

On ‘Holocaustia’ and the Place of the Shoah in Contemporary Jewish Life

**Editor’s Note: This Comment is a Response to Ian Lustick’s
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Ian Lustick’s analysis of the place of the Holocaust in Israeli political culture covers a fascinating topic in need of further examination. Lustick examines the evolving nature of Israel’s relationship to the Holocaust and asks why the place of the Shoah has assumed more centrality in the national identity of the state as time and distance from the event have grown. As Lustick notes, in April 2015, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin made this statement: “All of us, each and every one of us, has a number tattooed on his arm.” Why and how have we come to a place and time when the Israeli president can make such a statement? Why and how has the Shoah become a central component of Israel’s educational curriculum, with trips to Poland a necessary rite of passage for students, and Yad Vashem a required visit for all politics leaders? Lustick’s answer is this: “Contemporary Israel is marked unmistakably with ‘Holocaustia.’” The centrality of the Holocaust in Israeli life, according to Lustick, means that few Israelis would question its place in Israeli politics and society, or question the fact that today, “the standard language of leaders and candidates includes evocations of the unique suffering of Jews in the Holocaust, the inhuman behavior of the Nazis, and the callous and hostile disregard of gentiles toward the destruction of European Jewry.” And, indeed, Lustick is correct; Israelis generally do not question the place of the Shoah in contemporary Israeli politics and society, although the centrality of the event in Israeli life, more than 75 years after the outbreak of World War II, demands investigation.

In order to better understand the evolution of Israel’s relationship to the memory of the Shoah and how, in particular, the attitude of the political leadership to the Shoah has changed over time, Lustick divides the chronology and Israel’s relationship into four distinctive constructions: “Zionist proof-text,” “wasting asset,” “human rights object lesson, and “template for Jewish life.” Lustick argues

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this about the “template for Jewish life” construction: “Along with the exhaustion of Zionist ideology and the indirect but suffocating influence of the Israel lobby, it [is] one of the three reinforcing elements in the constellation of belief and power that dominate the State of Israel, so constraining its leaders and institutions as to explain both Israel’s failure to embrace negotiated routes to resolve the Israel-Palestine problem and the likely demise of the Zionist project as a whole.” The final phrase, “the likely demise of the Zionist project,” may sound like hyperbole, but it is, in fact, central to understanding Lustick’s argument: The memory of the Holocaust has been used and misused for political purposes to such an extreme as to pervert the Zionist movement’s original goals and intentions, distorting the original vision of the Jewish state and threatening its very existence. I will return to this argument below.

Lustick helpfully distinguishes between the impact of the event itself, in the form of wartime responses in the Yishuv or the reception of Holocaust survivors in the newly created state, and the construction of “collective memory” of the Shoah in Israeli society: “In fact, it is not the event itself, so much, as the collective memory of it, that has so powerfully shaped Israeli politics and policy. In other words, to understand Israel’s present and the forces that are determining its future, what we need to appreciate is not so much what happened to Jews in Europe between 1933 and 1945, but what has come to be believed by Jews—especially Israeli Jews—about themselves and the world they inhabit, as a result of how the events of those awful years have been culturally and psychologically absorbed.” Lustick argues that the collective memory of the Shoah is in fact a political, educational, social, and cultural construct—a construct, he argues, created and manipulated by the political class so as to distort the intent and vision of the Zionist project.

Methodologically, Lustick’s approach focuses on the political class, but even so, he underestimates the impact of survivors as agents of memory in Israeli society beginning in the first decade of the state’s existence. This impact is even stronger today, with the general anxiety over the passing of the survivor generation. What has been the role of survivors and their descendants in shaping the collective memory of the Shoah? Lustick suggests that in the 1950s, survivors were discouraged from speaking about their experiences due to social pressures (true) and an impulse to repress their memories (questionable).

Despite their numbers, Holocaust survivors in the Israel of the 1950s did not organize as such or give voice to their memories and losses. Their relative silence about what they had been through and what they had lost was based on two imperatives: social pressure not to burden a new and struggling society with more pain and despair than it could tolerate, and their own inclination to repress memories of agony and, often, of shame. The general absence of the Holocaust and appeals to its memory in public speech and Israeli political discourse in the 1950s echoed the silence of the survivors.

However, a compelling new vein of research on survivors in Israel after the war complicates this narrative (see, for example, the work of Hanna Yablonka or Boaz Cohen) on the “silence that never was” in Israel and the role of survivors directly and indirectly in the creation of such institutions as Yad Vashem and Kibbutz

Lohamei HaGeta'ot and the Ghetto Fighters House museum. Likewise, Hasia Diner's work in the American context has challenged the Peter Novick thesis of the postwar "myth of silence." And while Lustick admittedly focuses on the political classes and their shaping of collective memory, by focusing almost exclusively on the political elite in this analysis, be it in the form of David Ben-Gurion or the Jewish Agency or Ben-Zion Dinur, it appears to be manipulation. However, if we focus on the experiences of the survivors themselves, in sources created by them, the history becomes more complicated. It might be useful to make a distinction, then, between public collective memory of the Shoah that was ever present in debates in the early years of the state (as in the debate over reparations, the Kastner Affair, or the Eichmann trial) and those private memories of survivors that were only shared and heard in later years (after Israelis were more willing to embrace their vulnerabilities). The question is, what changed to open a space in Israeli society for a greater willingness to embrace the vulnerability associated with a collective memory of the Shoah? And how has Israel's collective memory of the Shoah changed over time?

Lustick suggests that the most recent phase of Israel's relationship to the Shoah is in viewing the Holocaust as a "template for Jewish life." This may be akin to the collective embrace of the Haggadah's call that "in every generation, each person must see himself or herself as though he or she had personally come out of Egypt."

Immediately after the war, Jews in the displaced persons camps of postwar Germany saw the linkage between slavery in Egypt and slavery in Germany; this was in many ways the ultimate Jewish response to the Shoah (one rooted in Jewish tradition). So, this begs the question, is the present-day collective identification of Israelis with Jewish enslavement in Europe a novelty? Or does this in some way reflect a Jewish normalization of the Israeli relationship to the Holocaust? What I mean is that the early response of the 1950s to deny the trauma of the event and the suffering of the Jews was absolutely rooted in an intense ideological denial that sought to distance the new state from its links to Jewish history in the diaspora; perhaps, as the rootedness in Labor Zionist ideology has declined, the distance from Israel's diaspora past has decreased as well. As Lustick suggests, Israelis, particularly since the Yom Kippur War, have developed a greater empathy for Jewish suffering that parallels their own national experience of suffering and trauma. Not surprisingly, this identification with Jewish suffering (and the decline of the Israeli aura of invincibility and triumph after the Six-Day war) has paralleled the rise of Menachem Begin (and now Benjamin Netanyahu) and the Likud version of Revisionist Zionism.

In 1967, the Israeli Jewish public felt the "template for Jewish life" construction of the Holocaust intensely, but only briefly. By contrast, the prolonged sense of weakness and vulnerability that had gripped the country during and after the 1973 war, coupled with attitudes of disillusionment and distrust, made that construction of the Holocaust altogether more convincing and psychologically potent than the other three I have discussed. The identification of Israeli Jews with Holocaust victims, whose political effects as powerfully, if briefly, apparent in 1967, now became the sustained basis for

popular political understandings of the existential predicament of the State of Israel and its Jewish population. From that point on, it was only a matter of time before politicians positioned to exploit that frame would reap the benefits of doing so.

The post-Yom Kippur War sense of weakness and vulnerability, coupled with the rise of Begin and the increasing relevance of Gush Emunim and its ideology of post-Holocaust messianism, which viewed Jewish settlement in Judaea and Samaria as the next phase of pioneering Zionism, came to view Israel's existence as a response to the Holocaust, making the Shoah a central component in the reason for the existence of a Jewish state. For Begin, continuing the legacy of Vladimir Jabotinsky and previewing the policies of Netanyahu, the world was divided into Jews and their enemies, and the lessons of the Holocaust dictated the Jewish approach to politics, domestically and internationally. This is the way Begin articulated the impact of the Holocaust on his own worldview:

The seeds of Jewish destruction lie in passively enabling the enemy to humiliate us. ...During the Holocaust, it was after the enemy had humiliated the Jews, trampled them underfoot, divided them, deceived them, afflicted them, drove brother against brother, only then could he lead them, almost without resistance, to the gates of Auschwitz. Therefore, at all times and whatever the cost, safeguard the dignity and honor of the Jewish people... (Menachem Begin, May 1981), cited in Avner (2010).

As Lustick notes, for Begin, the Jews were always isolated and always subject to persecution; contrary to the Labor Zionist fantasy, the creation of the State of Israel did not actually “normalize” the Jewish position in the world. In some sense, constant war and the conflict with the Palestinians were confirmation of the need for Zionism and the Jewish state as a response to antisemitism and the Holocaust. And Lustick is certainly justified in concluding that it was Begin who “who released the genie of the Holocaust from the bottle” and that the nearly four decades since the ascent of the Likud to power in 1977 have only seen the Holocaust become more central in Israeli politics and society. But this phenomenon of continued Jewish fascination with the Holocaust, of an avalanche of contemporary fiction and film dealing with the subject, and of the popularity of Holocaust museums is not confined to Israel. If we compare the Israeli and American Jewish responses to the Holocaust over time, what parallels do we see? Is there something particular to the Israeli/Zionist response? How have the Jewish people as a whole integrated the Holocaust into their understanding of contemporary Jewish life? How might this compare with earlier catastrophes in Jewish history? It is certainly worth examining the American Jewish relationship to the Holocaust and its influence in Israel. What, for example, was the influence of the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993 on the redesign and opening of the new Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem in 2005? What is the correlation between the renewed focus on interviewing Holocaust survivors in the American context (beginning with the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University in the early 1980s and continuing with the Shoah Foundation's Visual

History Archive in the 1990s) and increased attention to the experiences of survivors in Israel? In parallel, since the 1980s, the Holocaust has become even more central in the American Jewish psyche, from the time of the airing of "Holocaust," a four-part miniseries on American television in 1978 and the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993 to the point of the present day, where, in the 2013 Pew Research Center study, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 73% of respondents identified "remembering the Holocaust" as essential to Jewish identity (more than Jewish law, Jewish food, Jewish humor, etc.). This then raises this question: Why has the Holocaust assumed an even more central role in Jewish life worldwide in the 21st century? What influence have the survivors, and the passing of the survivor generation exerted on the centrality of the Holocaust in contemporary Jewish life? This is, indeed, a question that demands even further investigation.

To return to Lustick's conclusion, that "the demise of the Jewish polity itself [may] become the largest unintended casualty of Holocaustia's ascendance," when viewed in a more global context, as part of a broader Jewish response to the Holocaust and its incorporation into the understanding of the Jewish place in the world, may suggest that *Holocaustia*, while not leading to "the demise of the Zionist project," does indicate the fundamental ideological inability of Zionism to actually divorce itself from diaspora Jewish history, or for that matter, from world Jewry as a whole.

Reference

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