


enabled the Egyptian, Soviet-supported cross-canal offensive on Yom Kippur in 1973.

Shortly after my presentation, I received a letter from a member of the congregation who had a doctorate in history; he politely protested my debunking a myth of the kind that is essential for maintaining national pride and morale. Never mind that I had pointed out this myth's pernicious effect: It became a central component of the notorious "concept" that led to Israel's disastrous unpreparedness three years later. It was only last fall, in a pamphlet issued by the Air Force Association to mark the ceasefire's 40th anniversary, that I first saw an explicit admission that Israel had actually lost the War of Attrition.

Historical processes — especially wars — are composites of countless discrete events. Tracing their causality and evaluating their results — assigning responsibility, adjudicating victory or defeat — is therefore debatable. But unlike quantum physics particles, factual accounts of these elemental building blocks cannot be true and false at the same time. At this level, there can be no competing but equally valid narratives; the event in question occurred in only one way, no matter how difficult or perhaps impossible it may be to establish it.

The field marshal among historians must be sorely frustrated that demolishing such a laboriously assembled general theory can be so much easier than its construction. Even foot

soldiers like us — who limit ourselves to the certainty of forensic dissection — can return from a patrol with a single observation that simply cannot be reconciled with the marshal's grand scheme of things. Faced with a multiplicity of such clues, a great marshal will painfully admit that his cherished theory was, in whole or in part, myth. He then will go on to adapt his outlook. Lesser minds will reject the new evidence as logically fallacious because it contradicts what for them, after years of study and thought, has become axiomatic. They proceed at their own risk.

It is at this point — drawing overarching conclusions from the elemental facts and shaping an interpretation that takes on moral value as part of a collective heritage — that legitimate myths are created, along with competing narratives. Such myths may exaggerate our side's performance and motivation into heroism and sainthood, but so long as they can be reconciled with the facts as they are discovered, the myths will not become dangerous or offensive, and they will eventually coexist with rival mythologies if both are built on solid ground. However, overzealousness in fostering or perpetuating a myth may lead to a reverse process: inventing fictitious versions of events to conform to cherished but unsubstantiated legends. This is where danger lurks, and where conflict with the adversary's myth becomes inexorable. 

Rereading *Zachor*: Three Essays on History and Memory

The late Columbia University historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's book Zachor is among the most influential recent books on the intersection between history and memory, the often uneasy relationship between what happened in the past and what is recalled. As a recurring theme of this issue of Sh'ma, we've invited three writers to reflect on Yerushalmi's book and its continued relevance.

Remembering It All

MARC J. MARGOLIUS

In his classic work *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, historian Yosef Yerushalmi posits and laments a dichotomy between what he describes as collective Jewish memory (which he describes as selective, mythological, ahistorical, and decaying), and secular, modern Jewish historiography (which never found mass appeal among modern and post-modern Jews).

"[M]odern historiography...is really neither collective memory nor recollection in any of their prior senses, but basically a new venture,"

he writes in a postscript. "The past it constantly recreates is often barely recognizable to what remains of collective memory; the past it retrieves is indeed a lost past, but it is not the one we *feel* we have lost" (my emphasis).

In our amnesiac world, irrefutable historical reality is denied or distorted beyond recognition; dangerous national myths are embraced with disregard for their disastrous legacies (the "Masada complex," for example). More than ever, a steadfast commitment to historiography is beyond cavil and consonant with the Torah's

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(admittedly mythological) imperative to remember. Count me in the historians' camp.

I am committed to the recollection of historical reality and the contextualization of sacred text and ritual. Yet as a progressive religious Jew, I don't consider Yerushalmi's dichotomy between Jewish historiography and "collective memory" as inevitable. I believe that the mythic imperative to remember the past must be married to historiography, so that history might yield its multidimensional truths.


Jewish life today demands a creative synthesis of the secular and the sacred: an adherence to historiography along with greater appreciation for history's significance — the sacred aspect — to be extracted from historical patterns and from each moment along history's timeline.

We might conceive this integration of Jewish history and group memory (as expressed in text and ritual) as the "unpacking" of the collective lived experience of the Jewish people over time. (By collective experience I refer to all retrievable aspects of Jewish history, including constituencies — such as women, gays, and lesbians — whose stories have been neglected or rendered invisible both by rabbis and historians.)

Viewing our past through the lens of the classic rabbinic exegetical model known as

PaRDeS: *peshat* (the literal or contextual dimension), *derash* (homiletical), *remez* (allusive or allegorical), and *sod* (hidden or mystical), we can understand the historical dimension of human experience as the *peshat*, the critical starting point of exploration. The text we investigate is the ever-growing record of our recoverable past; through it, we discover, acknowledge — and yes, even feel — our personal connection to those who have preceded us.

As a Jew committed to searching out the sacred dimension of every moment, place, and person, I see the excavation of the past as a spiritual practice. Through it, we can deepen our consciousness by investigating the truth of our experience, noticing that which has escaped awareness. We can make obvious connections that until now were latent. We can discover significance in that which may have been considered superfluous.

If as Jews we are to maintain our crucial sense that sanctity abides in all of creation, then nothing — no person, no place, no moment, no history — is meaningless. We need to remember it all. The so-called "secular" and the "devout" can find common ground in Rabbi Nachman's dictum: "In remembering is the secret of redemption." 

Judaism over Time

DEENA ARANOFF

The notion that historical inquiry is disruptive of a more traditional engagement with Judaism was given its most eloquent and influential expression by Yosef Yerushalmi in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. In this now canonical volume, Yerushalmi outlined the ways in which the historian confronts the unsorted and fragmented materials of the past and produces an account that is at odds with the narratives embedded in Jewish liturgy and ritual. In contrast to the unity and coherence of collective memory, with its implied therapeutic function for Jewish society through the ages, critical research remains outside the matrix of popular Jewish ritual and practice; it is even at odds with some of its most resilient refrains, such as the centrality of divine providence in the experience of the Jewish people.

I would like to suggest that this long-held dichotomy between critical history and an abiding engagement with Judaism has lost its grip on the contemporary Jewish imagination. Recent trends in cultural and intellectual sen-

sibilities reflect an increasing readiness to attribute positive meaning to the contingencies of history. The contemporary *zeitgeist* is one that acknowledges the fragmented and shifting nature of reality and embraces the notion that people and phenomena can best be understood through their temporality, kind, and condition, through an inquiry into their past and the role of the past in shaping the present. This growing capacity to make meaning out of history is coupled with an increasing suspicion of its opposite, namely, the pursuit of the essence of Judaism. The attempt to peel away layers of Jewish history in the search for its timeless core is regarded as a thinly veiled reproduction of the values of its author.

Despite its mournful tone, Yerushalmi's work signals the emergence of this new and increasingly viable mode of relating to Judaism. Though often read as sounding the death knell of the fruitful interaction between the historian's craft and the search for meaning, *Zakhor* represents an early and tentative instance of what

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