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Thou Shalt Tell Thy Daughter: Mothers Tell Daughters Their Holocaust Story—Three Case Studies of Contemporary Israeli Women Artists

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Abstract: The story of Israel and its *raison d'être* are suffused by memories of the Holocaust, which construct the self-definition and identity of the state. This article examines works by three contemporary Israeli women artists—Dvora Morag, Miri Nishri, and Bracha Ettinger—who subvert the traditional telling of history and enable rethinking of the past as the basis for the individual's existence in the nation state. Through the works of these artists, official memory disintegrates into fragments of personal memories of the artists' mothers, enabling a new moral, historical perspective. The reconstruction of history through stories that pass from mother to daughter contrasts sharply with Jewish tradition in which the historical story passes from father to son. The yearly Passover retelling of the Exodus admonishes "*Thou shalt tell thy son on that day to say, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt'.*" The two narratives, the Exodus from Egypt and the Holocaust, are told as stories of redemption of the Jewish people—from ruin to resurrection. The art examined here reassesses the past, while unraveling parallels between the stories from a female perspective that reflects a personal moral stance.



Citation: Scheffan-Katzav, Hadara. 2022. Thou Shalt Tell Thy Daughter: Mothers Tell Daughters Their Holocaust Story—Three Case Studies of Contemporary Israeli Women Artists. *Arts* 11: 94. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11050094>

Academic Editors: Emma Gashinsky and Tehila Sade

Received: 23 August 2022

Accepted: 18 September 2022

Published: 22 September 2022

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Keywords: transgenerational transmission; Holocaust memory; women's art; morality

1. Introduction

The history of the Holocaust forms a cornerstone of Israeli national culture. Memory of the Holocaust and of antisemitism, in general, has been used by the state to provide justification for its founding, ongoing existence, and policies (Zertal 2005). The Holocaust plays a central role in constructing the Israeli collective memory and its nationalist manifestations, turning it into a "civil religion" (Ophir 1987; Gershenson 2018) that is perpetuated by national holidays, school curricula, memorials, museums, and the like. The centrality and sanctity of the Holocaust in Israeli collective culture has contrasted sharply with the possibility of survivors conveying personal Holocaust memories. Indeed, upon their arrival in Israel, survivors were pressured to repress their past and to distinguish between their diaspora life with its devastating Holocaust outcome and their current life in Israel (Shapira 1998). Thus, in the early years of Israel's history, the space occupied by the Holocaust was marked by an internal contradiction—while the personal memories continued to distress survivors, their families, Israeli society, and Jews in general (Ben-Dat 2015), individual expressions of memory were discouraged out of concern that they would harm the unified national Zionist message. Silencing the personal expressions of trauma stemmed not only from the desire to unify the nationalist message but also, as noted by Holocaust author Elie Wiesel (1967), from the inability to construct from these diverse experiences a coherent narrative that would represent the truth, particularly in light of the disparity between what can be conveyed in words and what actually took place.

In this article, I explore the gap between the national narrative and narratives that challenge the discourse of Holocaust memory and the use made of this memory. I present an

interpretive analysis of contemporary work by three Israeli artists who offer parallel narratives that interweave Holocaust stories with other traumatic events, thereby using art to mediate the process by which history is told—undermining it and allowing for a rethinking the past as the basis for individual existence in Israel. I chose three female Israeli artists whose mothers conveyed their personal memories to them, in contrast with the Jewish tradition of transmitting the historical narrative from father to son. The Jewish people are commanded to remember, writes researcher of Jewish history and culture, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. Indeed, the verb ‘remember’ appears in its various declensions in the Bible one hundred and sixty-nine times (Yerushalmi 2011); however, it is worth noting that the verb “remember” in Hebrew (Zakhar) also means male. Hence, the inner and deep meaning of Jewish memory refers to a masculine transmission of memory. This transgenerational transmission has been particularly evident regarding the story of the Exodus from Egypt, a foundational element in the national-cultural memory of the people of Israel—the passage from slavery to freedom. The motivation for repeating the Exodus story is captured in the yearly reading of the Passover Haggadah: “In every generation, a man must consider that he himself had come out of Egypt, as it is said, ‘Thou shalt tell thy son on that day, it is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8).

The two narratives, the Exodus from Egypt and the Holocaust, are relayed as stories of redemption of the Jewish people—from ruin to resurrection—and are tenets of Jewish culture. The artworks presented here reassess the past, while unraveling the parallels between the stories, this time as reenacted from women’s perspectives and through a feminist lens.

The art discussed in this paper reflects the transgenerational transmission of the Holocaust memory from mothers who were Holocaust survivors to daughters, the so-called “second generation”. The second generation are those who live in the shadow of Holocaust memory and trauma but have not directly experienced it (Berger and Ivgi 2009). Much research has been conducted about this generation (Epstein 1979; Rowland-Klein and Dunlop 1998; Hass 1990; Harris 2020); the special intergenerational relationship is examined within the complex contexts of isolation and suffering, mutual over-responsibility, secrets and silence, guilt, and mourning. Psychologist Dina Vardi refers to those in the second generation as “bearers of the seal”—living memorial candles suffused by the aura of death, like their parents, which becomes a core element of their personalities (Vardi 1990). Unlike Vardi, I do not in this paper relate to these second-generation artists as memorial candles but rather as carriers of the torch—those who hold a light that illuminates the way forward in a search for meaning.

In this, I rely on studies by Kellerman in psychotherapy and Nir in literature who find many in the second generation engaged in a deep search for meaning:

For children of Holocaust survivors, the trauma of their parents can be perceived both as a curse and as a legacy. On the one hand, it may fill their inner lives with terrible anxiety-provoking associations; on the other, it may be a source of creative inspiration that motivates them to make the world a better place. (Kellermann 2008, p. 269)

In her article on the transgenerational transmission of the Holocaust trauma and its expressions in literature, cultural studies scholar Nir (2018) enumerates some characteristics that are common in the second generation, including an intense search for meaning in their lives. Among those in the first generation, the survivors themselves, who outlasted the horror, many set a purpose for themselves that was not only self-fulfillment but also transcendence of the self and finding meaning in life, and this was passed on to their children (Frankl, as cited in Nir 2018). This transmission interests me.

For that reason, this article does not deal explicitly with trauma transmission or the concept of postmemory, used by Marianne Hirsch (1997) to refer to the effects of the trauma passed down from the first to the second generation and how descendants have sought to memorialize this through narrative, visual arts, or other media. Instead, I look more closely at the negotiation of identity and meaning in the transmission of memories from mother

to daughter and the moral implications reflected in their art. For the daughter, the mother is not just a witness transmitting information for historical documentation; the trauma of the mother reverberates in the soul of the daughter, born in her mother's womb, living with her and her ongoing bleeding, internal and external, from the trauma. Therefore, and perhaps above all, the works of art presented in this paper reflect a feminine voice that does not try to speak for an entire generation but rather utters a personal, particularistic truth.

In *The Inheritance: The Holocaust in the Artworks of Second-Generation Israeli Artists* (Brutin 2015), Israeli art historian Batya Brutin presents research focused on the Holocaust trauma among male and female artists who did not directly experience it but rather absorbed the trauma twice—first, from their parents who survived and, second, from Israeli society's attitude toward it. Brutin explores the transmission of the traumatic narrative, its implications and expressions in art, and the intersection of personal psychological space with the social-cultural space of the Israeli collective.

Brutin observes commonalities among most second-generation sons and daughters: the impact upon the children of the parents' silence, parental difficulties in performing their role and the child's undertaking of parental roles, the impact on the child's imagination, identification and levels of fear, questions about how to convey Holocaust history to the next generation, the effect of mixing personal Holocaust stories with the historical, collective memory of it, etc. Brutin notes that Holocaust visibility in the visual arts began only in the late 1970s in the works of artists such as Haim Maor, Yocheved Weinfeld, and Moshe Gershuni, in which the Holocaust took center stage. Since then, the trauma of the Holocaust has assumed diverse forms in Israeli art (see also Manor 1998; Katz-Freiman 2003).

Like Brutin, I examine the transmission of the Holocaust narrative but differently: I do not explore whether the Holocaust is present in the works of these artists but rather the distinct way each expresses the fragments of Holocaust memories of her mother and sometimes the immediate environment, and how these have affected the mutual relationships around which the materials of her art are organized.

My analysis of three contemporary Israeli artists—Dvora Morag, Miri Nishri, and Bracha Ettinger—also draws upon personal conversations with the artists over the course of several years. The Holocaust was not the starting point of our conversations, but it was a magnet that drew to itself almost every story. We met in their studios, where they related their family stories to me over the course of discussing their work. Together with the known and familiar narrative, there was a moment each time when a new thread of memory was evoked, a sliver of insight. Through the work of these artists, I show how official memory shatters upon the personal memories of these artists' mothers and takes on a new historical perspective, a moral stance.

One issue that arose from analysis of the work of these artists was the national perception of the Holocaust as a unique case of genocide or crime against humanity. On this issue of the "singularity" of the Holocaust, French-Jewish philosopher Jacques Derrida noted in an interview with Israeli scholar and writer Michal Ben-Naftali, "For me the question of the name, that is of the singularity of this event, has always remained suspended, open, has always been a matter for debates, even disagreements with many of my contemporaries, contemporary philosophers" (Ben-Naftali 1998).

I seek to show that belief in the singularity of the Holocaust is undermined with the increase of personal discourse about it—as the gap widens between the private memory of survivors and the national collective memory. Relating to the Holocaust as a unique event in the history of humanity, as a trauma that takes precedence over every other trauma, is diminished by the examples brought here. In the work of the artists presented below, the Holocaust memories of the survivor mothers connect with the memories of other traumas, making the Holocaust both historical and ahistorical. It is historical because of its location in personal and human history, but it is also ahistorical as it is interwoven with other national traumas. It is the trace of trauma that links up with other traumas.

The Holocaust is like the first trauma, whose shock waves trigger other traumas, and for which one can, and perhaps is obligated to, draw a broader and deeper connection between crime and morality. According to Derrida:

Suppose we say that the Shoah has been a major trauma, unmatched, unique in the history of mankind. It is the wound of our time, the wound of our consciousness, of our memory. If we use the word 'trauma' to mean within a certain generality that a trauma occurred and that, for instance, the moral relation to the other passes, as Lévinas says, through a certain trauma, would you then reproach Lévinas with using the word 'trauma' when he ought to have reserved it for the Shoah? Are you going to reproach him with making trauma and wound, with making vulnerability into the very condition of morality, the transcendental—in any case, the general—condition of morality? It is certain that when Lévinas himself says 'trauma', 'persecution', 'hostage', 'haunting', he thinks, naturally, of the Shoah, this is indisputable. But he would say this in the same way even had there been no Shoah. The Shoah also helps us think [about] morality and crime. (Ben-Naftali 1998)

According to Derrida, eliminating the unique, homogeneous character of the atrocity leads to a moral perception and, in the cases I bring below, to a personal moral perspective, in which the memory of the survivor mother is neither linear nor presented as a whole to the daughter, but in fragments of atrocity mixed in with daily life, and seemingly senseless. These are processed by the daughter, the second generation of the Holocaust, who gives them meaning in her art.

2. Three Artists—Multiple Stories

2.1. Dvora Morag

Dvora Morag, the daughter of parents who survived the Holocaust but refused to speak of the past, grew up in a home shrouded in secrets and sorrow. The father worked outside the home and the mother, Genia, deeply troubled, remained at home with the silence, the frustration, and the children. Only at age 80 did the mother begin to speak at family dinners about the Holocaust, "but she didn't tell us the really difficult things", Morag told me. When she was already in an old-age home, Morag sat her 90-year-old mother down and asked her to tell of her experience "to the extent you can", and from these disconnected threads, she was able to weave a story of her mother's life: first in ghettos in Poland—in the Brzeziny ghetto, where her mother and one of her brothers were murdered and, then in the Lodz ghetto, where she was almost murdered when a soldier released a burst of gunfire into her bed while she hid behind the door. She then joined up with another woman whose two children had been killed, and they helped each other survive the difficult and dangerous circumstances. She spoke of her life at the Auschwitz concentration camp, the abuse of the female prisoners, starvation, forced labor, typhus, the tragic death of her sister asleep in the barracks that burnt down, and also her near death hiding under a stack of blankets that was repeatedly stabbed by one of the guards using his bayonet. Her suffering did not end in one death camp. After Auschwitz, she was transported with 500 other Jewish women to carry out forced labor in a munitions factory in Neukölln, and, after this, to Ravensbrück camp from where she was released in the liberation agreement of 7800 Scandinavians from prisons in Germany and sent to Sweden. There, she met her future husband, Morag's father, whom she married before immigrating to Israel in 1949. In her mother's words, "We married because we were lonely and in desperate need of a caress and warm word".

Only after her mother's death, upon learning that her mother had been married before the war and had had a child, did Morag understand the depth of the ongoing silence. "We even managed to find out her last name from her previous marriage", adds Morag, "but we know nothing else. They were all killed. My sister and I were shaken to the core when we learned about this".

In 2014, Morag was first able to give public voice to her mother in her video film *And you shall tell your daughter* (Figure 1). The film opens with her mother sitting at a table. The viewer can see only her hand against the table and hear her voice. The mother speaks in snatches of the moment she stood facing the crematorium in the death camp—“We were naked, they shaved us, we no longer cried”, and then, the film pivots to her immigration to Israel in 1949. The mother’s story, marked by personal details—the weather, her clothing, physical feelings—accentuates the vividness of the memory that haunts her despite her long silence.



Figure 1. Dvora Morag, “And you shall tell your daughter”, 2014. Single-channel video.

In the course of her description, the mother tells of a significant moment in her immigration to Israel—a story that stayed with the artist daughter and later also entered the daughter’s art—about her mother’s arrival at the Jaffa home given to them by the Jewish Agency. Upon entering, they saw a table in the yard set for a meal, seemingly abandoned in haste. Memories rushed back to her of when they had been forced to abandon their own home in Poland, to leave everything and flee, following the German *aktion*. With this traumatic memory in mind, she and her partner (Morag’s father, who intervenes in the film at this point and confirms her words) come to an immediate decision: to turn down the home and return to the transit camp in Pardes Hanna. This story was known in the family because, of all the harsh events of the period, this one was related by the mother as a seminal story in her life. This was one moment of pure grace, the daughter noted, in the burden of guilt that marked her life for having survived, while other family members and friends were murdered: “Toward the end of her life when she would tell stories in which she was saved from death, she always emphasized that she had not wanted to live, but something happened each time to save her, though she didn’t understand why. All her life she suffered the guilt of having survived”.

This video film was a collaboration of Morag with her mother and daughter Hadar. The daughter did the filming and Morag edited it. “I could have done it by myself”, said Morag, “but it was important to me to do it together with my daughter”. The artist wished to involve her daughter in the making of the film, which re-weaves family memories and blends critical-political meanings with personal content, moving like a ghost through the family history and constructing its identity. The work sets forth a narrative of personal memory as a subversive alternative to the narrative of national-collective memory, adding an important moral dimension. Encouraging the mother to speak has allowed for the unraveling of the singularity of the Holocaust and created a parallel of traumas on the issue of uprooting: the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of the Palestinian nakba. In con-

trast with the passivity felt by many Jews during the Holocaust, the mother takes a clear, active role in her decision to walk away from the home offered to them. This personal moral stance emanates from her own memory of trauma, which triggered her empathy for the other. The mother's deed brings to mind Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" (Benjamin 1974) in which he challenges the historicist, mechanistic, and deterministic perception of time that disempowers individuals from affecting the course of history. To the forward progression of time, Benjamin sought to introduce the experiences of personal time, the unexpected events, thereby restoring agency to individuals to influence history. The mother who refuses to cooperate with the pre-ordained history, made a moral choice and thereby wrote her personal history manifested both by her act of defiance in identifying with the victim and by relating the story to her daughter, who transmitted it into public space. In the final frame of this video, Morag writes: "Dedicated to my dear parents who, despite the horrors they experienced, retained their compassion".

"Giving my mother a voice also gave me a voice", said Morag. Her words allude to the deep, abiding bond that links her life and art with her mother. Retelling the traumatic story that was rooted in the Holocaust and came with her into Israel created a choir of voices of the women in the family.

The artist's choice of video art to challenge the collective memory is intriguing. On the one hand, Morag is ostensibly part of the long Israeli tradition of films conveying Holocaust memories. Media scholar Marita Sturken notes that the media create many "screen memories" that become embedded in the collective memory, some even replacing the personal memories of survivors (Sturken 1995). Contemporary video art, on the other hand, says Sturken, differs in that it offers alternatives to the hegemonic narrative of the Holocaust. "This memory is not about retrieval as much as it is about retelling and reconstruction" (Sturken 1995, p. 7).

In writing about the Holocaust in video art in Israel, Olga Gershenson also notes the critical approach to Holocaust memory among the younger generation, particularly the third generation: "The medium of video art allows the new generation of artists to critically engage with the narrative of Holocaust memory, and to reshape it in the process" (Gershenson 2018, p. 70).

The ability of video art to offer new forms of narrative assumes another important role in Morag's work as it challenges the singularity of the Holocaust by bringing together two dimensions of time and two traumatic memories of two different communities.

The story of the abandoned dinner table captures a critical moment in the life of the Morag family, but it also reflects a collective story of a nation pursued by trauma. In "A Table Set for the Last Supper", Israeli art historian Gideon Ofrat writes:

Alongside the tables of moral and national renewal, Israeli art primarily knew tragic tables, even when their declared subject was "a set table": Naftali Bezem began drawing his dinner tables in 1958, shortly after he began devoting his art to the subject of the Holocaust. Most of his tables lacked people and served as the last supper tables of a family that had dissolved and/or some of whom had been sent to death camps, such as his parents who perished in Auschwitz. (Ofrat 2012)

Naftali Bezem is just one example in Ofrat's article of many Israeli artists who have represented the trauma of the Holocaust through a set table that becomes the Christian Last Supper.

The family table appears in another work by Morag entitled *A Set Table* (2005) (Figure 2). This installation consists of 14 dinner settings wrapped in burlap in which the pieces are suspended from the ceiling by thin iron wires, at a dinner table height and lit by fixtures set above it. This work first appeared in the Kalischer Gallery in Tel Aviv and, later, with minor alterations, in several solo and group exhibitions. The sight of a fragile mobile of dishes suspended in mid-air without a table under them, wrapped in burlap so that only their generic form can be discerned, conveys the artist's feelings toward the family table as a ghostlike remnant of a painful memory. Morag told me that on holidays, her

family would set a beautiful table, sit down, and cry. The memory of the past in Poland did not allow for traditional holiday dinners, and finally, they decided not to hold these at home but rather to be guests in other homes.



Figure 2. Dvora Morag, “A Set Table”, 2005. Installation. Photo: Avi Amsalem.

The technique of wrapping the dishes in burlap also relates to her dialogue with the German artist Joseph Beuys, who often worked with felt. After viewing a retrospective of his work in Israel and reading many reviews of it, Morag was surprised by the failure to mention World War Two, the Holocaust, or Jews in the artistic discourse about him. Morag then embarked upon an artistic dialogue with him, exchanging the felt for burlap sacks, a coarse material usually reserved for the transport of basic foodstuffs such as rice, legumes, etc., and which represents basic Israeliness to Morag. The burlap sack also connects to the ancient Jewish mourning rituals in which the mourners wear sackcloth. The burlap thus combines mourning and loss with the Israeli essence—roughness and insensitivity—which is what wraps and covers the dishes of trauma.

In addition to the personal symbolism of the table, Morag also spoke to me about the critical feminist meaning this work holds for her:

The dining table also symbolizes the system of law on which society is based. The mother serves the food while the other family members are seated. When I became a mother, I understood how important feeding the family is to the mother’s role, and how much it places the woman in the kitchen. My ambivalence about this is also one reason that I wrapped the dishes. Food is an element that enables, opens, and brings together, but the social implications of the role of the woman in the kitchen are dismaying. (Dvora Morag, Hadara Scheflan-Katzav. 2018. Tel Aviv. Personal communication)

In addition to the large installations, Morag has worked for years on small sculptures, many of which appeared in her solo exhibition “Unrest” (2015, Artists’ House, Tel Aviv). Three of these smaller works reflect the experience of the artist in a female intergenerational setting in which each woman—the mother, the artist herself, and her daughter—becomes a link in a chain of trauma and its transmission. In these three works, three small, sculpted

heads make an appearance: two with brunette hair (like that of the artist and her daughter) and one with red hair (like the artist's mother). In the work *Mom?* (2013) (Figure 3), the red-haired head is set inside a fine, porcelain teacup and has a small gilded horn emerging from its mouth. In *A Full Mouth* (2013) (Figure 4), a head with brown hair is glued to the center of a white porcelain plate with a dry branch protruding from the mouth. In *Make a Sound* (2013) (Figure 5), a head with brown hair is mounted on a wall and a large element made of cardboard that resembles a shofar or horn projects from the mouth. These three works convey the identity of the women in the family by a small identifying sign (the hair color) known primarily to the artist herself. The pieces reflect the tension between silence and speech, the desire to speak and forced speech (although the wind instruments seem to allow for a voice, they appear violently forced into the mouth), hence the tension between swallowing and vomiting.



Figure 3. Dvora Morag, “Mom?”, 2013. Mixed Media. Photo: Avi Amsalem.



Figure 4. Dvora Morag, “A Full Mouth”, 2013. Mixed Media. Photo: Avi Amsalem.



Figure 5. Dvora Morag, “Make a Sound”, 2013. Mixed Media. Photo: Avi Amsalem.

The silence surrounding the Holocaust trauma assumes another aspect in Morag's life as a mother. When her daughter was 10 years old, she was sexually molested by her piano teacher. At the time, the daughter remained silent about it and the mother knew nothing. Learning of it later led to the creation of works dealing with failure as a mother

or, in the words of Morag, “the fact that I didn’t know and didn’t read the writing on the wall—that’s the cross I must bear”. *Blind Woman* (2004) (Figure 6) consists of a polyester cast of a welding mask on which Hebrew sentences and words are handwritten. Most are blurred under the polyester, but some are legible and even emphasized above all the other words: mother, woman, artist, guilt, truth. The welding mask, Morag’s work tool, becomes an object that connects her identity as an artist to the conflicts of her identity as a mother. In this work, blindness joins silence, serving as barriers to two bodily orifices—the mouth and the eye. The voice and the gaze, so important in the mother–child relationship, appear in her works by their absence and the never-ending demand for their presence.

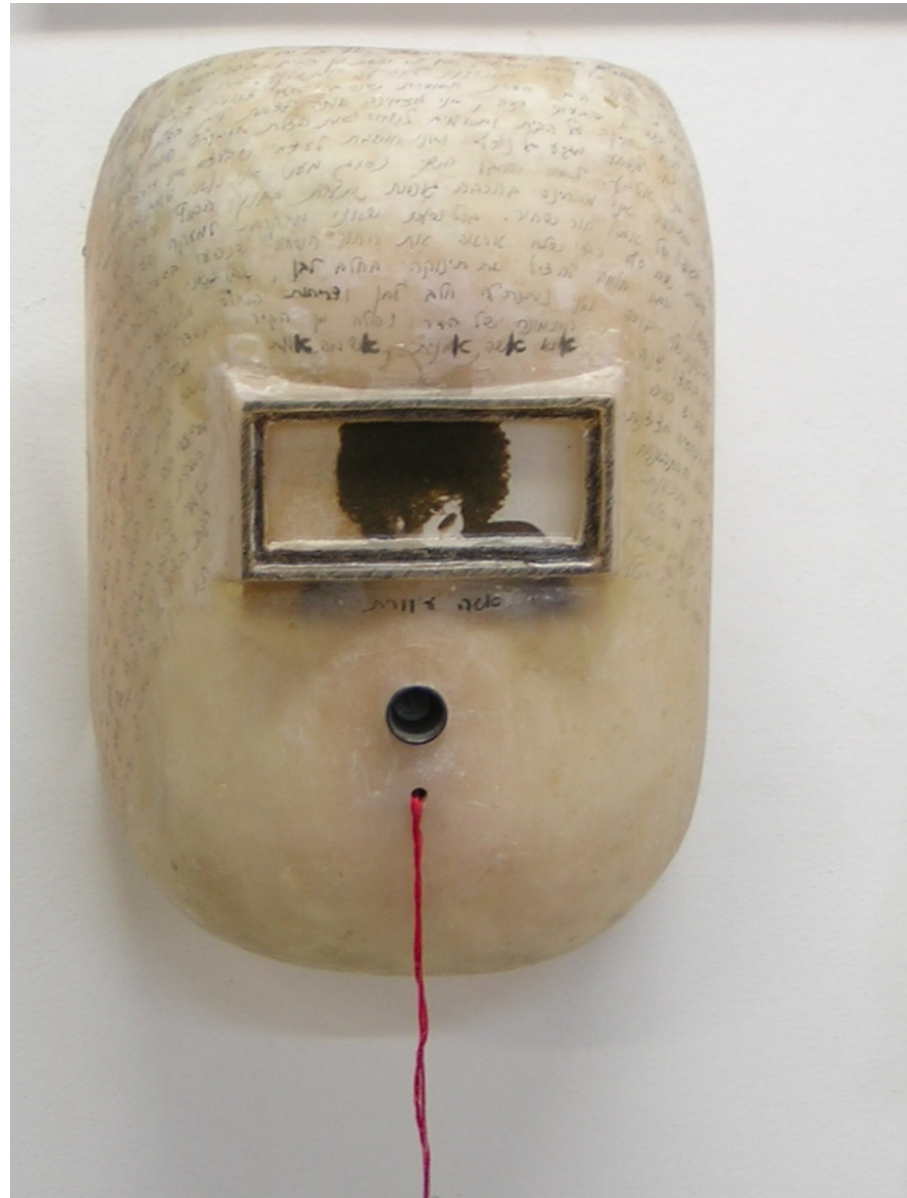


Figure 6. Dvora Morag, “Blind Woman”, 2004. Mixed Media. Photo: Avi Amsalem.

To My Daughter (2006) (Figure 7) offers a different approach to the loss of voice and gaze. Here, red threads descend from the artist’s hands (photographs of hands coated with polyester) that embroider the following text on a white, silk cloth: “your words bleed into me drip into my blind stain we are holding onto a vacuum that is between us translucent and clear the space between us adorned with pearls of words that we asked of a treasure not ours”. I believe that the onrush of words—without punctuation, embroidered like a

spiral or vortex of feelings—is addressed to both women, the mother and daughter. They lament the silence and the blindness, the barriers between them, and at the same time, they seek healing through touch. Beyond the words that are uttered or bleeding, beyond the gaze that is present or absent, are the hands of the mother, touching. The touch of the motherly body creates meaning and struggles with what is absent by the laborious task of embroidering words but constructs meaning primarily through the rhythm, the gaps, and the spaces between.



Figure 7. Dvora Morag, “To My Daughter”, 2006. Mixed Media. Photo: Avi Amsalem.

2.2. Miri Nishri

The voice, the silence, and motherly words as hidden threads connected in a web of traumas can also be found in the art of Miri Nishri. Her installation *Troubled Water* (2006, Artists’ House, Tel Aviv) (Figure 8) is situated in a large dark room. It comprises a video film illuminated by the beam of a searchlight, cast intermittently upon a small, wooden ship set upon an iron cot turned upside down on a bed of sand. The revolving beam casts light in turn upon the bed that seems to be a raft at sea and items that appear to have drifted to shore—a man’s old coat, a woman’s used hat, a toy sailboat. The searchlight circles,

momentarily revealing the stationery images, as the frozen landscape seems to bring to life fragments of memory.



Figure 8. Miri Nishri. “Troubled Water”, 2006. Installation. (C) Courtesy of the artist.

At the heart of this work is the figure of Gita, the artist’s 85-year-old mother. Gita gave birth to her oldest daughter (the artist’s sister) in a ghetto in Ukraine. When the Russians liberated the ghetto prior to the end of the war, they conscripted Gita’s father and uncle and sent them to the front. The train in which they were traveling was shelled from the air: the father survived, but the uncle, who had jumped from the train, was killed. After the war, unable to obtain a visa to enter Israel, Nishri’s parents moved to South America. When the artist, who was born there, was 7, the father was hit and killed by a truck. The mother immigrated to Israel with the children, settling in Kibbutz Ginagar. In her old age, after many years on the kibbutz, she was moved to a nursing home. On Passover eve, the artist brought her mother to her home to celebrate the Seder together with the family. While her mother was there, the artist decided to document the mother’s Holocaust stories for the family history. The mother had not talked much when the artist was young, Nishri noted, though on the subject of the Holocaust, the mother had a repertoire of “thrillers” that she would recount: From the period in the ghetto, Gita described how the Germans were searching for the men in the family, who were hiding under the wooden floor, but she as a young mother with an infant in her arms confronted them, denying that any men were present there at all. From the period of liberation, Gita told of the shelling of the train in which her father was traveling to the front, and their ocean voyages to South America and subsequently to Israel. From these stories, the artist pieced together a disjointed but coherent story of travails, survival, and courage. This time, on Seder eve, she also expected to hear tales of personal bravery and redemption, but now her mother’s testimony to the camera was muddled and confused: “We were injured, they injured us, when we ran away from the ghetto, then on the bridge, then they hit us, we weren’t able to walk, we stayed there. And then they killed us”—mixing narratives known and unknown. “I don’t want to go to the nursing home I’m afraid. They only want to capture me and all is hopeless,

hopeless. They once caught me and dragged me to the police, one took me by the right arm and the other by the left arm, and I thought I was doomed". Throughout it all, the sense of tragedy and loss are powerful, particularly the fear of being caught, like the current fear of returning to the nursing home.

The video is composed of three interwoven parts. The central part is the interview with her mother that was recorded, as noted, when Gita was already disoriented, and she speaks confusedly about her life during the Holocaust; the second part concerns the Twin Towers tragedy through the eyes of an American woman, who speaks of her husband, a brave firefighter, who sacrificed his life in the disaster and their children who are now orphaned of a father; and the third part is audio documentation of the killing of a Palestinian child from IDF gunfire in 2005 during the second Intifada. The visual motif connecting these three parts is a galloping white horse, which becomes a kind of stone relief through computer manipulation. During the film, the rider of the horse is transformed from a girl to a young woman and finally to a calvary figure in the image of Joan of Arc. Only during the segments about the firefighter who was killed does the rider become a cavalryman in combat.

The historical approach that brings together a personal story—difficult, confused, unusual, unexpected—with three national, public stories—the Holocaust, the fall of the Twin Towers, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—allows Nishri, like Dvora Morag, to infuse moral meaning through the connection of many voices. Instead of a fossilized, frozen, and etched-in-stone record, the artist offers history that shifts like a movie in which she links the past and the present through a new story.

That same overturned metal cot, a remnant of her youth on the kibbutz that moved to the city with the artist, is an Israeli story exactly like the wooden boat in which the Holocaust survivors landed. Both intermingle personal memories of the mother and daughter with the official, written history. The fragility of the mother's awareness makes it possible to shatter the monolithic, canonical narrative and link the traumas of human narratives that are unrelated in time or place, at the center of which is the angel of history (in the metaphor of Walter Benjamin)—her eyes wide open, the nightmare coursing through her veins, the fear ripping her soul, trapped in a cycle of terror. The cycle of terror in the three stories stems from the mechanistic ethic when authority confronts a defenseless individual. Through the art of the daughter, what is real in the life of the mother—being forced into a kibbutz nursing home in which she is at the mercy of the institution—meets up with the other real traumas—terror, loss, killing—events in which the individual encounters the loss of agency and control over one's life. The meaningless abyss from which human morality can emerge anew.

2.3. *Bracha Ettinger*

Transmission of the Holocaust trauma through a reverberating silence is also the story of the family of Bracha Ettinger, artist and psychoanalyst. In her childhood, relates Ettinger,

My parents didn't speak of the Holocaust at all. Because they didn't know Hebrew and I couldn't speak Polish, I was like an imprisoned soul who doesn't utter a word. Later, when I grew older, I could no longer ask them directly what happened to their entire family in fear of causing them anguish. (Bracha Ettinger, Hadara Schefflan-Katzav. 2022. Tel Aviv. Personal communication)

During the war, her Polish parents fled to Slovakia, then to Hungary where they joined the underground and were caught, spending the rest of the war in a forced labor camp. Toward the end of the war, her mother was given a visa and arrived in Israel in 1944, while her father remained in Europe one more year as a volunteer. Some of her mother's family did not survive the Holocaust: her father died in the ghetto, her brother was taken away for forced labor and then murdered, her three sisters were sent from the ghetto to Auschwitz—two survived and went to Israel, and the third perished. The family silence led Ettinger to

search family and public Holocaust photos for information to fill in the silent presence of her mother and the fragmented sentences she heard from her.

In his book on Holocaust memories, [Langer \(1991\)](#) examined testimonies of survivors and showed how extreme trauma affects the memory and its representation. Such trauma cannot be understood, conceptualized, or absorbed because it dismantles one's identity, confronting it with the incomprehensible. The trauma is not forgotten but cannot be relayed properly by the one who experienced it first-hand. However, this is also the one who mediates it for future generations. In her writing, Ettinger relates to this act of mediation, the transmission between generations, particularly in its unconscious form, by use of the word "carriance":

Carrying is knowledge. *Carriance* is the symbolic relief for a Real of carrying and being-carried, and for its sublimation. In the Real, carriance absorbs the effects of depth-working of subreal strings and threads. While the one carries and the other is being carried, some conscience of carriance, a conscience that includes encounters and resonance of elements on the subreal level, is formed at the unconscious level. ([Ettinger 2015](#))

The concept "carriance" evolved out of Ettinger's psychoanalytical theory about trans-subjective relations that are created during pregnancy. When a woman is pregnant, according to Ettinger, an encounter takes place between what she calls "partial-subjects" that co-emerge in the mother and the fetus, together contributing to the separate and distinctive subject. To formulate these distinctions, Ettinger offers two terms: "matrixial space" and "trans-subjectivity" ([Ettinger 1992a, 1992b, 1996](#)). Matrixial space relates to the space in which the borders are the walls of the womb where the meeting takes place between "partialities" of the pregnant woman and partialities of the fetus. The encounter is called "trans-subjective" because it involves parts that are beyond the awareness of the subject. In this space, intra-uterine traumas take place and the phantasmic processes of which one is unaware leave indelible emotional traces on the woman and the fetus. These give rise to shared emotional elements within the subjectivity and dismantle the borders between the subjects ([Ettinger 2006](#)).

Because the source of the carriance is in the womb, its significance is the female trans-subjective transference. According to Ettinger, this is the compassionate womb (in Hebrew the root of "womb" and "compassion" are identical) because it carries and is carried. It thus enables female transgenerational transference of trauma through the strings in the trans-subjective depths, which resonate to each other in a way that links one's personal pain with the pain of the other: "Webbing continues. Nets are knotted. At what depth? Hurting the other will 'in'-hurt us across the heart-shadow-rope" ([Ettinger 2015](#)).

The mother is the carrier of wound-space that transmits a kind of in-depth, grounded knowledge, of the kind that hurting another also hurts ourselves. This is a type of transference/carriance that enables emergence of a moral standpoint toward the other and the other's pain through a meeting between them that first takes place unconsciously and then can move to the conscious level and thought: "Carriance . . . informs thought and, out of thought it shapes our ethical stance, by which my other will in me be charged" ([Ettinger 2015](#)).

To explore the concept of carriance in the moral sense as a special case of female transgenerational transference, I look at two of Ettinger's works and the connection between them, one of an early series of hers on Eurydice and the other from a later series on the Annunciation that adopts fragments from the earlier work on Eurydice and continues to work on their memory.

An initial look at Bracha Ettinger's art is like a layperson peering into an old ultrasound image of a woman's uterus. The inside becomes the outside, visible, but its meaning is obscure, unfathomable. While a professional would read an ultrasound with confidence, the eye moving in an uninterrupted sequence, the viewer of Ettinger's work has no clear route for the eye to follow in its search for traces of existence. Although Ettinger's work contains no ultrasound images, only remnants of old photos, they nevertheless undergo a

complex process of creation, leaving a product that brings to mind the ultrasound image of a uterus.

In the Eurydice series on which she began work in the early 1990s, Ettinger uses old, anonymous Holocaust photographs as well as family photos from wartime and earlier. In *Eurydice, No. 18* (1992–1996) (Figure 9), she processes an old photo from the death camps showing two women from the back, one with a child in her arms. The name of the series associates the woman from the Holocaust with the mythological figure of Eurydice, beloved wife of Orpheus, whose yearning glance backward at his lover causes her death. In this piece, the woman becomes a heroine, one who gradually fades away or re-emerges, back and forth from death to rebirth. The power of this work seems to be drawn from the gaze at the image, as the viewer grasps at the remains of an image that has undergone a long, complex process until it is barely a shadow of visibility. The viewer's effort to revivify the image comes up short, wavering between memory and forgetting, between the revealed and the repressed.



Figure 9. Bracha L. Ettinger, “Eurydice18”, 1992–1996, oil and mixed technique on paper mounted on canvas. (C) Courtesy of the artist.

Ettinger works with archival photos that are first put through a photocopier machine and then, in an extended, painstaking process of addition, erasure, thickening, dilution, brush strokes, and layering, the image emerges. Her intriguing method involves several original techniques. One is use of a photocopier that she interrupts at a random moment. The result is unexpected because the image is revealed only after the artist opens the machine. Halting the copying process engenders new relations between the scanned image and the original. Every image retains something of the original, but something new is born in each, neither planned nor foreseen, but subject to the random effect of time. The absence of intervention of the conscious is a condition of memory that precludes an accurate, sequential, and clear telling of an historical story. From the moment the new image

is born, the artist processes it by the application of paint, usually horizontally, layer upon layer, shiny and translucent like the scanning of the machine. Sometimes, she adds toner to the paint or the fine dust that remains in the cartridges, thereby mixing mechanical and human intervention, the original and the copy, the material and the image, the creator and the created. The final appearance, rich with horizontal translucent layers, is the product of years of work and alters from moment to moment, like sand dunes changing shape with the shifting wind.

Ettinger's oeuvre deals with loss and its outcomes. It is a partial loss of the gaze, of the original, of the memory, and their rebirth in new, changed forms. The repeated loss of what has been reborn is the outcome of the relationship between the originals (the photographs) and the processing of them.

The story of Eurydice is also one of loss, a loss twice over. Eurydice dies from a snake bite. Although the gods of the underworld, Hades and Persephone, give her a chance at rebirth thanks to the charmed music of her lover Orpheus, she dies a second death from the forbidden backward glance of Orpheus, who had been warned not to look back until he exited the underworld. Orpheus is unable not to turn and look at what was forbidden—the fate of someone who has been overtaken by desire to look at the horror, at death—like the biblical story of Lot's wife. In both stories, the woman is punished, but only in one of them was she the subject of the gaze. Thus, it seems as if the fate of the woman is sealed by death, whether she sinned or not. Ettinger's artistic techniques add layers that mask the source of the longing, the original image of the past, the abjection, the dread, the one that must not be seen. Our inability to see this image revivifies it anew: while the gaze of Orpheus had trapped the image and caused its death, the failure of our gaze seems to release it from death.

The original image of Ettinger's photograph continues to slip away, and only the hand engaged in the art maintains its memory. This is a painting in which the animated body becomes the mechanism of both memory and forgetting. This is the body that embraces within it the carriance—that which carries and is carried. The image of Ettinger's paintings is born, grows, and flourishes due to the meticulous, years-long attention it has been given. Line after line, layer after layer, slowly and gently, like "caring" for a child. Perhaps this is why Ettinger creates works in a series or, as Brian Massumi writes of her work (Massumi 2000, p. 12), "... even if you cannot in principle complete a canvas, you can always start another. And another". This is a work of love and connection. In love there is no good or bad, just hard work, reviving it some more, reviving it for as long as the act of working on it continues.

The borders of our memory intersect with the borders of our gaze at an image. We look with a gaze that is hypnotized by the ghosts of memory—between them and our fear, the faithful hand of Ettinger intercedes. Each and every brushstroke of color brings us closer to the memory of the trauma and ties us to the conscious by threads concealed to the eye.

The ability of her art to reach beyond the borders of the gaze and awaken a primal memory is related to the womb-depth of the carriance. The womb, writes Ettinger, is like the eye looking out from the body, issuing forth like a spring:

Eye-spring, spring-eye (*ain*—Hebrew—עין)—From the heart of the spring I will carry you. *Ein Raham* (the eye of the vultures, the spring of the womb) expresses this desire, both particular and potentially available for those who unconsciously await it to feel their trust in the world. (Ettinger 2015)

The depths explored by Ettinger's work—the depth at which the trauma lies as well as the deep, hidden spaces through which the traumatic knowledge or wound passes—allows her art to offer the viewer another potential space beyond what is offered by visual representation with its constraints.

The blurring of the borders of memory and gaze are connected in Ettinger's work with her theory of the matrixial gaze that posits a different model in which the visual does not have exclusivity. The matrixial gaze is a meeting that is not merely visual and for

this Ettinger offers the concept *link a* to replace the Lacanian *objet a*. In *The Seminar* (Lacan 1977), Lacan develops the concept *objet a* in the context of the gaze, which he relates to the presence/absence of the mother in the experience of the infant. The gaze of the mother, like her voice, envelops us, touches us, but also avoids us, disappearing and wounding us. The Lacanian gaze, therefore, is not one sent by the subject but, first of all, a gaze back at the subject, turning it into a picture. The subject searches for the primal gaze that was averted, but that gaze is absent. The field of vision, therefore, is the domain of the longing based on the absent. For Ettinger, the motherly presence is not fully lost because the tactile memory of the mother's womb lasts an entire lifetime. This is the reason that instead of *objet a* that emphasizes the gaze as phallic—as a search for the missing object—Ettinger offers the concept of *link a*, which does not convey loss, but connection or bond. This is exactly the concept of *carriance*, which expresses continuity, not disconnection.

What is interesting in Ettinger's proposition is that transference takes place not only between the mother who remembers and carries and the artist daughter who is carried, but that it extends to the viewer through the idea that gaze at a picture can awaken an archaic memory of matrixial experiences. The painting can evoke an encounter with trauma in trans-subjectivity that derives from the intra-womb traumas.

The gaze appeals to the viewer to follow it into a space beyond yet inside the visible; to abandon defenses and become fragmented and fragile; to share, absorb and further redistribute fragments of trauma on condition of plaiting into the tableau one's own matrixial threads and letting it penetrate one's own borderspace of severality (Ettinger 1999, p. 22).

Ettinger thus allows for thinking about a work of art as communication in which the encounter with art begins with the gaze but does not end there, as it addresses a space that is beyond what can be seen but, nevertheless, still visible.

Carriance then rises to consciousness and accompanies the human subject throughout conceiving, discovering that which is mysterious, connecting to the other and the world, up to bearing witness (Ettinger 2015, p. 2).

The gaze as “witness bearing” or—as Ettinger refers to it elsewhere—“wit(h)nessing”, is testimony to an encounter, the product of gaze that looks not only at the memory that is missing but meets with its most archaic memory based on the traces of trauma engraved in the body (Ettinger 2001).

The words of Derrida on trauma in which vulnerability is a condition of morality are echoed in Ettinger:

Traces of trauma in me are not ‘purely’ mine. Not only am I concerned by my own wound, and not only the encounter with the Other which is to me traumatic, but I am also concerned by the wound of the Other. (Ettinger 1999)

In Ettinger's paintings, the traces of Holocaust trauma are barely visible but powerfully felt. The painting establishes a space in which the trauma of one encounters that of the other, which can dissolve the otherness and establish the moral. This premise rethinks the basis of being human, as noted by art scholar Tina Kinsella:

Bracha's artistic and theoretical project asks us to countenance the *feminine as an originary aesthetical co-ordinate that humanises the human* . . . Thus to grasp the profundity of Bracha's artistic practice and thought requires re-considering the very *ontological* foundations of the human. Here we relocate . . . the life drive as *Carriance* alongside the death drive, but also prior to it. In this way, the feminine that Bracha continues to place before us—in her art and in her thought . . . is a *gift to the human*, for if we can learn to listen and see this feminine . . . we already participate in potentialising affective relations *now* and in the past, present, future of beyond-as-before Matrixial Time. (Kinsella 2014)

Ettinger's later art (2015–2022) “recalls” Eurydice: the mythological tale of loss, punishment, and gaze are introduced into a fundamentally Christian story, one that undergoes a gender and matrixial transformation. These newer works connect three Christian motifs—the Annunciation, the Birth, and the Pieta—into a new, fundamentally feminine,

narrative. Her work “Annunciation-Birthing-Pieta” (2017–2021) (Figure 10), differs from the previous painting by the range of colors spanning from pink to purple. The image of Mary harkens back to one of the Eurydice figures in an earlier series and the angel in the Gospel of Luke becomes a female, a mother, the [female] angel of carriage. Thus, Mary/Eurydice receives the news from a mother, and the good tidings themselves, the information about new life being created in the female body, becomes a connection between two women. From this connection—information passed from mother to mother, conveyed by generations of women about life and death—comes Mary’s reply: “I am ready”. Mary submits to this angel, who touches Mary with her wing. This physical touch breaks down the fundamental otherness between the young girl and the winged creature from the Gospel, between flesh and spirit, and evokes echoes of the deep connection between the two figures, a matrixial, female-womb connection. A red stain like a bleeding womb links the two women and the hazy image of an infant, who carries traces of the trauma. This infant reveals the moral imperative for compassion and caring carried in its mother’s womb, bearing an internal, not external, imperative, testifying to the human ability to care about the Other.



Figure 10. Bracha L. Ettinger. “Annunciation-Birthing-Pieta n.3”, 2017–2021, oil on canvas. (C) Courtesy of the artist.

3. Conclusions

The memory of the Holocaust began with a deafening silence of the survivors. We know that their voice was suppressed for many long years, and then, after some broke the silence, others chose what to tell, how to tell it, and especially to whom. In two of the cases presented here, it was the daughters who urged their mothers to speak, and the mothers, before their deaths, cooperated. Morag and Nishri acknowledged that they felt an obligation and urgency to transform into words, into signifiers, what had been conveyed virtually without words until then. They both felt that it may have been too late but that earlier would have been impossible. This delay, intermingled with a sense of urgency, also characterized the work of creating the art following conversations with their mothers. Both felt they had been given a gift by their mothers, but also that they were holding a ticking bomb. Both underwent a process of rediscovering their mothers, resulting in an unusual

decision: Their work challenged the concept of reenacting history in which the voice of the lone narrator has ownership of the story, as they chose to present a multiplicity of voices that traversed periods and generations, cultures and locations.

In other words, the motif “And thou shalt tell thy daughter” becomes in their work something that moves the plot forward but is incorporated differently than in the familiar plot. “And thou shalt tell thy daughter” allows for a new understanding of the history, one that removes the extreme trauma from its perceived singularity by weaving a new fabric of connections and moral insights.

The subject of mediation is complex, particularly because it is affected by more than two parties. In addition to the witness who conveys messages to their child in various forms, whether mute, confused, or delayed, there is also the mediation of the official, national narrative. When the witness remains silent, their unspoken messages are translated subjectively by the child and in perpetual negotiation with the national message. The Israeli national message demonized the Nazis and Hitler, removing them from the realm of the human. Such a binary perception about the essence of a person is very human, but it abdicates moral responsibility (Nir 2018). The work of Nishri and Morag joins the work of Ettinger precisely at the point at which the depth of the transgenerational messages does not allow the national message to remain valid.

“And thou shalt tell thy daughter” transforms the connection between the two stories that are foundational to the national Israeli identity. The story of the Exodus from Egypt told from father to son is a tale of national redemption—with a continuous, linear narrative that has a goal and catharsis. It rests on a clear distinction between good and evil, between “us” and “them”. The story of the Holocaust told from mother to daughter is one of ethics. It is a broken, fragmented story, juxtaposing different times and places, creating endless time loops. Its anchor is the multigenerational female connection that links the human with itself.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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