



CSJO Newsletter

“The Voice of Cultural Jews”

Winter 2006-2007

Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

Annual CSJO Conference - Cleveland, May 25-28, 2007

From Rifke Feinstein, Executive Director

Here's a reminder about the CSJO conference in May of this year at Ursuline College in Cleveland, OH. The program committee has been and is very hard at work and there will be many very interesting workshops for everyone to attend. I hope you are thinking about spending American Memorial Day in Cleveland!...as they say here...Cleveland Rocks!



We are happy to announce our newest affiliate community...the Secular Jewish Humanists of Los Angeles. This group has been together for a number of years and have affiliated with CSJO. I

had the pleasure of visiting this community in January and had a warm and friendly feeling from everyone. I am very happy that they are now part of CSJO!

Our new video lending library is up and running! We still have only a small selection of videos and DVDs (and an audio tape or two), but we are planning to expand our offerings. We stock Jewish-themed videos that you can't find at your corner video rental store and we're looking for recommendations.

Videos can be borrowed by CSJO member affiliates and associates without charge. We ask only that you mail the video back to us promptly after use.

Non-CSJO Secular Jewish groups are charged \$8 per rental (and we do ask for a credit card number as security).

Our list of available items will soon be posted on our web site, along with instructions for borrowing. I hope you will use this new CSJO service!

We have received a new shipment of the book *The Hidden History of Hanuka For Kids (And Grown-Ups, Too)* by Hersh Hartman and Jeff Kaye from the Sholem Community in Los Angeles. This book is for youngsters (5th grade and up) who want to know the “why” of everything. Kids who are Jewish and part-Jewish (and their families) appreciate the historical and multicultural approach to the “December dilemma.” We're too late for Hanuka 2006, but you can still order the books at csjo@csjo.org. The price is \$5.00. But Pessakh is now approaching, and we have Haggadahs for you as well. Check the website.

CSJO Mourns passing of Itche Goldberg, pioneer in Secular Yiddish education

The Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, representing 24 communities in North America and England, mourns the death of Itche Goldberg, a pioneer, leader and inspirer of Secular Yiddish education and culture.

His leadership of the shuln and camps of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, the Service Bureau for Jewish Education and Kinderbuch Publishers had a profound effect on the Secular Sunday Schools conducted by our affiliated communities. In his person, his thought and his writing, he was the direct link between our schools and Dr. Khayim Zhitlovsky, the founding philosopher of *veltlikhkeyt*.

The many generations he influenced are his undying legacy. We are all lessened by his death.

Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

"The Voice of Secular Jews"

Affiliates – for more information, go to www.csjo.org or contact the Executive Director, (320 Claymore Blvd., Richmond Heights OH 44143. E-mail: csjo@csjo.org).

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2007 Conference
Cleveland Ohio, May 25 - May 28, 2007



CONGRESS OF SECULAR JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS

A non-profit organization

An affiliate of the North American Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews,
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From the 2006 Conference

The Role of the Holocaust In Shaping the Zionist Narrative

by Leonard Grob, Ph.D.

Leonard Grob is a professor of philosophy at Fairleigh Dickinson University. This material was presented at the CSJO conference, May 2006, and is a version of a chapter in a volume entitled Anguished Hope: Holocaust Scholars Confront the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, co-edited by Leonard Grob and John K. Roth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, in press, anticipated publication date, fall 2007).



Prof. Leonard Grob

In 1988 the Israeli philosopher and historian Yehuda Elkana stunned fellow Israelis by writing an article entitled “In Praise of Forgetting.” Elkana, himself a Holocaust survivor, urged Israelis to “...uproot the domination of historical remembrance [of the Holocaust]...” from their lives. Elkana did not argue that the events of 1933-1945 should—or could—literally be forgotten. What he had in mind was a radical critique of the role that

some central forms of Holocaust remembrance had played in the lives of the Zionist leadership of decades past, as well as in the lives of his Israeli contemporaries.

This afternoon I want to reflect on some ethical dimensions of remembering the Holocaust insofar as such remembrance has played and continues to play a crucial role in determining Israeli political attitudes and policies in the ongoing conflict with Palestinians. There can be no doubt that although Zionism has millennia-old roots in the ethos of the Jewish people, the State of Israel was born, in some substantial sense, of the destruction of two-thirds of European Jewry. How, I ask, have alleged lessons of the Holocaust helped shape the dominant Zionist narrative? I’ll try to articulate some ways in which rethinking a Zionist narrative forged substantially in the shadows of the Holocaust might serve to memorialize, more responsibly, the six million who were murdered.

Widespread abuse of Holocaust memory

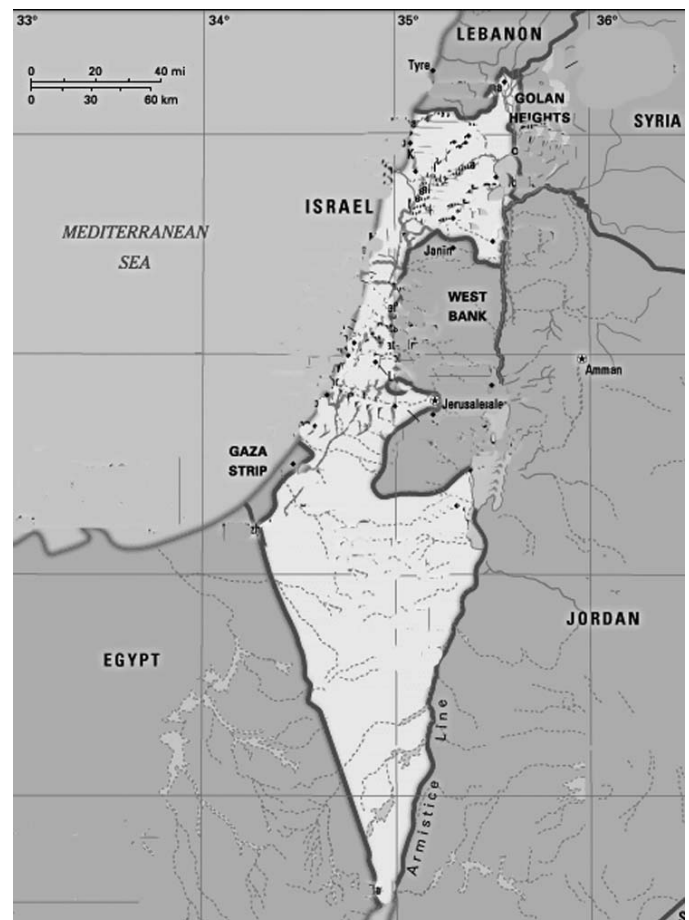
Abuse of Holocaust memory in the Middle East conflict does not fall within the province of Israel alone. Israelis and Palestinians allude freely—and, I argue, largely irresponsibly—to the Holocaust in the process of shoring up a rhetoric of war. Palestinians frequently compare their situation in the territories with European Jews’ treatment by the Nazis. Likening, simplistically, the systematic genocide of European Jewry at the hand of the Nazis to (admittedly often heinous) abuses of power by Israeli leaders toward Palestinians fans the flames of hatred in the region. Memory of the Holocaust here has clearly been abused, militating against the development of dialogical approaches which might lead to a just peace.

Although both peoples employ Holocaust images in constructing their largely fixed, unyielding narratives—narratives which, in turn, drive public policy—I focus in this chapter, as I have noted above, on *Israeli* modes of remembering. Given an asymmetry of power between the warring parties, misuse of Holocaust memory by Israel is especially grievous. Such misremembering contributes substantially to Israel’s failure to take those initiatives toward peacemaking which, morally speaking, are demanded of the more powerful party to a conflict in which each has legitimate claims to be in the right.

David and Goliath - or not

To speak of an asymmetry of power is not to say that we are in the presence of a clear-cut “David and Goliath” scenario: Palestinians are not merely helpless victims of Israeli power. Lacking firepower, extremist and even some mainstream Palestinian leaders have expertly utilized forms of power other than armaments to press their case both before the eyes of their own people and before the world community.

Exploiting millennia-old, ingrained, and virtually worldwide anti-Semitic attitudes to demonize Jews; manipulating popular media to incite “the streets” (both at home and in neighboring



countries) to violence against the alleged Jewish “outsider” in a Muslim world; utilizing Holocaust denial to invalidate that history of Jewish suffering which helped give rise to the need for a state where Jews could control their destiny; glorifying the *shaheed*, the martyr who has sacrificed his/her life to murder Israeli civilians—these are forms of power which some Palestinians employ in the service of their cause.

Existential fear of Israelis

The existential fear of Israelis that they may be driven from their land in the name of Greater Palestine—or worse, annihilated—is rooted, in some measure, in the reality of hatreds spawned by some Palestinians, as well as by some Muslim nations held captive to extremist ideologies. Not to be minimized in this regard is the current threat to Israel posed by Palestinian links to *Hizbullah*, backed by an Iran sworn to Israel’s destruction and capable, militarily, of realizing that aim.

Not to be minimized, as well, is the ideological commitment of the current Hamas-led Palestinian Authority to a Palestine which would extend from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River. Palestinians, like their Jewish counterparts in the struggle, are both victims and perpetrators. There are no innocent parties in the Middle East conflict.

Asymmetry of power

Yet, it cannot be denied that there is an asymmetry of power in the region. To say, as has been argued by some supporters of Israel, that the image of Palestinian powerlessness is rooted in a distorted narrative of dispossession is to fail to acknowledge facts on the ground. Israel is not only the leading military power in the region, but one of the leading such powers in the world. It is nonsensical to tell Palestinians that their image of powerlessness is contrived when they are confronted with Israeli jets, gun ships, tanks, and high-powered artillery.

If asymmetry in the conflict is still in doubt, one might add the unquestioned—and unquestioning—allegiance to Israel on the part of the United States, the world’s sole superpower. Whether or not Palestinians have done all they can to lay the groundwork for a nation state—an endeavor hard to conceive under current conditions—Israel can and does employ the full might of an organized state against a people suffering from the ravages of what is recognized internationally (and labeled by Israel’s Prime Minister) as occupation.

Whether or not Palestinians have always negotiated peace in good faith, it is the Israeli leadership—often captive to the idea of *Eretz Yisrael Shlema* (Greater Israel)—that remains in control of access to the region via air, sea, and land. It is Israeli might that has allowed for the presence and ongoing proliferation of 250,000 settlers in the territories. While both parties to the conflict must demythologize those narratives of suffering which would validate possession of the whole of a “land of two peoples,” Israel has a moral obligation to *initiate* the work of demystification.

And here, memory of the Holocaust comes to play an important role in preventing Israel from doing just this. Holocaust imagery abounds in the present-day Israeli rhetoric, often used to shore up morally questionable political objectives. The Palestinian enemy has not alone been subject to ongoing “Nazification”: *Israeli* supporters of a negotiated peace have been subjected with increasing frequency to such demonization as well.

I do not need to return to archival material to cite instances of

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a misuse of Holocaust memory which demeans its victims. As of the months immediately preceding this writing, the following reports have appeared in mainstream newspapers: 1) Residents of the Gush Katif settlements in the Gaza Strip announced their intent to wear Star of David badges to call attention to the evils of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s disengagement plan. Nadia Matar, co-chairperson of the grassroots movement Women in Green, referred to the Gaza disengagement administration as “a modern version of the *Judenrat*...” Some settlers have deemed Prime Minister Sharon’s endeavor to evacuate Gaza settlements as designed to make the Land of Israel *judenrein*, free of Jews.

Holocaust Imagery

Although each of the above accounts must be understood in the context of ongoing brutal hostilities in which the lives of military and civilian populations are at risk daily; and although many such reported expressions can be attributed to *extremists* within Israel, it is nonetheless true that Israelis of all political persuasions are haunted by Holocaust imagery. The highly-charged term “Auschwitz borders”—alluding to borders deemed indefensible—was first employed by esteemed statesperson Abba Eban to refer to the Green Line (the 1948 borders of Israel).

The alleged cowardice of those “who went like sheep to the slaughter” is compared, time and again, to the “new” Israeli Jew who will stand firm in the face of the Palestinian *Amalek*, the inveterate enemy of the Jewish people who has returned anew to threaten its survival. And with great frequency do Israeli leaders of all political stripes appear to have gleaned one, *and only one*,

lesson from the Holocaust: *Never again will innocent Jewish blood be shed with impunity.*

Use of Allusions to the Holocaust

That allusions to the Holocaust abound in Israeli discourse is understandable. For a people traumatized by the systematic slaughter of one third of its population just sixty years ago, how could the ghost of the Holocaust *not* haunt Jewish Israelis? *That* the Holocaust haunts the Israeli consciousness is thus not at issue in this chapter.

My task here is to examine *the moral implications of the use of Holocaust allusions* which have so deeply permeated the Zionist narrative. In so doing, I will suggest ways of forgetting/remembering the Holocaust which might alter that narrative so as to honor the memory of the victims and, at one and the same time—from an avowedly utilitarian perspective—provide greater protection for the continued existence of a state with a Jewish majority.

And, indeed, the state of Israel is in need of greater protection than can be provided by superior weaponry alone. Envisioning oneself as a community of victims—in Yiddish, *Shimson der Nebedicher* (“Wretched Samson” or *a superpower which can only see itself as victim*)—may, ironically, produce real victims. Israelis might well attend to the words of Holocaust scholar Zygmunt Bauman to the effect that Hitler may yet have a posthumous victory: “[The designers of the Final Solution]...did not manage to turn the world against the Jews, but in their graves they can still dream of turning the Jews against the world, and thus...make the Jewish reconciliation with the world . . . all that more difficult, if not downright impossible.” Embracing a self-image of the *eternal* victim, Bauman implies, limits Israel’s ability to forge that lasting peace with her neighbors which may provide for her genuine physical security.

Furthermore, in several post-Holocaust theologies, ahistorical images of absolute victimhood become paired with equally ahistorical images of absolute redemption: “Meta-narratives” arise, heralding in absolutist terms the movement from victimhood (during the Holocaust) to deliverance (with the founding of the State



Elie Wiesel, spokesman for Holocaust remembrance

of Israel). Such meta-narratives, I contend, must be reexamined for their role in helping create a Zionist narrative of mythic proportions, jeopardizing both the physical survival of Israel *and* the renewal of its tradition of justice toward the other.

For Holocaust scholar and Rabbi Irving Greenberg, for example, “Israel’s faith in the God of History demands that an unprecedented event of destruction be matched by an unprecedented act of redemption, and this has happened.” For the contemporary French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the founding of the state of Israel is the passage (in Divine hands) from Auschwitz, the “Passion,” to the State of Israel, the “Resurrection.”

What is the concrete danger, *ethically speaking*, in embracing those meta-narratives which have so deeply influenced post-Holocaust Zionism? As *totalizing* endeavors, such narratives are inevitably reductive in nature. They objectify the other, reducing him/her to the terms dictated by that overarching ideological framework within which the essential (often divinely-ordained) nature of the nation is envisaged. The other is subsumed under categories devised for him/her in the course of a nation telling its story: Meta-narratives become nothing other than auto-narratives!

The Dominant Zionist Narrative

The dominant Zionist narrative, influenced greatly by “holy dramas,” runs the particular risk of exclusivism insofar as it fails to acknowledge the presence of the Palestinian other who must share a land to which two peoples have legitimate claims. Normative Zionism has often been held hostage to an all-encompassing *mythos* in which Palestinians are either largely absent or, when present, are most often assigned the role of Israel’s current “*Amalek*”: In a drama largely forged by what I have termed mis-remembrance of the Holocaust, Palestinians are often regarded as little more than bit players.

To avoid objectifying the other, I argue, meta-narratives must be transformed into “inter-narratives,” “inter-myths.” Such inter-myths are continually formed and reformed in the space between Israelis and Palestinians. More verb than noun, Zionism-as-inter-myth is incessantly forged/re-forged *in the presence of the face of the Palestinian* who calls his/her Israeli other to account for the ethical import of his/her actions.

Such a Zionism is called upon, for example (as of this writing), to rethink the creation of each checkpoint, each sector of a fence/wall across the Green Line, each home demolition, each segment of Israeli-only bypass roads, each uprooting of an olive tree. Such a Zionism perpetually reborn must ask itself if these measures are just. Are they intended *solely* for defensive purposes? Do they provide genuine security for Israel? Might all these dehumanizing measures—temporarily necessary as they may be—come to serve *in place of* facing the other in initiating the sacred work of forging a just peace?

Needless to say, the measures listed above for moral reassess-



“Remembering-by-forgetting” - Stalin leaves town in Eastern Europe.

ment by Israel must be viewed in the context of the reality of murder of innocent civilians by extremist Palestinians. Never again to allow Jewish blood to be shed with impunity is *one* vital lesson of the Holocaust. There are times when the concrete face of the other is occluded, obscured from sight, by virtue of its hostility. As the philosopher Martin Buber argues, moral agents must endeavor to wring from each situation in which they find themselves the maximum amount of divinity which they can perceive it to permit. The moral “line of demarcation” between action and action shifts from context to context. Genuine defensive action is indeed required at a given place and point of time. For Zionism-as-inter-narrative, each decision is undertaken in holy insecurity, in anguish, considering *both* the immediate danger to life *and* the call to establish a just peace with the Palestinians.

What is advanced here, then, is no pure Zionist ethic, no injunction to act according to an absolute standard of morality removed from its context in a lived world in which mortal enemies exist. Zionism-as-inter-myth has ultimately no static content which would make it just one more narrative among the pantheon of nationalist ideologies, each realizing the aims of its totalizing narrative through a monopoly of power within its borders.

Such a Zionism refuses to claim for itself the status of a static absolute: As a *living absolute*, this Zionism is *enacted* rather than *posited*, a tale “told-to-another,” rather than one told-as-auto-narrative. A narrative told without the living presence of the other to whom one is responsible is a narrative which lacks ethical import.

How to forget, how to remember

To embrace this Zionism, what is needed, I have argued throughout, is “forgetfulness” of the Holocaust, forgetfulness of those elements which prompt Israelis to embrace perpetual victimhood and so often bring in their wake the ideology of Greater Israel. We must forget in order to better remember. To remember well the six million murdered at the hands of the Nazis is to engage in a doing (and re-doing) which is a building of an inter-human, dialogical space in a land rightfully claimed by two peoples. To remember is thus, literally, to re-member, e.g. re-collect, re-gather that which has been rent asunder.

Such re-collection does not deny the *irremediable* nature of the

genocide of Jews by their Nazi oppressors. But to re-member the victims we must no longer contribute to processes of dis-memberment. Israelis must stand as co-witnesses with the Palestinian people in the sharing of a contested land. The Holocaust was an attempt to destroy such co-witnessing, to destroy human solidarity, the possibility of creating interhuman space, the “between” of dialogue. To-forget-in-order-to-remember means to attempt to hear the silent screams of the victims calling upon the remnants and their descendents to no longer engage in those acts which might serve, as it were, to murder them a second time.

Remembering-by-Forgetting

Israelis might well begin this remembering-by-forgetting by owning up to the dispossession of Palestinians caused by the pressing need of Jews to establish a homeland in which they would be safe.

To initiate the breaking out of a vicious cycle in which each party believes in the inviolability of its victim status—to accept the risk of acknowledging the pain one has caused without believing that this acknowledgment will result in even greater victimhood—this is a way to re-member, in a holy paradox, what has been (irremediably) dis-membered. Such an act not only humanizes the party acknowledged as wronged—“your pain is as important as mine” is now averred—but also humanizes the party doing the acknowledging: Freeing oneself of victim-identity allows for an empowerment not achievable as long as one is locked into the seemingly inevitable cycle in which victim-becomes-victimizer for the purpose of preventing further (real or often only perceived) suffering.

A human tragedy has occurred: Jews, fleeing intolerable oppression, rushing for safety to the land for which their people had yearned for millennia, brought about the dispossession of large numbers of indigenous people. The tragedy will not end as long as each people holds fast to its own fixed narrative of suffering. Both peoples must demystify their narratives, but it remains incumbent upon Israelis to memorialize the dead of the Holocaust by taking the initiative in forgetting-in-order-to-remember.