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HOLOCAUST MEMORIALS: The Politics of Perception

Since the dawn of human history, memorials have been the often sacred shrines through which communities have aspired to seal in space the memory of events that shaped their collective consciousness in time. Yet memorials are not just signs, or guideposts through history. Because of their institutional and public nature, they are the privilege of dominant cultures, and as such they are inextricably entwined with the reality of power. Indeed, memorials rely for their effectiveness on the preservation and codification of memory, and a relationship to that memory nurtured by individuals through their shared experience.

This shared experience, in its turn, remains alive and is renewed in meaning through the cyclical rhythms of civic and religious rituals, which seek to maintain a unified relationship to the past. So, for example, the memorials to the American republic of freedom and democracy which dot the Washington Mall would be emptied of contemporary significance for most citizens, were they not nurtured by the public rituals that characterize the cycle of American holidays. Such rituals have the primary function of making the past relevant to personal experience. They promote the integration of the past within the person, shaping personal identity in the crucible of shared history.

Hence, memorials depend on memory which, in turn, relies on myth, and myth depends on a constellation of crystallized, and yet relatively open-ended, symbols as its primary language. More specifically, memorials are sensory stimuli functionally integrated into the inner dynamics of cultural symbolism. They are just one of many instruments through which a nation gestures to its legitimated and reified ideals. On keen reflection, then, it is clear that memorials are not only part and parcel of a nation's self-understanding, but they are also value-laden: they articulate by way of synthesis those preferences that best fit the perceived national interest, and are thus self-serving, mirroring the goals of political elites.

Traditionally, minorities have had to rely on storytelling and oral history for the inter-generational transmission of memory at its most basic and fundamental level. So, for example, the central mode of Jewish memory is

the paradigmatic telling of the redemption from Egypt. This is an extremely integrated model which involves both intellectual and sensory stimuli. At the level of narrative form, it is a highly selective and calculated fusion of factual, traditional, and liturgical elements, which relies on empathetic understanding and studied re-enactment for its continued effectiveness. Thus, the Passover Haggadah stresses that "the more you *talk* about the Passover liberation, the more praiseworthy you are."¹ This participatory 'talking' has as its object something that happened to '*oneself*', and not to '*others*,' albeit through a creative process of inter-generational transfer. As the climax of the liberation story is reached, the Haggadah prescribes, quoting a talmudic injunction (*T.B. Pesahim* 116b): "In each generation, a person is to see *himself* as having *personally* come out of Egypt."² The past is regenerated through telling into a never-fading personal memory that is welded indistinguishably into a general sense of religious rootedness and national destiny. Thus, the 'telling' encodes both past, present, and future. On the one hand, the memorial of the event is not conceptualized through surrogate objects that remain 'other' from the participant in the experience; on the other, remembrance is rejuvenated through the active participation of real people in dialogue. It is an uninterrupted chain of testimonials, in which the participants are required to retell the story of freedom in a way that takes into account the individuality of each listener. Thus, the Haggadah relies on a modality of transmission epitomized by four prototypical children, each of whom is given a different insight into the Exodus, in accordance with his specific level of consciousness and perspective.

Even more characteristically, in a clear departure from the more static and contemplative character of secular memory, the concept of 'memorial' in the Jewish tradition includes an injunction for action, usually in ritually prescribed form. So, for example, it is written "When you see . . . you shall remember . . . and do" (Numbers 15:37-41). Seeing is the catalyst to remembrance, and the latter leads to action.³

The difficulty that minorities generally face in having moments of their history publicly inscribed in the memorial landscape of the country in which they live is aptly illustrated by the misfortunes of an early Holocaust-related monument. In 1964, sculptor Nathan Rapoport proposed two monuments for a site in New York City's Riverside Park, which had been reserved by the City for a Holocaust memorial. The statues in question were both unequivocally Jewish-specific and, at least in one case, cruelly realistic as visual representation. But it was not simply the artistic merit of the works, and the prudence of their location in a recreational park, that were questioned by the commission in charge of the project. In the words of City Arts Commissioner Eleanor Platt, had the city endorsed such a display, it "would set a highly regrettable precedent." Indeed, she asked, "[h]ow would we answer other special groups who want to be similarly represented on public land?" But the public legitimization of special minority interests was not

the only problem. According to Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris, "monuments in the parks should be limited to events of American history."⁴ The disintegrated memory of the immigrants prior to their 'Americanization' was simply unfit for memorialization in American public culture. There was a sense in which "American history", and the experience of the "(immigrant, Jewish) American citizen," could not be reciprocally integrated in a shared realm of civic significance.

Last but not least, a more subtle motive was probably involved as well. It is rare for communities to allocate resources to commemorate defeat and suffering at an institutional level. Mourning is and remains a predominantly private ordeal, an encounter with shadows within the fortified walls of the self. This is especially so in American public rituals, which aim at eliciting pride, and are averse to the pensive rhythms of sorrow and mourning. To the American people, the Holocaust, which was executed on distant soil against remote peoples, could not easily fit with the zealously optimistic attitude of the American dream. As the first Israeli ambassador to the United States, Eliahu (Epstein) Eilat remarked once, "nations are in the habit of erecting monuments not to the memory of failures or suffering but rather to victories and acts of glory."⁵

The erection of a federally sponsored memorial to the Holocaust in Washington must, therefore, be seen as both an anomaly and a breakthrough in both Jewish and American history. The consciousness of these hard facts must constitute the starting point for any reflection on its significance.

The general problems that a memorial of this kind encounters are somewhat analogous to the dilemmas that many a museum face in presenting distant, defunct civilizations, existentially and spatially apart from the experience of their patrons. As a stand-in for memory, they cannot rely on the direct evidence of ruins, relics, and other artifacts. Hence, they cannot have the kind of direct appeal that places like Auschwitz, for example, can claim for themselves. Likewise, in terms of a cultivation of active remembrance, they are not woven into a vibrant fabric of life. So, for example, upon visiting Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, the visitor is both stirred by the horrors impressed upon him, as he is influenced by the surrounding human reality of a living people successfully growing out of national trauma. There, the memorial to the Holocaust victims is one among countless memorials to Jews as successful masters of their own destiny. The horrors portrayed are located on an unfolding historical continuum that is balanced between suffering and death, as well as national pride and revival.

Interactive memorials of the kind featured in Washington must predominantly rely on the stranger's empathy and imagination both to stir awareness, and to convert inert information into affirmative moral value.

Indeed, here perhaps more than elsewhere, memory is meant to effect a transformation of consciousness; remembrance is not suggestive evocation or contemplative free-association, but prescriptive exhortation to right action.

One must realize, however, that this feat is almost Herculean in its demands even in the ordinary case. Memorials are, after all, postscripts to absence. They give presence to what was, and is not; they orchestrate an encounter with the remote and unreal. They fall into two basic categories. On the one hand, they can establish a chain of continuity between contemporary communal identity and its multi-layered roots. In other words, memorials project multi-dimensional depths into the dull meaning of everyday experience. To achieve this aim, they presuppose a relative similarity between the meanings they convey and the experiential and ideological reality of the community they serve.

On the other hand, memorials might well cause the stranger's encounter with remoteness to be even more mysteriously 'other' and estranged. Perhaps this is similar to the reactions of many a person abruptly confronted with *avant-garde* art: visually disturbed in his feeling of being at home in the world, he wanders confusedly and without ease amidst the unsettling assault of the intricately different, his educated sensibility jeopardized by an eerie sense of being and remaining a visitor to a world that bears no relationship to what he is, and what he aspires to be.

To clarify the difficult task that a dominant majority faces in understanding and empathizing with a minority in its midst, one might consider, for example, the biblical injunction to the Jew not to oppress the stranger. Thus we read,

Do not wrong a stranger and do not oppress him, for strangers you were in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:20)

Do not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, since you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9)⁶

The modality of Jewish interaction with the stranger is dominated by a universalizing metaphor of reciprocity. The Jew is asked to convert imagination into a moral instrument, and to act upon it. This expanded awareness does not rely primarily on the open-ended, highly subjective laws of empathy, or the legalistic formula of equality, but on the more vividly charged force of memory. Plunging deep into the ruthlessness of exile and the formative stages of national experience, the text calls upon memory to transform the plight of the stranger into something familiar. This exercise does not involve free-flowing associations, but forceful and pointed images in which the pain, the sweat and the subjugation reverberate in all their reality.

But if the dominant culture to which the message of the memorial is primarily addressed cannot be fairly called upon to conjure up and re-live

such essential, primordial memory, then how can the minority articulate the anxiety and the terrors of total annihilation? How can the unutterable reality of 'strange' pain be transformed into familiar terms that can be mutually related to?

The question is partly related, albeit more deeply and subtly, to the discussion about the "comprehensibility" of the Holocaust, and its "uniqueness." To make an experience intelligible, the subject of that experience must rely on a categorial and interpretive framework that may deprive him of a specific universe of meaning. The communicative effort is rendered especially arduous when the experience that strives for articulation is intricately painful, beyond utterance. The resulting process of representation is transformative both of the narrator and the basic experience itself.

The trade-off, while diminishing, in a sense, both the person and the experience, is allegedly justified, as the lesser evil, by the priority of the need to know and make known, to learn from each other. It would seem quite likely, therefore, that Jews should be keen, finally, to voice their suffering as messengers reminding the world of the cosmic dangers of unfettered power and ruthless technology, as well as the catastrophic outcomes of ambiguous moral priorities which result in the dehumanization of the different and the breakdown of human solidarity among the nations of the world.

What is remembered and how in the presence of a monument depends on who we are, our motivation to remember, and the perceptual angle from which we construe reality. With this in mind, the curators of the Washington Holocaust Memorial devised a model that constitutes an attempt to resolve the problem of inter-subjective, inter-group understanding of the Holocaust. Mediating between the thesis of incomprehensibility and the sense of historical irrelevance expressed by the New York commissioners, which results in the civic disenfranchisement of minorities, a new approach has emerged, namely, the so-called "Americanization of the Holocaust." The Holocaust is thus recodified as the most extreme example of what the American dream is meant to dispel: prejudice, racial discrimination and hatred, authoritarian centralism, and the obliteration of civil rights. Jewish collective identity is recast reductively as an archetypal microcosm pulsating with the experience of near total annihilation.

Some might argue that we should not have expected anything different or better. After all, institutional memory, for good or bad, must be geared to national interest, and the latter is determined according to selective and not necessarily truth-oriented interpretive preferences. Be that as it may, the pressing question is what such "Americanization" of the Holocaust, now internalized within the mainstream of the American constitutional landscape, does to the specific interests of the community it is meant to serve and protect.

In this regard, I am reminded of a disquieting image in which the collusion of symbols dramatically undermines the omnipotence of empathy.

Upon touring the site of Birkenau, members of the “Yarnton group”—an international, interfaith commission, convened in 1989 by the Polish government to reassess the remaking of public memory at Auschwitz—were struck by a jarring sight. In a gesture of both solidarity and reconciliation, young Polish volunteers had arrayed across a green meadow—the former site of burning pits and mass graves—large whitewashed stars of David and crosses. In two spots, the young volunteers had sought to generate an integrated symbol of mutual recognition between Jewish and Polish martyrs by nailing stars of David to the crosses, in effect crucifying the Jewish star. Despite the good faith attempt to create a peaceful and egalitarian marriage between Jewish and Christian symbols, they could only produce a clumsy evocation, reawakening bitter memories of Jewish martyrdom at the hand of Christians.⁷

Even when specifically Jewish events are remembered, Polish-Catholics will remember as Polish-Catholics, harnessing Jewish events to the background myths and metaphors of their own traditions. Despite the closeness of the persecution and concentration camp experience, and the sharing of memorial space at Auschwitz, even sensitized Poles could not help but relate to the Jewish experience as outsiders removed from the insider’s universe of values. Indeed, it would be as absurd to expect Poles to recite Kaddish at Auschwitz as it would be ludicrous to expect Jews to remember Polish victims of Nazi persecution according to the Polish-Catholic martyrological tradition.

There is no reason to believe that matters can be significantly better in the United States or elsewhere, for that matter. It is probably with this realization in mind that the curators of the Washington Holocaust Memorial have attempted to stem the dangers of misunderstanding by presenting the Holocaust in a way that capitalizes on the civic and historic consciousness of the ‘average’ American, and hinges upon a commonality of categorial and interpretive frameworks. Empathy is stirred by analogy to the probable and the familiar, within the imaginative world of the prototypical visitor. To trigger the process, a hi-tech effort is made to generate an experiential appreciation of the suffering and annihilation of the Holocaust. Surely the team behind the memorials must have realized that remembering well is ultimately dependent on the correctness of the act of remembrance itself.

But the shock of a confrontation with a strange world of threatening destruction and ravaging degradation at the limits of the imaginable can result in a kind of alienated anxiety, a disorientation which may lead to denial, distancing, evasion. Significantly, in the Passover Haggadah the possibility of alienation is offset by the “happy ending”: the memory of slavery glides over to the redemption from bondage and the end of the exile. Perhaps the visitor to the Washington memorial will resourcefully pause and consider the continuation of Jewish life in the United States as the ultimate ‘redemption,’ the happy ending that allows him to release the distress

of a painful confrontation with an alien world.

This shock-releasing thought finds some reinforcement in an interesting symbolic exchange that occurred recently during a ceremony at the museum. With solemn gravity, the soil of several concentration camps was mingled with soil from Arlington National Cemetery. The symbolism evokes a sort of cross-fertilization, in which 'immigrant' and 'American' history, no longer separate, are bonded in a unity that appears as natural as the bond between man and the land in which he lives. This re-connecting appears to signify a conciliatory healing of the souls, seemingly bestowing ultimate approval to the "Americanization" of the Holocaust.

But behind "Americanization" lurks a 'revisionism' of sorts. As one perceptive commentator has remarked, the gesture "recalls 'Liberators,' a film that merged the story of African American soldiers fighting racism at home with the plight of Jewish victims of Nazi racism. The desire to yoke the American experience of racism to the Holocaust was so great that the erroneous claim was made that these brave soldiers had liberated concentration camps that many had never even seen."⁸

To remember correctly, in the sense of 'passing memory on,' there must be a consensus as to the meaning of what is remembered. The commission behind the creation of the Washington memorial appears to have endorsed the most traditional global-historical interpretation of the Holocaust. Very simply put, Nazi-German anti-semitism is portrayed as the culmination of a virulent process of anti-semitism and racial hatred, made far more vicious by its amplification within Fascist authoritarianism and its loyal bureaucratic apparatus, as well as the use of heretofore unknown techniques of mass destruction. From this perspective, the vastness of the evidence can be re-characterized to support a claim that the Holocaust was only 'quantitatively' different from other varieties of genocide, while ignoring the claim of a qualitative distinction between this and other types of mass-murder.

This interpretation fits very well with current United States federal policy. On the one hand, it 'secularizes' the Holocaust by overshadowing deeper, theological interpretations of destruction which are more in keeping with the unbroken chain of Jewish tradition. But in so doing, it leaves a faithful portrayal of the roots of anti-semitism significantly truncated at its vital core. It also silences the individual voices of Jews themselves struggling to articulate the uniqueness of their own suffering. This glossing over in the explanation and understanding of the Holocaust preserves the value of church-state separation by avoiding an impermissible entanglement with religion, while at the same time, neither furthering nor hindering any specifically religious cause. But at what cost to Jewish memory ?

On the other hand, this interpretation reaffirms the principles of equality and state neutrality among competing moral beliefs. It safeguards against the socially disruptive possibility that non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust or

other genocidal policies will resent the Jewish claim to a more transcendent level of suffering. Indeed, some may argue that to even suggest the possibility of the 'uniqueness' of the Holocaust is tantamount to setting up a kind of 'invidious competition' with regard to victimhood, with the state having to adjudicate with the full weight of its authority between competing claims of "unique suffering."

Last but not least, this historical model appears not to call into question the American policy of generous forgiveness towards the German nation at the end of World War II and ever-after. This pragmatic policy of unreflective appeasement and 'normalization,' for the sake of staving off the ideological and military threat of the neighboring Soviet Union and its satellites, is a burning instance of guilt rewarded. After the blandness of the Nuremberg trials, Germany was given the bounties of the Marshall Plan on a silver platter. Convicted Nazi criminals who could help rebuild the new Germany were pardoned. A fertile context was allowed to develop in which the seeds of "denial" history and literature could burgeon and eventually gain ground.

Thus, the policy underlying the Federal Memorial in Washington appears to solve in one stroke the grievous issues of forgiveness and reconciliation. It also seems to implicitly downplay and even stigmatize as unreasonably vengeful any Jewish-specific arguments denouncing the rightness, the prudence, and the ultimate justice of such 'normalization.'

When Yad Vashem was being proposed, many a voice was raised questioning the wisdom of such an enterprise. It was felt by some that such a memorial would elicit not pride, but deep sorrow at best, and that it would dampen the creative energies that were being devoted to the rebuilding of the state and to the healing of a wounded collective consciousness. As Eliahu (Epstein) Eilat put it, it was better "to create new life through a living enterprise rather than a stone monument."⁹

In keeping with Zionist efforts, for example, the Jewish National Fund had decided, already in 1942, to dedicate a memorial forest to the dead, the Martyrs' Forest that now stands on the Judean Hills on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The language of tree-planting is rich in symbolic imagery. Re-rooting is an act of 'natural' empowerment, re-establishing a marriage between man and his land. To repossess the land by sowing, planting, and reaping after hard work is to become one with it again in a bond of strength and territorial security that constantly regenerates itself through the cycle of nature. Simply, the "greening of Israel" became shorthand for the return from exile, the final end of rootlessness and the powerlessness that goes with it.

The political leadership was keenly aware of both the difficulty in shaping the collective memory of grief as well as the effects of such memorialization upon the Jewish people.

Before Yad Vashem, there was no analogous precedent of establishing a Jewish memorial in the modern sense. There appears to be no “memorial” in biblical tradition of the type the word denotes in our times. There is no concept of building something to become a monument. Even when we find memorials in the Bible and the Prophets, they are tombstones or something similar to Laban’s “Gal ed,” the “witness pile of stones”¹⁰. They are nondescript objects involving no human ‘art,’ and are bereft of pictographic material; bare signs for insiders, meaningless to those unfamiliar with the tradition behind them. They do not emerge dramatically from the landscape to ‘inspire’ to action. The *mishkan*, the portable tabernacle built by the Israelites in the desert upon Moses’ instructions¹¹, which might be seen as a ‘monument’ of sorts, is in fact unrelated to the idea of a memorial. As the root of the word suggests, it is a marker of God’s “indwelling presence” amidst the people. It denotes the merciful ever-flowing and all-powerful presence of a God who never leaves His people. Unlike a memorial, then, the *mishkan* does not connote the dire condition of loss and absence.

Perhaps the Western Wall in Jerusalem, regarded as the remnant of David’s Temple, comes closest to being a memorial in the Jewish tradition. But even here, the Wall is a memorial, at best, in a sense analogous to the way the ruins of Auschwitz are a monument: they were not *deliberately* erected to perform this function.

The dynamics of Jewish memorial objects is probably best synthesized by a story which appears in the Bible after a battle between Joshua’s men and Amalek, the Jewish symbol of radical evil and eternal enmity, in the time of Moses:

And the Eternal said unto Moses, “Write this for a memorial in the book, and rehearse this in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” And Moses *built an altar*, and called the name of it Adonai-nissi. (Exodus 17:14-16)

This condensed narrative highlights in lucid, pointed sequence the steps of memorialization. The “memorial,” strictly speaking, is the “book.” This “book,” the written word, acts as a stimulus to the development of an oral tradition, which fulfills an essential function from generation to generation. The oral tradition supplies the specific details necessary for the implementation of the commandments, while at the same time rehearsing and developing philosophical and ethical themes only alluded to in the text.

In this manner, the oral tradition provides the possibility of interpretive meaning for generations to come, allowing them to draw from the original experience to their own reality. Thus, the oral tradition operates as a catalyst for the authentic experience of the text, whereas the written word safeguards against the danger of interpretive subversion at the hands of future generations.

Rashi, the classical medieval biblical commentator, reads the verse "and [Moses] called the name of it 'Adonai-nissi'" in a way that highlights the function of the memorial altar. The stone itself has no independent significance. It matters only in terms of its allusive name. It is just a pointer, so that whenever an individual mentioned the name of the altar, God's saving grace would be remembered, "since he would be saying, 'The Lord, He is our miracle'."

Therefore, the altar is not an intermediary in the sense in which an elaborate, dramatized monument is. The altar itself is unambiguous, it does not require interpretation. Its name, however, suggests an extrasensory divine power, which exclusively it is meant to evoke. Again, the biblical passage reinforces a concept of memorial which is meaningful only in the light of an oral tradition.

A visually stimulating, 'narrative' symbol, standing alone, is not, and cannot become, a Jewish memorial. It is precisely this kind of intermediary that the tradition for centuries sought to avoid. For this type of symbol fosters a relationship to the past that is contrary to the oral, dialogic transmission of collective memory. Alone in the presence of the artifact, the mind is left to roam. What was meant to stimulate an interactive exchange between a traditional understanding of the past and its relevance to the present becomes a purely intellectual pursuit, a seduction of the mind.

What we face in Washington and elsewhere is precisely a memorial that becomes a symbol, for Jews and non-Jews alike. It is the implications of this subversive move that I wish to examine.

It was not too long ago that Nietzsche pointed out how history becomes a secular substitute for religion in the modern world. Having relegated tradition to the margins of personal identity, the modern individual seeks in scientific history a satisfying meaning for life. History thus earns a role as a semi-providential provider of a sort of compensatory meaning, filling a function in the construction of personal and societal identity that was once reserved for religion and its meaning-making rituals.

The effects of this change on the dynamics of Jewish communal life have been especially shattering. On the one hand, Judaism is eminently history-oriented: indeed, Jewishness and peoplehood overlap, and as categories they are generated within a specific time-and-space oriented historical frame.

Alternatively, Judaism defines history teleologically as bound up with God's purpose in the universe, leaving to man's choices a significant, yet constricted, role. In short, man is the master of his own destiny in a limited sense defined by the concept of covenant, which outlines the preordained destiny of the people Israel. Unlike modern philosophies, man is not made to be the gravitational center of the universe, and the biblical narratives hammer out a human condition which is marred by vulnerability at the hands of God.

Because of this inextricable link with the manifestation of God's purpose in the world, Jewish history and memory are eminently selective, at odds with the main tenets of the modern conception of objective, scientific historical inquiry.¹²

To the post-Enlightenment, assimilated Jew, the question of continued loyalty to a traditional conception of Jewish history is a source of deep inner struggle. For such a conception makes his freedom to define his own identity, and to choose his own affiliations unencumbered by biology and tradition, at best an illusion, at worst a fateful curse. Thus, it would seem that the emancipated Jew should rationally abandon the fetters of Jewish teleological particularism, and consequently embrace the tenets of ethical universalism. But even a conception of identity that stresses individual autonomy and choice encounters a limit in the existential claims of personal well-being. At this level of experience, the need to continue to identify oneself relationally with one's family and ethnic roots make the rejection of Jewish particularism a traumatic and potentially devastating prospect. This is the condition of the 'cultural' Jew; a reality that defies logic, representing an ill-defined existential compromise made by much of contemporary Jewry.

The appeal of the Holocaust to the self-understanding of the non-traditional Jew lies first and foremost in its opening a new cycle for Jewish history, and with it new possibilities. The search for the meaning of the Holocaust has provided a formidable challenge for Jewish theology, one that has been answered either esoterically or in ways that hardly appeal to the probing mind or the educated sensibility. The attempt to explain it in ways that make sense can all too easily reinforce a categorical suspension of belief. To the skeptical mind, the destruction of European Jewry means the failure of the belief tenets for which the tradition stands: it portrays with stinging evidence a Judaism impotent before utter dehumanization and death, inadequate to support the right to life and the proposition of self-defensive action in the face of radical adversity.

The other side of the doctrinal demise of the "Old World" is the most empowering event in Jewish history since the loss of the Jewish homeland, namely, the creation of the State of Israel. Jewish nationalism in its present-day version has claimed that nationhood can prosper outside the all-absorbing tenets of religion, that to be powerful and respected as a Jew by the nations of the world one need not believe in God. To the emancipated Jew, this ideology bears a further meaning: the belated entry of Jewish history into the fold of the modern conception of scientific history, the history of autonomous and self-determined nations. Thus, one of the consequences of the Holocaust is the emancipated Jew's confirmation of his own choice both to remain culturally identified with Judaism, while at the same time asserting his own allegiance to the tenets of modernity.

On a more subliminal level, the Holocaust has given the concept of "chosenness" a meaning that can be made to fit the pursuit of the civic and

constitutional values of equality, tolerance, and democratic pluralism. In this sense, “chosenness” does not connote a transcendental difference and particularism at odds with liberal values. On the contrary, because of the Jewish people’s authentic experience of perseverance in the face of suffering, having survived the threat of total annihilation, the Jewish voice is ‘chosen’ as the most credible and legitimate interpreter of the aspirations of humankind.¹³ ‘Jewish’ becomes a metaphor for the suffering of humanity at large. Thus all peoples, confronting the omnipresence of exterminating violence in an age of nuclear warfare and moral decline, are on the verge of sharing the experience of Israel; just as social inequality and all forms of exploitation are but on the threshold of becoming Auschwitz.

Both transformations in the meaning of Jewish history and “chosenness” converge, directly or indirectly, in the secularized educational design of the federal Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, as well as the Beit haShoah/Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. In addition, these institutions—one should emphasize—successfully collect, preserve, and organize the only compelling and decisive evidence that can resist the entropy of the program of those who would gamble with the facts of history, rejecting as speculation the indictment of the “Final Solution.”¹⁴ To counteract such insidious designs, one needs to cultivate the public’s capacity to make distinctions and to exercise judgment, utilizing in the most sophisticated manner possible that most powerful of banners, the force of real evidence itself. But the question is whether, in the end, such memorials can serve the healing needs of the Jewish community they are meant to empower and safeguard.

There are very subtle and potentially self-defeating risks in attempting to integrate a tragedy rooted in Jewish and European history within general moral categories and a symbolism of suffering, adapted to the American sensibility. The constitutional separation between state and religion cannot negate the fact that the United States is a deeply Christian country at its roots. Despite recent attempts to revise the theological demonization of the Jew, the fact remains that Christian symbolism throughout still assigns the Jew the role it defined hundreds of years ago, namely, that of the suffering victim, in the image of Jesus Christ sacrificed on the cross for the sins of humanity.

So, for example, Pope John Paul II, on visiting the site of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp, told a large audience during prayer services that “[t]heir (i.e., Jewish) suffering was a gift to the world.”¹⁵ On the same occasion, the Pope refused to consider whether Christian stigmatization of the Jews as killers of God created a climate of opinion among Christians that cast the Jews outside the realm of humanity and moral obligation. Significantly, the Pope was speaking in the midst of the Auschwitz convent controversy, therefore at a highly sensitized time on both sides, when Jews saw Christians attempting to obliterate Jewish memory, and to reappropriate the Holocaust to themselves.

Why Jews should reinforce this stereotype by presenting themselves as an abstract symbol of generalized victimization remains a perplexing issue. Here again, it seems, the Jew buys his place in the world at the expense of the concreteness of his own public individuality.

From a point of view internal to the Jewish community itself, "Holocaustmania" represents an attempt to break away from the 'old' biblical code and create a new language and paradigm for the Jewish experience. One of the consequences of this approach is to downplay the centrality of religious tradition to Jewish existence, and to substitute the Holocaust as a broad 'consensus issue' uniting all Jews. As attractive as this approach might appear to Jewish organizations in terms of building a common front, its long term implications are puzzling indeed.

For to reject the old code means to cut oneself off from the fundamental sources that nurture the continuance of Jewish identity. It is the relinquishment of a heritage which regards those sources as a never dry, never impervious, well of truth.

This results in a kind of silence which is the opposite of that searching dialogue which has kept Jewish existence alive over the centuries, with each generation delving into the sources and uncovering ever reinvigorating meaning. It is a spiritual abdication that atrophies whatever is energizing, constructive, and positive about Jewish identity.

Last but not least, it gives anti-Semites a posthumous victory: for it leads Jews to define themselves defensively, from the outside, as it were, according to a perspective shaped and enforced by the priorities of their oppressors.

More fundamentally, the memory of the Holocaust can live only if the community is healed from within.¹⁶ Some may argue that American Judaism represents precisely the healing of a resilient people, constructively asserting themselves in a society that allows for equal opportunity of communal definitions without the authoritarian constraints of religion or centralized politics. But to the keen observer, the fortunes of Jewish survival in North America represent merely the laborious re-establishment of an environment of relative security and self-confidence, nothing more than a precondition for true and searching spiritual healing and collective growth.

To remember well, the Jewish community has to mourn. To mourn well, it is necessary to resort to a stable, well-formed, uncontested framework that gives meaning to that suffering. But today, with the fragmentation of the Jewish community, traditional Jewish symbols are no longer sources of positive interaction in the face of a catastrophe exploding the resources of the imagination. Hence the memory of the Holocaust is suspended in a vacuum, wavering restless among wounds that, deep down, are still as raw as blood and ashes.

The Holocaust has provided the fertile ground for more research than any single event in Jewish history. Yet the more we inquire, the less we

seem to know, the less we seem to hear, torn as we are amidst the ruins of a past that defies the coherence of meaning, and is impervious to the explanatory models of human behavior and history. Perhaps this is but one effect of the natural survival drive to set aside the memory of pain and to begin anew, to remember the pain in order to 'let go' of it and move on. But there are no priests or physicians for wounded memory, and our obsession with memorialization seems to be a yearning for a new meta-historical myth to exorcise the burden of the Holocaust.

In the end, Holocaust memorials appear to be designed by the living for the benefit of the living, and the myths they choose to hand over to future generations. They are the instruments of group needs and interests often scantily related to the sacrifice or experience of the dead. As such, they may serve useful and necessary functions. But their existence as objects to be put to profitable use should not be confused with memory itself, in the same way as perception and process do not add up to meaning.

NOTES

1. The fundamental modality of 'telling' is inextricably associated with the commandment 'to remember.' So, for example, the command to "remember what Amalek did to you ... do not forget" (*Deuteronomy* 25:17-19) is fulfilled not by mere inward thought, or the contemplation of action in some future, as yet undetermined, time, but by speaking of it at the festive time of the holiday of Purim. See T.B., *Megilla* 18a.
2. The passage continues with a reference to *Exodus* 13:8, "And you shall tell your son on that day: 'This commemorates what God did for me when I came out of Egypt'. For God delivered not only our ancestors, but also us along with them, as said: 'And he brought us out of there in order to give us the land that He promised our ancestors' (*Deuteronomy* 6:23)."
3. See T.B., *Menakhot* 43b.
4. A more detailed account of the story may be found in James E. Young, "Israel's Memorial Landscape: *Sho'ah*, Heroism, and National Redemption," in *Lessons and Legacies. The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World*, P. Hayes ed. (Evanston, 1991), p. 285.
5. Cited in Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million* (New York, 1993), p. 429.
6. Other references to the experiential and educational value of 'remembering' slavery and oppressed minority status in exile may be found in *Exod.* 1:13-14; *Lev.* 25:43; *Deut.* 5:14-15; 15:14-15; 16:11.
7. The story is told with more details in James E. Young, "The Future of Auschwitz," *Tikkun Magazine*, Nov./Dec. 1992, p. 31 ff.
8. J. Rosen, "The Misguided Holocaust Museum," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1993, p. 7E.
9. Cited in Tom Segev, *supra* note 6, pg. 429.
10. *Genesis* 31:46-49.
11. *Exodus* 25:8.
12. The paradoxes of the "Jewish historian" are poignantly elucidated in Y.H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Philadelphia, 1982).
13. This new "chosenness" of the Jewish people was allegedly Ben-Curion's favorite thesis: the "people of Israel" should be a "chosen people" and a "light to the nations," a paragon of national morality as well spiritual and scientific genius. Cf. Tom Segev, *supra* note 6, pg. 468.

14. See D. E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York, 1993); the claims and methods of the "revisionist" movement in Europe and especially in France are exhaustively documented in P. Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust* (New York, 1993).
British 'revisionist' historian David Irving recently claimed that his campaign would bring about "the destruction of the State of Israel," and predicted that "Israel would be destroyed within ten years because that is how long it would take him and his colleagues to overturn the belief in the Holocaust." See "Holocaust Denier Uses Telephone For Interviews," *The Jewish Press*, May 28, 1993, p. 25.
15. "John Paul Cites Suffering of Jews," *The New York Times*, June 26, 1988, p. A6.
16. See Y.H. Yerushalmi, *supra* note 13, pgs. 93-94.