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Transmitting Jewish Trauma:

How Jews talk about the past is shaping the Jewish present and future

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For my teachers, in all their forms.

Abstract: The way history is told is inherently political, and has profound implications for the present and future. The Jewish People, as a collective, have a complex relationship to the past as it pertains to history and memory. In the past couple decades, the concept of "trauma" has been introduced as a lens through which to understand the Jewish past, which further complicates this relationship. The Jewish People see themselves as an identity group that experiences collective and intergenerational trauma, and understandably so, given events such as the Holocaust and October 7, 2023. This identification, which is both self-imposed and socially imposed, has had deep ramifications on how Jews view themselves and the world around them. This identification with trauma primarily comes down through the ways in which Jews have narrated Jewish history since the rise of 19th Century European Enlightenment thinking. My thesis brings together the insights of trauma theory and Jewish historiography to explore the ways in which Jews narrate the past, and how those narratives impact the ways Jews behave in the world today. The goal of combining these two fields of study is to bring awareness to how trauma-based narratives of Jewish history are playing out in the world today in both constructive and destructive ways, informing how Jews navigate the world and interact with other victimized groups in the wake of recent traumatic events.

possible to receive. In many ways, this thesis has been a labor of love for both of us: me, because

I have so much I want to say, and him, because he gave me the courage and inspiration to say it.

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Introduction

Trauma is not inevitable. It is not a naturally occurring phenomenon; at its core, trauma occurs when there is a crisis in meaning, when something shatters a person or group's understanding of the world and their place in it. Traumatic experiences have their basis in our meaning-making systems, in the stories we tell ourselves about our past, our present and how the world is "supposed" to work. Stories are the lenses through which we live our lives, and they profoundly impact our experiences – including our susceptibility to trauma.

In Jewish spaces especially, the past weighs heavily on the present. The act of remembrance is, in many ways, at the core of what it means to be Jewish. The Jewish Tradition is full of sacred texts, rituals, and institutions that help us remember the past and those who inhabited it. And yet different groups of Jews often understand the past – and the lessons we are to draw from it – in vastly different ways. A central debate in Jewish historiography is whether the history of the Jews should be seen as a story of vibrancy and flourishing, interrupted by brief periods of death and destruction, or whether Jewish history is more or less one long litany of suffering and tears. Jewish historian Salo Baron described the suffering-and-tears narrative as the "Lachrymose Conception." He disagreed with this narrative, proposing the "Anti-Lachrymose Conception" of Jewish history in its place. To Baron's frustration, though, the Lachrymose Conception became the dominant narrative through which most Jews view Jewish history.

In this thesis, I will argue that the Lachrymose Conception has been harmful for the Jewish people, engendering a sense of collective trauma – so much so that when terrible things happen to Jewish people and communities today, those events are seen as a fundamental, inevitable part of the Jewish experience. Although that might be a useful survival mechanism in

some cases, one side effect is that many Jews live in a constant state of fear. And they are often unwilling or unable to consider the possibility that working in solidarity with other victimized groups could be helpful rather than dangerous for Jewish survival.

What if it did not have to be that way? What if we as Jewish people did not have to organize our identities and communities around the idea that doom and gloom is inevitable? What if we could take a new approach to our history and tell our stories in a different way?

This thesis will explore the fields of Jewish historiography and collective trauma theory, with a goal of interrogating toxic and retraumatizing narratives and understanding how we might build a Jewish present and future founded in our people's history of resilience and flourishing. Chapter One will explain what trauma is, especially collective trauma, including how it functions and the types of behaviors it can engender. Chapter Two will detail the specifics of Jewish collective trauma while setting up the theoretical framework for the rest of the thesis, including the posttraumatic lens through which Jewish history is often viewed. Chapters Three and Four will give readers the opportunity to look at how two different periods of Jewish history, the Medieval period and the Holocaust, have been described through a posttraumatic lens, and the different behaviors caused by these posttraumatic narrative choices.

A key goal of this thesis is to bring awareness to the ways Jews have talked about history, in both the past and the present, so that we as a Jewish community are equipped to respond to history as it plays out going forward. History is ultimately a compilation of stories, and those stories can provide both constructive and destructive frameworks as we navigate the world and make choices about how we want to live in it. It is important for Jews in the present to understand that the history we have been taught is inherently political, and that just because events turned out one way in the past does not mean they are going to turn out the same way in

the future. Again, trauma is not inevitable. It is crucial for us to have historical narratives that allow us to respond to potentially traumatic events in ways that are generative and life-affirming, rather than retraumatizing and fear-based. I hope this thesis helps illuminate a path forward in which Jews no longer languish in our sorrows, but rather move forward with hope and vibrancy.

Chapter 1: Towards Understanding "Trauma"

In order to understand the legacy and impact of Jewish collective trauma, it is imperative to understand what trauma is and how it works. Trauma is a complex topic that has come to play an outsize role in both the academy and popular discourse. To illustrate this point, a simple Google Scholar search for the keyword "trauma" yields 5,460,000 results. Google Scholar is not even an exhaustive database. Additionally, a 2022 Vox article says trauma became "the word of the decade," explaining, "the TikTok hashtags #traumadump and #traumadumping, a trend where creators describe their various traumas via sound memes or 'story time' retellings, have a collective 31 million views. #Trauma has 6.2 billion."[1] This explosion of interest in the concept of trauma is not necessarily a bad thing, because it has led to profound individual and collective healing. At the same time, because trauma has become such a popular concept and construct through which to see the world, it has come to describe an increasing array of events. In a 2016 op-dd in the Washington Post, University of Melbourne-based psychologist Nick Haslam noted that:

> "By today's standards, [trauma] can be caused by a microaggression, reading something offensive without a trigger warning or even watching upsetting news unfold on television…This is not a mere terminological fad. It reflects a steady expansion of the word's meaning by psychiatrists and the culture at large. And its promiscuous use has worrying implications. When we describe misfortune, sadness or even pain as trauma, we redefine our experience. Using the word 'trauma' turns every event into a catastrophe, leaving us helpless, broken and unable to move on."[2]

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[1] Lexi Pandell, "How Trauma Became the Word of the Decade," Vox, January 25, 2022. https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22876522/trauma-covid-word-origin-mental-health
[2] Nick Haslam, "How we became a country where bad hair days and campaign signs cause 'trauma,'" The

While trauma is an important and useful construct through which to understand tragedy and suffering, it is just as important and useful to understand the constructive and destructive effects that the label "trauma" can have on individuals and collectives.

The study and usage of the word "trauma" to describe psychological distress among individuals and collectives is a fairly recent phenomenon. While the word "trauma" has been in usage since the 1700s, until the late 19th century it was only used in relation to physical injury. In the 1880s, French psychiatrists started observing severe psychological distress in patients who had experienced severe physical injuries, and in patients who had suffered physical and sexual abuse at some point in their lives. Just a few decades later, during World War I, when soldiers were returning home from the front lines, people noted the pronounced psychological distress of these soldiers, eventually describing what these men were experiencing as "shell shock." In the cases of clear psychological distress caused by both abuse and war, questions around who was responsible for the terrible fate of these sufferers and who should treat them started to circulate. Because these questions had far-reaching economic, political, and social ramifications, the British military and government sought to bury the evidence of these patients' distress and cast them as people who were pathologically weak and undeserving of sympathy.

It was not until the 1960s-1980s, when research on the effects of psychological stress on Holocaust survivors and the experiences of Vietnam War veterans started to come to light, that the word "trauma" became widely used to describe the psychological stress these people were experiencing. The official diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was not officially recognized until 1980, when the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition (DSM-3), the authoritative diagnostic text of the psychological establishment, finally included it

Washington Post, August 12, 2016.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/08/12/when-bad-hair-days-and-campaign-signs-cause-trauma-the-concept-has-gone-too-far/

— and even then, only because of intense social pressure to validate the real suffering of military veterans so that they could finally receive government social services. From here, the study and classification of trauma has reverberated outward, and continued to expand to encompass an ever-wider array of causes of psychological distress.

As this chapter will show, the claim of "trauma" is inherently political. Being labeled as "traumatized," whether by oneself or by others, has profound implications on relationships from the individual level to collective level. It affects ingroup and outgroup dynamics and relations and puts stress on economic, political, cultural, and social institutions, which can lead to fierce fights over key resources. To be clear, trauma is real. It is also important to be aware of how the label is used to justify both constructive and destructive behaviors. This is key to overcoming the paralyzing nature of trauma, and using it to move forward in ways that are generative and life-affirming.

Definitions

Any discussion of trauma must begin by defining what trauma actually means. Although the greek word *trauma* means "wound," the term has become ever-more expansive and flexible, with contested meanings among experts and lay people. Lay people often use the word in ways that may have the effect of diluting and trivializing trauma, whereas experts seek to be precise in when and how they use it. Not only that, but in the staggeringly vast literature on trauma, across such fields as medicine, psychology, literature, film studies, sociology, and political science, there are different forms of trauma of which scholars speak. There is physiological trauma and psychological trauma, individual and collective trauma, social and cultural trauma, and intergenerational and transgenerational trauma. In this section I will discuss definitions of each

variety of trauma, paying special attention to those that affect larger collectives and especially identity groups.

Psychological Trauma

The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5) defines trauma as:

"exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more of the following ways)

1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s)

2. Witnessing in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.

3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.

4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g. first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse).

    a. [This] does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this is work related."[3]

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), perhaps the most famous and researched byproduct of traumatic experiences, was first recognized as a mental disorder in the DSM-3, published in 1980. At that time, a traumatic event was conceptualized as a catastrophic stress that "was

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[3] American Psychiatric Association, *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: APA, 2013), 271.

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outside the range of usual human experience."[4] The DSM-3 was referring to events such as war, torture, genocide, natural disasters, and human-made disasters, as opposed to other painful although "normal" stressors such as divorce, rejection, failure, illness, financial losses, etc.

In the 1980s, after the publication of the DSM-3, feminist scholars working on the issue of trauma began to bring to light the secret and insidious traumas experienced primarily by women and girls, such as incest and abuse. With extensive research, it became clear just how pervasive abuse and incest is; "as many as a third of all girls are sexually abused prior to the age of sixteen.[5] Incest was not unusual, and clearly not 'outside the range of human experience.'"[6] Through the work of feminist activists and scholars such as Laura Brown, Maria Root, and Diana E.H. Russel, the larger mental health community came to acknowledge just how widespread traumatic events were, and ultimately broadened the definition of a "traumatic event" to include:

"exposure to war as a combatant or civilian, threatened or actual physical assault (e.g., physical attack, robbery, mugging, childhood physical abuse), threatened or actual sexual violence (e.g., forced sexual penetration, alcohol/drug-facilitated sexual penetration, abusive sexual contact, noncontact sexual abuse, sexual trafficking), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war, natural or human-made disasters, and severe motor vehicle accidents. For children, sexually violent events may include developmentally inappropriate sexual experiences without physical violence or injury. A life-threatening illness or debilitating medical condition is not necessarily considered a traumatic event. Medical incidents that qualify as traumatic

[4]Matthew J Friedman, "Va.Gov: Veterans Affairs," PTSD History and Overview, January 31, 2007, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/essentials/history_ptsd.asp.
[5] (Russel, 1986)

[6]Laura Brown, "CHAPTER TITLE," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed.Cathy Caruth, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 101.

events involve sudden, catastrophic events (e.g., waking during surgery, anaphylactic

shock). Witnessed events include, but are not limited to, observing threatened or serious

injury, unnatural death, physical or sexual abuse of another person due to violent assault,

domestic violence, accident, war or disaster, or a medical catastrophe in one's child (e.g.,

a life threatening hemorrhage). Indirect exposure through learning about an event is

limited to experiences affecting close relatives or friends and experiences that are violent

or accidental (e.g., death due to natural causes does not qualify). Such events include

violent personal assault, suicide, serious accident, and serious injury. The disorder may be

especially severe or long-lasting when the stressor is interpersonal and intentional (e.g.,

torture, sexual violence)."[7]

These examples, as set in the DSM-5 in 2013, are not all-encompassing but are clearly broader

than first conceptualized in the 1980s.

Traumatic events, while objectively awful, do not affect all people in the same way. Some

people may experience these events as deeply distressing without experiencing intense or

long-lasting effects. It is widely agreed that a deeply distressing event becomes a trauma when an

individual's meaning-making system (the way they understand themselves and the world) is

completely shattered, rendering them psychologically different than they were before the event

occurred. These traumas may not develop into PTSD. In fact, most people who experience

traumas do not develop PTSD.[8] Nevertheless, a trauma creates a profound shift in a person's

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[7] American Psychiatric Association, *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: APA, 2013), 274-275.

[8] Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda (n.d.), "Cultural trauma and epigenetic inheritance," *Development and Psychopathology*, (Published online 28 September 2018): 16, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579418001153.; George A. Bonano, "Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events?" *American Psychologist*, 59 (2004), 20 –29, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt, "Altruism born of suffering: the roots of caring and helping after victimization and other trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry,* 78 no. 3 (2008): 267-280; Richard G. Tedeschi, "Posttraumatic growth in survivors and their societies," *Aggression and Violent Behavior,* 4 (1999),

understanding of the world, whether that be in a constructive or destructive way. It depends on the individual.

Collective Trauma

Of particular relevance to this thesis is the way in which people experience and respond to trauma not as individuals but as members of collectives. While there are similarities between psychological and collective trauma, they are markedly different phenomena. Israeli researcher Gilad Hirschberger[9] defines collective trauma as "the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society[10]; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people. It suggests that the tragedy is represented in the collective memory of the group, and like all forms of memory it comprises not only a reproduction of the events, but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it." This suggests that collective trauma not only includes the experience of the event itself but the way in which that experience is represented and remembered by the group.

While only a few people may directly experience a traumatic event, the event nonetheless comes to constitute a collective trauma when people who may have been removed by time and space from the actual event come to experience the world through the crisis of meaning that the event created. For instance, many consider the events of 9/11 to be a collective trauma for the United States, in that the events and their aftermath reverberated out from that day forward, affecting millions of Americans from a variety of backgrounds and fundamentally changing the

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319-34, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt, "Altruism born of suffering: the roots of caring and helping after victimization and other trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry,* 78 no. 3 (2008): 267-280.
[9]Gilad Hirschberger. "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018),1. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441.

[10] This could refer to communities of any size or any kind of identity group including but not limited to social, political, cultural, gender, ethnic, or religious groups.

nation's defensive stance towards the outside world. The vast majority of Americans weren't at Ground Zero that day, or in New York City for that matter. But they were irrevocably touched by the events of 9/11, whether emotionally, socially, or politically, mainly through mass media and television. Tens of millions of people around the country watched in real time as a plane hit the second tower, as that tower crumbled, and as people jumped out of windows to their deaths. It was utterly horrifying. The aftereffects of 9/11 changed our world, and those effects are still being felt today. For example, air travel in the U.S. changed forever. Before 9/11, one could arrive at their gate 10 minutes before their flight took off. Now, it is normal to remove your shoes, pass through full-body metal detectors, and have one's hands swabbed for explosives. The events of 9/11 engendered a sense of fear and caution towards foreigners and exacerbated issues around racism, immigration, and international relations. It is hard for most people of all ages in the United States to remember what life was like before 9/11, as that day so irrevocably changed the way people travel and understand the world.

Collective trauma also happens on much smaller scales. In his work on the disintegration of small-town communities destroyed by the Buffalo Creek flood in West Virginia in 1972, sociologist Kai Erikson noted that collective traumas constitute "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality."[11] Collective traumas can happen to any collective of any size and can unfold over a wide array of timelines, depending on how they are remembered and represented across space and time.

The concept of memory is key to understanding trauma at all levels, because the way an individual or a collective remembers the catastrophic event directly informs the meaning they make out of the experience and the reactions they have to it. Hirschberger tells us that

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[11] Kai Erikson, *Everything In Its Path* (Simon & Schuster, 1978), 153.

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"collective memory of trauma is different from individual memory because collective memory persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events, and is remembered by group members that may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space. These subsequent generations of trauma survivors, that never witnessed the actual events, may remember the events differently than the direct survivors, and then the construction of these past events may take different shape and form from generation to generation."[12] Hirschberger additionally suggests that trauma is not necessarily only a destructive event but may also be an "irreplaceable ingredient in the construction of collective meaning."[13] In this way, collective traumas may come to constitute what trauma researcher Vamik Volkan calls *chosen trauma* or "the mental representation of an event that has caused a large group to face drastic losses, feel helpless and victimized by another group, and share a humiliating injury… [reflecting] a group's unconscious *"choice"* to add a past generation's mental representation of an event to its own identity."[14] We will continue to explore the role of collective memory in the transmission of collective trauma later in this chapter.

Cultural Trauma

A subcategory of collective trauma that was identified by a group of sociologists[15] in the early 2000s is the concept of *cultural trauma.* Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander explains that a

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[12] Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning.".
[13] Ibid.
[14] Volkan Vamik, "Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas," transcript of speech delivered at Opening Address of XIII International Congress of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy, August, 1998.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247735625_Transgenerational_Transmissions_and_Chosen_Traumas_An_Aspect_of_Large-Group_Identity

[15] Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, University of California Press, 2004.

cultural trauma occurs "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."[16] To this, Alexander's colleague Neil Smelser adds that a cultural trauma "is a memory accepted and publicly given credence to by a relevant membership group evoking an event or situation that is a) laden with negative affect b) represented as indelible c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more fundamental cultural presuppositions."[17] For both Alexander and Smelser, trauma is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but rather one that is socially constructed through the way a culture remembers or commemorates a specific event, and the sociocultural situation of that society at the time of the event. Events such as catastrophic natural disasters, massive population depletion, genocide, and war, for example, may be candidates for cultural trauma, but they do not automatically become so. Not only that, but a given event or situation may constitute a trauma for a society at one point in time but not in another. It all depends on how the event is remembered and the function of remembering at various points in time. As Smelser says "Cultural traumas are for the most part historically made, not born."[18]

Smelser further differentiates between social traumas and cultural traumas. He defines society as the organization of social relations in a given community. The main units of society are economic, legal, medical, educational, and family institutions, and may be further divided into social classes and racial and ethnic groups. A social trauma, then, is an event or situation that massively disrupts organized social life. Examples include decimation through disease, famine and war, or the Great Depression of the 1930s. A culture, on the other hand, is a grouping

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[16] Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, (University of California Press, 2004), 1.

[17] Neil J. Smelser, *"Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma,"* in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, (University of California Press, 2004), 37.

[18]Smelser, *"Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma,"* 37.

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of elements including values, norms, outlooks, beliefs, ideologies, knowledge, and empirical

assertions, linked with one another to some degree as a meaning-making system.[19] A cultural

trauma, then, is an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or overwhelm

several ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole. Examples include the Protestant

Reformation, which threatened the dominant Catholic worldview; colonialism (the imposition of

Western values on colonial societies); and the exposure of migrating groups to the cultures of

host societies. Some historical events may constitute both social and cultural traumas. For

instance, Jewish emancipation in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries led to the breakdown of

traditional Jewish institutions and communal structures, and fundamentally changed Jewish

practice and belief.

Fundamental to the concept of cultural trauma is that for a group to call a given historical

event or situation traumatic, the event must create a radical challenge to, disruption of, or change

to collective identity. It must create a crisis in meaning, not necessarily for how the collective

functions but in how the collective understands itself. This may change and inform collective

functioning, but cultural trauma fundamentally has to do with more collective identity.

Intergenerational Trauma

A closely related phenomenon to psychological, collective, and cultural trauma is the idea

of intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma refers to trauma effects passed down from

parents to their children and to future generations. This relatively new field emerged in the 1990s

through studies conducted with the children of Holocaust survivors. Researchers started to notice

that second-generation Holocaust survivors who had not themselves experienced the death

camps had certain mental images, affects, and coping mechanisms directly related to the

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[19]Ibid.

experiences of their parents. This led researchers to wonder if there was an underlying biological component to what the second-generation survivors were experiencing.

Through the study of epigenetics,[20] researchers are finding that there may in fact be ways that experiences such as famine and parental neglect change the way certain genes related to stress and metabolic responses express themselves. This is not to say that the DNA itself is changed, but rather that environmental factors can affect how a gene comes to be expressed. For instance, a study found that the offspring of Holocaust survivors are three times more likely to develop PTSD from a traumatic circumstance.[21] Why this is the case is not altogether clear, but it seems likely to be a biological and behavioral stress response inherited from parents and grandparents. The language of epigenetic change mechanisms[22] has helped researchers understand how trauma persists through generations, especially among certain cultural groups like Ashkenazi Jews and African Americans. While most studies on epigenetic transmission of intergenerational trauma have focused on the descendents of Holocaust survivors, there have been similar findings among other populations that have experienced genocide, colonization, war, and slavery.[23]

Transmission of Collective Trauma

Collective Memory

Collective memory can be defined as recollections of a shared past held by members of any group of any size who experienced it. Collective memory differs from history in that

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[20] The study of alterations on genes that change the way genes are expressed and function.
[21] David Samuels, "Is Jewish Trauma Genetic?," Tablet Magazine, December 11, 2014, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/trauma-genes-q-a-rachel-yehuda.
[22] We will go into this further in the chapter.
[23] Lehrner and Yehuda, "Cultural trauma and epigenetic inheritance," 12.

memory does not constitute an objective reconstruction of past events, but rather a group's attempt to create meaning from past events in order to help inform the group identity. Collective memories function much the way myths do, in that they are reconstructions of past events told again and again in order to create narratives of a group's past which in turn shape the present and future of the group. Sociologist Ron Eyerman, who worked closely with Alexander and Smelser on developing the concept of cultural trauma, notes that "collective memory is essential to a group's notion of itself and thus must continually be made over to fit historical events, that is, events that are recorded and known to others, the meaning of such events is interpreted from the perspective of the group's needs and interests, within limits of course. History, especially as a profession and academic discipline, aims at something wider, more objective, and more universal than group memory."[24] Collective memory, then, is a dynamic process that is constantly re-evaluating and re-examining a group's past in order to provide continuity to that specific group's identity. The boundaries between collective memory and history are fuzzy and often contested, because in order for a group to maintain its identity, it may try to cast collective recollections as objective truth. Objective truths in the realm of history and memory are hard to come by, because all events are multifaceted and multidimensional, and are likely to be remembered and represented differently by all parties involved. What is important to note about collective memory, though, is that it is first and foremost concerned with creating communal narratives that in turn inform communal identity.

Collective trauma often creates a disruption in collective identity and forces old narratives to be re-evaluated and re-cast. This in turn shapes collective memory and collective identity. Sometimes past traumas become essential to collective memory and collective identity,

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[24]Ron Eyerman, "*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,*" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, (University of California Press, 2004), 67.

becoming chosen traumas over the years in that the group makes an unconscious "choice" to add past generations' representations of traumatic events to the group's present identity. According to Volkan, "the historical truth about the event is no longer important for the large group, but what is important is that through sharing the chosen trauma, members of the group are linked together."[25] Chosen traumas may lie dormant in a collective until they are reactivated by conscious and unconscious connections made between the past trauma and a contemporary threat. This activates fears, expectations, fantasies, and defenses associated with the chosen trauma.[26]

Why do collectives remember past traumas?

The Victim's Perspective

There are many reasons why groups who have experienced trauma, whether by human or natural forces, remember past victimization. At the basic evolutionary level, remembering promotes group survival and restores a group's feeling in its capability to survive. If members of a group know that quickly-receding water at the beach indicates a tsunami is about to crash down, then they will know to seek higher ground, thus making their survival more likely. Beyond that, collective memory of past traumas helps establish collective meaning, which is essential to a group's perpetuation. Just as it is essential to individual human functioning to be able to make meaning out of extreme adversity,[27] so too do groups need to do this in order to survive. Collective memory of past trauma acts as a transgenerational way for group members to understand the world. Letting go of that understanding can have adverse and costly

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[25] Volkan, "Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas."
[26] Ibid.
[27] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962.)

consequences. It may even be akin to "abdicating"[28]collective meaning, because it allows the lessons learned from the trauma to be lost to future generations. Remembering past traumas acts as a guide for future generations on how to identify threats and respond effectively.

While tsunamis will always remain tsunamis, human groups change over time, and their relationships to other groups can also change over time. A past enemy may become an ally when circumstances arise that allow for groups to work together for their own survival. Should these past enemies — who may have perpetrated unspeakable cruelty against the other group — always be remembered by future generations as untrustworthy, even when circumstances change? It makes sense for a victimized group to remain vigilant and cautious toward former perpetrators and perhaps even all outside groups. But this type of meaning-making can develop into what Hirschberger calls a *post-traumatic worldview.*[29] Adaptive caution turns into a post-traumatic worldview when it is

> "characterized by extreme vigilance, compulsive attention to threat that may be accompanied with inattentional blindness to positive signals from other groups, and the sense that the group is alone in this world and must fend for itself[30]... the chronic distrust of others might foster extreme self-reliance and an aggressive stance toward any threat, big or small. If existence is capricious and the group stands alone against the entire world then any threat must be considered an existential threat as there is no margin for error and no tolerance for incorrect rejections of a threat that may turn out to be real; responses must be swift and powerful, and because life itself is at stake, the moral justification for action is incontrovertible."[31]

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[28] Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning."
[29]Ibid.
[30]Ibid.
[31]Ibid.

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This aggressive stance toward the world may in turn justify extreme actions, and even violence toward perceived threats — actions which themselves may end up threatening the survival of group members.

If this is the case, why do groups hold on to post-traumatic worldviews that may be more destructive than constructive? One reason is because trauma is closely a kind of *symbolic immortality*[32] in that a person lives on through the group after death. Identification with a group then becomes a form of survival, so any threat to the group becomes a threat to the individual. Collective traumas strengthen group adherence and identification because they signal an existential threat to the group and their members.[33] Additionally, post-traumatic worldviews and the search for collective meaning that they engender signal an attempt to insert meaning into otherwise meaningless tragedies, by recasting these tragedies as acts of heroism and triumph. For example, although suicide bombings are horrifically tragic events for random innocent victims and their communities, they are also a tragic loss of the individual life of the bomber and their communities. The underlying motivation of a suicide bombing, though, is the bomber's sense that their death, an individual tragedy, will transform them from a powerless nobody to a glorious martyr who was willing to sacrifice their life for the good of their people, thus contributing to their group's symbolic immortality.

Social representations of collective trauma at any given time indicate how that group is making collective meaning from that experience. This changes over time as the group faces new and different circumstances, and are highly variable. Just because people belong to the same group, for example, does not mean they understand history the same way. For instance, take the

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[32]Ibid.
[33]Ibid.

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phrase often used by Jews, "Never Again," which refers to the Nazi Holocaust. Some Jews understand this phrase to mean, "Never again will the Jewish people be led like sheep to their own slaughter," see the words as a call to preserve Jewish life at all costs. Others understand them to mean that Jews must lead the fight against discrimination and prejudice of all kinds, for all people, because Jews know what it is like to suffer at the hands of hatred. This shows that while social representations of collective memory may try to cast history as a certain set of facts, individuals within a group will still draw their own conclusions from those facts.

The Perpetrator's Perspective

Perpetuating violence on others constitutes a trauma in and of itself, in that it represents an identity threat. People and groups want to see themselves in a positive light, so when members of those groups do something horrendous against others, this may cause moral injury and a search for meaning among the wider group.

When accused perpetrator groups are cast by victimized groups and third parties in a negative light, they may react in a variety of ways. They may deny they had anything to do with the trauma; they may try to reconstruct what happened in order to portray themselves in a positive light; they may try to willfully forget the trauma in order to bury past misdeeds; or they may acknowledge responsibility; which allows them to regain moral authority and acceptance.[34]

Depositing

Research on child-rearing and child psychological development shows that traumatized caregivers can "deposit" traumatic memory fragments to their children.[35] In the depositing

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[34]Ibid.
[35] Vamik Volkan and William F. Greer, "Transgenerational Transmission and Deposited Representations: Psychological Burdens Visited by One Generation upon Another," (Published in Finnish), 4-5:

process, an adult consciously or unconsciously pushes their self-specific and internalized images onto the developing self-representation of the child. In this way, the child becomes a reservoir for deposited images and may receive what some have called a *psychological gene*[36] that influences how they see and represent themselves, thus affecting their sense of identity.

The same phenomenon seems to happen among traumatized collectives. Individuals in a traumatized group have their own unique identities and reactions to trauma, but they share the mental representations of tragedies experienced by the group. Unless these shared mental images of a shared traumatic event are consciously worked through, then they are "deposited" on the developing self-images of children of the next generation for them to work through on their own. If these children are unable to deal with the images deposited onto them, they will pass them on to their children. And so, through depositing, trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next.[37]

The Cycle of Generational Memory

As might be expected, collective memory can take on different forms and mean different things as it is passed down, or forgotten, throughout the generations. It is widely thought that events experienced during adolescence or early adulthood tend to make a great impression and link one to others of their age cohort who experienced those events as well, leading to what experts call *generational memory.*[38] Sociologist Karl Manheim shows that the function of

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360697347_VOLKAN_2007_PUBLISHED_IN_FINNISH_Transgenerational_Transmission_and_Deposited_Representations_Psychological_Burdens_Visited_by_One_Generation_upon_Another.

[36] Volkan and Greer, "Transgenerational Transmission and Deposited Representations: Psychological Burdens Visited by One Generation upon Another," 6-7.

[37]Volkan,"Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas."

[38]Ron Eyerman, "*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,*" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity,* edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka (University of California Press, 2004), 71.

generational memory is in offering "fresh contact with 'the social and cultural heritage' of a

social order, which 'facilitates re-evaluation of our inventory and teaches us both to forget that

which is no longer useful and to covet that which is yet to be won.'"[39] Youth play an important

role in society by providing a fresh perspective on the past as well as generating new responses

to the past that will inform their future behavior through their own experiences of the present.

This can happen through direct experience of generationally defining events, as well as being

mediated through mass media. For instance, not all children of the sixties participated in social

movements; many watched on TV. And yet there is still a strong sense of generational identity

among people who came of age during that era.

      This applies to the collective memory of collective traumas, in that every 20 to 30 years,

members of a generation look back and reconstruct the past, in order to make sense of traumatic

histories.[40] In their work studying remembrances of the Spanish Civil War, scholars Juan Jose

Igartua and Dario Paez[41] identified four factors that underlie and explain generational memory:

1. The healing power of time: psychological distance from a traumatizing event allows

    people to look back at the past with less pain.

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[39] Karl Manheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Culture,* (London: Routledge, 1952), 360, quoted in Ron Eyerman, "*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,*" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity,* edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka (University of California Press, 2004), 71.

[40] James W. Pennebaker and Beckly L. Banasi, "On the Creation and Maintenance of Collective Memory of Political Events: History as Social Psychology," in *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives,* edited by J. W. Pennebaker, D. Paez, and B. Rime (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997), quoted in Ron Eyerman, "*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,*" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity,* edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka (University of California Press, 2004), 72.

[41] Juan Jose Igartua and Dario Paez, "Art and Remembering Collective Events," in *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives,* edited by J. W. Pennebaker, D. Paez, and B. Rime (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997), 83-84, quoted in Ron Eyerman, "*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,*" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity,* edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka (University of California Press, 2004), 72.

2. The accumulation of social resources to commemorate the trauma: these often do not come until middle age when people have enough financial resources to undergo and participate in commemorative activities.

3. The power of youth: the most foundational events of one's life typically occur between the ages of 12-25 and are remembered vividly later in life.

4. Disappearance of sociopolitical repression with time: if there is sociopolitical repression around past events, these forces will disappear socially and physically within 20-30 years of the event, leaving room for victims to publicly commemorate what happened to them.

This shows that the meaning of traumatic events morphs over time as the generation that directly experienced them ages and (hopefully) develops more power. It also shows that power and access to the means of representation play important roles in how events are remembered or forgotten. These remembrances are passed down to members of future generations, who themselves will age and amass power and in turn put their own spin on the past, affecting how it informs the present and thus the future.

Collective Memory, Cultural Trauma, and Collective Identity

In his groundbreaking study on the development of African American identity through the intersections of collective memory, collective trauma, and collective identity, Ron Eyerman defines collective memory as "the biography of a group…a historical narrative of the making of a group's collective identity."[42] In this way, collective memory provides a framework for individual identity. Through his work, Eyerman shows how cultural trauma can become an essential component of a group's collective memory through historical narratives based in loss

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[42]Eric Taylor Woods, "Cultural Trauma: Ron Eyerman and the Founding of a New Research Paradigm" *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 7 no. 2 (2019): 266, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-019-00071-0.

and suffering. For instance, the slavery of African Americans is an example of a cultural trauma whose legacy has endured since the end of the Civil War and is the "key point of departure in the narration of African American collective memory. It is the 'primal scene,' or 'root,' from which narratives of black identity in the United States begin…situating a cultural trauma at the root of collective memory in this way has implications for how it is narrated. Unlike collective identities that have as their 'primal scene' an imagined glorious past, which can be recalled positively for succor and inspiration, the recollection of a cultural trauma is loaded with negative affect."[43] If cultural traumas lie at the root of collective identity they must be "repaired." In order for there to be repair, the collective memory must make sense of the trauma, putting it into the large context of the collective's history and imbuing it with some kind of positive meaning in order to give group members a sense of empowerment.

As an example of this, Eyerman notes that African American intellectuals have tended to converge around one of two narratives surrounding slavery: the progressive narrative and the tragic narrative. The progressive narrative uses the remembrance of slavery as a measuring stick for the progress of Black Americans. In this narrative, slavery is seen as a stepping stone on their way to collective fulfillment and integration in larger American society. In the tragic narrative, the pernicious legacy of slavery is not confined to the past but rather lives on through ongoing racism experienced at the individual and structural levels. The path to full collective fulfillment then is not full integration into American society, but rather independence and self-determination.[44] These narratives take different perspectives on a past characterized by extreme suffering and oppression, but each, in its own way, provides individuals with a way to

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[43]Woods, "Cultural Trauma: Ron Eyerman and the Founding of a New Research Paradigm," 267.
[44]Eyerman, "*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,*" 71.

understand their place vis a vis the past and gives them a constructive path to approach their identity, and how they choose to express it in the world.

The Social Process of Cultural Trauma

In conjunction with the work of Eyerman, Smelser, Giesen, and Sztompka, sociologist Jefferey Alexander laid out the social process of cultural trauma in his field-defining book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* in 2004, co-written with the aforementioned authors. Alexander argues that massive disruptions experienced by societies are not in and of themselves traumatic. "For traumas to emerge at the level of collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing, representations of these events quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. Is the result of the acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors 'decide' to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go."[45]

The *trauma process* begins with a claim about an event causing a fundamental injury to a collective. This claim is first made by a speaker and transmitted by *carrier groups*. Carrier groups are generally cultural specialists such as clergy, politicians, intellectuals, artists, journalists, moral entrepreneurs, and leaders of social movements.[46] The speaker makes a claim to a public over which they have influence, asserting that something experienced by the group is a trauma. The speaker uses the particularities of the historical situation, the symbolic resources at hand, and the constraints and opportunities provided by institutional structures. Once carrier

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[45] Alexander "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," 10.
[46] Smelser, "*Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma,"* 38.

group members are convinced they have been traumatized, they broadcast the trauma claim to a wider public audience.

Sometimes convincing others of the trauma means the creation of a new story — a new master narrative. There are four critical representations essential to the creation of a new master narrative:

1. **The nature of the pain:** What actually happened — to the particular group and to the wider collectivity of which it was a part?

2. **The nature of the victim:** What group of persons was affected by this traumatizing pain? Were they particular individuals or groups, or "the people" in general? Did a singular and delimited group receive the brunt of the pain, or were several groups involved?

3. **Relation of trauma victim to the wider audience:** To what extent do the members of the audience for trauma representations experience an identity with the immediately victimized group?

4. **Attribution of responsibility:** Who actually injured the victim? Who caused the trauma?[47]

The creation of new master narratives is powerfully mediated by the nature of the institutional arenas and stratification hierarchies within which it occurs. This includes religious, aesthetic, legal, and scientific institutions, as well as the mass media and state bureaucracy.[48] The social process of cultural trauma and the creation of a new master narrative will cause collective identity to become significantly revised. This identity revision will cause a search for remembering the past. Once the collective identity has become revised, there will eventually

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[47] Alexander "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," 12-14.
[48] Ibid, 15-21.

emerge a period of "calming down." The lessons of the trauma will become objectified in monuments, museums, and collections of historical artifacts. The new collective identity will be rooted in sacred places and structured in ritual routines.[49] In this way, the trauma process will have become routine. This is neither good nor bad. Carrier groups might find it regrettable that past traumas no longer hold the same salience for lay members of the collective and may at times try to resurrect the strong feelings originally engendered by these cultural traumas. This routinization does not mean that the cultural trauma ceases to hold extraordinary social significance. Their routinization still has "profound normative implications for the conduct of social life. By allowing members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others, cultural traumas broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy, and they provide powerful avenues for new forms of social incorporation."[50] In this way, cultural traumas can lead to greater social cohesion and cooperation for both ingroups and outgroups.

Epigenetic Transmission

Through the study of trauma and epigenetics — or how a person's behavior and environment can change how their genes work without altering the DNA sequence — there seems to be evidence for biological trauma transmission. As trauma researchers Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda[51] note, this does not mean that "Trauma from slavery can actually be passed down through your genes: you can get PTSD from your ancestors."[52] It means that scientists have identified epigenetic mechanisms through which certain genes *may* become expressed when people whose ancestors have a history of trauma are exposed to certain environmental stressors.

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[49] Ibid, 23.
[50] Ibid, 24.
[51] Lehrner and Yehuda, "Cultural trauma and epigenetic inheritance," 13.
[52] Lincoln Anthony Blades, "Trauma from Slavery Can Actually Be Passed down through Your Genes," Teen Vogue, May 31, 2016, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/slavery-trauma-inherited-genetics.

For instance, research on PTSD has found that the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, an essential component of the body's stress management system, shows that offspring of trauma survivors and combat veterans, even offspring without PTSD, have HPA axis alterations similar to those observed in samples with PTSD. This includes lower cortisol levels and higher glucocorticoid receptor sensitivity, all of which are associated with the way the body manages stress.[53]

In the field of epigenetics, there is a difference between intergenerational and transgenerational transmission. In intergenerational transmission, trauma effects are induced by the offspring's direct exposure to the trauma, usually in utero. Transgenerational effects are those observed in generations not directly exposed to the environment that triggered the trauma. "For this reason, effects are only considered transgenerational if observed in F3 females (F0 is the exposed mother), because the F1 female offspring and her F2 germ cells would be exposed to the trauma in utero. F3 would therefore be the first generation not directly exposed to the trauma. In males, effects observed in F2 would be considered transgenerational."[54]

Researchers have identified three epigenetic trauma transmission mechanisms: parental and social care, in utero transmission, and transmission through sex cells.[55] A child's social and familial environment may in fact transfer information to the child's epigenome, which will affect how the information is biologically encoded and expressed. "Myriad forms of social information, including parent-offspring interactions, social learning, and symbolic cultural communication can lead to the transmission of epigenetic variations."[56] A mother's experiences and environment while pregnant can also have effects on epigenetic transmission. A mother's nutritional intake

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[53] Lehrner and Yehuda, "Cultural trauma and epigenetic inheritance," 18.
[54]Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56]Ibid.

and stress levels can all have dramatic effects on the development of offspring and the offspring's offspring. For instance, starvation during pregnancy can affect health outcomes in grandchildren.[57] Trauma that occurred prior to conception may also affect offspring through alterations in parental sex cells that are conserved during fertilization and the formation of the embryo,[58] and can be maintained across more than one generation.[59] Trauma is clearly a process, the effects of which can be passed down through collectives and through generations in a variety of ways.

Effects of Collective Trauma

While we often think of trauma of any kind as an objectively terrible thing, the effects of trauma are in fact more mixed. Some are destructive, some are constructive, and others are somewhere in between. Traumas on the individual and collective level induce a crisis of meaning. Alexander Veerman and Ruard Ganzevort define crisis as a disturbance of meaning due to the appraisal of events as too demanding, resources too limited, and are visible in symptoms of the disruption of psychological equilibrium.[60] For them, the main tasks of coping with trauma include the restructuring of the inner world and the integration of the events into the narrative meaning-system. Sometimes, individuals and groups undergo experiences for which there is no narrative frame, and so they must derive novel meaning from the experience. This is not necessarily a bad thing, because it adds new forms of knowledge to the group's consciousness that will inform future behavior.

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[57]Ibid, 21.
[58]Ibid, 22.
[59]Ibid, 23.
[60]Alexander L. Veerman and Ruard Ganzevoort,"Communities Coping with Collective Trauma," 2001. http://www.ruardganzevoort.nl/pdf/2001_Collective_trauma.pdf.

Because collective trauma undermines a fundamental sense of security, Hirschberger observes that at the individual level, people "display significantly higher rates of psychological distress; at the social level second and third generation survivors display heightened individual and collective fear, feelings of vulnerability, injured national pride, humiliation, a crisis of identity, and a predisposition to react with heightened vigilance to new threats, such that the pain of past generations is conflated with threats facing the current generation."[61] Conversely, because trauma catalyzes a search for meaning, collective trauma may also "contribute to the creation of a national narrative, a sense of identity, and cognitive working models that ostensibly function to ensure the safety and well-being of the group and provide it with values and guidelines for the future. Collective trauma may, therefore, facilitate the construction of the various elements of meaning and social identity: purpose, values, efficacy, and collective worth. These effects of trauma on the construction of collective meaning may, ironically, increase as time elapses from the traumatic event because the focus of memory shifts from the painful loss of lives to the long-term lessons groups derive from the trauma."[62] Collective trauma sometimes also has a positive impact on group identity and "cohesion and often bolsters affiliation with the group through a feeling of shared fate and destiny – an integration of the traumatic experience into one's identity and narrative.[63]

Scholars on epigenetic trauma transmission have similarly noted that while transgenerational trauma most commonly portrays a sense of vulnerability and damage, it could also be said that it shows growth, evolution, adaption, and resilience. Lehrner and Yehuda argue that few say "memory (collective/cultural memory) is damaging or poses a threat to healthy

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[61]Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning."
[62]Ibid.
[63]Ibid.

development, or requires preventive interventions.[64] If this is the case, why should molecular memory be "mired in a narrative of damage?"[65] With this in mind, this section will explore various effects of collective trauma as they apply to groups and individuals. Some of these effects are destructive and some constructive, but all are nonetheless responses to the meaning found in collective trauma.

Siege Mentality

One of the byproducts of a prolonged history of collective trauma is *collective angst* due to *extinction threat.* Extinction threat refers to the possibility that the existence of an individual or collective may be in jeopardy. At the communal level, this may trigger collective angst, which is characterized as generalized concern for an ingroup's future vitality. In 2010, a series of studies[66] on Canadian Jews showed that collective angst induced by extinction threat can regulate group behavior by motivating group members to engage in group strengthening and protecting activities. This can lead to greater social cohesion, while also legitimizing acts of harm to outgroups in the name of protecting the ingroup.

Consequently, these responses may develop into what's called *siege mentality.* Siege mentality is defined as a mental state in which members of a group hold a central belief that the rest of the world has highly negative behavioral intentions toward them.[67] This occurs when a significant or influential part of a group believes that outsiders have intention to do wrong to or inflict harm on their group. This is accompanied by beliefs that their ingroup is "alone" in the

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[64]Lehrner and Yehuda, "Cultural trauma and epigenetic inheritance," 29.
[65]Ibid.
[66]Michael J. A.Wohl, Nyla R. Branscombe, Stephen Reysen "Perceiving Your Group's Future to Be in Jeopardy: Extinction Threat Induces Collective Angst and the Desire to Strengthen the Ingroup," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36(7)(2010), 898–910.
[67]Daniel Bar-Tal, "Altruistic Motivation To Help: Definition, Utility and Operationalization," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 13, no. 1/2 (1986): 3–14. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23262656.

world; that there is a danger to their existence; that the group must be united in the face of danger; that they cannot expect help from anyone in time of need; and that all means are justified for group defense.[68] "When siege mentality beliefs characterize a society, they are part of the national ethos and therefore are expressed through educational, cultural, and political channels. Individuals acquire them in schools, from parents, through literature and media."[69]

The study of siege mentality has primarily focused on Jews and especially Israeli Jews, but it is not unique to these cases. For Jews and Israeli Jews especially, the siege mentality "is a consequence of a long history of past experiences which left their mark on the Jewish psyche and imprinted on the emerging Israeli ethos."[70] For example, in a national survey of Israeli Jews, performed in January 1988, 50% of the respondents believed that "The whole world is against us," with 63% believing that "Israel is and will continue to be 'a people dwelling apart.'"[71] Researchers say this explains Israel's behavior towards the world. In a study conducted on Israeli Jews in the early 1990s, Israeli researchers Bar-Tal and Antebi hypothesized that religious Israeli Jews would be more hawkish on political and security issues because of biblically rooted beliefs in other nations' hatred of Israel and their intentions to hurt it, which are a hallmark of siege mentality beliefs. The researchers found this hypothesis to be correct. Religious Israeli Jews were indeed found to have higher levels of siege mentality than secular Jews.

Siege mentality is often associated with ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism denotes a tendency to accept the ingroup, reject the outgroup, and view the ingroup as superior to the outgroup in all

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[68] Daniel Bar-Tal, "Altruistic Motivation To Help: Definition, Utility and Operationalization," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 13, no. 1/2 (1986): 3–14. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23262656, quoted in Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antebi, "Beliefs about Negative Intentions of the World: A Study of the Israeli Siege Mentality," *Political Psychology* 13 (4) (1992), 634. https://doi.org/10.2307/3791494.

[69] Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antebi, "Beliefs about Negative Intentions of the World: A Study of the Israeli Siege Mentality," *Political Psychology* 13 (4) (1992), 636. https://doi.org/10.2307/3791494.

[70] Bar-Tal and Antebi, "Beliefs about Negative Intentions of the World: A Study of the Israeli Siege Mentality," 634.

[71] Ibid., 634-635.

ways.[72] Siege mentality differs from ethnocentrism, though, in that it is not rooted in a group's sense of superiority but rather feelings of mistrust and suspicion towards the outside world — a sense of perpetual danger from outgroups, and a sense of being alone and unable to rely on other groups.[73]

Collective Victimhood

Another potential outcome of collective trauma is the development of a sense of collective victimhood. It is important, though, to distinguish between collective victimization as a process and collective victimhood as an identity. Collective victimization refers to the objective infliction of harm by one group toward another, whereas collective victimhood refers to the psychological experience and consequences of such harm. These consequences may entail victimization-related effects, cognitions, and behaviors that shape the group's collective identity, as well as its interactions with other groups.[74] Most instances of collective victimhood stem from collective victimization, but not all collective victimizations result in a sense of collective victimhood. Collective victimization can include both structural and direct violence.[75] In defining the difference between structural and direct violence, Noor et al say:

"Structural violence entails harm that is done by creating discriminating societal

structures and practices, resulting in inequalities in health, housing, education,

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[72]W. G. Sumner, *Folkways*, (New York: Ginn, 1906), quoted in Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antebi, "Beliefs about Negative Intentions of the World: A Study of the Israeli Siege Mentality," *Political Psychology* 13 (4) (1992), 636. https://doi.org/10.2307/3791494.
[73]Bar-Tal and Antebi, "Beliefs about Negative Intentions of the World: A Study of the Israeli Siege Mentality," 643.

[74]Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017), 121. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.
[75] J. Galtung, "Violence, peace, and peace research." *Journal of Peace Research*, 6,(1969), 167–191, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

employment, and so forth that can impact life expectations. Collective victimization

resulting from direct violence includes colonization, occupation, slavery, ethnic conflict,

terrorism, hate crimes, war, and genocide. Victim groups may also be exposed to both

direct and structural violence simultaneously, or they may endure one form after

another."[76]

Both forms of violence have negative impacts on individual group members' psychological

well-being.[77] The impact of collective victimization can extend to members of groups who did

not directly experience the harm but identify with the group. Suffering can be transmitted and

vicariously experienced through the experiences of directly impacted group members,[78] or

through media, history books, family narratives,[79] shared societal beliefs and conflict narratives.[80]

Researchers have found that when collective victimization becomes collective victimhood,

victim groups develop a desperate need to have their victimization acknowledged.[81]

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[76] Noor et al., "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," 121-122.

[77] http://dx.doi.org/10.1521/psyc.2010.73.3.219, quoted in quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300; M. T. Schmitt, Branscombe, N. R., Postmes, T., & Garcia, A. "The consequences of perceived discrimination for psychological well-being: A meta-analytic review." *Psychological Bulletin,* 140(4) (2014), 921–948, http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1037/a0035754, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[78] B. Lickel, Miller, N., Stenstrom, D. M., Denson, T. F., & Schmader, T, "Vicarious retribution: The role of collective blame in inter-group aggression," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10(4) (2006), 273–390. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1004_6, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[79] Michael J.A. Wohl, and Jay J Van Bavel, "Is identifying with a historically victimized group good or bad for your health? Transgenerational post-traumatic stress and collective victimization," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41 (2011), 818–824.

[80] Daniel Bar-Tal, *Shared beliefs in a Society: Social psychological analysis.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300;
E. Ben Hagai, Hammack, P. L., Pilecki, A., & Aresta, C, "Shifting away from a monolithic narrative on conflict: Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans in conversation," Peace and Conflict: *Journal of Peace Psychology*, 19(3)(2013), 295–310, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0033736, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[81] M. Minow, *Between vengeance and forgiveness. Facing history after genocide and mass violence, (* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social

A group's sense of their collective victimhood can have negative effects on intergroup relations. "For example, reminders of historical victimhood resulted in reduced collective guilt for harm-doing in a present-day, unrelated conflict[82], and reduced intergroup trust toward other outgroup members in the present[83] Importantly, these studies suggest that the effects of collective victimhood extend beyond the immediate context of victimization and affect relations with outgroups that were not responsible for the ingroup's victimization."[84]

Different groups, and even different individuals within groups, will derive different lessons from their collective victimhood. For instance, Israeli conflict studies researchers Yechiel Klar, Noa Shori-Eyal, and Yonat Klar[85] distinguish four lessons that Jews have drawn from the Holocaust:

1. **Never be a passive victim:** this belief has led to harm-doing against perceived adversarial groups.[86]

Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300; E. Staub. "Promoting reconciliation after genocide and mass killing in Rwanda—And other postconflict settings: Understanding the roots of violence, healing, shared history, and general principles," edited by A. Nadler, T. Malloy, &J. D. Fisher in *The social psychology of intergroup reconciliation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[82] Michael J.A. Wohl and N.R. Branscombe, "Remembering historical victimization: Collective guilt for current ingroup transgressions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 94 (6) 2008, 988 -1006.

[83] K. N.,Rotella, Richeson, J. A., Chiao, J. Y., & Bean, M. G, "Blinding trust: The effect of perceived group victimhood on intergroup trust," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 39(1)(2012), 115–127. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167212466114, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[84]Noor et al., "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," 123.

[85]Yechiel Klar, Shori-Eyal, N., & Klar, Y, "The 'Never Again' State of Israel: The emergence of the Holocaust as a core feature of Israeli identity and its four incongruent voices," *Journal of Social Issues,* 69 (2013), 125–143, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/josi.12007.

[86] Michael J.A. Wohl and Nyla R. Branscombe, "Remembering historical victimization: Collective guilt for current ingroup transgressions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 94 (6) 2008, 988 -1006.

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2. **Never abandon one's brothers and sisters:** This can lead to ingroup-strengthening behaviors resulting from perceived existential threat to the ingroup, such as supporting ingroup members who were experiencing discrimination.[87]

3. **Never be a bystander:** the imperative to assist weak and persecuted peoples around the world." [88]

4. **Never be a perpetrator:** The perceived moral obligation to help others extends to neutral third parties. However, this is not always extended to perceived adversaries in ongoing conflict.[89]

Competitive Victimhood

In the field of intergroup relations, researchers have found that groups often engage in what is called *competitive victimhood* irrespective of their roles in conflict.[90] This reflects the motivation of conflicting groups to establish that their group has suffered more than their adversarial group. Groups may compete over any or all aspects of collective victimization.[91]

- **Physical Dimension:** Who has suffered from a higher death toll or more injuries?

- **Material Dimension:** Who has lost more resources or is more severely deprived?

- **Cultural Dimension**: Who has been forced to give up more of their way of life?

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[87]Michael J. A.Wohl, Nyla R. Branscombe, and Stephen Reysen, "Perceiving Your Group's Future to Be in Jeopardy: Extinction Threat Induces Collective Angst and the Desire to Strengthen the Ingroup," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36(7)(2010), 898–910.

[88]Ruth H. Warner, Michael J.A. Wohl, and Nyla R. Branscombe, "When do victim group members feel a moral obligation to help suffering others?", *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 44, (2014) 231–241.

[89]Warner, Wohl, and Branscombe, ""When do victim group members feel a moral obligation to help suffering others?", 231-241.

[90]Masi Noor, Nurit Shnabel, Samer Halabi, and Arie Nadler, "When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16(4)(2012), 351–374.

[91]Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, and Nadler, "When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts," 351-374.

- **Psychological Dimension:** Which group's psychological well-being has been more severely affected?

Groups are also likely to fight over the moral dimensions of suffering and whose victim status is more legitimate.[92] This includes the perception by adversarial groups that the other group may have suffered more, but that their suffering was decidedly more unjust than that of the other group. "Even when a group suffers more objectively, their adversary group may still debate the legitimacy of their respective suffering and whether the suffering was brought on by the victim group itself."[93]

While it may seem strange that groups compete over victimhood, it actually serves several functions. First, it helps leaders bolster group cohesiveness and strengthen identification with the group by strategically recounting and constructing their historical narratives of suffering so that their group is the "bigger" victim.[94] Second, claiming the title of the "greater victim" can entitle groups to justify ingroup violence,[95] or violence against others by an ingroup, including what is viewed as defensive and preemptive violence against perceived threats.[96] Third, if a

[92]N. Ferguson, M. Burgess, and I. Hollywood, " Who are the victims? Victimhood experiences in postagreement Northern Ireland," *Political Psychology,* 31(6) (2010), 857–886. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2010.00791.x, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[93]Noor, Vollhardt, Mar, and Nadler, ""The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood."

[94]Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, and Nadler, "When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts," 351-374.

[95]Daniel Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, L., Schori, N., & Gundar, A., "A sense of self-perceived collective victimhood in intractable conflicts," *International Review of the Red Cross,* 91(874) (2009),229–258. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1816383109990221; Michael J.A. Wohl and N.R. Branscombe, "Remembering historical victimization: Collective guilt for current ingroup transgressions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 94 (6) 2008, 988 -1006.), quoted in in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[96]Daniel Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, L., Schori, N., & Gundar, A., "A sense of self-perceived collective victimhood in intractable conflicts," *International Review of the Red Cross,* 91(874) (2009),229–258. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1816383109990221; M., Ignatieff, *Blood and belonging: Journeys into the new nationalism*, London, UK: BBC Books, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

group has perpetrated harm on another group, it can deny responsibility by claiming the status of "victim" in order to justify its violence as self-defense.[97]

Over the years, research has shown that competitive victimhood not only occurs between adversarial groups, but also between members of minority groups not in conflict with each other. Minority groups have publicly expressed negative attitudes towards other minorities that were not responsible for their past victimization. Laura De Guissme and Laurent Licata note the example of Khalid Muhammad, from the Nation of Islam, who stated that "The black Holocaust was 100 times worse than the so-called Jew Holocaust."[98] M. Bilewicz and A. Stefaniak[99] found that Polish participants who felt their group was strongly victimized during World War II, or felt they were victimized more than Jews during this war, displayed more negative attitudes towards Jews. Recognition of victimhood has important psychological, sociological, and political ramifications, so when recognition of victimhood is denied to a group, or does not meet its expectations, competition for these resources ensues.

Inclusive Victimhood

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[97]Masi Noor, Brown, R. J., & Prentice, G., "Precursors and mediators of intergroup reconciliation in Northern Ireland: A new model," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 47 (2008), 481–495. http://dx.doi.org/10.1348/014466607X238751; Masi Noor, Nurit Shnabel, Samer Halabi, and Arie Nadler, "When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16(4)(2012), 351–374, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[98]Khalid Muhammad, speech at Howard University, 1994, quoted in W. Benn Michaels "Plots against America: Neoliberalism and antiracism," *American Literary History,* 18(2)(2006), 288–302. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajj017, quoted in Laura De Guissmé and Laurent Licata, "Competition over collective victimhood recognition: When perceived lack of recognition for past victimization is associated with negative attitudes towards another victimized group," *European Journal of Social Psychology,* 47(2017), 148.

[99]M. Bilewicz and Stefaniak, A., "Can a victim be responsible? Antisemitic consequences of victimhood-based identity and competitive victimhood in Poland," *Responsibility: An interdisciplinary perspective*edited by B.Bokus, Warsaw, Poland: Lexem (2013), quoted in Laura De Guissmé and Laurent Licata, "Competition over collective victimhood recognition: When perceived lack of recognition for past victimization is associated with negative attitudes towards another victimized group," *European Journal of Social Psychology,* 47(2017), 148.

The converse to competitive victimhood is *inclusive victimhood.* This entails

acknowledging that an outgroup, whether adversarial or not involved in conflict, has suffered in

similar ways to the ingroup. This is also referred to as *inclusive victim consciousness.*[100]

Inclusive victim consciousness predicts positive intergroup attitudes, both within a conflict

setting and toward other victim groups with whom a group is not in conflict with. For example,

drawing groups' attention to their common suffering as a result of regional conflict reduces the

tendency to engage in competitive victimhood and increases willingness for forgiveness.[101] Some

research has also shown how inclusive victim beliefs predict solidarity with and support for other

victim groups that are not adversaries in a conflict or otherwise related to the ingroup's

victimization.[102] For instance, this has been shown in studies on Jewish Americans' support for

victims in Darfur and for shared memorials with other victim groups,[103] and also on general

solidarity between different minority groups that have been targeted by direct and/or structural

violence.[104]

Studies[105] on Jewish Americans show that in order to reach inclusive victim

consciousness, it is imperative that groups' past history of suffering be acknowledged as unique

when they are also paired with shared histories of other groups' victimizations. Victimized

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[100]Noor, Vollhardt, Mar, and Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood."

[101]N. Shnabel, Halabi, S., and Noor, M., "Overcoming competitive victimhood and facilitating forgiveness through re-categorization into a common victim or perpetrator identity," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 5,(2013), 867–877, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.04.007, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[102]Johanna Vollhardt, R. Nair, and L. Tropp, "Inclusive victim consciousness predicts minority group members' support for refugees and immigrants," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 46, (2016). 354–368, quoted in Masi Noor, Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Silvia Mari, and Arie Nadler, "The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47 No. 2 (2017) https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300.

[103]Johanna Ray Vollhardt, "'Crime against Humanity' or 'Crime against Jews'? Acknowledgement in Construals of the Holocaust and Its Importance for Intergroup Relations," *Journal of Social Issues*, 69, (1) (2013), 144-161.

[104]Johanna Ray Vollhardt, "Inclusive victim consciousness in advocacy, social movements, and intergroup relations: Promises and pitfalls." *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 9(1)(2015), 89–120. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12011

[105]"'Crime against Humanity' or 'Crime against Jews'? Acknowledgment in Construals of the Holocaust and Its Importance for Intergroup Relations."

groups crave acknowledgement. Thus, in order to induce inclusive victim consciousness, distinct

group suffering must be acknowledged alongside a connection to universal human suffering.

Resilience

One of the more positive sides of experiencing trauma is that it can lead to greater

resilience. Resilience is defined in this context as "positive adaptation within the context of

significant adversity."[106] The literature has identified three categories of variables contributing to

resilience:

1. **Individual characteristics** such high self-esteem, internal locus of control, self-efficacy,

   social expressiveness, easy-going temperament, optimism and humor, high

   problem-solving and learning skills, and good intellectual functioning.[107] Positive

   temperament may also attract support and create positive experiences during or after

   traumatic events.

2. **Family characteristics** such as positive parenting practices, characterized by warmth and

   consistent inductive discipline,[108] parental monitoring,[109] a close bond with at least one

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[106]S. Luthar, Cicchetti, D., and Becker, B., "The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future wor," *Child Development*, 71 (2000), 543, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2008,* 78 (3)(2008)*,* 269.

[107]Staub and Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," 269.

[108]L.A. Serbin and J. Karp, "The intergenerational transfer of psychosocial risk: Mediators of vulnerability and resilience," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55 (2004) 333–363, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2008,* 78 (3)(2008)*,* 269.

[109] E. J. Christiansen and W.P. Evans, "Adolescent victimization: Testing models of resiliency by gender," *Journal of Early Adolescence,* 25 (2005)298–316, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2008,* 78 (3)(2008)*,* 269.

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competent caregiver,[110] and a family that encourages looking at others' perspectives and empathy.[111]

3. **Social Environment Characteristics** such as bonds to prosocial adults outside the family and connections to prosocial organizations,[112] positive peer influence,[113] and neighborhood cohesion.[114]

All of these factors help people cope with adverse events and limit their negative impact. They may also help transform the meaning of adverse experiences and change the negative psychological orientations to self and others that often arise from adverse experiences. Such resilience can help prevent an adverse experience from becoming a traumatic experience. Even when something is experienced as traumatic, the development of greater resilience is possible.

Post-Traumatic Growth

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[110] M. Rutter, "Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms," in *Risk and protective factors in the development of psychopathology*, edited by J.Rolf, A. Masten, D. Cicchetti, K. Nuechterlein, & S. Weintraub, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press (1990), 181–214, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2008,* 78 (3)(2008)*,* 269.

[111] N. Eisenberg, Fabes, R. A., and Spinrad, T. L." Prosocial development." In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Series Eds.) & N. Eisenberg (Volume Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology*: Vol. 3. Social, emotional, and personality development (6th ed, 646–718). New York: Wiley.(2006),quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2008,* 78 (3)(2008)*,* 269.

[112] A. S. Masten, and J.D. Coatsworth, J. D., "The development of competence in favorable and unfavorable environments: Lessons from research on successful children," *American Psychologist*, 53 (1998), 205–220; E.E. Werner, and R. Smith . *Overcoming the odds. High risk children from birth to adulthood.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1992, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2008,* 78 (3)(2008)*,* 269.

[113] E.E. Werner, "Vulnerability and resiliency in children at risk for delinquency: A longitudinal study from birth to young adulthood," in *Prevention of delinquent behavior, edited by* J. D. Burchard & S. N. Burchard, Newbury Park, CA: Sage (1987), 16–43, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2008,* 78 (3)(2008)*,* 269.

[114] E. J. Christiansen and W.P. Evans, "Adolescent victimization: Testing models of resiliency by gender," *Journal of Early Adolescence,* 25 (2005)298–316, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2008,* 78 (3)(2008)*,* 269.

It is a commonly held belief in Western culture that suffering can be good for the soul. Indeed, trauma research shows that there can be positive growth following trauma. This phenomenon is called *post-traumatic growth* (PTG)*,* which is defined as psychological change following difficult or traumatic events that may take the form of "increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life."[115] This concept can be applied to both individuals and collectives. PTG is thought to depend on how people make meaning out of an event, as opposed to the nature of the event itself.[116] Researchers have identified compassion and altruism as outgrowths of trauma, citing recognition of one's own vulnerability as almost a form of "empathy training."[117]

Although PTG is often associated with positive prosocial behavior, it can also lead to the opposite. A study conducted in 2007[118] on Jews' and Arabs' reactions to events in Israel during the Second Intifada found that PTG was positively correlated with heightened PTSD and greater ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, and support for extreme violence. This may be due to the previously cited research on increased ingroup strengthening and protecting activities among groups that have experienced collective victimization and see themselves in a state of collective victimhood.

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[115]R. G.Tedeschi and Calhoun, L. G, "Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence," *Psychological Inquiry,* 15(1)(2004), 1-18, quoted in Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda (n.d.), "Cultural trauma and epigenetic inheritance," *Development and Psychopathology*, (Published online 28 September 2018): 31, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579418001153.
[116]Staub and Vollhardt, " Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," 270.
[117]Ibid.
[118]S. Hobfoll, Hall, B., Canetti-Nisim, D., Galea, S., Johnson, R., and Palmiari, P., "Refining the understanding of traumatic growth in the face of terrorism: Moving from meaning cognitions to doing what is meaningful," *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 56(2007), 345–366, quoted in Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt," Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 2008,* 78 (3)(2008)*,* 270.

Altruism Born of Suffering

One form of PTG identified by researchers is *altruism born of suffering* (ABS). ABS is distinct in at least three ways: the focus on victimization, the prevention of violence, and the "generation of positive psychological changes that lead to helpful actions."[119] Studies have documented that altruistic and prosocial behavior can be exhibited both during and after experiences of suffering.[120] It also appears that ABS can be promoted through healing or psychological recovery after intense suffering, truth, justice and the assumption of responsibility by perpetrators, and through understanding the root causes of one's suffering.[121] The psychological effects of such ABS-promoting experiences include greater salience and awareness of suffering, increased ability to see others' perspectives, empathy, and sympathy, perceived similarity and identification with other victims, and greater sense of responsibility for others' suffering.[122]

These effects may even lead to victim group members feeling a moral obligation to help other suffering groups.[123] For instance, a series of studies found that Jews felt a greater sense of moral obligation to help other victims of genocide and other human and non-human-caused disasters when reminded of the Holocaust. (This sense of moral obligation did not, however, seem to extend to helping Palestinians, whom Jews saw as an adversarial group.[124]) Additional research shows that victimized groups such as Jews are seen by outgroups as having a greater

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[119]Staub and Vollhardt, " Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma," 270.
[120]Ibid., 271.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., 275-276.
[123]Warner, Wohl, and Branscombe, ""When do victim group members feel a moral obligation to help suffering others?", 231.
[124]Ibid.

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obligation to help and not harm others, and that oftentimes members of a historically victimized group accept that moral obligation.[125]

This view of Palestinians has become further complicated in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, Hamas massacre of Israelis. As of the writing of this thesis, it is hard to find quantifiable evidence as to how Jewish/Israeli views of Palestinians have changed, as the war is still ongoing. However, the cascading events of October 7 have exacerbated deep fault lines between the different generations of Jews in the U.S., and between the American Jewish community and Israel. There is a growing and vocal contingent of American Jews who are actively identifying as Anti-Zionist and Pro-Palestinian, which is changing the narrative of how Jews understand and relate to the history of Zionism and the movement for Palestinian liberation. In Israel as well, there is a growing movement, although it seems to be smaller than its U.S. counterpart, working to grapple with the realities and legacy of almost 60 years of occupation, and sharp inequalities in Israeli society. There are concerted efforts to figure out how to heal over a century's worth of conflict and trauma and create a shared society. Only time will tell how these efforts, on the part of both American and Israeli Jews, will pan out.

<u>Conclusion</u>

As this chapter has shown, trauma at the individual level, and especially at the collective level, is an exceedingly complex topic. Differing perspectives on the causes of trauma, and who "gets" to have that label, are so charged that they can literally rip apart communities, and even countries. Key to understanding collective trauma is how it is transmitted on the social and cultural levels, and how it comes to impact groups' identities and behaviors. This in turn can lead to an array of constructive and destructive behaviors by both traumatized groups and their perceived oppressors.

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[125]Ibid., 234

The foundational concepts outlined in this chapter will help further illustrate, in the proceeding chapters, the very real collective traumas experienced by Jews around the world. These concepts will help clarify how Jews have come to understand themselves as a traumatized collective, the effects this worldview has had on Jewish identity, and the different behaviors collective trauma engenders among Jews. In elucidating this reality, my hope is to help not only the Jewish community but the larger world develop a better awareness of how trauma has affected the Jewish past and is shaping the Jewish present and future.

Chapter 2: Towards Understanding Jewish Collective Trauma

It goes without questioning that the Jewish community's worldview is affected by intergenerational and ongoing cultural trauma. To illustrate this, a study of Jewish Canadians published in 2010[126] showed that while symptoms of PTSD did not reach the criteria for a clinical diagnosis, most respondents reported having some symptoms of Holocaust-related PTSD, even though none of them had personally experienced the Holocaust, and even though most were born 30-40 years after the Holocaust had ended. Holocaust-related trauma is widespread and far-reaching in the global Jewish community, and has had a profound impact on Jewish cultural identity. Many articles, books, and studies have been published describing the role of trauma in shaping Jewish cultural identity today. A poignant example is the work of rabbi and psychologist Tirzah Firestone. Through decades of research in the form of interviews of Jews in North America and Israel who have suffered the effects of trauma, Firestone found that the pervasiveness of this suffering within the Jewish community had come to directly impact and inform Jewish culture itself. In the 2022 edition of her book *Wounds Into Wisdom*, Firestone wrote, "My stacks of interviews and case notes contained both sides of the Jewish cultural trauma legacy: stories of suffering that went on to produce continuous suffering, and testimonies of those who struggled to stop the train of their mistrust, hopelessness, and rage. I found in some narratives a determination so relentless that it would obliterate anything in the path threatening

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[126]M. J.Wohl, and J. J. Van Bavel, "Is identifying with a historically victimized group good or bad for your health? Transgenerational post-traumatic stress and collective victimization" *European Journal of Social Psychology,* 41(7) (2011), 818–824. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.844

Jewish survival. Alongside these were narratives describing a fierce commitment to alleviate suffering everywhere, to *tikkun olam*, repairing the world."[127]

While we often think of trauma as being a net negative, as Firestone notes and as the previous chapter shows, not all effects of trauma are in fact negative. It is widely recognized that Holocaust survivors and their offspring have a tendency to work in the helping professions, such as medicine, social work, clinical psychology, education, and scientific research.[128] As Firestone writes, "concern for the well being of others and the desire to spare others the pain they themselves had suffered was a leitmotif throughout [her] interviews."[129] Dr. Rachel Yehuda, a leader in research on the epigenetic transmission of trauma, sees this as a direct response to a cultural trauma. "You can get stuck in the legacy of victimization," she notes, "or you can say, 'No, no, no, no, no. I'm going to be part of the solution.' I don't know why in the Jewish culture, you have an overwhelming response of, 'I'm going to make sure this doesn't happen again'...Whether that's in the DNA or not, I don't know, but I think it's certainly the culture overall."[130]

While a concern for and tendency towards helping others is an identifiable trend in response to cultural trauma, other researchers have shown that a collective victimhood mindset is another widespread Jewish response to cultural trauma. As Firestone notes, "No matter what a Jew's ancestry or where Jews have hailed from, Jewish identity today is bound up with some facet of victimhood. Whether through family stories, media, education, or personal experience,

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[127] Tirzah Firestone, *Wounds Into Wisdom: Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma (*Rhinebeck, New York: Adam Kadmon Books/Monkfish Book Publishing Company, 2019), 106.
[128]Firestone, *Wounds Into Wisdom: Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma;* David Samuels, "Do Jews Carry Trauma in Our Genes? A Conversation with Rachel Yehuda," Tablet Magazine, December 10, 2014. https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/trauma-genes-q-a-rachel-yehuda; E. Staub and J. Vollhardt, "Altruism born of suffering: the roots of caring and helping after victimization and other trauma," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry,* 78 (3) (2008): 267-280.
[129]Firestone, *Wounds Into Wisdom: Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma,* 107.
[130]Samuels, "Do Jews Carry Trauma in Our Genes? A Conversation with Rachel Yehuda."

Jewish victim identity comes to us via trauma images and sensory information deposited and carried in the bodies and minds of Jews everywhere."[131] Others have noted the preoccupation of Jewish people with *extinction threat,* and the belief that a history of past victimization means more victimization is an enduring part of the Jewish experience.[132] This has a whole range of effects on both internal and external group dynamics, as was discussed in the previous chapter.

It is hard to overstate the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish cultural identity, especially as it relates to trauma. The Pew Research Center's report on "Jewish Americans in 2020" found that 76% of the Jews surveyed say remembering the Holocaust is essential to being Jewish, compared to only 33% who say being part of a Jewish community is essential, and 15% who say observing Jewish law (halakhah) is essential to being Jewish.[133] This is quite striking, given the fact that this study was conducted 75 years after the end of the Holocaust.

In Israel, the situation is even more pronounced. A study of adult Israeli Jews conducted in 2009 found that 98.1% of respondents reported "remembering the Holocaust" as a guiding principle in their life, which ranked higher than other guiding principles such as "feeling part of the Jewish people," "feeling part of Israeli society," "living in Israel," or even "having a family."[134] In 2013, Israeli researchers identified six ways in which the Holocaust has an omnipresence in Israeli life today: through daily mentions in the media, the publication of new Hebrew books, the Israeli school curriculum, Yom HaShoah commemorations, organized trips to Holocaust sites (especially for Israeli high school students), and the Holocaust Presence Scale.[135]

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[131]Firestone, *Wounds Into Wisdom: Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma,* 169.

[132]H. C. Kelman, "Acknowledging the other's nationhood: How to create a momentum for the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations," *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, 22, (1992), 18-38.

[133]Travis Mitchell, "2. Jewish Identity and Belief," Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/.

[134] A. Arian, *A portrait of Israeli Jews: Beliefs, observance, and values of Israeli Jews, 2009*, (Jerusalem, Israel: The Israel Democracy Institute and the AVI CHAI– Israel Foundation, 2012).

[135] Yechiel Klar, Noa Schori Eyal, and Yonat Klar, "The 'Never Again' State of Israel: The Emergence of the Holocaust as a Core Feature of Israeli Identity and Its Four Incongruent Voice." *Journal of Social Sciences,* 69 (1) 2013, 127.

The Holocaust Presence Scale, published in 2008, was a survey of 378 Jewish Israelis ranging in age from 18 to 71. This highly diverse sample showed that while two-thirds of respondents had no direct family ties to the Holocaust, "more than half of the respondents also indicated that they found themselves occasionally contemplating how they would have behaved during the Holocaust, that the Holocaust affects their attitudes and beliefs, that they are afraid the Holocaust could happen again, and that many events in the news make them mull over it."[136]

Many studies have shown that the way the Holocaust is portrayed in society even has effects on people's political cognitions. One set of studies, the results of which were published in 2017, hypothesized that "Holocaust exposure — whether experimentally primed or observed in the community — is associated with a radicalization of political cognitions, an increase in support for militancy, and a decrease in support for reconciliation through a process of increased ideological identification and heightened existential threat perceptions."[137] The results of these studies found this hypothesis to be generally accurate. They clearly indicated that "the memory of the Holocaust still produces considerable effects on political attitudes towards peace and conflict, not just as a distant vague memory of a past collective trauma, but as a prism through which Israeli-Jews understand contemporary political dynamics."[138] However, consistent with the findings of other research, these studies found that a person's political beliefs vis a vis peace and conflict are dependent on how events of the past are framed. For instance, when the Holocaust was framed as exclusively a crime against the Jewish people, this tended to increase levels of

[136]A. Rinkevich-Pave, "Presence of the Holocaust in Jewish Israelis' day-to-day lives," unpublished Master's Thesis, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel, (2008), quoted in Yechiel Klar, Noa Schori Eyal, and Yonat Klar, "The 'Never Again' State of Israel: The Emergence of the Holocaust as a Core Feature of Israeli Identity and Its Four Incongruent Voice." *Journal of Social Sciences,* 69 (1) 2013, 127.
[137]Daphna Canetti, Gilad Hirschberger, Carmit Rapaport, Julia Elad-Strenger, Tsachi Ein-Dor, Shifra Rosenzveig, Tom Pyszczynski and Stevan E. Hobfoll, "Collective Trauma From the Lab to the Real World: The Effects of the Holocaust on Contemporary Israeli Political Cognitions" *Political Psychology,* 2, no.2 (2017), 3.
[138]Canetti et al., "Collective Trauma From the Lab to the Real World: The Effects of the Holocaust on Contemporary Israeli Political Cognitions," 16.

ideological identification, which amplified militancy and decreased levels of support for political compromise. When the Holocaust was framed instead as a crime against humanity that left a legacy of pain for many groups, the trauma was remembered without increasing levels of "ingroup-specific loyalty and without having a toxic effect on the resolution of contemporary intergroup conflict."[139]

How a traumatic history is framed is essential to the argument of this thesis. The way we tell history, and the way we remember past group suffering, has real effects on the way people think and behave, and real implications for the health and safety of all people. It is incumbent upon us to interrogate the way we tell history, and to ask ourselves about the outcomes of the ways we remember. We must consider how our actions will affect the world we and our children and children's children will live in.

Narrating Jewish Trauma, Memory, and History

If trauma, whether individual or collective, represents a breach in someone's meaning-making system, and the narrative through which they understand themselves and the world around them, then the first task of healing from trauma is creating a new narrative. Sousan Abadian and Tamer Miller — researchers on collective trauma and its effects on communities, and specialists in Jewish collective trauma — identify these new forms of meaning-making as *posttraumatic narratives*.[140] While all posttraumatic narratives are adaptive, these narratives fall on a continuum from generative, life-affirming narratives to toxic, retraumatizing narratives. Toxic narratives, according to Abadian and Miller, are "stuck in some measure of distortion."[141]

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[139]Ibid.

[140] Sousan Abadian and Tamar Miller, "Taming the Beast: Trauma in Jewish Religious and Political Life," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service,* 83, no. 2/3 (2008), 229.

[141]Abadian and Miller, "Taming the Beast: Trauma in Jewish Religious and Political Life," 229.

Some toxic narratives are disempowering, in that they tell a story of damage, unworthiness, isolation, lack of support, and helplessness. Others are falsely empowering, in that they can be full of entitlement, blame, disdain for others, categorical condemnation, and concerned with settling scores. Generative, life-affirming posttraumatic narratives, on the other hand, tend to focus on healing, peace, prosperity, and growth.

In this thesis, I will argue that the way we tell and understand Jewish history is refracted through posttraumatic narratives. Abadian and Miller offer interesting examples of how the Passover and Purim stories are posttraumatic narratives of both the generative and toxic sort. Discussing Passover, Abadian and Miller write:

> "'We were slaves; now we are free people.' This is the title of our posttraumatic narrative and truly is a powerful generative life-affirming story. It is a narrative of agency and hope and one that has inspired many freedom movements around the world. Underlying its storyline is the subtext that God is on our side; we are a deserving people, worthy and capable of experiencing redemption. This has remained the Jewish foundational story for 3,300 years, a story that does not deny or forget the trauma of slavery and yet renews the sense of hopefulness and healing each year."[142]

While this narrative of the Passover story is a generative, life-affirming story, the rabbinic interpretive retelling of the Passover story and its lessons also contains elements of toxicity. The Haggadah instructs us to recite that "in every generation, they rise up against us to annihilate us," and that we implore God to "pour out Your wrath upon the nations." This version of the narrative reflects a world view of mistrust, despair, fear, and unending suffering. The basic lesson is, "They hate us; they always have, and they always will." Both of these narratives exist within the

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[142]Ibid, 232.

Passover story and ritual, and they have affected the way Jews understand themselves and the world around them for millenia.

The story of Purim similarly contains these contrasting sides of the posttraumatic narrative. On one hand, it is a story of agency and bravery, of standing up for one's people against the greatest odds and ultimately triumphing. While most popular tellings of the Purim story end with Queen Esther saving the Jewish people from being massacred, the original text ends with the mass killing of 20,000 Persians by Jews, as an act of revenge. From a trauma lens, we can see this as "an attempt at a restorative fairy tale by an oppressed people to cope with expulsion, oppression, and near annihilation."[143] This triumph by the Jews over their enemies reveals once again the posttraumatic worldview that Jews are an *Am l'vadad yishkon,*[144] "a nation that dwells alone." No one but the Jews themselves will come to their aid, and so they must fight back in order to be safe. God is notably absent in the entire Book of Esther, which conveys a sense of the Jews being not only politically alone, but also cosmically alone.

What's more, the biblical meta-framing of the holiday of Purim reflects the posttraumatic narrative of perpetual isolation and danger from outside groups. On the Shabbat before Purim, Shabbat Zachor, we read in the Torah about Amalek, the nation forever destined to torment the Jewish people, and the imperative to guard against and fight Amalek for eternity. Haman, the evil figure of the Purim story, is seen as an incarnation of Amalek. Throughout Jewish history, Jews have identified the current enemies of the Jewish people as incarnations of Haman, and therefore Amalek. Even today, one hears Jews refer to Hamas as the modern-day Amalek. The prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, used this framing at the beginning of Israel's war with Hamas in 2023, saying, "You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy

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[143]Ibid, 234.
[144] Numbers 23:9

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Bible."[145] This reiteration of Purim's toxic and retraumatizing posttraumatic narrative has been used to justify untold suffering of millions of Israelis and Palestinians.

American historian Dominick LaCapra, who writes about the role of trauma in understanding history, especially as it pertains to the Holocaust, also provides a useful framework through which to understand the role of trauma in the narrating of history. Inherent to the study of history is *transference,* or the observer seeing something of themselves in the observed. Transference often occurs in therapeutic relationships, where a patient may project their own past experiences, feelings, or judgements onto the clinician, regardless of the clinician's actual relationship to any of these things. For instance, a patient may anticipate that a clinician is judgemental, because the patient's father was judgemental of them as a child.

In terms of writing history, LaCapra identifies two different and countervailing ways to understand transference: "acting-out" and "working-through." Acting-out is compulsive repetition, a common behavior of people who have been traumatized that involves reliving the past as though you are the past person. Working-through, on the other hand, is where "the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present, and future."[146] Working-through is helpful for assuming responsibility in the present, while understanding that one cannot completely transcend the past, especially when it involves trauma. These two responses should not be seen as opposite responses, but rather as responses that work in concert with each other.

For example, when it comes to the experience of mourning, one may never transcend attachment to a lost loved one, or transcend some kind of identification with the lost loved one,

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[145]"Netanyahu's References to Violent Biblical Passages Raise Alarm among Critics," NPR, November 7, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/11/07/1211133201/netanyahus-references-to-violent-biblical-passages-raise-alarm-among-critics.

[146] Amos Goldberg, Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra, Cornell University, *Yad Vashem*, Jerusalem, June 9, 1998. https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/interviews/dominick-lacapra.html

"but one may generate countervailing forces so that the person can reengage an interest in life."[147] They should not be so enmeshed in grieving that the present no longer exists or matters and they can't imagine a future. Another example LaCapra gives of the countervalence of the processes of "acting-out" and "working-through" is the Holocaust. It may be impossible for those born after to ever fully transcend this or put it in the past, but it may also be possible to enable processes of working-through that are not simply therapeutic for individuals "but have political and ethical implications."[148]

LaCapra notes that before the Holocaust, historians wrote *grand narratives,* which often took the form of redemption narratives that sought to redeem the past and make it meaningful for present use. For example, in the past many historians have cast the Biblical narrative as a form of "grand narrative," which says that even the worst catastrophes will one day make sense and illuminate the future. This does not mean that the Biblical narrative itself will one day make sense, but rather they will one day help people understand how the world works. Other grand narratives, which we will discuss later in this chapter, narrate the past in similar ways. In a post-Holocaust world this redemptive way of understanding the past no longer makes sense to a significant number of people. One of the goals of historiography today, then — especially historiography as a form of working-through in its broadest sense — should be "an attempt to restore to victims, insofar as possible, the dignity of which they were deprived by their oppressors. This is a very important component of historical understanding: to try, symbolically, to compensate for certain things that can never be fully compensated."[149] The redemptive narrative is one that minimizes trauma, and thus new narratives must be made that allow people

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[147]Amos Goldberg, Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra.
[148]Ibid.
[149]Ibid.

"to come to terms with trauma in a post-traumatic context, in ways that involve both acting-out and working-through."[150]

Using the discipline of historiography to try and understand the Jewish past is a fairly new phenomenon. For most of Jewish history, from Biblical times to European Emancipation and the Haskalah, Jews had a very different relationship to the past than we do today. The Jewish encounter with modern European scholarship has produced a fundamentally different approach to understanding Jewish history, an approach that in many ways is divorced from traditional Jewish ways of making meaning out of past events, especially those that relate to suffering. No one writes about this approach more clearly and pointedly than the Jewish historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in his path-breaking book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory.* The Hebrew word *zakhor,* or "remember," is the imperative set out many times in the Bible to remember the past and keep it alive for future generations. "Historiography, an actual recording of historical events, is by no means the principal medium through which the collective memory of the Jewish people has been addressed or aroused,"[151] Yerushalmi writes. Yerushalmi lays out the way Jewish collective memory has operated throughout time; how the Jewish turn to historiography in the last two centuries has come to usurp Jewish collective memory; and how, because of this, Jews today have become disconnected from the Jewish past. Whether or not one agrees with Yerushalmi's conclusions, his insights into the ways Jewish collective memory worked in the past is invaluable to understanding the impact of trauma on Jewish people past, present, and future.

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[150] Ibid.
[151] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory,* Seattle and London: Universiy of
Washington Press, 1982, 5.

As Yerushalmi notes in the opening pages of *Zakhor,* the biblical appeal to remember has little to do with curiosity about the past. Not everything in the past is meant to be remembered; memory is by nature selective. From the close of the Biblical era to the early modern period, there was little interest in the actual facts of historical events, but instead lots of interest in Jews' place in history and what that history means. When bad things happened to Jews, it was seen simply as a return of the biblical phenomenon of being punished for their sins, and the sins of past generations. Events of the past were understood through the Talmudic dictum *mai de-havah havah:* "what was, was."[152]

The moments that were recorded and passed down were usually moments of suffering and persecution. These events though were seen through the ancient prism of being punished for sins. "It is important to realize that there is also no real desire to find novelty in passing events. Quite to the contrary, there is a pronounced tendency to subsume even major new events to familiar archetypes, for even the most terrible events are somehow less terrifying when viewed within old patterns rather than in their bewildering specificity."[153] This way of understanding current events as a continuation of familiar patterns helped Jews find meaning in terrible events. Perhaps this kept such events from becoming "traumatic," because Jews had a way in which to incorporate these experiences into their worldview.

The terrible events of the Crusades in Europe brought new challenges to this worldview. For instance, during the German Crusade of 1096, some Jews, especially in the city of Mainz, chose to die instead of converting to Christianity. Mass suicides of entire Jewish families were seen by other Jews as psychologically intolerable. How were they supposed to make sense of this? Chronicles of the crusades return repeatedly to the scene of the Binding of Isaac in the

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[153] Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory,* 36.

Book of Genesis,[154] except in the case of what happened in Mainz, no angel appears in the knick of time to save the poor young child. An angel comes to save Isaac,[155] but no angel comes to save the children of Mainz. This deeply traumatic event challenged the pre-existing worldview passed down through generations that God ultimately saves his people. This time, there was no salvation. The narrative of the Binding of Isaac provided "desperately needed understanding of what had occurred. The catastrophe simply could not be explained by the stock notion of punishment for sin, for the Ashkenazic communities of the Rhineland were holy communities, as their own response to the crisis had demonstrated."[156]

This turn to Biblical narrative, liturgy, and ritual was a characteristic response to tragic events for much of Jewish history, and provides most of our historical record of the Jews before the pre-Modern era. Yerushalmi cites four characteristic vehicles through which Jewish collective memory was passed down: *selichot* (penitential prayers), memorial books, second Purims, and special fast days.[157] Selichot were religious and literary responses to catastrophe and were often attributed to certain people and events. Memorial books preserved names of people to be communally remembered, and were usually local in origin and focus. Second Purims, inspired by the holiday of Purim, which celebrates divine deliverance, were holidays of deliverance from some danger or persecution. These Second Purims, however, never became national holidays, and were usually local in character, and only observed in a certain geographic area. Special fast days recalled bitter occasions when there was no deliverance.

It was not until the 15th century that Jewish scholars began taking an interest in more historical writing, and this was mostly in response to the events of the Spanish Expulsion.[158]

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[154] Genesis 22.
[155] Genesis 22:12.
[156] Ibid, 39.
[157] Ibid, 45-48.
[158] Ibid, 62.

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Whereas before the 15th century, we only have a record of four pieces of historical writing, the 15th century saw the publication of 10 works. The historical crisis of the expulsion from Spain stimulated a turn to historical writing as a way to make sense of what happened. This was "one among a gamut of Jewish responses to the trauma of the expulsion from Spain."[159] While these works of historical writing made little impact on the wider Jewish consciousness, which still held onto more traditional modes of understanding and passing on the memory of past events, it is nonetheless an example of Jews using historiography to process trauma.

As Yerushalmi notes, modern Jews largely do not have access to these traditional modes of collective memory and thus have had to turn to historiography to make sense of current Jewish suffering as a part of the Jewish historical condition. While Yerushalmi sees this as an abjectly bad phenomenon, perhaps it is not all bad and not completely discontinuous from Jewish history. Perhaps Jewish collective memory is just different than what it once was, and people are harnessing the lessons of Jewish historiography to inform Jewish culture and identity today, in the same way Jews used biblical narrative, liturgy, and ritual in the past.

Master Narratives of Jewish History as Post-Traumatic Narratives

In this thesis, we will explore the ways in which Jews today are looking at Jewish history as a post-traumatic narrative. As I shall discuss later on, many Jewish scholars and lay people are trying to make sense of Jewish history and its effect on Jewish identity and culture through the lens of trauma. Many are focused on how we might treat the traumatic wounds left by the past, in order to promote healing on individual and collective levels. This thesis is an attempt to contribute to that effort. However, I am most interested in bringing awareness to the ways we have talked about history both in the past and in current times; how those conversations have

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[159] Ibid, 63.

been informed by trauma theory and trauma narratives; and how these trauma-informed narratives of Jewish history are affecting people's behavior in the present. My hope is that in bringing awareness to this issue, we as a Jewish community will better be able to respond to history as it is playing out today in ways that are generative and life-affirming, and not retraumatizing or fear-based.

Since the inception of the field of Jewish historiography in 19th-century Europe, scholars have tried to make sense of Jewish history through what Michael Brenner identifies as *master narratives*. A master narrative can be defined as "a coherent historical account that has a clear perspective and is generally about a nation-state. Its influence is not only exercised to found a school within the discipline, but also becomes dominant in the public sphere."[160] There have been several attempts at putting forth a coherent master narrative of the Jewish nation in the last few hundred years. One example is the Zionist Narrative of moving from degradation in exile to redemption in the founding of the State of Israel. Another is what the influential 20th-century scholar of Jewish History Salo Baron identifies as the "Lachrymose Conception of Jewish History." This is a narrative of enduring suffering and persecution, which Baron saw as deeply reflected in the popular work of pioneering 19th-century German historiographer Heinrich Graetz. The popularity of this narrative endures to this day. And then there is Baron's counter-narrative to the Lachrymose narrative: the "Anti-Lachrymose Conception," which instead seeks to portray Jewish suffering as just one part of a long history of Jewish survival and thriving in Diaspora. Baron's narrative does not seek to downplay Jewish suffering throughout time, but rather seeks to say that it is not the whole story.

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[160]Michael Brenner, *Prophets of the Past: Interpreters of Jewish History,* Translated by Steven Rendall, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010, 9.

Much of the rest of this thesis will focus on these last two master narratives. I see each of them as posttraumatic narratives in that they are each informed by moments of deep pain and suffering that have caused fundamental shifts in the Jewish worldview. One of the narratives, though, the Lachrymose Conception, says that a fundamental part of being Jewish is and always will be trauma. I find this way of looking at history, to use the words of Abadian and Miller, toxic and retraumatizing. The Anti-Lachrymose Conception, while still informed by a history shifting suffering and persecution, tells us that there is more to being Jewish than our collective trauma. It is a narrative of resilience and flourishing.

The next chapter will take a closer look at these two master narratives, and in doing so attempt to make sense of key periods of Jewish history. It will examine how scholars who represent each of these two narratives have tried to make sense of the Medieval Period and the Holocaust and its aftermath. To be sure, Medieval Jewish history represents a long period of time and a huge geographic area. However, historians from various times and locales have pulled out larger themes that they believe define this period. As we will see, different scholars have identified a variety of key themes and outcomes of these periods in Jewish history that help shape the way Jewish history is remembered.

That last point is key. Narrating history is not a neutral act. The way we tell history tells us a lot about ourselves, the way we see the world, and the way we want others to see the world. Every person, myself included, has an agenda for passing on history the way they do. History has real implications for the present and future. Thus it is incumbent upon those of us who care about making a better present and future to take great pains in how we remember and use history, and state clearly what we hope the outcoming of our telling will be.

Chapter 3: Medieval Jewish History Through Posttraumatic Narratives

Introduction

This chapter will focus on how the Lachrymose Conception of Jewish History, as a toxic and retraumatizing posttraumatic narrative, and the Anti-Lachrymose Conception, as a generative and life-affirming posttraumatic narrative, narrate different versions of the Medieval Period of Jewish history. The Medieval Period is usually defined as the years 800 CE-1400 CE, which roughly correlates from the time the Talmud[161] was codified to the expulsion from Spain in 1492. The lives of Jews during this period varied drastically based on geography. This thesis will focus on Western, Central, and Eastern Europe because most of Medieval Jewish historiography up to this point has focused on these areas, and because the history of these areas is the history of the majority of Jews of Ashkenazi descent today. And for better or worse, Ashkenazi history has dominated Jewish scholarship and popular history. The historical narratives put forward by the Lachrymose and Anti-Lachrymose conceptions of this period portray Medieval Jewish life quite differently. The Lachrymose conception is often termed as one that focuses on "suffering and scholarship," highlighting the persecution and oppression of Jews and the great rabbinic minds these conditions produced. The Anti-Lachrymose conception seeks to take the long-view of Jewish history, focusing on continuity over crisis and stressing Jewish achievement, pride, and the creative possibilities of diaspora life. Salo Baron best summarizes his view of the Medieval period saying that:

"It would be a mistake...to believe that hatred was the constant keynote of Judeo

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[161]The period in which the Talmud was redacted and codified is thought to have spanned from 500-800 CE, although there is debate about this. For more information see: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bavli.

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 the ordinary flow

of life. A community which 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, attracted widespread attention. Since modern historical treatment can no

longer be satisfied with the enumeration of wars and diplomatic conflicts, the history

of the Jewish people among the Gentiles, even in medieval Europe, must consist of

much more than stories of sanguinary clashes or governmental expulsions.... Normal

relations between Jews and Christians were generally amicable, or at worst

characterized by mild mutual suspicion."[162]

Similar to Yerushalmi's exploration of Jewish historical writings, Baron notes that the historical

record mostly consists of extraordinary events, not the day-to-day lives of normal people. It

would be a mistake, then, to assume that the limited knowledge of events passed down through

the ages gives us the full story of what life was really like. In fact, Baron argued that "the Dark

Ages of Europe were really a time of relative prosperity and high civilization for the Jew."[163]

Heinrich Graetz and Salo Baron

Before going further into the details of these narratives, it is important to understand the

people behind them — their origins, their worldviews, and the impact of their work. Much of the

research on the Lachrymose conception came from Baron, who proposed the Anti-Lachrymose

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[162] Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews,* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937), 2:31.
[163] Salo Wittmayer Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We Revise the Traditional
View?" *Menorah Journal* 14 (1928) 516.

as a direct reaction to this research. He identified the main disseminator of the Lachrymose

approach as the father of Jewish historiography, Heinrich Graetz.

Graetz was born on October 31, 1817, in Xions, Posen (Poland). He was born to a

nominally religious family, and in his youth became influenced by the work of German rabbi

Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1880), who is considered the grandfather of today's Modern

Orthodoxy. Hirsch sought to bridge traditional Jewish practice and learning with modern

Enlightenment thinking. This was very attractive to Graetz, who studied under Hirsch for several

years. Graetz eventually broke with Hirsch over Hirsch's staunch Orthodoxy and went on to

teach at the new Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, the founding institution of what

became Conservative Judaism. It is here that Graetz taught Jewish history for the rest of his

career and wrote his 11-volume "History of the Jews," published between 1853 and 1876.

"History of the Jews," today considered the classic work of Jewish historiography of the

19th century, came to have a profound impact on generations to come. It was the first

comprehensive history of the Jews ever attempted. Graetz's three-volume "Popular History of

the Jews" made him the most widely read writer on Jewish history.[164] As Baron wrote of Graetz's

legacy:

> "[He] succeeded in persuading German Jewish youth, who had increasingly become
>
> alienated from Judaism, to put aside for weeks or months at a time the reading of some
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> non-Jewish literature in favor of his presentation of the life of their ancestors. He was
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> able to awaken or to reinforce the interest of the entire Jewish world in its own past."[165]

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[164]Michael Brenner, *Prophets of the Past : Interpreters of Jewish History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, Cop. 2010), 58.

[165] Salo Wittmayer Baron, "Heinrich (Hirsch) Graetz, 1817-1891," in *History and Jewish Historians: Essays and Addresses,* ed. Arthur Hertzberg and Leon A. Feldman (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society 1964), 275. Baron on Graetz, 275

"The Graetz," as his "History of the Jews" came to be known, was soon after its original publication translated into Hebrew, English, French, Russian, Hungarian, and Yiddish and became one of the most popular Bar Mitzvah gifts of its time. It eventually became the textbook on Jewish history in the Israeli national school system, although with significant revisions which cast him as a more staunch Zionist than he actually was.[166] While Graetz did support the settlement of Palestine and the building up of the Jewish nation, he believed firmly in the possibilities of vibrant Jewish life in Diaspora.

Part of what made "The Graetz" so popular was his colorful and compelling writing style. Later scholars have noted that his historical method lacked the scholarly rigor of today, but for his time it was quite remarkable. Additionally, he sought to make Jewish history accessible to the masses. To his credit, he was wildly successful in doing so.

One of the people most influenced by the work of Graetz was Salo Wittmayer Baron. Baron (1895-1989) was born in Tarnów, Galicia (Poland) to a wealthy and influential family of bankers. A voracious learner from a young age, Baron went on to receive rabbinic ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Vienna in 1920 and earned three doctorates from the University of Vienna in philosophy, political science, and law. He began his teaching career in 1926 at he Jewish Teachers College in Vienna, but shortly thereafter, due to rising antisemitism and the increasing precariousness of Jewish life in Vienna, he immigrated to New York to teach at the Jewish Institute of Religion. In 1929, he was appointed as the Nathan L. Miller Professor of Jewish History, Literature and Institutions at Columbia University, marking the beginning of the academic field of Jewish Studies in American universities.

Although he was intimately aware of the difficulties of Jewish life in Europe and the virulent antisemitism there, he looked at the arc of Jewish history very differently than his

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[166] Ibid.

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scholarly predecessors and contemporaries. While most scholars at the time portrayed the suffering of Jews as the defining and enduring trait of Jewish life in Diaspora, he blamed modern Jewish suffering on the Emancipation of Jews in Europe and the rise of the modern ethnostate. This focus on eternal Jewish suffering, he believed, obscured the actual historical record of the vibrancy and richness of Jewish life in Europe, especially during the Medieval period. In 1928, he published an essay in the popular publication Menorah Journal, entitled "Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We Revise the Traditional View?" While this essay will be explored in more in depth later in this chapter, it is worth saying now that it is in this essay that Baron first laid out his view of Jewish history and used his famously coined term "The Lachrymose Conception," which he also referred to as "the Graetzian conception of Jewish History."

His most famous and in-depth work, in which he spelled out his Anti-Lachrymose Conception, was the 18-volume "A Social and Religious History of the Jews," which he worked on tirelessly with his wife Jeanette Meisel. It was published from 1937-1983 by Columbia University Press. Baron had grand ambitions for this work. While publishers were impressed with the breadth and erudition of Baron's magnum opus, they weren't sure how large an audience it would find. One publisher concluded:

> "Its scope and scholarship should make it the standard book on the subject. The more
>
> cultivated Jews and Gentiles interested in the disturbing problem of the modern Jew in
>
> the midst of a Gentile world will want to add this work to their libraries. Public and
>
> college libraries will have to buy it as soon as they have the funds to do so. On the other
>
> hand, I do not think that the first volume, Israel and Antiquity, will have much of a
>
> market as a college text. It is too mature a work for the average student. The second

volume, if sold separately, should have a small sale as a text in the better Hebrew schools."[167]

This prediction proved to be fairly accurate in that while Baron received critical acclaim for the quality of the work, "A Social and Religious History" never reached much of a popular audience. It did not make much of an impact on popular consciousness in the way Graetz had, especially because early editions were published contemporaneously with the rise of the Nazis in Europe. Baron did, however, have a profound impact on the work of American Jewish historians, even creating what some call the "Neobaronian" school of European Jewish history.[168]

Despite being keenly aware of the impact of the Holocaust on the Jews, Baron never gave up on his basic thesis about Jewish history and life, writing that "suffering is part of the destiny [of the Jews], but so is repeated joy as well as ultimate redemption."[169] While he never sought to minimize the reality of the suffering Jews have experienced throughout history, his life's task was to show the world that suffering was not the whole story.

The Lachrymose Conception of Medieval Jewish History

To understand the Graetzian "Lachrymose Conception of Medieval Jewish History" as a toxic and retraumatizing posttraumatic narrative, one must look at the text of Graetz's "History of the Jews." It is truly, as others have famously noted, a history of suffering and scholarship. It reads as a long litany of persecutions by European and Muslim hordes, punctuated by temporary protection from kings and priests — always short-lived, and always ending in grisly massacres of Jews described by Graetz in equally grisly language. The only reprieve the reader is given

[167] Robert Liberles, *Salo Wittmayer Baron: Architect of Jewish History* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), 126-127.
[168] David Engel, "Crisis and Lachrymosity: On Salo Baron, Neobaronianism, and the Study of Modern European Jewish History," *Jewish History*, Vol. 20, No. 3/4 (2006), pp. 243-264.
[169] Liberles, *Salo Wittmayer Baron: Architect of Jewish History*, 117–118.

from this litany of suffering is to hear about the major scholars of the day. The text includes very

little on the day-to-day lived experience of regular Jews. Graetz admits in passing that there were

periods of calm, success and prosperity. But he narrates as though those periods were short-lived

and of little consequence when compared to the barbarity of the persecution Jews experienced

during other times.

> In describing the impact of the First Crusades (1096-1099 CE) on the Jews, Graetz wrote:
> "The first armies of the crusades…did not do special harm to the Jews; they plundered
> Jews and Christians alike. But the hordes that followed, the scum of French, English, and
> Flemish in the absence of Mahometans, began the holy work of plundering and
> murdering the Jews. It was a shameless mob of men and women, who indulged in every
> sort of excess."[170]

And:

> "Fortunately for the Jews of western Europe, and especially Germany, those filled with
> this blood-thirsty fanaticism were the mere scum of the people…The time had not arrived
> when the three powers — the nobility, priesthood, and people — were united in their
> hatred and persecution of the Jews."[171]

In his continued narration of the Second Crusades (1147-1150 CE), Graetz wrote:

> "The German Jews who were on the point of raising themselves from a state of
> barbarism, were thus hurled into the depths of an abyss of degradation, from which they
> were enabled to raise themselves only after a lapse of six hundred years. For this reason,
> their intellectual efforts bore the stamp of degeneracy, their poems consisted only of
> elegies and lamentations, which, like their speech, were tasteless and barbaric, and even

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[170] Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1894) vol 3, 298-299.
[171] Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 3, 306.

in the study of Talmud very little work of note was accomplished. The German Jews were

pariahs in history till the end of the eighteenth century."[172]

This narration of history hardly inspires pride or optimism. Deeply embedded in the collective

memory of the Jews reading Graetz is a sense that Jewish history is one of unmitigated

degradation. While history and collective memory have their differences, the manner in which

Graetz writes — his agenda to appeal to a mass audience, and his readers' alienation from

traditional forms of Jewish memory, leading to their turn to history for remembering the past —

makes Graetz's work a powerful form of trauma broadcasting to the wider Jewish public. As the

work of sociologist Ron Eyerman shows, cultural trauma — which Graetz's work suggests Jews

endured for centuries in Medieval Europe — can become an essential component of a group's

collective memory through historical narratives based in loss and suffering.[173] Graetz's historical

narration of perpetual collective victimization has led to the perpetuation of the self-perceived

collective victimhood of the Jewish people.

Graetz does write about how the Jews coped with their struggles, but even these

descriptions do not inspire confidence. On the results of the First Crusades on the Jewish psyche,

Graetz writes:

"The German Jews, already inclined to extravagant piety, became yet more bigoted in

consequence of their unexampled sufferings. All merriment died out amongst them, and

they clothed themselves only in sackcloth and ashes…The Judaism of Germany from that

time on assumed a gloomy aspect. The so-called poets in their penitential prayers and

lamentations, rang the changes only in one theme, the fearful troubles and the desolation

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[172]Ibid., 357.
[173] Ron Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the formation of African American identity," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity,* Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Niel J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka,*Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. University of California Press, 2004, 62-75.

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of Israel…The study of the Talmud became balm for the wounds inflicted by the crusading mob on the communities of the Rhine district. The pleasure resulting from creative thought ruled in the schools, and subdued sorry and despair; and the House of Learning became the refuge for the unfortunate oppressed."[174]

In response to the institution of the infamous "Jew badge," the marker that Jews were required to wear on their clothes, in 1215, Graetz writes:

"Worse than the outward dishonor was the influence of the badge on the Jews themselves. They became more and more accustomed to their ignominious position, and lost all feeling of self-respect. They neglected their outward appearance, because they were nothing but a despised, dishonored race, which could not have even the least claim to honor. They became more and more careless of their speech, because they were not admitted to cultured circles, and in their own midst they could make themselves understood by means of a jargon."[175]

This "jargon" of which Graetz spoke was the Yiddish language, which his whole life he despised and considered degenerate. The only positive coping mechanism Graetz ascribed to the Jews of the Medieval period, which only applied to less than half the population, was the study of Talmud. He writes:

"In the midst of all these troubles, petty infections and persecutions, there was only one spot in which the Jew might feel himself quite happy, and was able to forget his sufferings. The house of learning, where young and old gathered together in order study the Talmud, was their only haven of peace. Absorbed in their study, the Talmud enthusiasts became entirely oblivious of the outer world, with its bitter hate, its malicious

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[174]Ibid., 309.
[175]Ibid., 512.

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laws, and its cruel tortures. Here they were princes, the majesty of thought cast a halo

about their brows, and their delight in spiritual activity transfigured their features."[176]

In keeping with his emphasis on Jewish history as one of "suffering and scholarship," Graetz

portrays the only saving grace of the Jews as study.

This narration of history, as we shall see, in many ways still dominates, and perpetuates a

view of Jews as passive victims of history who will forever be hated by the peoples of the world.

It is true that the Jews of Medieval Europe experienced awful events, events which undoubtedly

left their marks on the Jewish collective psyche. However, to focus only on these events and the

Jews' seeming inability to rise above their circumstances leaves us with a toxic and

retraumatizing view of the past, and obscures the full picture of what life was like during this

period.

The Anti-Lachrymose Conception of Medieval Jewish History

It was this conception of Medieval Jewish history that Baron's 1928 essay "Ghetto and

Emancipation" directly sought to disrupt. In the opening, he writes:

"The generally accepted view has it that before the French Revolution the Jews of Europe

lived in a state of extreme wretchedness under medieval conditions, subject to incessant

persecution and violence, but that after the [French] Revolution a new era of

enlightenment came to the nations, which forthwith struck of the bonds that fettered the

Jew and opened up the gates that shut him off from civilized life. Prisoner in the Ghetto,

denied access to the resources and activities of Western society, distorted intellectually,

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[176]Ibid., 571.

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morally, spiritually by centuries of isolation and torture, the Jew was set free by the

Emancipation."[177]

According to most scholars, rabbis, and laypeople of the day, especially Graetz,

Emancipation represented the dawn of a new day for European Jewry. People say that before

Emancipation, Jews did not have "equal rights." But that's because, as Baron argues, there was

no such thing as "equal rights." Jews were not the subject of special unfavorable discrimination,

because everyone was discriminated against in some way. In fact, Jews had many more rights

than the "enormous mass of peasants, the great majority of whom were little more than

appurtenances of the soil on which they were born."[178] In contrast to the peasants, the Jews were

quite well off. Even though Jews could not own land or join most of the guilds, and thus were

effectively barred from certain lines of work, all social classes faced restrictions. During much of

the Medieval period, Jews were considered *servi camerae* (servants of the Treasury), which

meant they were owned by the king. While on paper this does not seem desirable, it still left Jews

qualitatively better off than serfs who were owned by private owners. Jews' status was not so

different from the condition of people today who are under the aegis of the State, which imposes

taxes, can send a person to war and is "the complete master of all lives and property."[179]

Additionally, Jews "enjoyed full internal autonomy"[180]and were left more alone by the

State than serfs were by their owners because they were seen as complex, isolated, and foreign.

Jews enjoyed autonomous rule over their own education, administration of justice, taxation,

communal and State affairs, health, markets, and public order. The Jewish community was even

[177]Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We Revise the Traditional View?"
[178]Ibid.
[179]Ibid.
[180]Ibid.

"the fountain-head of social work of a quality generally superior to that outside Jewry."[181] All this ended as a result of Emancipation, and the dissolution of the ghetto.

Although eventually considered an "unimitigated evil" by emancipated Jewry, "The ghetto grew up voluntarily as a result of Jewish self government, and it was only in a later development that public law interfered and made it a legal compulsion for *all* Jews to live in a secluded district in which no Christian was allowed to dwell." A separate Jewish district was not out of the ordinary; cities had neighborhoods where shoemakers lived, bakers lived, etc. The ghetto was also a means of defense: there were locks on the inside before there were locks on the outside. In the ghetto, Jews were able to live full, well-rounded lives because it was a "state" or territory of their own, which in turn led to extraordinarily cultural flourishing and preservation.

Even the Inquisition, according to Baron, made only a marginal impact on the Jews. Only instituted in a few European countries, it had no jurisdiction over self professing Jews. It was only interested in self professed converts. This made Jews a privileged class, in that they were virtually immune from inquisition activities.

From a demographic standpoint, despite periodic minor attacks, pogroms, and forced conversions, the Jewish population pre-Emancipation grew at a much greater rate than that of its Christian counterparts. Additionally, "it is no exaggeration to say that the average Jewish income much surpassed the average Christian income pre-Revolutionary times."[182] Restrictions on Jewish professions benefited the Jewish amassing of wealth. It forced Jews into the money trade, and forced them to create wide international networks of support from other Jews and "equipped them with vast sums of ready cash."[183] While there still were impoverished Jews, especially in Eastern Europe, they were not so many, and they were still better off than Christian serfs. Jews

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[181]Ibid.
[182]Ibid.
[183]Ibid.

had a better standard of living, and there were complaints about Jewish extravagance, which "indicate a degree of well-being which is surprising."[184] Even though there were poor Jews, there were also many Jewish welfare and social safety organizations, of which there were virtually none among the non-Jewish population.

In his staggeringly detailed "A Social and Religious History," Baron spends multiple volumes describing the conditions of the Jews in Medieval Europe. The writing in "A Social and Religious History" is much denser, more detailed, and less colorful than Graetz. Baron goes into exacting detail on taxes, payments, and decrees by popes and kings. Compared to Graetz, it is clearly more meticulously researched. For instance: When talking about the Jew badge enacted in 1215, Graetz gives it 1.5 pages, whereas Baron spends five pages just introducing the concept of the badge, detailing Jewish rebellion against the badge, and examining how stringently it was or wasn't enforced. There are also incredibly detailed footnotes. Baron's work doesn't shy away from the horrors of Jewish life in Western Europe especially, but it does not necessarily dwell on it, showing a much fuller picture of what life was like.

In Volume 4, one of several volumes covering 800-1200 CE, Baron writes: "Remarkably, the growing feeling of estrangement and instability did not prevent masses of Jews from settling in western lands during the twelfth century. In fact, the center of gravity of the whole people was moving slowly but inexorably to those harsh but vigorous and enterprising young nations who were beginning to shape the future of all mankind. Despite the tremendous difficulties facing them in these new lands, some Jews were irresistibly drawn to them by economic needs; others by their spirit of adventure and pioneering."[185]

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[184]Ibid.

[185]Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews,* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1957) 2nd Ed., Vol 4, 90.

He also describes times when the Jews defended themselves against attack and were aided by others. For example the "Jews of Mayence took up arms against crusaders and were aided by 1,000 troops provided by the duke and defeated the crusaders. The local Jews were then transported to a nearby castle to keep them safe from more hordes of crusaders."[186] Despite the horrible reality of the crusades, "the European Jewish communities constantly increased in numerical, economic, and cultural strength…certainly by 1200 many more Jews lived under Christendom than had in 1095."[187] In describing the 12th century, the height of the crusades, Baron writes: "The 'multifaceted' twelfth century was anything but a period of unmitigated gloom even in Jewish history…Once again undismayed by its tragic experiences, the Jewish people, in pursuit of its historic destiny, overcame the enormous resistance of natural, as well as man-made, factors and opened a new era of its Western achievement."[188]

While the 13th century brought with it a new set of challenges for the Jews of Europe, the Jews still often found themselves under the protection of the Church. Popes often issued legislation protecting Jews against assaults by fanatics and profiteers, and protected Jewish houses of worship and cemeteries. With the infamous accusation of Blood Libel, Pope Gregory X (13th century) expanded on old constitutional statement that proclaimed:

> "We decree that the testimony of Christians against Jews not be valid unless there is some Jew among these Christians to confirm that testimony, just as Jews alone may not offer testimony against Christians…Therefore we decree that Christians not be allowed to testify against Jews on such occasions, and we order that Jews, seized on frivolous accusation of this sort, be freed from prison, and not be again imprisoned on such

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[186]Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews,* vol. 4, 103.
[187]Ibid., 148.
[188]Ibid., 149.

frivolous charges, unless they are seized in the flagrant commission of the crime, which we do not believe to be true."[189]

Here we see that the Church even sought to protect Jews against the Blood Libel, one of the most insidious forms of European Jew hatred. With the regard to the ghetto, Baron says:

 "We must differentiate, therefore, between the ghetto in the technical sense, in which according to law all Jews were bound to live and from which Gentiles were excluded, and the non-technical ghetto, that is a Jewish quarter growing up freely without any legal constraint. In a sense, the technical ghetto was the less effective of the two…Only the erection of synagogues came within the purview of the Church, inasmuch as it tried to outlaw the building of new Jewish houses of worship…[and perennially] losing battle against new synagogues…"[190]

Despite efforts to curtail Jewish activity, Jewish life nevertheless found a way not only to survive but thrive. And Jews were hardly alone in their quest for survival, as Baron's detailed account shows us.

This portrayal of European Jewish history during the Medieval period paints a much more complex picture of Jewish life than does Graetz's narration. It does not portray this period as one of endless suffering, but rather one of growth, industriousness, and empowerment that was peppered by moments of anti-Jewish violence and persecution. It does not minimize Jewish suffering during this time, and in fact often provides heartrending portrayals of what Jews underwent. But it does not dwell on this suffering. It seeks to show Jews as they really were — resilient and vibrant. This is what makes the Anti-Lachrymose Conception a life-affirming and resilience-focused posttraumatic narrative.

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[189]Ibid., vol 9, 40-41.

[190]Ibid., 33.

That, scholar Adam Teller rightly argues:

"Baron's view of the past juxtaposed two different, even diametrically opposed

states—what he termed, 'the ordinary flow of life,' and 'extraordinary events,' by which

he meant outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence. The first, he posited, was a long-lasting

norm, while the second was a short-lived exception, going on, in his words, for 'only a

few days.' It was these two assumptions—that the 'ordinary flow of life' was a realm full

of the calm of neighborly living and that violence was essentially an extra-ordinary and

short-term phenomenon—that allowed him more-or-less to bracket out persecution from

the historical processes he described."[191]

This worldview, Teller argues, allowed Baron to largely ignore the lived stories of human

suffering, and instead recast these dark times as moments of positive change. For instance, the

expulsion from Spain led to the rise of Ottoman Jewry. The expulsion from Vienna meant the

development of Central Europe. Expulsions from Germany meant the flowering of Polish Jewry.

Teller writes, "Of course, this perspective is not wrong; it just ignores the costs—economic,

physical, and psychological— that were involved in bringing these changes about."[192] Teller

wants us to remember that persecutions and expulsions were deeply traumatizing events,

individually and collectively, even if people nevertheless resumed their lives. Teller suggests that

in Baron's telling, "living with violence and persecution—and more particularly their

consequences" become part of the "'ordinary flow of Jewish life' for communities across

Europe."[193]

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[191] Adam Teller, "Revisiting Baron's 'Lachrymose Conception': The Meanings of Violence in Jewish History," *AJS Review* 38, no. 2 (2014): 433.
[192] Teller, "Revisiting Baron's 'Lachrymose Conception': The Meanings of Violence in Jewish History," 435.
[193] Ibid., 436.

I disagree with Teller's assertion that Baron downplays the cost of suffering. Baron shows us that despite immense suffering, Jews went on living and building communities. What's more, the Jews of the Medieval period likely had a much different relationship with violence than we do today. Violence was a much more frequent and accepted occurrence than it is now. While the violence Jews endured then was indeed awful, it may not have been traumatizing in the way we think about it today. If trauma is created by a crisis of meaning, and experiences that lead to a fundamental shift in worldview, then perhaps what the Jews of Medieval Europe experienced was not trauma at all, because violence was an everyday part of life for Jew and non-Jew alike.

Perhaps this assertion comes across as uncompassionate. But I think it is important to put suffering in its context, and to not let it take up more space than it needs. Focusing on resilience and growth is, in my view, a much more compassionate way to understand the lives of people who lived under terrible circumstances. It does not reduce them to the worst things that happened to them, but rather lifts them up as full persons with agency and dignity. The Anti-Lachrymose Conception as a life-affirming narrative of resilience does this. It shows Jewish history in its full human complexity.

Conclusion

In a 1939 essay, "Emphases in Jewish History," Baron wrote: "Every generation writes its own history of past generations."[194] Indeed, that is the task of every age: to make sense of the past in a way that allows us to move forward. "That is why, it seems, the removal of outworn historical conceptions is not only dictated by the scientific consciousness of the investigator and by the quest for truth of the genuinely interested public, but may also, in the long run, pave the way towards the formulation of a new philosophy of Jewish history which would more closely correspond to our own modern social needs and our new intellectual requirements."[195] This was true at the beginning of the 20th century, and it is still true now. We need a new conception of Jewish history that moves Jews today in a positive direction, towards flourishing and interconnection, because our destiny is tied to the destiny of all oppressed peoples of the world. The Anti-Lachrymose Conception, as a life-affirming narrative of resilience, provides this.

Even in 1939, Baron identified that "this lachrymose conception of Jewish history has served as an eminent means of social control from the days of the ancient rabbis, and its repudiation now might help further to weaken the authority of the Jewish communal leadership."[196] Study on collective trauma indeed shows that people are more involved in in-group strengthening activity when they are motivated by danger and fear. Just look at how Jewish communal engagement rises every time there is a high profile antisemitic incident. Communal leadership benefits from fear. For example, immediately following the October 7 Hamas massacre of Israelis, American-Jewish communal participation and fundraising efforts for

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[194] Salo Wittmayer Baron, "Emphases in Jewish History" in *History and Jewish Historians: Essays and Addresses,* ed. Arthur Hertzberg and Leon A. Feldman (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society 1964), 65.
[195] Baron, "Emphases in Jewish History," 89.
[196]Ibid.

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Israel skyrocketed. We need to disrupt this dynamic, and let ourselves be animated and driven by something other than fear alone.

In Baron's time, he "had the perhaps tragi-comic experience of finding the Jewish public sort of enamored with the tales of ancient and modern persecutions."[197] How true is that still today? And it makes sense! From an evolutionary and cognitive perspective, human brains tend to focus on the negative over the positive in order to survive. While we should be careful not to overwrite our survival instinct, we must not let that instinct work to the detriment of living full lives in the here and now.

In an attempt to bring to light the enormity of pre-modern Jewish suffering, Teller writes: "When asked to pick the most important events, then, pre-modern Jews seem to have viewed their own recent history simply as a series of catastrophes. This suggests that we need to think of the lachrymose conception not just as a modern historiographical strategy, but rather as an historical phenomenon in its own right. When pre-modern Jews thought about themselves and their place in the world, they did so not in liberal, but in lachrymose terms. And if those were the terms in which they understood their own 'normality,' then when we try to do the same, we should not dismiss them, but take them very firmly into account."[198]

Teller surely is not wrong. This is how pre-modern Jews viewed themselves and their lives. Perhaps this strategy worked for them. I do not mean to demean the coping strategies of people in the past; they had to do what they had to do to survive. But this approach should no longer be ours. We should not allow ourselves to languish in our sorrows; we must move

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[197]Ibid., 88.
[198]Teller, "Revisiting Baron's 'Lachrymose Conception': The Meanings of Violence in Jewish History," 439.

forward. If we are to make a case for continued Jewish existence and flourishing, we must move

beyond fear and sorrow.

Chapter 4: The Holocaust

Introduction

Summarizing the role the Holocaust plays in Jewish life today seems like an almost impossible task. This period of horrific events, which ended exactly 80 years before the writing of this thesis, still haunts the world. Humanity has tried to make sense of what happened, but to this day it boggles the mind. The best way I can describe the Holocaust's effects on the Jewish community is to borrow the term "soul wound," which I have heard Indigenous Americans use when describing the experience of their own genocides. The Holocaust has left the collective Jewish soul irrevocably wounded. We are still enduring that pain all these years later.

Here's the thing about wounds, though: They heal. They may never go away completely. They may leave a scar. But they do heal. Some say time heals, but in my estimation, the wounds inflicted by the Holocaust plague the Jewish community today as much as ever before. Healing does take time, but it also takes work. Hard work. In my own attempts to heal the Holocaust trauma I carry, I have tried to understand how I came to have the thoughts and fears I do — which ones I want to carry forward, and which ones I want to leave behind. The central questions I explore in this chapter deal with how we got here and how we move forward.

To prove that the Holocaust plays a foundational role in Jewish identity today, one need only look at Pew Research's surveys of Jewish Americans in 2013 and 2020. In 2020, 76% of American Jews reported that remembering the Holocaust was essential to being Jewish,[199] which was a 3% increase from 2013.[200] "Being part of a Jewish community" was much lower down on

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[199] Pew Research Center, "Jewish Identity and Belief," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/.
[200] Pew Research Center, "Chapter 3: Jewish Identity," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, October 1, 2013, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/.

the list, with 28% of Jewish American adults reporting it as essential to being Jewish,[201] with the

number ticking up to 33% in 2020.[202] The lowest value on the list was "observing Jewish law

(halakha)," with only 19% of Jewish Americans reporting it as essential to being Jewish in

2013,[203] (15% in 2020).[204] It seems that remembering something that happened decades and

decades ago is more important to American Jews today than actually doing anything Jewish in

the present day. This begs the question: How did we get here?

     There are different answers to this question. Many hold an implicit assumption that the

role the Holocaust has come to play in Jewish life is just an inevitable development. This view

takes the Freudian view that thoughts and behaviors are largely unconscious psychological

processes that take time to manifest. From this perspective, it makes sense that the Holocaust

works the way all traumatic experiences do: The initial event is so profoundly destabilizing that

it is initially repressed; a period of repression follows; and then, inevitably, the repressed

experience returns. So now then, eight decades after the Holocaust, we are living through an

intense period of return. For individual survivors and their families, it makes sense for the

experience of trauma to take this progression. But what about whole communities of people who

did not directly experience the events of the Holocaust? How did they become traumatized?

     As explored in the first chapter of this thesis, collective and cultural trauma, of which the

Holocaust is an example, functions differently than individual psychological trauma. It is often a

social process that gets reiterated over time as collectives reinterpret the past to make sense of

their present. The Holocaust has become an enduring Jewish collective and cultural trauma

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[201] Ibid.

[202] Pew Research Center, "Jewish Identity and Belief," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/.

[203] Pew Research Center, "Chapter 3: Jewish Identity," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, October 1, 2013, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/.

[204] Pew Research Center, "Jewish Identity and Belief," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/.

through a series of communal choices over different periods of time. Some of these choices have been tacit, and some intentional. Regardless of who made those choices and why, the sheer fact that there were choices makes the Holocaust what trauma researcher Vamik Volkan refers to as a "chosen trauma." He defines this as "the mental representation of an event that has caused a large group to face drastic losses, feel helpless and victimized by another group, and share a humiliating injury… [reflecting] a group's unconscious *'choice'* to add a past generation's mental representation of an event to its own identity."[205] While Volkan refers to these choices as "unconscious," as we shall see, sometimes these choices are very much conscious and made in order to produce a specific outcome. For instance, in his book published in the year 2000 "The Holocaust in American Life," scholar Peter Novick argues the the Holocaust, "as virtually the only common denominator of American Jewish identity in the late twentieth century, has filled a need for a consensual symbol well designed to confront increasing community anxiety about 'Jewish continuity' in the face of declining religiosity, together with increasing assimilation and a sharp rise in intermarriage, all of which threatened demographic catastrophe."[206] Some leaders within the Jewish community have called the increasing rate of assimilation and intermarriage among Jews the "Silent Holocaust," evoking the language of demographic decimation to perpetuate fear over a modern trend that has nothing to do with actual physical death.

A Historical Overview of Holocaust Consciousness

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[205]Volkan Vamik, "Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas," transcript of speech delivered at Opening Address of XIII International Congress of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy, August, 1998. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247735625_Transgenerational_Transmissions_and_Chosen_Traumas_An_ Aspect_of_Large-Group_Identity

[206] Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 13.

Holocaust memory has played differing roles in Jewish society over time. As years pass by and the world inevitably changes, Holocaust memory and consciousness in Jewish life in the U.S. and Israel have been reiterated and reinterpreted by successive generations to fit the needs of the times. That is to say, the Holocaust did not always play the role it does today in the Jewish world.

Many forces have shaped those interpretations: thought and religious leaders, religious and cultural institutions, artists and creators, and of particular interest to this thesis, Jewish schools. Jewish schools played an especially crucial role as mediators of Jewish memory in the post-World War II war years. This was caused by radical changes in American Jewish life after the war. Jews became more suburbanized, and a secularizing Jewry transferred the duty to transmit Jewishness and Jewish memory to schools, which became the sites of "identity training." In this way, the "natural" communication lines that broke down post-war included traditional observance, immigrant culture, and ethnic neighborhoods. In a sweeping study of Jewish American Holocaust education in Jewish supplementary schools, scholar Rena Sheramy showed that between the early 1940s and early 1960s, "the number of children attending Jewish schools tripled, from approximately 190,000 to 590,000, accounting for roughly eighty to eighty-five percent of all Jewish children between the ages of five and fourteen; by the end of the century, according to the findings of the 1990s National Jewish population survey, approximately seventy-five percent of the 4,360,000 Jewish adults represented in the study had received some sort of Jewish education.[207] With the history lesson constituting an integral part of the Jewish

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[207] Jack Wertheimer, "Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues," *American Jewish Year Book* 99 (1999): 38; Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000) 60, quoted in Rena Sheramy, "Defining Lessons: The Holocaust in American Jewish Education" (Dissertation, 2001), 4-5.

school program, educators were thus in a position to help shape the historical consciousness of the postwar American Jewish community."[208]

There were different strategies and ideas over time about how to approach Holocaust education. Some sought to avoid discussion altogether for fear it would traumatize and alienate students, and deter them from building Jewish lives in America. Others found it valuable for educating the next generation of Jews about courage, the value of democracy, and the need for a Jewish state.[209] Interestingly, the centering of Holocaust in Jewish education was a phenomenon born primarily in non-Orthodox settings; the more observant an environment, the less focus there was on the Holocaust.[210] "Looking at Holocaust education from the 1940s-1990s, we can see educators responding to this challenge by constructing historical narratives that attempted to reconcile American and Jewish ideals. In the 1940s and '50s, this led to an emphasis on heroism," Sheramy writes,[211] but by the end of the century Holocaust consciousness was seen as a key tool in the struggle for Jewish survival. The victimization narrative arose largely as a product of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Jewish survival in the State of Israel was under threat. In the last decades of the 20th century and into the 21st century, Israeli approaches to and memorialization of the Holocaust played a huge role in shaping the discourse in the diaspora.[212]

1945-1960: Heroism, Punishment, Silence, and Forgetting

For a long time, it was widely believed that in the years immediately following World War II, there was a "conspiracy of silence" in the U.S. and Israel around what had happened to European Jewry. Many said that the horror of the atrocities — and feelings of shame for not

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[208]Rena Sheramy, "Defining Lessons: The Holocaust in American Jewish Education" (Dissertation, 2001), 4-5.
[209]Rena Sheramy, "Defining Lessons: The Holocaust in American Jewish Education" (Dissertation, 2001), 5-6.
[210]Sheramy, "Defining Lessons: The Holocaust in American Jewish Education," 7 .
[211]Ibid., 14.
[212]Ibid.,15.

having done more to stop them — was too great for Jewish society to bear, and so people did not talk about them. In psychoanalytic speak, perhaps this was the period of repression. However, the belief in this period of silence, at least in the U.S., was turned on its head in 2009 with the publication of American Jewish historian Hasia Diner's book *We Remember With Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962*, which laid out in great detail the major efforts of American Jews in almost every communal sector to memorialize, study, and teach about what had happened. So it is not that American Jews did not talk about the war. Rather, they emphasized different aspects of it than we do today. Jews at this time were, naturally, shaped by the conditions of post-war American Jewish life, namely the concern for self-esteem of Jewish youth; fear of association with Communist causes; a desire to partake of the post-war victory spirit; and identification with Zionist ideology, all of which "discouraged a full encounter with the tragic dimensions of the Jewish experience under Nazism."[213] So instead of focusing on tragedy, Jews focused on heroism. Wanting to portray Jews as strong and heroic, lessons in American Jewish schools tended to focus on Jewish resistance to the Nazis and the heroes who emerged from these struggles. There was a general perception that "perhaps a million ... Jews were killed resisting the Nazi conqueror, fighting back against Hitler's juggernaut, dying not on their bedraggled knees but on their blood-soaked feet."[214] Jews were not to be seen as passive victims, but heroic martyrs.

In the years immediately following the war, accounts of incomprehensible horrors started to circulate in the Israeli press, and regular reports of people looking for lost relatives began to appear. Israeli historian Hannah Yablonka notes that there were four predominant reactions:

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[213] Ibid., 54.
[214] Arnold Forster, 10 May 1961 report from Jerusalem, quoted in his *Square One* (New York, 1988), 228, quoted in Novick 189, quoted in Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 13.

doubt, guilt, sympathy, and criticism. Israelis at this time generally put victims into two categories: those who went like sheep to slaughter, and the ghetto/resistance fighters. This lack of perspective showed a "powerful need to forget. The fear in the survivors' community of 'reopening unhealed wounds' was just as strong as the desire of many of them to rehabilitate themselves, to create new family ties as far as possible from the horrors of the Holocaust."[215]

Immediately following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, there was a continued desire to forget what had happened, but also an emerging desire to punish those who had collaborated with the Nazis, including other Jews.[216] There was strain on the Israeli police as survivors accused each other of serving on the Nazi's Jewish councils, the *Judenrat*, or as kapos in the concentration camps. In 1949, the Knesset passed the "Law for the Punishment of Nazis and Their Collaborators," which was intended for actual Nazis and Jewish collaborators. It used the universal language of "crimes against humanity," but described Jewish suffering as unique and the Holocaust as something new that had never happened to another group in human history. The law accused Jewish collaborators of moral cowardice and said they should be prosecuted and sentenced to prison or even death. Some saw the law as a way to "'tell Jews what they must do if something like this ever happens again.' In other words, the main aims of the law were educational, to pave the way for future generations, so that they would know how to act under similar situations and so that there would be no justification for moral cowardice."[217]

This mentality can also be seen through the creation of official state Holocaust memorial days. In 1951, the Knesset chose the 27th of Nisan to be the official commemoration date of the Holocaust as that was the day the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising started. They named the day *Yom*

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[215]Hannah Yablonka, "The Formation of Holocaust Consciousness in the State of Israel: The Early Days," in *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory After Auschwitz*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 122.

[216] Yablonka, "The Formation of Holocaust Consciousness in the State of Israel: The Early Days," 125.

[217] Ibid., 127.

HaZikaron laShoah ve-laG'vurah, or Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day, known colloquially today as Yom Hashoah. The Knesset enshrined this memorial day into law in 1959. This emphasis on heroism over victimization was part and parcel of Israeli Zionist thinking at the time, which valued Jewish strength and self-reliance above all else.

In the 1950s, there was little public interest in the trials of those prosecuted under the new law, which only ever led to 40 trials. However, a heated debate began to take shape around the idea of reparations from Germany — stirring vehement opposition from Menachem Begin's Herut Party, which began to use Holocaust images and myths as political currency. In countless speeches, Begin referred to victims as "our martyrs," "our children," "blessed spirits," and "our burned and slaughtered," and Germans as "beasts," "Amalek," "sons of Satan," and "children of hell." He accused David Ben-Gurion's Labor Party, which supported reparations, of cooperating with Nazis, labeling them as the new *Judenrat*, "the German Nazi Agency" and "Exterminators." Herut saw reparations as a disgrace to the memory of the six million, who according to Herut's view wanted eternal revenge. The Labor Party, on the other hand, saw reparations as a way to move forward from the past, passing several laws to improve the lives of survivors. Herut's rhetoric "lost the support of the Holocaust survivors' community, most of whom were trying at the time to turn their backs on the past, to rebuild their lives, and to rehabilitate themselves as integral parts of Israeli society. Herut did nothing, either on the parliamentary or party level, to help the Holocaust survivors."[218]

The 1960s: The Eichmann Trial and the Six-Day War

Attitudes in both Israel and the U.S. would change in the early 1960s, in large part due to highly publicized Holocaust "events" such as the the capture and public trial in Israel of former

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[218] Ibid., 133.

high-ranking Nazi official Adolf Eichmann, the man who was in charge of implementing the

Final Solution; the trials of other Nazi war criminals in West Germany; the publishing of texts

extensively documenting the horrors of the Holocaust; the fierce debate around Hannah Arendt's

1963 work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; and the explosive 1963 play *The Deputy* by Rolf Hochhuth,

about the role of Pope Pius XII in allowing the Holocaust to happen. All of these events created

an opening for the Holocaust to pervade not just the Jewish consciousness, but also the larger

American consciousness, in a new way. Sheramy notes that "the Eichmann affair and other

'Holocaust events' of the early 1960s…presented very new images of [the Holocaust]

experience. The trials, scholarship, and literature arising out of the 1960s highlighted the

brutalization, suffering, and victimization of Jews during the Second World War, demanded

contextualization and explanation…While not as yet embracing a victim identity, Jewish

educators in the 1960s nevertheless felt less inclined to deny or run away from discussion of

victimization."[219] With increasing numbers of Jewish children in the U.S. attending

congregational schools, reaching 86% by 1966,[220] Jewish educators felt the need to address the

public conversation and portrayal of Holocaust horrors. American Jewish educators began

increasingly to turn to Israeli educational materials,[221] making Israeli forms of education and

remembrance increasingly part of American Jewish consciousness.

      The Eichmann Trial was particularly important in shaping American Jewish discourse

around the Holocaust. Novick notes that "in the United States, several Jewish leaders privately

expressed concern about the trial's promoting the Jewish-victim image; all thought it likely that

at least in some circles it would exacerbate anti-Semitism. The American Jewish Congress noted

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[219] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 61.
[220] Ibid., 10.
[221] Chaim Waxman, "Center and Periphery," in *Jews in America: A Contemporary Reader,* ed. Fraber and Waxman, 213, Rena Sheramy, "Defining Lessons: The Holocaust in American Jewish Education" (Dissertation, 2001), 80.

the widespread expectation that the trial might have a 'boomerang effect' on Israel and American Jews. One staff member of the American Jewish Committee echoed this concern, fearing that the presentation of 'gruesome details' in the press and television might lead to the public blaming Jews for inflicting these horrors on them."[222] In order to avoid this, the Jewish press sought to present the Eichmann case to the public in a universalist fashion, that the trial was "not a case of special pleading for Jews.... What happened to the Jews of Europe ... can very well happen to other peoples oppressed by totalitarianism."[223] At the opening of the trial in Jerusalem, however, Israel Attorney General Gideon Hausner described the Nazis as part of a long line of groups who had hated the Jews extending back to Pharoah. This rhetoric reflected the Zionist view of the Holocaust as an inevitable outcome of life in the Diaspora, and sought to drive home the vulnerability of Jews outside the Jewish state.[224] Regardless of how American Jewish institutions tried to spin the trial, there was no great backlash against Jews by the American public; if anything, the trial may have increased sympathy towards Jews, because it presented the Holocaust as something distinct from Nazi barbarism in general.[225] For Israelis, the trial changed perceptions of the Holocaust from a national tragedy to a series of individual tragedies, giving a face to the personal nature of the traumas. It also became a formative event in the development of the identities of Holocaust survivors' children, whose parents were largely silent about their experiences.

The Six-Day War in 1967 was also a turning point in American Jewish and Israeli Holocaust consciousness. Through the fledgling country's near-annihilation and then decisive

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[222] Robert Disraeli to John Slawson, 1 November i960, AJCommittee Papers, GS 12, Box 41, quoted in Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 178-179.

[223] Arnold Forster, "The Eichmann Case," *ADL Bulletin,* March 1961, 1-2, quoted in Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 179.

[224] Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 180.

[225] Ibid., 181.

victory, "consciousness of the Holocaust fused into the hard core of Israeli collective identity."[226]

It was around this time, as well, that American Jews began combining the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel with each other, or the idea that the State of Israel is a kind of "insurance policy" for the Jewish people should life in the diaspora become untenable, constituting the most "prominent" and "powerful" myth of American civil Judaism.[227]

This mythology also related to Jewish American anxieties about their place in their own country, and contributed to Holocaust education becoming part of mainstream Jewish education. Sheramy describes how "the New-Left's hostility towards Israel during and after the 1967 war; the rift between the Jewish and African-American communities over the civil rights movement, Zionism and urban relations: the emergence of a 'new antisemitism' in the United States; and a significant rise in intermarriage rates (by 1971, reported to be over 30 percent),"[228] left American Jews feeling defensive and isolated — as though they were under attack from both the outside and the inside. American Jews felt the need to promote Jewish survival, and they believed that a Jewish victim identity which would engender a sense of responsibility to other Jews.

The 1970s: Victimhood and Survival

By the 1970s, Holocaust consciousness and education had moved from the periphery to the mainstream. There was an explosion of Holocaust education materials,[229] many of which now emphasized the victimization narrative — especially after the Yom Kippur War in 1973, which heightened world Jewry's sense of isolation and vulnerability. American Jewish educational materials began presenting Jewish life in Israel as "redeeming" Jewish suffering from the

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[226]Yablonka, "The Formation of Holocaust Consciousness in the State of Israel: The Early Days," 133.

[227] Jonathan Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 132, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 15.
[228] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 83.
[229] Ibid., 56.

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Holocaust and stressing Jewish victimization during the Holocaust "as critical to understanding the need to support and defend Jewish interests, especially regarding Israel."[230] During and after the Yom Kippur War, "it seemed former allies were turning their backs on Israel. Most significantly, while the United States was still Israel's greatest supporter, her relationship with Israel threatened to exacerbate tensions with the Soviet Union and oil-producing Arab nations.[231] As an editorial wrote in *Jewish Education* observed in 1973, "the [Yom Kippur] war and its aftermath — including the energy crisis — taught us some poignant lessons about the quest for peace in the Middle East, about the loneliness of the Jew and the solitude of Israel, about the interdependence of diaspora and Israel for the security and survival of the Jewish State and the Jewish people."[232] Even by 1976, one scholar noted that "the ever-present awareness of the Holocaust accounts for a great sense of loneliness, a main characteristic of Israeli temperament. It explains Israelis' overwhelming urge for self-reliance at any cost, for a world which permitted the Holocaust to happen could easily look the other way as the Jewish State was destroyed."[233]

Jewish educators in the 1970s thought it was important for Jewish students to learn the facts of the Holocaust, but also to understand the "feelings" of victims.[234] As the sociologist Simon Herman recommended in 1976, "It is precisely the task of education to make the memory of the Holocaust a part of the psychological life space of every generation, affecting their view not only of the past but also of the present and the future of the Jewish people. One of the fullest expressions of continuing influence to be found in the attitude of those students in our studies who see themselves 'as if they are survivors of the Holocaust.' This feeling is accompanied by a

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[230] Ibid., 76.
[231] Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 151.
[232] Alvin Schiff, "The Yom Kippur War and Jewish Education," *Jewish Education* 43, no. 1 (1973), 4, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 82.
[233] Amos Elon, *Understanding Israel: A Social Studies Approach,* (New York: Behrman House, 1976), 124, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 82.
[234] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 85.

heightened sense of responsibility for the welfare of the Jewish people. We should regard this as the optimal achievement of a program of Jewish achievement."[235] A popular way to achieve this feeling of being a victim was through Holocaust reenactments and simulations. One school in 1973 hired a psychiatrist to set up a confinement scenario for its students.[236] Another school did an exercise called "Gestapo," which it claimed aroused students' interest and involvement far more than reading texts.[237] Teachers also started having youth read texts written by and about Jewish youth in the ghettos and camps, in order to get contemporary children to identify with victims their own age.[238] In the 1970s, direct survivors also began sharing their stories. They were often brought into public and educational settings to discuss their experiences.

The movement of the Holocaust from the periphery to the mainstream took place not only in American Jewish circles, but in the general American public sphere. It began in the 1970s due to a variety of political, social, and cultural factors. The first of many popular cultural portrayals of the destruction of European Jewry was the television mini-series *Holocaust*, which aired on NBC in April 1978 and reached 120 million viewers.[239] The series was so popular that it eventually became required viewing in American classrooms, as various government institutions believed learning about the Holocaust could engender a greater sense of "commitment to moral values, civic responsibility, and ongoing moral and civic renewal in the United States."[240] In this way, they saw Holocaust knowledge as a catalyst for creating a better society for everyone.

Meanwhile, many Jewish institutions made an inward turn, caused by a rise in what many American Jewish communal leaders saw as a "new Anti-semitism," arising mostly from leftwing

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[235] Memo, Herman to the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, [1976], 1, JESNA Papers, YIVO, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 85.
[236] *Summary Report, Third Workshop on Innovative Jewish Education,* 7, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 86.
[237] Rosenfield to Himmelfarb, "Evaluations of Holocaust Curricula," 29 November 1977, AJCommittee Files, AJCommittee, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 86.
[238] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 86.
[239] Ibid., 97.
[240] Ibid., 100.

movements. Previously, Jews and Jewish organizations had emphasized connections with non-Jews and sought to portray Jews as just like everyone else. Now, though, Jews increasingly felt themselves to be othered by those they had sought to build bridges with. Many believed the good old days had ended with the '60s. Novick quotes Benjamin Epstein of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) as saying:

> "[By 1970] we in ADL were convinced that the golden age of progress for Jewish security that marked the 20 years between 1945 and 1965 had indeed ended and that the pendulum was swinging in the opposite direction.... The 20-year honeymoon with Jews [is over]. Leaders must verbalize and clarify the unarticulated gut feelings of the rank-and-file in the community. It is our job to ... document their instinctively accurate gut feelings—to sound the alert."[241]

Whether or not this feeling was accurate, a siege mentality seems to have taken hold. It was under these conditions that the Holocaust became emblematic for the eternal Jewish situation, as expressed by the popular Lachrymose Conception of Jewish history.

The rise of identity politics also helps to explain the mainstreaming of the Holocaust Jewish victimhood narrative. Around this time, "many groups, from African-Americans and Hispanics to women and gays, mobilized in this period on the basis of shared experiences of discrimination. Their sense of unity revolved largely around a common feeling of persecution. Jews as well participated in this phenomenon."[242] This acceptance of victimization as a foundation for group identity helped Jewish educators feel justified in teaching about the Holocaust in ways that "stressed the destruction of European Jewry as a historical experience that set Jews apart. Curricula highlighted the particularity of Jewish suffering during the war and

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[241] Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 236.
[242] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 108.

emphasized that Jews suffered for only one reason: because they were Jews. Curricular materials did not shy away from exploring the specificity of Jewish suffering under the Nazis; rather, they stressed it."[243]

The phrase "Never Again" — became a rallying cry for Jews saying never again would they be led like sheep to slaughter. It was first and foremost a statement of Jewish self-defense. While few Jews actually predicted an American holocaust, many were concerned that severe Jewish persecution in America was not only possible but inevitable, in spite of actual accounts of antisemitic acts and attitudes decreasing.[244]

The dominant and rising "culture of victimization" in the United States did not necessarily cause Jews to embrace a victim identity based on the Holocaust. Rather, the cultural shift helped Jewish Americans, a hugely diverse demographic, understand that their identity was the only thing they had in common. It was an identity around which Jews could unify. As Novick notes, "insofar as the Holocaust became the defining Jewish experience, all Jews had their 'honorary' survivorship in common. Insofar as it attained mythic status, expressing truths about an enduring Jewish condition, all were united in an essential victim identity."[245] This sense of collective victimhood, which appealed to Jews of all ideological bents, seemed in accord with the way many Jews understood Jewish history — as a series of catastrophes of which Jews were always the victims. This identity "was reassuringly comfortable to all sorts of Jews who found it disturbing that Jews were no longer seen as victims or underdogs; that, as one Jewish leader complained, through "some sort of sociological sleight-of-hand Jews have become part of the 'white majority.'"[246] On college campuses, this was certainly the case, as Jews were increasingly

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[243] Ibid.
[244] Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 242.
[245] Ibid., 262-263.
[246] Benjamin R. Epstein, "American Jewry in the Mid-1970s: Security Problems and Strategies," in National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, *Papers from the 19/4 Plenary Session,* NCRAC Papers, Box 12, Plenary Sessions, 1974, 7, quoted in Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 264.

being cast as white oppressors, which did not map easily onto how Jewish college students understood themselves and their community's history.

Continuously rising rates of intermarriage and assimilation also contributed to growing Holocaust consciousness and the dawn of Jewish victimhood identity during the '70s. It is as if the absence of hostility and generally friendly attitudes towards Jews in the U.S. were causing some Jews to increasingly turn away from Judaism altogether. To Jewish communal leaders, this trend threatened demographic catastrophe. As I described earlier, intermarriage and assimilation were often described as a "quiet," "silent," "bloodless," or "spiritual" Holocaust. For instance, Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University, wrote, "with a diminishing birth rate, an intermarriage rate exceeding 40%, Jewish illiteracy gaining ascendance daily — who says that the Holocaust is over?... The monster has assumed a different and more benign form ... but its evil goal remains unchanged: a Judenrein[247] world."[248] Many saw young Jews' disinterest in Jewish affairs as a direct result of their insufficient knowledge of the Holocaust. Unless something was done, according to prominent Rabbi Joachim Prinz, "within one or two generations the beautiful edifices which have been built in Jewish communities all over the land may be empty."[249] This view was held by countless Jewish leaders at the time. Many hoped that programming on the Holocaust could attract young people who were "indifferent to and 'turned off' by most approaches."[250] They seemed to be right. As Novick describes, "Jewish college students who had shown no interest in other academic courses with Jewish subject matter oversubscribed offerings on the Holocaust. Supply responded to demand, and the number of such

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[247] "Jewish free"

[248] Norman Lamm, "Schools and Graves," in Ivan L. Tillem, ed., *The 1987-88 Jewish Almanac* (New York, 1987), 111, quoted in Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 255.

[249] Address at the National Biennial Convention, 27 April-i May 1966, AJCongress Papers, Box 16, Convention Speeches, quoted in Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 258.

[250] Report of discussion in *Workshop Reports: Papers from the Plenary Session, June 28-July 2, 1972,* 8, NCRAC Papers, Box 12, Plenary Sessions, 1972, quoted in Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 258.

courses rapidly multiplied throughout the seventies. According to one (possibly inflated) estimate, they were being offered at more than seven hundred colleges by 1978."[251] Public events related to the Holocaust were also hugely popular. As Samuel Belzberger, the millionaire who provided most of the original funding for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, told a reporter, "it's a sad fact that Israel and Jewish education and all the other familiar buzzwords no longer seem to rally Jews behind the community. The Holocaust, though, works every time."[252]

The seeming effectiveness of engaging Jewish youth through Holocaust programming led to a vast number of educational institutions from across the spectrum of American Jewish life sponsoring the creation of study guides for use in Jewish schools, community centers, and homes. Jewish organizations "ultimately distributed 8,000 study guides for reproduction to 2,000 Jewish institutions, including bureaus of Jewish education, Jewish community centers, synagogues, schools, and Jewish organizations."[253] These new guides tried to to strike a balance between universalistic and particularistic lessons from the Holocaust, and to instill in American Jews that not only did they have the unique responsibility to protect themselves from future genocides, but to prevent genocide from happening to anyone.[254]

The 1980s and On: The Continuity Crisis and Identity Politics

The 1980s and on saw the spread of what Jewish communal leaders came to call "the continuity crisis." For instance, by 1990 the intermarriage rate had risen to 52% from 29% in

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[251] Ellen K. Coughlin, "On University Campuses, Interest in Holocaust Started Long Ago," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 1 May 1978, quoted in Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 259.

[252] Samuel Belzberger, quoted in James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven, 1993), 306, quoted in Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 259.

[253] William J. Shroder Award Application, [1978], 4-5, Box 11, Holocaust Study Guides, JESNA Papers, YIVO, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 104.

[254] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 103.

1970.[255] Holocaust education was increasingly seen as a way to stem the tide. Many leaders

sought to find ways to "personalize" the Holocaust. For instance, they created synagogue rituals

such as dedicating Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations to children who perished in the Holocaust,

and doing rituals that involved reading names of victims.[256] Not everyone saw this as a good

thing. "Reflecting a broader critique of the 'use' and 'abuse' of the Holocaust in American

society, these critics expressed concern that overemphasis on the Holocaust was a superficial and

ultimately flawed means of promoting Jewish affiliation."[257] As Israeli historian Yaffa Eliach put

it: "American Jewry most recently discovered that the Holocaust offers instant solutions to long

range problems. It serves as an instant Judaizer by shocking people into Jewishness…[T]he

Holocaust may be mistaken as a solution offering quick visible results by making inroads among

the young."[258] Jewish educators, like Max Nadel and Shimona Frost, wrote "Holocaust

awareness has become a substitute for Jewish learning, Jewish living, and Jewish aspirations"[259]

One Holocaust educator cautioned that "teachers should not confuse traumatization with

education. Teaching about the Holocaust readily lends itself to tempting the teacher to use 'shock

treatment' in order to get a response from otherwise often apathetic students."[260]

In recent decades, changing attitudes among American Jews towards Israel, based in part

on its treatment of the Palestinians and its ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, has

eroded support for Israel and the perennial quest for Jewish unity. One way Jewish leaders have

sought to stem this erosion is by sending American Jewish youth on trips to Israel. One

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[255] Cited in Roberta Rosenberg Farber and Chaim I. Waxman, "Assimilation," in *Jews in America: A Contemporary Reader,* eds. Farber and Waxman, 30, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 112.
[256] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 120.
[257] Ibid., 121.
[258] Yaffa Eliach, "The Holocaust as Obligation and Excuse, *Sh'ma* 9 no. 8 (1979), 1-2, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 121.
[259] Max Nadel and Shimon Frost, "Teaching the Holocaust in the Jewish School," *Jewish Education* 49, no. 1 (1981): 30, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lesson,* 122.
[260] Byron L. Sherwin, "Teaching About the Holocaust– Some Guidelines," *Pedagogic Reporter* 32, no. 2 (1982): 5, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 122.

prominent and popular trip is the March of the Living which takes participants to Eastern Europe and then Israel. Started in 1988, the March of the Living program has had over 300,000 participants from more than 150 communities in over 50 countries to date.[261] The program, co-founded and co-organized by Israelis, is an enactment of the Zionist narrative of history. It features a two-week tour of Poland, with the centerpiece of the program being a march from Auschwitz to the gas chambers of Birkenau on Yom Hashoah. During the march, Jewish youth walk the same route towards the gas chambers in Birkenau that Jewish prisoners followed, with leaders enforcing a strict code of behavior on the march route — most importantly complete silence — in order to give participants a sense of the solemnity of the event being reenacted. The impact of the march is significant, as exemplified by one alumnus who remarked afterward, "I am proud to be a Jew— I feel like a survivor at heart."[262]

As Sheramy, who attended the program in 1996, writes:

"The March of the Living attempts to 'make history real' by staging reenactments of the Jewish past at the sites where historical events actually occurred. For Jewish youth removed by time and space from the devastation of the Holocaust and the birth of Israel, the March of the Living allows the performance of a carefully constructed version of seminal twentieth-century events. The 'scripts' of these reenactments — the study guide and itinerary — emphasize putting Jewish youth in the shoes of those who went through the Holocaust and the founding of Israel, and giving participants 'memories' of these critical events."[263]

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[261]"About the March," March of the Living, n.d., https://www.motl.org/about/.
[262] Qtd in William Helmreich, "The March of the Living: A Follow-Up Study of Its Long Range Impact and Effects," 40, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 136.
[263] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 134.

Excerpts from March of the Living Study Guide[264] include statements like, "Try standing

absolutely still. See how long before you really feel uncomfortable." And, "If you were able to

get an extra piece of bread, would you give it to your parents?" Or, another example: "Go to your

kitchen, measure 50 grams of bread; this is your food for the day." In her reflections on the trip,

Sheramy wondered if the difficult conditions, such as unappetizing food, short nights of sleep

and rigorous and emotional itineraries were intentional, designed to give participants a sense of

what it must have been like to suffer during the war.[265] She noted that march leaders certainly did

not discourage participants from likening their experiences to those of Jews during the war.

     In the 1980s, American Jews increasingly pushed for public recognition of their

collective trauma. It is important to note, though, that "Jews were by no means alone in pressing

for acknowledgment of past injustices. Japanese Americans spoke of their wartime internment;

Chinese Americans memorialized the Rape of Nanking; Armenian Americans directed attention

to the 1915 genocide; Irish Americans sought commemoration of the Potato Famine of the

1840s."[266] Jews, though, were successful in gaining center stage for their collective tragedy,

making the Holocaust a "benchmark against which other atrocities were judged, which produced

a fair amount of resentment,"[267] or what scholars have termed "Holocaust envy."

     This resentment only grew, especially with the creation of the federally funded United

States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1993. African

Americans, for example, did not receive their national museum until 2016. Many believed "it

was American Jews' wealth and political influence that made it possible for them to bring to the

Mall in Washington a monument to their weakness and vulnerability."[268] In response to this,

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[264] Central Agency for Jewish Education, Miami, Florida, *Study Guide,* quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 135.
[265] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 135.
[266] Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life,* 264.
[267] Ibid.
[268] Ibid., 269.

prominent Jews like Elie Wiesel and Rabbi Irving Greenberg held that they were, in Novick's words, "intent on permanent possession of the gold medal in the Victimization Olympics,"[269] because Jewish suffering during the Holocaust was unique in human history. Many Jews were offended by the appropriation of Holocaust verbiage and imagery by other marginalized groups, with some going so far as to equate Holocaust comparisons with Holocaust denial.

Critics of the "Victimization Olympics," such as Novick, say that this possessiveness stems from the fact that "many Jews don't know who they are, except insofar as they have a 'unique' victim identity, and because the uniqueness of the Holocaust is the sole guarantor of their uniqueness."[270] In many ways, the findings of the 2020 Pew survey of American Jews show that the generations who sought to enshrine the Holocaust as a core feature of American Jewish identity have indeed succeeded in their project.

In Israel, Holocaust consciousness as a core part of Jewish Israeli identity similarly became firmly solidified in the 1980s with the rise of Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud party and its close affiliation with Revisionist Zionism, or the view of Zionism that saw military strength and armed resistance as a core feature of a Jewish State. Continued clashes with the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab states continued to heighten Israeli's sense of isolation and vulnerability, with the proliferation of Holocaust imagery and language being central to this phenomenon.

October 7, 2023, and its Aftermath

On October 7, 2023, the same day as the Jewish festival of Simchat Torah, Hamas militants stormed into Southern Israel, killing nearly 1,200 Israeli civilians, soldiers, and foreign

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[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid., 274.

nationals, and taking over 250 hostages. This attack, which marked the largest loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust, led to an ongoing war between Hamas and Israel, which by May 2025 had led to the deaths of over 52,000 Palestinians inside Gaza, and over 100,000 wounded, according to the Hamas-led health ministry. Fifty-nine Israeli hostages, some dead, remained in Gaza.

It is hard to overstate the impact these events have had and continue to have on world Jewry, and on the world in general. It is impossible to say how much impact because the situation is still unfolding rapidly. Every day there are new and critical developments.

One thing is for sure though: The underlying Jewish collective traumatic wound formed over the course of history was ripped open and exploited that day, and we are all living with the consequences. The Jewish collective nervous system is in a state of constant activation, and it is unclear if and when we will ever be able to relax. For many Jews, the events of October 7 and their aftermath have only further entrenched the Jewish sense of siege mentality, and the dark view of Jewish history as being one of unending suffering. For other Jews, these events have been a clarion call to stand in solidarity with Palestinians and other marginalized groups to work towards ending the suffering of all. For others still, their reactions and feelings about October 7 lie somewhere in the middle.

Although I started this thesis before October 7, the events of the last year and a half have made the goal of this project all the more relevant. In many ways, we stand at a crossroads in Jewish history. It is up to us how we respond to this latest trauma. Nothing is inevitable. We have choices to make about how to move forward. Will we seek shelter in the same old narratives of the last half century? Or will we embrace alternative ways of understanding the past that take into account the full spectrum Jewish experience throughout time and space — good, bad, and everything in between? Will we continue to build American Jewish life on a foundation of shared

trauma and competitive victimhood, or will we seek to grow vibrant communities and individuals founded in positive and life-affirming values and experiences?

The Holocaust and Posttraumatic Narratives

How we are to understand and draw meaning from the Holocaust is a question for which there is no easy answer. In some ways it is up to each individual to determine how to draw meaning from something so horrific, and how to move forward with the knowledge of what human beings are capable of doing to one another. As a collective, Jews have tried to draw various lessons from the destruction of so much of European Jewry. This process is probably best summed up by the phrase, "Never Again." In the U.S., this phrase is usually taken to mean one of two things: either that Jews will never again be victims of genocide, or that Jews will never again let anyone be victims of genocide. In Israel, the phrase "Never Again" has seemed to take on four different, incongruent meanings: Never be a passive victim; never forsake your brothers; never be a passive bystander; and never be a perpetrator.[271] How individuals and groups arrive at these differing interpretations of "Never Again" has a lot to do with how they view Jewish history, and the lessons they draw from the Holocaust as a historical event.

In this section, we will examine how leaders in the fields of Jewish scholarship and education promoting the Lachrymose and Anti-Lachrymose Conceptions of Jewish history have worked to weave the posttraumatic narrative of the Holocaust into their existing worldviews to bolster their arguments.

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[271] Klar and Eyal, "The 'Never Again' State of Israel: The emergence of the Holocaust as a core feature of Israeli identity and its four incongruent voices," 134-136.

Perhaps the most contentious area wherein Jews and those who study them have tried to make sense of the Holocaust is in the academic sphere. Illustrative of this is the fact that Holocaust Studies has actually become a field in and of itself, separate from the rest of Jewish Studies. This is in part because the Holocaust is so overwhelming that there is no consensus on how it should relate to the study of Jews and Judaism. In 2010, David Engel, a professor of Holocaust and Judaic Studies at New York University, published a sweeping study of how historians of the Jews have sought to understand the Holocaust. While the Holocaust is often thought to dominate the field of modern Jewish history, he showed that historians in the twentieth century largely tried to sequester the Holocaust from the rest of Jewish history. Engel vehemently criticized this approach, asking the simple question, "What is more central than the Holocaust?"[272] How can we not encounter the Holocaust and be fundamentally changed? How can the Holocaust not completely and irrevocably color the way in which we see the Jewish situation throughout time and space? Engel's questions are understandable and worthy of careful consideration. However, despite his frustration with the field of Jewish Studies' general rejection of the centrality of the Holocaust, his view has certainly won in the public square. Most Jews do look at Jewish history through the Lachrymose lens, with their main example of the endurance of Jewish suffering and persecution being the Holocaust. For these Jews, the main lesson of the Holocaust is that it happened and could happen again.

I find this view to be problematic because it hyper-fixates on one short period of Jewish history as being emblematic of the last 3,000 years of he Jewish experience. And so I disagree with Engel, and with the broader Jewish public's view of the centrality of the Holocaust. The Anti-Lachrymose Conception of Jewish history that actually dominates the academic study of

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[272] David Engel, *Historians of the Jews and the Holocaust* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 179.

Jews and Judaism ought to provide the Jewish public with a positive alternative to the narrow narrative of doom and gloom. Anita Shapira, a preeminent scholar of Zionism and the State of Israel, says that while the Holocaust is "a most significant and most traumatic occurrence, whose impact must be studied in courses about the history of the last half century," she simultaneously warns that "it must not become a surrogate for research into Jewish life and culture."[273] Similarly, Ismar Schorsch, the former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and devoted student of Salo Baron, argues that "the Holocaust tends to imbue all Jewish history with the stain of passivity and submissiveness, making Jews appear too craven to defend their vital interests. By doing so, [Baron] has argued, the catastrophe of the 1940s has blinded historians to the fact that over the centuries Jews fashioned for themselves a formidable tradition of political action on their own behalf."[274] In the name of his beloved teacher, Schorsch sought to "'to repel the noxious fumes of the Holocaust' from Jewish historical writing by preventing the destruction of European Jewry from overshadowing the memory of 'the irrepressible fortitude and creativity of the Jewish people' in contemporary Jewish historical consciousness."[275]

Baron would have been proud. Even though his parents and sisters perished in 1942 in Europe despite his desperate attempts to save them,[276] the Holocaust did not fundamentally change Baron's view of Jewish history, or his thoughts on how Jewish history should be written. Not only did Baron believe in the historical inaccuracy of the Lachrymose conception, he was also concerned this way of looking at the Jewish past would have a negative impact on Jewish life in the present. As Engel writes, "The most important contribution that Baron envisioned for

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[273] Anita Shapira, "He'arot," Mada'ei haYahadut 36 (1996), 20, quoted in David Engel, *Historians of the Jews and the Holocaust* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 32.
[274] Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism,* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1994) 118-21, quoted in David Engel, *Historians of the Jews and the Holocaust* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 31.
[275] Schorsch, *From Text to Context*, 386, quoted in Engel, H*istorians of the Jews and the Holocaust,* 42.
[276] Liberles, *Salo Wittmayer Baron*, 269– 74.

the Anti Lachrymose approach was to strengthen contemporary Jews' sense that they were still able to influence the conditions in which they lived. 'Rejecting the passivity of fatalistic answers,' he declared, 'most thoughtful Jews seek new, rational vistas into the future. Above all, they seek to know their role in the events which are to shape the destinies of their people.'"[277] Baron's desire to emphasize the generations of mutually beneficial interactions between Jews and non-Jews was meant to show that Jews have agency to affect their environments and improve their communities. Even if Jews had not wielded significant political power, history had nonetheless equipped them with other significant powers such as spiritual and economic, and they had always sought to make the best of every situation. Baron never advocated for sequestering the study of the Holocaust from Jewish history. He just believed it should not overshadow everything else.

In many ways, Baron failed. To this day, the Lachrymose narrative seems to have won in the popular mind, despite the prevailing scholarly attitude that the Holocaust is a black box in Jewish history. The way most people view Jewish history is primarily through the catastrophic events that have occurred from time to time. We focus on the crises, and not the continuities as Baron would have us do. We do not have to keep doing it this way, though. We can choose a different path forward. The best way to do that is through Jewish education.

Jewish Education

As we have seen, Jewish educational institutions and publications did not always emphasize the Holocaust in the way they do today. In 1964, for instance, one Jewish educator expressed concern that "the unrelieved recital of massacres, mass murder, persecutions, and

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[277] Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, Second Edition, Revised and En-larged, 18 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952– 83), 2:365, quoted in Engel, H*istorians of the Jews and the Holocaust,* 59-60.

disabilities inflicted upon Jewish communities…engenders in the mind of the Jewish

youngster…deep seated feelings of inferiority and emotional insecurity."[278] By 1999, though,

programs like March of the Living were using Holocaust education as a way to

"reinforce…Jewish identity," inspire participants to "become more connected Jewishly," and

"'prepare participants for leadership' in the Jewish community.'"[279] As Sheramy notes,

> "The greater willingness of educators to incorporate the Holocaust – both its tragic and
>
> uplifting dimensions – into the Jewish curriculum also reflected a changing attitude
>
> toward teaching the 'tragic' periods of Jewish history to Jewish youth. Indeed, much of
>
> the discussion regarding Holocaust education in the early 1960s was bound up in a
>
> broader debate over how to present somber events to young Jews. 'We are all familiar
>
> with the handicap of teaching Jewish history of the Common Era,' observed Isaac
>
> Toubin, executive director of the American Association for Jewish Education, in 1964.
>
> 'The unrelieved procession of persecutions oppresses our souls and alienates both young
>
> and adolescent.'[280] A Jewish communal leader reflected that same year that 'questions
>
> about the desirability and wisdom of teaching…tragic historical facts to our children have
>
> been raised persistently by teachers in our Jewish schools, by parents, and by rabbis. The
>
> unrelieved recital of massacres, mass murder, persecutions, and disabilities inflicted upon
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> Jewish communities…engenders in the mind of the Jewish youngster, we are repeatedly

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[278] Isaac Franck, "Teaching the Tragic Events of Jewish History," *Jewish Education* 34, no. 3 (1964): 173, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 1.

[279] William Shulman, interview by Rena Sheramy, 27 January 1999; Gene Greenzweig, telephone interview by Rena Sheramy, 17 February 1999., quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lesson,* 1.

[280] Isaac Toubin, "How to Teach the *Shoah*," *Conservative Judaism* 18 (summer 1964): 22, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons.*

told, deep-seated feelings of inferiority and emotional insecurity.'[281] For this reason, Jewish schools have feared addressing the 'trauma-laden subject' of the Holocaust."[282] Whatever misgivings Jewish educators may have had in the '60s, clearly by the '80s and '90s these misgivings had been thrown out the window by Jewish leaders and educators who had seen that Holocaust education seemed to be very good at getting people "in the door" and willing to pay attention. In this way, Holocaust education worked. But however well it might "work" in the short term, the long-term effects it has had on Jewish identity and affiliation seem questionable.

From the earliest years of Holocaust education, even before the victimhood narrative took hold, Baron himself saw issues with the approach of Jewish educators — specifically the emphasis on heroism. Commenting in 1964, he said:

> "All my life I have been struggling against the hitherto dominant 'lachrymose conception of Jewish history'... because I have felt that an overemphasis on Jewish sufferings distorted the total picture of the Jewish historic evolution. However, just as we must not misunderstand the true reality of life and psychology among… the Eastern European Jewish masses during the Nazi era, so must we not overlook the inherent tragedies of Jewish life during the two thousand years of dispersion."[283]

He called for a more balanced representation of Jewish history – one that would show Jewish history and life in all its complexity, not saying that everything was all one way or another. His ultimate concern was for "making the Jewish child feel a part of his group in joy as well as in

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[281] Franck, "Teaching the Tragic Events of Jewish History," 173, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 61-62.
[282] Sarah Feinstein, "The 'Shoah' and the Jewish School," *Jewish Education* 34 (1964): 165, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 61-62.
[283] Salo Baron, "Newer Emphases in Jewish History," *History and Jewish Historians: Essays and Addresses* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1964), 96-97, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 63.

sorrow."[284] While Baron's scholarship certainly had an influence on Jewish educators of the day, his influence should not be overemphasized.[285]

Because the purpose of Jewish schools is to build identification with and commitment to the Jewish people, it makes sense that educators use Holocaust education as a means to this end; for many teachers, it makes Jewish education feel more relevant to the lives of young Jews. Sheramy found "that the Holocaust lessons regarding social justice that demonstrated the applicability of Jewish education to contemporary society"[286] were often more effective ways of making lessons seem relevant to their students. "Educators stressed that it could provide critical lessons for American Jewish youth in turbulent times: about the nature of democracy, the evils of racism, and propriety under certain circumstances of civil disobedience."[287]

One of the most popular and seemingly effective narratives through which the Holocaust has been taught over the last 40 years is through the Zionist Narrative of Jewish History, which sees the creation of the State of Israel as redemption of 2,000 years of Jewish suffering in exile outside the land. As discussed above, an example of this approach is the March of the Living program. The approach is perfectly exemplified in the name of the March of the Living study guide: "From Shoah to Gevurah: From Victim to Soldier."[288] It shows the Zionist revision of Jewish history by reverting a death march into a march of the living, culminating in a trip to Israel. By taking young Jews to Eastern Europe and reclaiming spaces lost during the war, and filling them with Jewish people, rituals, and symbols, the program "creates memories of empowered Jews in Eastern Europe. In so doing, the march inverts the recollections of Holocaust survivors by offering participants a memory of Jewish *empowerment* in Poland. Furthermore,

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[284] Feinstein, "The 'Shoah' and the Jewish School," 165, quoted in Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 64.
[285] Sheramy, *Defining Lessons,* 64.
[286] Ibid., 70.
[287] Ibid., 71.
[288] Ibid., 137.

these redemptive images intertwine with Israeli ideals and symbols. Jewish survival for March participants becomes inseparable from the existence and power of Israel."[289]

While this trip does spark short-term feelings of connection and inspiration, it has problematic repercussions. The program encourages participants to view the contemporary world through their experiences on the trip, and to see themselves not just as tourists but as survivors. This conflation distorts perception of current events "by encouraging participants to see themselves as though they too survived the Holocaust and founded the Jewish State."[290] The march thus "legitimates a perspective from a different time and set of circumstances."[291]

This historical and cognitive distortion plays out similarly among children in Israel. As a 2015 study on a new Holocaust curriculum being taught in Israeli kindergartens reflects:

"When learners fail, on the one hand, to note the time-bound and unique motives of historical perpetrators and, on the other hand, to see that the harsh events occurred more than two generations ago, they may conclude that they are in similar danger as the historical victims. Indeed, one of us saw firsthand such a fusion between past and present when, about 10 years ago, his eldest daughter, returning from kindergarten on Holocaust Remembrance Day, stormed into the house and rushed to her young sister, calling in relief, 'Ayelet, thank god you survived, I was sure that you were exterminated in the Holocaust as well!' It seems then that it may be advisable to refrain from early exposure to such powerful events altogether rather than to risk a narrow and distorted, yet very powerful, image of them."[292]

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[289] Ibid., 138.
[290] Ibid., 151-152.
[291] Ibid.
[292] Yair Ziv, Deborah Golden, and Tsafrir Goldberg, "Teaching Traumatic History to Young Children: The Case of Holocaust Studies in Israeli Kindergartens," *Early Education and Development* 26, no. 4 (February 23, 2015): 7-8, https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2015.1000719.

This particular curriculum tried to expose young learners to Holocaust imagery in a way that was developmentally appropriate, in order to help young children make sense of the images they would see around the public commemoration of Yom Hashoah, in addition to further inculcating them into the State of Israel's heritage, history, culture, and public remembrances. The short curriculum focused on images of cartoons drawn by children in the concentration camps, as a way to help modern-day children understand what their predecessors experienced. The study showed that most kindergarten teachers would prefer not to have to expose their students to Holocaust imagery, in order to protect what they perceive as children's fragile psyche and to protect their innocence. This reticence likely also represents a desire among teachers to protect themselves from feelings of helplessness and overwhelm. While teachers' desire to protect their students is understandable, there is research that shows children are able to grasp high levels of nuanced historical understanding when multifaceted and varied teaching methods are used, and that children already come to the classroom with somewhat formed historical understandings based on what they are exposed to in their environments. This shows the importance of exposing children to the Holocaust and other distressing events in ways that are thoughtful and appropriate and do not lead to historical distortions and retraumatization.

In a 2006 article reflecting on her fifteen years of experience in Holocaust education, educator Simone Schweber noted dramatic shifts in the ways students approached the Holocaust, from veneration to mild interest. "The Holocaust," she said of her students in 2006, "is for them, interesting but not awesome."[293] She saw this change in attitudes as a result of cultural and commercial trivialization of the Holocaust, curricular overexposure leading to "Holocaust fatigue," and the political contentiousness of the topic mainly due to the controversial role the State of Israel plays in American public opinion. She wrote that to teach about the past:

[293] Simone Schweber, "'Holocaust Fatigue': Teaching It Today," *Social Education* 70, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 48.

"...always and unavoidably implicates the present. Teaching about the Holocaust as history, for better or worse, raises questions about the Holocaust's uses and meanings in the present, posing a set of real dilemmas for teachers. In order to teach about the Holocaust, must we teach about the on-going conflicts in the Middle East? And, if so, whose politics might that choice seem to support? Conversely, if we choose not to include the Holocaust in the curriculum, whose politics does that choice seem to support? Is it fair or right to equate Holocaust coverage with support of Israel's existence or with support of its current policies? What do such linkages imply?"[294]

The experience of Jews in today's world, with Jews' public prominence and Israel's military strength, is vastly different from that of world Jewry at the beginning of the 20th century. She notes that in a world where Jews are powerful and empowered, it is important for people to learn that it was not always that way. She believes that in a world where Holocaust video games and Seinfeld and Simpsons episodes exist at the same time, we must help students become wise consumers "in an ever expanding marketplace of narratives."[295]

There is no denying that the Holocaust is a key event in Jewish history. There is no way to run from it; nor should we run from it. Instead, we must be thoughtful about how we look at it, and how we understand its role in the way we view the past and the present, and others and ourselves. Holocaust imagery and language is almost ubiquitous in today's world. However, just because the Holocaust has come to play the role it does in today's Jewish world does not mean that it always has to. We got here because of a series of choices, and we can go somewhere else if we make different choices.

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[294] Schweber, "'Holocaust Fatigue': Teaching It Today," 51.
[295] Ibid., 53.

<u>Final Thoughts</u>

I was at a Shabbat lunch recently with a bunch of folks in their 20s and 30s, all of whom had grown up going to Jewish American schools. As inevitably happens at these kinds of gatherings, we were joking about the trauma instilled in us as very young people at these schools. At one point, someone launched into a booming rendition of the Yiddish folk song, "Donna Donna," popularized by folk singer Joan Baez in the 1960s. Several of us, who knew exactly why our friend was bringing up this song, shrieked with knowing laughter and joined in. The lyrics go like this:

| On a wagon bound for market
There's a calf with a mournful eye
High above him, there's a swallow
Winging swiftly through the sky

"Stop complaining!" said the farmer
"Who told you a calf to be?
Why don't you have wings to fly with
Like the swallow so proud and free?"

Calves are easily bound and slaughtered
Never knowing the reason why
But whoever treasures freedom
Like the swallow has learned to fly | Chorus:
How the winds are laughing
They laugh with all their might
Laugh and laugh the whole day through
And half the summer's night

Donna, Donna, Donna, Donna
Donna, Donna, Donna, Don
Donna, Donna, Donna, Donna
Donna, Donna, Donna, Don |

After a rousing final chorus of, "Donna, Donna, Donna, Don," we all sat in silence. The friend who had originally burst into song finally broke the silence, saying, "When I was in kindergarten, we used to beg the teacher to let us sing that song. We were obsessed with it." A bunch of us chimed in with, "Same!" shaking our heads at the absurdity of little kids being obsessed with a song about a calf being "bound and slaughtered" while wishing it could be like a swallow flying free. Perhaps, in our own small way, we related to the poor calf. Regardless of the

reasons why we liked this song, the story instilled in us a sense that this is what it meant to be Jewish. Being Jewish is like being a helpless animal that can easily be led to market for slaughter with no one noticing, except perhaps the laughing winds.

If this scene is not indicative of the sense of self that American-Jewish education instilled in young people at the end of the 20th century through the beginning of the 21st century, I don't know what it is. No wonder young Jews today are less likely than older generations to be affiliated with Jewish institutions, and Jewish life in general. We were taught that at some level, to be Jewish is to be a helpless victim, and that in many ways it can be dangerous to be Jewish. This is hardly a compelling basis for an identity. I believe that by instilling in young people this lachrymose sense of what it means to be Jewish, Jewish institutions have failed their students. It is time we start preaching alternative narratives that emphasize beauty, resilience, and agency.

I am not the only person saying this. A lot of younger Jewish folks are reflecting on the traumatic narratives they received as children, and how it has impacted their sense of safety and identity. One great example of this discourse is the critically acclaimed 2024 film "A Real Pain," written, directed by and co-starring Academy Award-nominated actor Jesse Eisenberg. "A Real Pain," which is about two cousins reuniting for a heritage trip to Poland after the death of their beloved grandmother (who happens to be a Holocaust survivor), is a master class in how we ought to talk about Jewish heritage and history today. I had been told by friends that the film was "a Holocaust movie that isn't a Holocaust movie," because while the Holocaust is certainly a part of the narrative, it does not dominate the story. Being primed as I am for catastrophe in Holocaust movies, I kept waiting for something absolutely terrible to happen. But it never did. The film was ultimately about reconnection and finding oneself. It was about acknowledging that

although hardship and darkness are part of the story of the Jewish people, they are not the whole story. Our story is full of vibrancy and light-heartedness, too.

Jesse Eisenberg's character and his cousin, for instance, talk about their grandmother's war-time experiences in a concentration camp only briefly, with Eisenberg saying simply that "she survived by a million little miracles." Most of what they recollect about their grandmother is her strength and tenacity for life, and the legacy of strength and resilience she left behind for their family. While the film does have a scene where they visit the Majdanek extermination camp in Poland, where their grandmother was imprisoned, it's a fairly short scene. It is couched in between scenes of walking tours showing Jewish history and culture in Warsaw, including memorials to Jewish resistance fighters, a moving visit to the Old Jewish Cemetery in Lublin, reflective dinners in old Polish taverns, and finally a visit to the grandmother's former home in Krasnystaw. Although the Holocaust plays a role in the narrative, it only occupies a portion of it. It is hardly the full story.

Yes, many terrible things have happened to the Jewish people over the course of history. Things we would label as "traumatic." But we should not let those terrible events overshadow the fact that Jews have lived all over the world for thousands of years in peace and prosperity. We must not let the darkness overshadow the light. Because there is a lot of light.

Terrible things are bound to happen again. Unfortunately, that is part of what it means to be human. Hardship is not unique to the Jewish experience. No human has control over everything that happens to them, but everyone has control over how they respond to the distressing things that happen to them. That is true for collectives too. Becoming traumatized is not inevitable. If trauma represents a crisis of meaning, then we must find new ways of making

meaning that allow us to move forward in ways that are generative and life-affirming, not toxic and retraumatizing.

In many ways, the Jewish people are at a crossroads. Many people say the massacre on October 7, and the cataclysmic events that it sparked, represent the beginning of a fundamentally new chapter in Jewish history. The rise in antisemitism in the U.S. since October 7, and the way in which the current presidential administration is weaponizing antisemitism to further its own political agenda, raise major questions about the future of Jewish life in the United States and Israel. There are real reasons to worry about the future.

While we cannot control everything that happens around us, we can control how we respond, and the meaning we choose to make out of these events. Our actions and reactions will depend in large part on how we choose to understand Jewish history. Will we look back and see only the hardship and suffering? Or will we look back and see the vibrancy and resilience of our people that have kept us going for millenia? The choice is ours. Nothing is inevitable. It is up to us how we move forward.

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