

Myths And Memories

By Sidra Ezrahi/Special to the Jerusalem Post

In one of the last entries in his diary of the Warsaw Ghetto, Haim Kaplan records the urgings of his friends to give up his painstaking labours: “Why?” they challenged. “For what purpose? Will you live to see it published? Will these words of yours reach the ears of future generations? How?”

The “future generations,” in a kind of silent dialogue that has evolved between the living and the dead since 1945, can now verify that Kaplan’s words have reached them.

For years though it did seem that all that had been written in the ghettos and camps and all that had been endured there would be consigned to oblivion. But, eventually, along with other documents and the testimonies of survivors, the journals of Kaplan and Emmanuel Ringelblum and the diaries of Moshe Flinker and, above all, of Anne Frank, have claimed their place in Western civilization.

They are the source material for a history that has been meticulously pieced together over the last three decades despite Nazi attempts to obliterate all traces of their deeds; the Holocaust emerges as one of the most thoroughly researched periods in modern Jewish history.

As explanatory theories began to be formulated out of the morass of detail that the scholars were sifting through, they were quickly translated into systems of meaning by the architects of national symbols—in part because it is unbearable to think that any historical event, no matter how terrible, does not carry some meaning or lesson or the surviving remnant.

If theodicies and cultural programmes could be erected on the ruins of the two Temples, then surely, it seemed, we could at least build secular ideologies and cultural priorities on the ashes of Treblinka.

But the transition from explanation to meaning may have been too abrupt; the codification of legends and myths and rituals obscuring or short-circuiting the long and painful process of facing the past

Auschwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto became symbols too soon, Society needed to crystallize amorphous forces around central and unambiguous images.

PERHAPS WE HAVE now reached the stage where we are mature enough—or troubled enough—to examine some of our most sacred myths. If the legend of Bar Kochba, which has influenced the memory of the ancient past and infused meaning into the deeds of the present, can be reexamined, the time may be ripe for reappraisal of certain cultural taboos and myths that have shaped the meanings we assign to the Holocaust.

We can perhaps begin by comparing the processes by which the events were assimilated. simultaneously, into the consciousness and social ethos of American and Israeli Jews. These distinct processes reflect two different orientations towards contemporary Jewish existence, which can be defined as the dichotomy between Jewish experience as private enterprise and Jewish experience as the public enterprise.

Survivors fleeing the smouldering ruins of post-war Europe set the pattern with their mode of entry into the country of refuge: those who went to the U.S. entered singly or in very small groups and forged their lonely way into the vast host society, often keeping their memories as hidden as the numbers under their tightly-buttoned sleeves. They worked hard to appear as

“normal” as other housewives in Queens or businessmen in Chicago. The price of security: a closely-guarded anonymity.

Refugees from Europe to Palestine fought their way through British blockades to be claimed by the kibbutz, the army, the whole society. The price of collective identity; general conformity

The new American Jews, then, had charted their individual courses. The new Israelis were recruited into the macro-family of an evolving and self-affirming community.

The “children’s generation” is a product of transferred memories and of the social myths still evolving, that sharpen the differences between the two groups. There is, as far as I can tell, no “second generation” in Israel in the sense that it has defined itself in the U.S. The Israeli community as a whole is self-appointed heir to the civilization that was destroyed.

There is something existentially reprehensible in the notion, bandied about with such a lack of humility, that “we”—that is everyone living after the Holocaust—“are all survivors.” But in a broader sense what happened to the Jews of Europe, like every other major event over the centuries, becomes our collective inheritance, incorporated into our historic memory.

It is doubtful whether the public days of mourning that replace specific Yahrzeits, or the public memorials that substitute for private graves, help to ease the pain of the survivors, but they are the rituals that feed the collective ethos. During the war itself a debate arose over proper forms of commemoration, which resonates to this day.

Avraham Shlonsky wrote in 1943 that the only way for the Yishuv to deliver a defeat to Hitler and strengthen the spirit of those dying in Europe was to continue with business as usual, to persist in building and in creating a viable Jewish existence that would survive the attempts at genocide. Writer and critic Dov Sadan answered that such a response was inconceivable “while

our dead are lying before us,” and that the community must undertake the prescribed period of mourning and the poets speak in the voice of lamentation before business could be resumed as usual.

TODAY, while certain psychiatrists and social scientists cite phenomena in Israeli society that they associate with an uncompleted season of mourning, other observers point to the edifice built with the diverted energy of bereavement. Amos Eilon calls attention to the symbolic significance of the commemorative forests and the numerous monuments to the six million - planting and building being acts of faith that replace the rituals of prayer in a secularizing society.

Yet the collective mandate often becomes oppressive. The attitude of the Yishuv was never more ambivalent than towards the surviving remnant of the Diaspora, whose predicted demise had been axiomatic in Zionist ideology. The refugees were perceived in part, at least, as the victims of a way of life devoid of the means of self-defence; pity was diluted by feelings of disdain, mingled with the patronizing pretense of revenge, particularly on the part of the young soldiers of the Yishuv. This, of course, was compounded by a profound and unexamined sense of guilt, one the entire community shared over the paltry attempts at rescue that had been made during the Holocaust.

Both Hanoah Bartov and Yehudah Amichai explored this theme in their fiction. But the most serious indictment of the Yishuv appears in Aharon Appelfeld's most recent novel, *Mikhvat Haor (Searing Light)*, in which the refugees in Eretz Yisrael represent- in their deformities of body and soul, in their names, in their mannerisms—almost the antithesis of the prototype Israeli.

The price, as noted before, of their new collective identity was conformity. So while the community as a whole had assimilated the Holocaust into its calendar and into the rhythm of its collective existence, private wounds went undressed for many years.

Where private memory clashed with public myth, it would take a long time before it would be legitimate for survivors to remember again. Fiction remains the licensed realm where prevailing social taboos could be explored and challenged. Yoram Kaniuk's novel, *Adam ben kelev* (*Adam Resurrected*) made but a small ripple when it appeared in 1969; its recent adaptation for the stage (*Adam's Purim Party*) suggests that 11 years later an Israeli audience is willing to confront the painful metaphor of the survivor as social outcast, whose haunting memories are subversive to the collective ethos of reconstruction and rehabilitation.

IT HAS BEEN stated here that there is no "second generation" in Israel in the sense that such a group has defined itself in the U.S. The prevailing notion in America of the Sixties and Seventies that the individual is primary and reality is internal and psychological—the "concern with the self" that Isaiah Berlin says characterizes "modern consciousness"—released painfully repressed memories and granted the survivors a voice.

The silence and ignominy of the early post-war years were replaced by confession and self-affirmation, transforming what had been an externally-imposed event into a kind of *identity*. Psychological models replaced both casual historical explanations and ideological models as modes of relating to Jewish history. The position of the survivor, in this view reflects not the fortunes of history but a "syndrome" of behavior and attitudes to be passed on from generation to generation like a mutated gene.

The survivor syndrome and that of the children (and children's children) remains an internal reality not harnessed to any positive external activity. Now the survivors were free to speak—but as the price of their willingness to listen Americans placed a moral value or survival itself. The articulate survivors, the writers and philosophers have become, willy-nilly, heroes who epitomize the strength and virtue of outstanding individuals—even when they may be speaking on behalf of those who did not survive.

The Eichmann trial was a watershed in the evolving consciousness of American Jews and Gentiles. The psychological definition of moral as well as historical categories had a liberating effect on individual survivors and had far reaching implications of another sort. While the Israeli public—and undoubtedly, most of the survivors living in America—concentrated on the testimony of the witnesses and the plight of the victims so copiously documented at the trial, the American public at large focused on the phenomenon of evil. On the portrait of the Nazi as it was displayed in the courtroom and analysed by prominent social scientists.

Together with the physically dwarfing agency of television which contained the evildoer within the confines of the 24" screen, the psychological categories that evolved in America to explain Eichmann's behaviour—and that of other Nazis who have been tried since—made him more familiar and therefore somehow more "understandable." In Germany the effect of such theories was to make conformity within the system appear inevitable, and the roles of victim and victimizer interchangeable—leading to an attenuation or even rejection of historical accountability.

Of course theories of the banality and bureaucracy of evil are meant not to explain away the evil but to alert every one of us, every member of the post-Holocaust generation, to the universal human potential for evil.

The absence of such concern in Israel is, I think, symptomatic of the total preoccupation with the status of Jews as victims. The Nazi hardly appears in Hebrew literature of the Holocaust, except as the demonic Other, Uri Zvi Greenberg's "HaGerman." The Israelis did not view Eichmann through a TV screen—thousands saw him, in real-life proportions, in the courtroom. But it was not his appearance or behaviour, but author Ka-tzetnik's collapse that shocked and engaged the Israeli public. The poet Haim Gouri, covering the trial in the Hebrew press, responded to report that Eichmann had lost weight during the course of the trial: "Perhaps it is true. As for myself, I would prefer to continue to see him undeciphered, impenetrable."

YET IT IS here and now, in Israel of the 1980s, in the context of autonomous, corporate Jewish life where property modulated theories about the human potential for conformity and violence could play a sobering role. The status of the victim is a degraded but morally comfortable one. The myths and the official lessons of the Holocaust reinforce the conviction that Jews are constitutionally incapable of oppressive behaviour and attitudes. Just as there is something morally repellent in the fascination with evil that leads to its domestication, so there is something morally evasive in the refusal to face the *sitra ahara*, the evil side, of our body politic.

Those voices which have called out recently for a reexamination of myths that have oversimplified complex realities are drowned out in the generally strident noise of public rhetoric that invokes the spectre of dying children in a Polish ghetto to back up any tactical decisions of the Israeli military and any governmental appeal for funds.

There are many paths to memory but attitudes towards the Holocaust reflect choices of ways of being in the present at least as much as ways of remembering the past.

The author is an expert on Holocaust literature.