into tribal moral communities. We circle around sacred values and then share post hoc arguments about why we are so right and they are so wrong. We think the other side is blind to truth, reason, science, and common sense, but in fact everyone goes blind when talking about their sacred objects.

If you want to understand another group, follow the sacredness. As a first step, think about [their] moral foundations, and try to figure out which one or two are carrying the most weight in a particular controversy. And if you really want to open your mind, open your heart first. If you can have at least one friendly interaction with a member of the “other” group, you’ll find it far easier to listen to what they’re saying, and maybe even see a controversial issue in a new light. You may not agree, but you’ll probably shift from Manichaean disagreement to a more respectful and constructive ying-yang disagreement.

7. Tosefta Sotah 7:12

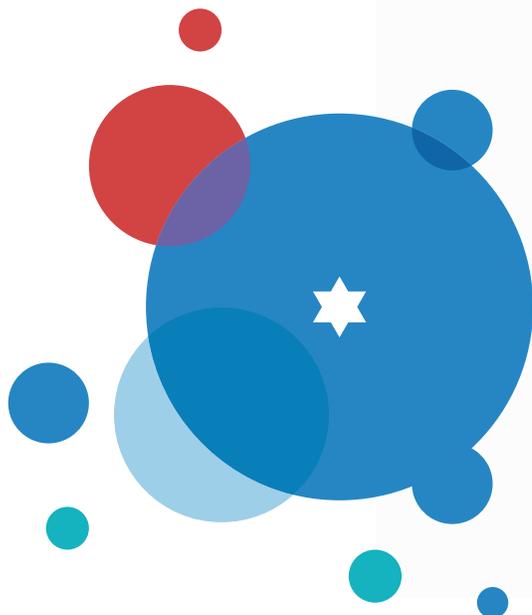
שמא יאמר אדם בדעתו, הואיל ובית שמאי מטמין ובית הלל מטהרין, איש פלוני אוסר ואיש פלוני מתיר, למה אני למד תורה מעתה. תלמוד לומר דברים, הדברים, אלה הדברים. כל הדברים נתנו מרועה אחד, כלם אל אחד בראו, פרנס אחד נתנו, רבון כל המעשים ברוך הוא אמרו. אף אתה עשה לבך חדרי חדרים והכניס בה דברי בית שמאי ודברי בית הלל, דברי המטמאין ודברי המטהרין.

A person might think, “Since the House of Shammai declares ‘unclean’ and the House of Hillel ‘clean,’ one person prohibits and another permits — how, then, can I learn?” Scripture teaches, “words,” “the words,” “these are the words” (Exodus 19:6). All the words have been given by a single Shepherd, one God created them, one provider gave them, the Lord of all deeds, blessed be He, has spoken them. So make yourself a heart of many rooms, and bring into it the words of the House of Shammai and the words of the House of Hillel, the words of those who declare unclean and the words of those who declare clean.

8. Song of Songs Rabba 2:5 (3)

בְּשִׁלְפֵי הַשְּׂמֵד נִתְּכַנְסוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ לְאוֹשָׁא וְאֵלּוּ הֵן : רַבִּי יְהוּדָה וְרַבִּי נְחֵמְיָה, רַבִּי מֵאִיר וְרַבִּי יוֹסִי וְרַבִּי שְׂמַעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחָאִי וְרַבִּי אֶלְיעֶזֶר בֶּן שֵׁל רַבִּי יוֹסִי הַגָּלִילִי וְרַבִּי אֶלְיעֶזֶר בֶּן יַעֲקֹב. שְׁלַחוּ אֶצְל זְקֵנֵי הַגָּלִיל וְאָמְרוּ כֹּל מִי שֶׁהוּא לָמַד יָבֹא וְלָמַד, וְכֹל מִי שֶׁאִינוּ לָמַד יָבֹא וְלָמַד. נִתְּכַנְסוּ וְלָמְדוּ וְעָשׂוּ כֹּל צְרֻכֵיהֶן.

At the end of the persecution, our rabbis gathered in Usha, and these were they: Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nehemia, Rabbi Meir, and Rabbi Yosi, and Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, and Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yosi HaGalili, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov. They sent to the house of the Elders of the Galilee and said, “All who have already taught, let them come and teach, and all who have not yet studied, let them come and study.” They gathered together and learned and met all their needs.



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