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The Representation of the Holocaust in Israeli Society and Its Implications on Conceptions of Democracy and Human Rights of “Others”

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Abstract: Much has been written about the representation of the Holocaust in Israel, but there is less awareness to its effects on attitudes toward democracy and the universal meaning of human rights. Representations of the Holocaust by Israeli socialization agents usually focus on hatred toward Jews, disregarding the broader theoretical-ideological context. This tendency is typical to groups that suffered such severe traumas in their past. Nonetheless, we argue that it does not allow a healing process and fosters a reduced perspective on the essential principles of democracy. It also particularizes the concept of human rights, thus excluding those of “others,” such as Palestinians. We further argue that a more extensive perspective on the Holocaust, which includes an understanding of Nazism within an ideological mosaic that denies democratic principles and humanity, may strengthen Israelis’ identification with democratic principles and universal human rights. We analyze the different approaches to teaching the Holocaust in the context of the collective trauma and explore their impact on society’s sense of victimhood and moral injury. The paper ends with a suggestion for further research that will explore the possibility that a school curriculum that emphasizes universal lessons will enable the memorialization of the Holocaust without succumbing to nationalistic perceptions.

Keywords: Holocaust studies; collective memory; democracy; human rights; collective trauma; antisemitism; education; Israel–Palestinian conflict



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1. Preface

According to philosopher Karl Mannheim, the characteristics of the liberal Enlightenment were the following: the “social contract,” the “inalienable rights of man,” “liberal rationalism which aims to conduct any inquiry on the basis of reason,” (Mannheim 1986, pp. 107–8), and “the principle of equality upon which the concept of freedom rests” (Mannheim 1986, pp. 84, 91, 102). Hannah Arendt, in her analysis of antisemitism, states the following: “The old manipulators of logic were the concern of the philosopher, whereas the modern manipulators of facts stand in the way of the historians. For history itself is destroyed, and its comprehensibility—based upon the fact that it is enacted by men and therefore can be understood by men—is in danger” (Arendt 1966, p. 9).

Accordingly, we claim that teaching the Holocaust by means of the traditional-particularistic blinds young generations to the fact that it was the very destruction of these ideas that enabled the extermination of Jews. In addition, evading the discussion of the synergy between extreme nationalism, compromising democratic values and the principle of indivisible human rights on the one hand, and the genocide of the Jews and other groups on the other, poses the danger of encouraging a sense of victimhood and moral superiority among Israelis. This sense of victimhood and moral superiority leads, in turn, to the acceptance of oppressive, undemocratic policies against the Palestinians as morally permissible, based on the belief that Israeli Jews are under constant, ongoing threat, and that such actions necessary self-defense. Thus, this approach not only destroys

the potential ability of young people to understand painful truths, but also dangerously clouds their ability to recognize the threats inherent in the collapse of human rights and democracy itself.

This article analyzes the dangerous consequences of the dominant approach to the lessons of the Holocaust for the views of Israelis and explores the ways in which it endangers the humanistic attitudes of Israelis in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It presents the manner in which the traditional approach, which prevails among many historians and in the Jewish Israeli collective memory, is expressed manipulatively in politicians' speeches to justify military actions that perpetuate the conflict between the two nations.

We begin with a review of the traditional approach, noting our unique contribution to its analysis. In the second section, we analyze the context-oriented approach as an alternative way of remembering the Holocaust. The third section discusses the impact of the traditional (long-term) approach and examines how it breeds a mindset of victimhood and a sense of moral superiority. Next, we turn to an analysis of the impact of the long-term approach on society's development of a sense of victimhood and moral superiority. The sixth section discusses the relationship between history and collective memory and their relations with the two approaches. The paper concludes with a suggestion for further research on the possibility that the contextual approach may strengthen Israelis' identification with democratic principles and universal human rights.

2. Different Approaches to the Holocaust

The research literature on the Holocaust in the Israeli consciousness usually points to three major approaches, which are referred to by various terms, and the interpretation given to them is similar, but not identical (see [Naveh 2017](#); [Feldman 2018](#)). The first is the particularistic approach, which focuses exclusively on Jewish suffering and views the extermination of the Jews as the primary goal of National Socialist policy. We refer here to this approach as the traditional approach (expressed in [Bauer 1978](#)). Of the other approaches, which are critical of the first, we chose to relate to the context-oriented approach ([Feldman 2018](#)) (sometimes called the universal approach) ([Naveh 2017](#)). This approach aims to draw alternative, universalistic lessons from the Holocaust, thus requiring, inter alia, the inclusion of victims from other collectives in the process of studying the Holocaust and an understanding of the conceptual structures and thinking processes that enabled the rise and success of the Nazi regime (see [Wolff 2019](#), for an overview of the discourse between intellectuals identified with the universal approach and their opponents).

There are at least two more approaches: forgetting and post-Zionism. We will not address these here, because although they stem from different motivations, they are both "non-processing" approaches, as Yehuda Elkana, renowned Israeli historian and philosopher, discusses in his canonical article "In Favor of Forgetting" ([Elkana 1988](#)).¹ Elkana claims that, while history and collective memory are inseparable from people's cultures, the past should never determine the nation's fate or future. In his view, the upbringing of young Israelis on the ethos of the Holocaust threatens democracy and unintentionally encourages hate towards the Palestinians.

This call to "forget" ([Elkana 1988](#)), we claim, does not ultimately bring about the results it seeks, as its complaint against the manipulation of logic leads to a rejection of the option of learning from history, thus creating a vacuum in which further manipulations can take place. Moreover, as research on collective memory clearly shows, not only is "forgetting" impossible (see [Volkan 2006](#); [David and Bar-Tal 2009](#); [Keynan 2020](#)),² but attempts to forget may have the opposite effect, creating a counter-memory that preserves and reinforces the power of what was meant to be forgotten (see [Gutman 2017](#); [Keynan 2015a](#)). In contrast, we claim that from the study of the Holocaust one can learn about the importance of equal civil rights for minorities and the ways in which the "inalienable rights" of man are threatened when nationalism becomes a sublime value and when the characteristics and values of liberal democracy are trampled.

Our main argument is that the traditional approach minimizes both the suffering of non-Jewish collectives that were also victims of Nazism and other modern regimes (as scholars have previously claimed) (Wolff 2019) and the role that extreme nationalism and the war against democracy and liberal-democratic values played in the ideology of National Socialism.

3. The Traditionalist Attitude to the Holocaust

The traditional perspective on antisemitism, also called *longue durée* (long-term), a concept proposed by Reinhard Rürup (see Rürup 1975, p. 115), describes antisemitism and the persecution of Jews throughout history as almost independent of other circumstances. Thus, it describes Jewish history as a series of disasters anchored in the permanent hostility of Gentiles against Jews that has reared its head periodically in various forms since the destruction of the Second Temple until the renewal of Jewish life in the State of Israel, known as the *tkuma* (see Baer 1980; Dinur [1958] 1972). Its weakness, critical scholars claim, lies in three main points: ignoring Jewish achievements and times of prosperity (see Baron 1928, 1963); separating the Holocaust and modern antisemitism from the contemporary context; and considering Jewish history from the perspective of a “longer time frame” or as “supra-epochal” (see Katz 1993).³ In his book *A social and religious history of the Jews* (Baron 1937 in Teller 2014), an acclaimed Jewish historian studying the middle ages states: “It would be a mistake . . . to believe that hatred was the constant keynote of Judeo-Christian relations, even in Germany or Italy. It is in the nature of historical records to transmit to posterity the memory of extraordinary events, rather than of the ordinary flow of life. A community that lived in peace for decades may have given the medieval chronicler no motive to mention it, until a sudden outbreak of popular violence, *lasting a few days* [emphasis added], attracted widespread attention. . . . the history of the Jewish people among the Gentiles, even in medieval Europe, must consist of more than stories of sanguinary clashes of governmental expulsions.” This view has had supporters and opponents. Among the opponents, it is noteworthy that Teller (2014) claims that Baron, who focused on the pre-emancipation era, contrasted “ordinary flow of life” to “extraordinary events”, to emphasize that, while the Jews suffered short-term attacks, most of the time they had good relations with their neighbors and were able to flourish. Teller criticizes this view, claiming that it ignores the enormous effect of each “short” attack, like the expulsions from Spain (1492); Portugal (1497); Vienna (1669/70), and more, and the murderous massacres such as Chmielnicki and others. Thus, the violent attacks on the Jews of Spain in 1391, which indeed lasted “only” a few months, Teller says, set about a string of persecutions that effected daily life of Spanish Jews for over a century.

Baron also ignores, Teller continues, the decades-long impact on the expelled Jewish communities who lost loved ones, were led to impoverishment, were subject to physical suffering and dangers, and carried with them severe mental traumas. After re-analyzing Baron’s argument, Teller (2014) concludes that while it is correct that the Jewish history should be embedded in a broader context, “the dichotomy Baron drew between normalcy and persecution, which allowed him to downplay the significance of violence and anti-semitism as factors in the historical process, was too sharp” (Teller 2014, p. 439).

Proponents of this approach view the Holocaust as a natural outcome of the long-term hatred toward the Jews, yet another, albeit significantly more dreadful, chapter in the history of anti-Jewish massacres that have taken place since ancient times. Echoes of this view can be found in today’s academic and public writing. One example is the argument that antisemitism and antizionism are the same, and that antisemitism in Germany still flourishes, albeit in a different form (Porat 2003; Urban 2004).

On the other hand, critics of this view claim that this linear presentation blurs the threat of Nazism to humanity as a whole, as it frames the total abolition of human rights, democracy, and humanism as horrifying yet “simple” racial hatred of the Jews. In addition, it influences in this manner the Israeli consciousness and politically shapes and manipulates the Israeli interpretation.

The emphasis on the *longue durée* of cultural antisemitism is apparent in ultra-intentionalist historian Daniel Goldhagen's depiction of the German people in his controversial book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (Goldhagen 1996). In this book, Goldhagen describes the Holocaust as the culmination of obsessive and "eliminationist [German] antisemitism" that had been developing for hundreds of years, fostered by Christianity, and secularized in the modern age. In contrast, Ulrich Herbert asserts that the presentation of antisemitism as an "obsession" removes the concept from its historical and political context and thus does not enable general historical and political conclusions to be drawn (Herbert 1998; Ochberg and Shay 2012). Herbert's critique has substantial support among a wide range of historians who seek to locate the foundations of modern antisemitism and the success of National Socialism in Germany not necessarily in a long-standing hatred of Jews, but rather in broader ethical and sociopolitical phenomena.

4. The Context-Oriented Approach

As opposed to the proponents of the long-term perspective, historians who are considered advocates of the context-oriented approach emphasize the overall anti-liberal and anti-humanist foundations of modern antisemitism, as well as the nationalist ideology which was the anchor of antisemitism in Germany since the late nineteenth century. This school of thought is supported not only by scholars worldwide (see, e.g., Massing 1949; Sterling 1956; Pulzer 1964, 1992, 2004; Stern 1965; Rürup 1975, pp. 74, 75, 81; Mosse 1980; Rürup 1981, pp. 49, 52, 53; Strauss 1993; Benz 2004; Benz et al. 2007), but also by Jewish Israeli historians, as we show below. Despite theoretical differences between them and the range of different emphases among leading Israeli researchers of antisemitism since the 1970s, considerable number of scholars agree that the rejection of liberal democracy played a major role in Nazi ideology and that this turn against liberal democratic tenets had been present in Germany since the nineteenth century, providing an ideational pillar for conservative and anti-Semitic political parties.

Antisemitism was a pervasive presence in the conservative right in Germany and also had an effect on other parts of the political spectrum. It was a central motif, which Shulamit Volkov presents as a "cultural code" of the conservative right in Germany toward the end of the nineteenth century (Volkov 2006, pp. 153, 154) (Her description is confirmed by Christopher Browning in his epilogue to the Hebrew translation of his book *Ordinary Men* (Browning 2006)).

Studies examining Germany in the nineteenth century and through the fall of the Weimar Republic confirm the diagnosis that the same cultural code that defined the Conservative wing in Germany played a major role in the ultimate fall of the Young Republic.

In his research, historian Uriel Tal shows how the liberal and progressive factions present in the nineteenth century came under attack from resurgent conservative elements which based their opposition to the emancipation of the Jews on a rejection of the principles of equality and liberty and a declared preference for the "German people." This viewpoint, Tal states, was explicitly expressed in the propaganda of the Conservative Party (Deutsche Konservative) founded in 1878, and by the party of the Farmers' League (Bund der Landwirte), which was established in 1893. Both presented this point of view in the elections to the Reichstag of the years 1887, 1893, 1898, and 1907. Their slogan was: "We want to see the existence and the empowerment of a Christian worldview among the people and in the state, and we [want to] see its realization in the legislation, the administration, the education, in the organization of the public and in the general morality; all these are a necessary condition for the development of the Reich and the state both together." It was on the basis of this common denominator that Tal shows how in 1892—at the Tivoli anti-Semitic congress convened at the Tivoli Brauhaus in Berlin—the Conservative Party declared anti-Semitism as a formal part of its political program (Tal 1962, pp. 107–8).

Moshe Zimmermann describes how the Volk version of the nationalist "political atmosphere", as manifested by the German masses, influenced and dominated the courts of the Weimar Republic, eventually completely crushing democracy (Zimmermann 1998,

p. 78). Attempts by liberals such as Otto Wels from the Social-Democrat Party or Justice Minister Gustav Radbruch to defend the Republic against conservative intellectuals such as Karl Schmidt were doomed to failure. The Weimar Constitution was indeed liberal and social in its orientation, but the judiciary adhered to conservative positions and overlooked the importance of right-wing terror. Thus, for example, the participants in the attempted putsch of General Kapp (1920) were pardoned while the left-wing activists involved in the uprising of 1919 remained in prison. The lax attitude to extreme right-wing violence was tantamount to what Zimmermann calls “blindness in the right eye.” The same attitude led to the lenient treatment of the man who assassinated the social democrat Kurt Eisner (February 1919) and the acquittal by a jury of the murderer of the Centrum party politician Matthias Erzberger (1921). The murder of Walter Rathenau in June 1922 raised awareness of the bias in the judicial system and the prevailing nationalist mindset among the public. However, it did not alter this trend, which continued to intensify for another 11 years until the final elimination of the Weimar democracy and the rise of the National-Socialist regime (Zimmermann 1998).

Hitler’s war against democracy was reflected in his second book, an unpublished sequel to *Mein Kampf* authored in 1928. In this book, Hitler insisted that he loved the people but hated the hegemonic political majority, which he did not believe was attempting to improve the welfare and happiness of the Volk. During his trial following the Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler repeatedly asserted that all his actions were motivated by his interest in the progress of his people and his struggle against those political and social elements that sought its destruction. Thus, he regarded himself as a true patriot willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the collective (Wolff 2015, p. 93).

Saul Friedländer, who presents the primacy of the political motif of Nazi antisemitism, describes the Nazi enmity toward the Jews as intrinsic to its attitude toward the left wing, with which the Jews were identified, and hence as an integral component of its worldview (Friedländer 1997). In the same vein, the historian Otto Dov Kulka noted that the object of physically eliminating Jews was integral to the Nazi dogma of “redeeming” Europe from the humanist legacy of “all men are created equal,” which was, at least theoretically, claimed by both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the political ideologies of democracy and liberalism (Kulka 2001).

None of the historians mentioned in this article who support the universal approach deny the uniqueness of the Nazis’ unprecedented, distinctive dehumanization of the Jews. Precisely because of this, their universal view is critically important in the context of this article. While the traditionalists may share their analysis of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, they firmly object to the traditionalist view, as this approach remains confined in the uniqueness of the extermination of the Jews while failing to grasp the universal nature of human suffering that results from injustice and prejudice and is expressed in the fear, pain, agony, and death that accompany all groups that are victims of mass extermination (Tal 1989, p. 218).

Moshe Zimmermann also emphasizes the consequences of the Nazi imperviousness to human needs and suffering. He claims that the history of the Jews in Nazi Germany illustrates how such attitudes can all too easily lead to horrifying results through a series of bans on civil rights, and ultimately form a springboard for the intensified oppression of fellow citizens. In Germany, he shows, such results reached an unprecedented climax during the Holocaust (Zimmermann [2008] 2013). This horrific journey, Zimmermann continues, which commenced on 30 January, 1933—the day Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany—was not intentionally aimed at achieving the Final Solution, but rather comprised the sum total of many small steps consisting of dehumanization, civil expulsion, prejudice, and abuse that, for its victims, meant a kind of expulsion from life (Zimmermann [2008] 2013).

Ulrich Herbert (1998) suggests that most of the Germans who were nationalists before 1933 also had antisemitic attitudes. Yet he also argues that antisemitism was not the major shaping factor of the general German population (Herbert 1998). The possibility of carrying

out or supporting deportation and mass annihilation, Herbert claims, evolved rather from dominant fundamental “ethical” codes that ignored the principles of civil rights and the rights of minority groups. This “ethical” trend escalated during the years of dictatorship and led to an “ethical” brutalization of all the social strata in Germany (Herbert 1998). When this inclination was combined with patriotism and utilitarian motives, inhibitions were removed, and even personal acts of mass killing perpetrated by the *Einsatzgruppen* officers became a supreme cause (Herbert 1998, pp. 17, 38).

In this section, we showed that leading scholars in Israel and worldwide position the brutal antisemitism of Nazi Germany within the context of an anti-liberal worldview that lost all constraints. According to this view, antisemitism could only be materialized within the anti-enlightenment and anti-democratic radical fascist regime.

5. Societal Impact of the Long-Term Perspective: Victimhood and Moral Superiority

In his book *The Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm (2020) recalls the day Hitler came into power: “For this author the 30 January 1933 is not simply an otherwise arbitrary date when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, but a winter afternoon in Berlin when a fifteen-year-old and his younger sister were on the way home from their neighboring schools in Wilmsdorf to Halensee and, somewhere along the way, saw the headline. I can see it still, as in a dream” (p. 19). In this brief reference to his past, 60 years after the events, Hobsbawm unintentionally reveals one of the core components of post trauma: an altered form of memory. A traumatic memory is “more than remembering something terrible; it is a change in the brain’s pattern of memory”.⁴ Although the memory of groups naturally works differently, their pattern of memory changes works in a similar way. Second- and third-generation of traumatized groups, to whom the mental representation of the shared traumatic experience has been transmitted, may live simultaneously in two worlds: their own world, and their ancestors’ world (Volkan et al. 2012). “They are, unbeknownst to themselves and most others, caught up in a sort of time warp involving past traumatic events visited upon the large group to which they belong, but which they themselves never directly experienced” (Volkan et al. 2012, p. 4). Moreover, clinical studies of members of such groups, including second and third generation of Holocaust survivors, reveal that while each individual reacts in their personal way to the trauma, and consolidates their unique identity, all—or almost all—group members have developed an “injured self-image” (Volkan 2004, p. 48).

Ethnic, national, and religious groups that suffered severe traumas in the past share the unconscious choice to add these catastrophic events to their collective identities, a phenomenon Vamik Volkan calls “chosen trauma” (Volkan 2001). The psychological representation of this unconscious process is transmitted from generation to generation, imposing on future members of the traumatized community the task of reversing the helplessness, shame, and humiliation of the past. Moreover, it imposes upon them the duty of actively and assertively (in contrast to their perceived past passivity) ensuring such events will never happen again (Volkan 2001, 2006).

These groups also share a sense of victimization that to a great extent determines their attitudes toward other groups, especially rival ones, with whom they are involved in intractable conflicts (Keynan 2019).

Often, victims’ negative feelings toward perpetrators of past crimes against them may be projected onto those they perceive as aggressors in the present, or toward other groups that do not recognize the group’s victim status. In this way, past traumas echo into conflicts in the present. This phenomenon, which political psychologist Daniel Bar-Tal calls unification of the enemy (see Chapter One, Bar-Tal and Raviv 2021, for a brief explanation), is in line with the long-term approach to Jewish history, which, as mentioned above, interprets the fate of the Jews since the beginning of the Christian Era as a series of catastrophes caused by hatred of the Jews, by a different perpetrator in each era, unrelated to other circumstances. Bar-Tal et al. (2009) claim that these views, together with a commitment to preventing future harm, lead to a “victimhood syndrome” and a tendency

to experience fear, anger, and self-pity, all of which lead to vengeful attitudes that are enshrined in the collective memory of the group.

Israeli Jews still live in the shadow of the Holocaust. This is understandable, considering its magnitude and enormous repercussions. Indeed, a vast body of research shows the intergenerational impact of such colossal catastrophes in all traumatized groups and their grip on the group's mindset (Volkan 2006; LaCapra 2014). The problem, however, is that this grip does not allow for any healing process to take place, and instead boosts perceptions of moral superiority and the acceptance of violence as an unavoidable means of self-defense.

Dominick LaCapra (2014) describes two configurations of cultural and political coping with collective trauma: "acting out" and "work through," based on the Freudian model of individual trauma. He claims that post-traumatic societies "act out" their collective memory in an uncontrolled repetition of the traumas of the past in their political, social, and public lives. The understanding of this phenomenon has led to the realization that such repetition is "an unconscious attempt to represent experiences that are simultaneously impossible to forget and impossible to tell" (Gerson 2009, p. 1344). In other words, the unimaginable trauma reproduces the traumatic experience, not as a memory but rather as an action (Keynan 2020) that the posttraumatic individual or group acts out, reliving it repeatedly (Gerson 2009). This may be one of the reasons for the impossibility of ending conflicts between groups who have suffered severe traumas in the past (Volkan 2001). It may also explain the tendency of such groups to develop a sense of moral superiority that stems from the perception of entitlement born of victimhood (Bar-Tal 2007; Keynan 2015b).

In Israel, this syndrome is reflected in a constantly expanding sense of victimhood and entitlement vis à vis the Palestinians. Bar-Tal and Raviv (2021) explain that Israelis' self-perception as victims was reinforced by the adamant objection of the Arabs to Jewish immigration and to the establishment of the State of Israel in the land they saw as both their ancient homeland and their only refuge. Thus, in the intractable conflict that has been ongoing since 1948, many Israeli Jews perceive themselves as victims who have no other choice than to defend themselves against those who they perceive as yet another group of persecutors (Bar-Tal and Raviv 2021). Furthermore, most Israelis share a siege mentality that is in line with the long-term approach; they perceive time and fate as unchanging in terms of the persecution of the Jews, believe that the Holocaust can happen again, and are convinced that enemies do not disappear but only change names and origins (Zafran and Bar-Tal 2003). These views are also expressed by scholars who subscribe to the long-term approach, who, since the beginning of the current century, have tended to turn the spotlight from the ages-old Christian hostility to Jews to the similar hostility to Jews that they perceive as inherent in Islam (Wistrich 2010).

6. History vs. Collective Memory: Discussion and Conclusions

Memory should be analyzed not only as personal traces of the past, but also as a function of social life (Halbwachs [1952] 1992). Memory is not only the recollection of personal experiences, but also a social construction that connects people with other members of their group, and gives society a diachronic identity (Assmann 2011). It is what "allows us to construe an image or narrative of the past and, by the same process, to develop an image and narrative of ourselves" (Assmann 2011, p. 15).

Adding another layer to Halbwachs's theory, Jan Assmann (2011) suggests an additional two forms of collective memory: communicative and cultural. The first, Assmann says, is not institutional, it is not supported by institutions of learning and interpretation, nor called for in public ceremonies. Instead, it lives in oral, everyday interactions between contemporaries. Nevertheless, it may endure for 80–100 years, passed by parents and grandparents to successive generations. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is exteriorized by institutions that store it away in symbolic forms that are circulated and re-embodied in society and transferred from one situation to another (Assmann 2011). This is why it lives much longer. Transmitted from one generation to another, cultural memory relates

to recent as well as to remote past. Cultural memory leans on what is remembered and even mythologized, and not on what is investigated by historians. In other words, cultural memory is not just knowledge about the past, but rather a kind of consciousness that supports identity (Assmann 2011). These qualities expose traumatized groups to “time collapse” (Volkan 2001; Bar-Tal 2013), a phenomenon that blurs the distinctions between past and present, and even brings the past to life through current events. Thus, it creates a feeling that the nation is facing a threat similar to those it faced in the past. Politicians’ metaphors, therefore, which evoke the traumatic past, create a public atmosphere that tends to accept aggressive solutions as an unfortunate necessity. Volkan (2004) claims that many present-day conflicts cannot be fully understood without first understanding how the psychological “genes” (Volkan 2004, p. 51) of chosen trauma are transmitted from generation to generation, and how this is sometimes used by leaders to mobilize large groups in support of irrational decision making and inhumane acts.

This mechanism is prominent in Israel, and it is too often used by politicians in a way that increases its power over the public. The consequences are dangerous and morally disturbing. Immersed in their traumatic and haunting collective memory, Israelis tend to develop a sense of moral superiority which leads them to accept the oppression of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank as justified and to ignore the deterioration of their human rights and living conditions.

Unlike history research, collective/cultural memory usually focuses on a limited collection of events, images, and motifs that have intense national significance. These symbols are not mediated by varied and complex historical knowledge on their way to their target audience, but are transmitted in a simplified, one-dimensional manner, in the form of myths. Social psychologist Arie Nadler (1998) claims that every society has a collection of highly emotionally significant symbols and metaphors whose mention alone is liable to arouse a predominant pattern of feelings, thoughts, and even behaviors. These may be “chosen glories”, shared feelings of success and triumph, or chosen traumas; both are heavily mythologized over time, and both become elements of the group’s identity (Volkan 2004). When collective memory is structured in a way that perpetuates the memory of tragedies and past traumas, it emphasizes their historical significance, but also shapes them as a paradigm through which other developments in the group’s life are explained. In this way, collective memory becomes a kind of habitus (Bourdieu 1985), shaping the views and behaviors of the public.

Indeed, in general, the Jewish Israeli public perceives any hostile action as a grave collective threat. These feelings are often exploited by politicians, who thus pave the way for the situation to deteriorate into an armed battle and a further worsening of the conflict, leading to increasing violence and offering no way out (Keynan 2016). One salient example of this phenomenon is the speech of Prime Minister Netanyahu following the abduction and murder of three Jewish teenagers in the summer of 2014 as a preface to his decision to send the army into Gaza. In this speech, Netanyahu framed the event in a far wider context than that of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, emphasizing its connection to the long history of Jewish suffering, and suggesting that the murder stemmed from hatred for any Jew, and not from the political conflict. The same motif was used at the time by Chief Rabbi David Lau, who connected the slain teenagers to the “chain of our people’s sacred and pure martyrs throughout the painful history of the Jewish people.”⁵ This grip of post-traumatic memories on the Israeli consciousness seems to become stronger over time, contributing to the creation of “a culture of conflict” (Bar-Tal 2007), i.e., a well-organized system of societal beliefs and attitudes that maintain the collective identity of the group during the “institutionalization” phase of the intractable conflict (Oren and Bar-Tal 2014).⁶

This mechanism of reactivating traumatic memories is well rooted in the long-term approach to the Holocaust. Its main implication for the current context is the encouragement of the above-mentioned time collapse. In this case, the Jewish collective memory of helplessness against brutal attackers was reactivated. In the above-mentioned example, Netanyahu reinforced deep-seated Jewish fears, thus ensuring he would receive public

support for a forceful military response (Keynan 2016). This was not the first time that such a reactivation of traumatic memories had been exploited for political ends. In 1982, Prime Minister Menachem Begin did the same. Begin's term as prime minister following his victory in the 1977 elections, began with hope for peace with Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. Begin embarked on the peace process with Egypt with great enthusiasm. However, parallel to the peace process with Egypt, tensions on the Lebanese front increased. In March 1978, a group of terrorists who crossed the Lebanese border hijacked a bus in Tel Aviv. Thirty-five Israelis were killed and 71 were injured.⁷ When Begin presented to the Israeli Parliament his decision to take retaliatory action in southern Lebanon, he declared that: "[t]he days in which it was possible to shed Jewish blood and maintain immunity have gone, never to return" (Grosbard 2006, p. 199). The more tense the situation at the border became, the more intense became his use of metaphors drawn from the Jewish collective memory. Thus, when the decision to start a war was taken in June 1982, Begin said to his defense cabinet that "fighting means losses and losses mean mourning and orphans" but "the unacceptable alternative is Auschwitz" (Grosbard 2006, p. 273). This was one of his many remarks that compared a current threat to Israel with the Holocaust. Begin repeated to his cabinet members that Treblinka was the only alternative to war, compared the firing of Katyusha rockets on Israel's North to the persecution of the Jews and their children by the Nazis,⁸ and swore "never to abandon Jewish blood" (Grosbard 2006).

These events echo Dominick LaCapra's (2014) claim that victims of genocide or extreme violence tend to transfigure the trauma they have suffered into something sacred. This traumatopism, to use LaCapra's (2014) term, prevents trauma victims from undergoing a healing process ("working through") and instead plants the trauma in the group's mind as a kind of stigmata that demands endless melancholy and grieving, while any attempt to weaken its grip over the nation's psyche is perceived as profane (LaCapra 2014).

When looking at the instructions for history teachers for the year 2022 concerning the Nazi era, at first glance they seem to include universal lessons, among them the gradual diminishing of democracy in Hitler's road to power (Ministry of Education History Teachers' Portal 2021, pp. 12–24). These instructions concur with the contextual approach, and looking back at history textbooks, shows that this view has been prevalent for at least a decade. Why, then, do we still see such a powerful fear of a second Holocaust among young Israelis and such a strong sense of victimhood and moral superiority among young Israelis (see, for example, the cooperation index between young Jewish and Arab Israelis, Ran and Netzer 2021)?

The answer might be that history is taught not only in the classroom, but also, and perhaps mainly, through collective memory. The above views of PM Menachem Begin, PM Netanyahu and Chief Rabbi David La, correlate the main message young Israelis hear at their traditional trip to the concentration camps in Poland (during 11th grade), and in the annual memorials for the Holocaust and for the fallen soldiers of the state of Israel. Every year, beginning in the elementary school, all children participate in memorials for the Holocaust and for the fallen soldiers of Israel. The two memorials take place one week apart, and the instructions of the Ministry of Education for their content appear together, emphasizing that the establishment of the state of Israel is the guarantee that "never again will the Jewish people suffer any Holocaust" (Ministry of Education Hebrew Language Curriculum, Memorial Days for Intermediate Schools 2021).⁹ Memorials, naturally, cannot discuss complex issues. Their role is to commemorate, as part of collective memory. What remains, however, in the minds of young pupils is the horror, the fear, the gentiles' hate toward Jews, and the powerful message of the need of a strong military force. Democracy and human rights, thus remain an add-on, instead of being the main message. In fact, the teaching the Holocaust in the traditional approach is complementary to collective memory. It focuses on a limited collection of events, images, and motifs that are not mediated by complex historical knowledge, and that have intense emotional and national significance.

The contextual approach to teaching the Holocaust, however, aligns with history. It is investigative, critical, and strives to bring broad perspectives and interpretations.

We argue that the grip of the chosen trauma is strengthened by the traditional approach because of the similarity of its qualities to those of collective/cultural memory. It is not yet proven, however, that the contextual approach can loosen this grip. There is a debate among educational theorists over the question whether teaching the Holocaust can beget the adoption of humanistic values (see for example, Short 2003; Samuels 2019). We believe that it is possible at least to soften the traumatic grip of the Holocaust on young Israelis by adopting the contextual approach in teaching of the Holocaust. Anchoring it in evidence, however, requires further research, which should look at the overall Israeli curriculum in History, Literature, Civic Studies, etc., including ceremonies and other ways of learning, outside the classroom, and analyze it on the backdrop of educational and psychoanalytical theories.

The shadow of the Holocaust will be present in the minds of its victims and their descendants for generations to come. It will keep haunting, in conscious and unconscious ways, the minds of its direct victims and their offspring, as the image of colossal collective traumas exceeds individual PTSD (Volkan et al. 2012). Such presentations pass pathogenic influence across generational psychic boundaries, and create, “by transgenerational transmission, certain unconscious tasks for the group’s future generations to perform” (Volkan et al. 2012, p. 10). The questions that remain include those of how to heal post traumatic groups and prevent them from sinking into victimhood syndrome (Bar-Tal et al. 2009), how to prevent the memory from becoming flattened, and how to “grasp the meaning and consequences of historical horror” (Hoffman 2005, kindle edition, location 75).

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Notes

- ¹ We base our reading of the notion of “processing” on Robert-Alain de Beaugrande’s interpretation of this concept (de Beaugrande 1984).
- ² In fact, the core of Maurice Halbwachs’s canonical work *On Collective Memory* shows that memory cannot be “forgotten,” but is rather shaped and reshaped by society in accordance with its present needs.
- ³ Katz criticized the methodology of the *longue durée*. However, in his final work, which was published posthumously, he readopted the concept. See (Cohen 2002). Furthermore, Katz can be considered a proponent of the long-term approach due to his emphasis on the particular characteristics of the hatred of Jews. See (Wolff and Tal 2013).
- ⁴ See the Hebrew translation of the preface of the volume at: http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%201137.pdf (accessed on 30 November 2021).
- ⁵ Quoted in Haaretz, 30 June 2014. <http://goo.gl/8zg4iL> (accessed on 10 January 2022).
- ⁶ Oren and Bar-Tal (2014) define the “institutionalization” phase of a conflict as its climax, when neither side can win and achieve its goals, and at the same time, neither is willing to compromise in order to settle it peacefully.
- ⁷ See Israel Defense Forces—The Official Website: <http://www1.idf.il/DOVER/site/> (accessed on 27 March 2017).
- ⁸ Menachem Begin speaking at the 95th session of the tenth Knesset, 8 June 1982.
- ⁹ We do not discuss here the journeys to the concentration camps in Poland during the 11th grade, and the delegations of young officers sent there by the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces). These journeys are at the center of heated debates in Israel over the last two decades, due to criticism of the message they convey and their influence on the young visitors. See for example, (Feldman 2001; Ben-Amos and Tammy 2011).

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