

The link between the Holocaust and the Israeli-Arab Conflict in Israeli Cinema 1950's – 1970's

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The Holocaust as a pivotal experience in the Israeli life, has strongly influenced the way in which the Arab-Israeli conflict, in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular, were perceived and presented in Israeli culture. In the past three decades, as part of a narrative that seeks to reevaluate the way in which the collective memory of the Holocaust was endowed to the Israeli public, emerged a post-Zionist notion, that the Holocaust memory was and is politically manipulated in order to present Israel as an eternal victim and is used in order to justify violent policy against the Arabs (for example: Ayalon 1971, Evron, 1980 (2011); Elkana, 1988; Zartal, 2002, Bar-Tal, 2007).

In this article I posit a more complex notion. When examining cultural representations of the integration of the Holocaust and the Israeli- Arab conflict in the early decades of the Israeli state, one can see that until the 1970's the cultural narrative indeed emphasized victimization, and represented the Arabs as Nazis successors. But, alongside this narrative, one can find in those early decades very prominent artists who try to create awareness to both traumas – the Holocaust and the Nakba (the Arab disaster of 1948) - and even raise very disturbing questions regarding the moral outcome of the IDF's (Israel Defense Forces) behavior in 1948.

Arabs as the Nazis' successors:

In Israeli culture, the complex story of the Arab-Jewish dispute that accompanied Zionist settlement in Israel as early as the late nineteenth century was often phrased simplistically, after the Holocaust. From the late 1940's until the late 1970's one finds a strong resemblance between the ways that the Holocaust became integral to the Arab-Israeli conflict in formal political discourse (reflected in interviews with politicians, media-covered meetings, and so on), and in cultural representations. In both types of discourse, a distinct parallel between Arabs and Nazis was discernible in the Zionist narrative. Wars against Arab nations were termed wars to prevent a "second Holocaust" that could strike Israel at any moment. It was not only a question of internal discourse, but also of interviews that politicians gave across the world, and in the film industry that, in those

decades, was aimed at narrating Zionism's tidings to the world. Demonizing the Arabs and forging links between past and present helped unite the ranks in Israel, and create immediate empathy for Zionism in the Western world. If in the past the Allied forces had fought the Nazis, today it became their duty to subjugate the Arabs. Accordingly, when engagement with the Holocaust in Israel was only beginning, and Israeli society often preferred to engage with the Holocaust only at the national level but repress the Individual traumas, particularly so until the Eichmann Trial (1961) (Yablonka, 1994, 1997; Shapira, 1997), the Holocaust became a parapraxis (a slip of the tongue), as Thomas Elsaesser defines it, a "present absentee" with a concealed presence in the contemporary arena. What was forgotten, repressed, and concealed emerges elsewhere, in the present, in the cultural debate of a different trauma.

In most cases, Ben-Gurion used rhetoric that compared Arabs to Nazis only in closed circles of political and military leadership, or in personal correspondence. For example, in the early 1950's during debates at the Mapai party center over the affair of reparations from Germany, he repeatedly cited the possibility of a second holocaust. Israelis need power, he argued, because "we do not want the Arab Nazis to butcher us." Occasionally, though, Ben-Gurion diverged from his custom and compared Arabs to Nazis in public discourse too. Throughout the Eichmann trial, he and other top politicians gave interviews to the printed press, in which they used the trial to emphasize concrete and symbolic ties between Nazis and the Arab leadership. In an interview in *Yediot Aharonot*, for example, Ben-Gurion claimed that when he listened to "the Egyptian president's speeches about world Jewry taking control of America and the West, I feel that Hitler is talking." In an interview with the *New York Times* the same year, he maintained that "Egyptian propaganda is conducted along clearly Nazi lines" (Zartal, 2002).

During the tense run-up to the Six Day War (May 1967) consciousness of the Holocaust increased in Israel. Bellicose Arab declarations, using expressions like "we'll throw all the Jews into the sea," the uncertainty, and the feeling that Israeli civilians were sitting at home waiting for the impending attack, honed the equivalency between Arabs and Nazis. The press fuelled that sentiment. Newspapers mentioned "gas laboratories" that were operational in the Sinai, evoking associations with the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust (Caspi, 2008). When the war ended, the public discourse presented it as a war that had prevented a second Holocaust in Israel. Abba Eban, for example, called the pre-1967 Green

Line borders “Auschwitz borders.” In 1968, Yehoshafat Harkabi, a general and former head of Military Intelligence, published articles that indicated religious and political texts in Arab nations with the same anti-Semitic elements and racist arguments that typified Nazi ideology. A year after the war, a book was published that soon achieved mythic status in Israel: “The Seventh Day,” documenting a series of conversations held in kibbutzim after the 1967 war. The interviewer was Abba Kovner, a revered WWII partisan who had survived the Vilna ghetto. In one of the talks, Kovner interviewed Yariv Ben-Aharon, the son of Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, a Labor movement head. Yariv said that the feeling that Israel was facing extinction helped him and his soldiers in the war, and commented that “the Holocaust conferred that concept on us. It is a tangible concept for everyone raised in Israel, even if they did not undergo the Holocaust” (Yablonka, 2008).

Alarm over a "second Holocaust" fomented by the Arabs erupted again with full power during the Yom Kippur War in October 1973. The surprise attack struck the Israeli public forcefully, revealing as it did the complacency of the army and the government. For the first time, television showed sights of weakness and humiliation, and captive Israeli soldiers and the expression “like in the Holocaust” about the war was widely used. The media also used terms from the realm of the Holocaust in its coverage of the terror attacks from 1968 to 1978. The Arab terrorists were described as Nazis, the victims were compared to Holocaust victims, and the world was held to be indifferent to the suffering of Jews (Bar-Tal, 2007). After Arab terrorists murdered Israeli sportsmen during the Munich Olympics in 1972, the combination of the German setting and the butchered Jews helped to signify the Arabs as present-day Nazis. In media coverage of the hostages in the Entebbe affair (1976) the charged word “*selektziya*” was used in describing the Jewish passengers who were separated from non-Jewish ones; the press described the abducted Israelis as “candidates for sacrifice in the next Auschwitz” (Shapira, 1997; Yablonka, 2008; Bar-Tal, 2007).

From the 1930s until the late 1960s, Israeli cinema was dominated by ideological considerations. Films that distinctively propagated Zionist ideas served as an artistic platform for an ideological outlook through which the Zionist establishment sought to display its political, national, and economic achievements. Films focused on the Zionist struggle, donations to the Zionist movement, the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Israel and support for the state after its founding. To this end, many films were produced in English and then translated into myriad languages and distributed throughout the world (Zimmerman 2001, 2002; Shohat, 1991).

Of necessity, those films presented a tendentious worldview. Like other aspects of Israeli culture during that era, Israeli films did not deal directly with the Holocaust but rather with its Zionist "lesson:" the importance of establishing a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. As part of this lesson, Arabs were portrayed as the Nazis' successors.

The 1948 war was one of the first events featured in film that saw equivalency between the Holocaust and the Israeli-Arab conflict. The War of Independence / the Palestinian Nakba was a major watershed in the fight for the land. For the Jews, it was a battle for survival for their historical and national right to win their own state. For the Palestinians, it was a struggle for their country, that they did not want to share with the Zionists. Within Israeli territory on the eve of the 1948 war, there were 650,000 Jews and between 900,000 and 1,000,000 Arabs. During the war, 600,000 to 700,000 Arabs went into exile from their country – expelled, fled, chased out - creating the Palestinian refugee problem. The war ended with a series of separate ceasefire agreements between Israel and each of its Arab neighbors. After the war the Palestinians' situation was far worse than at the time of the United Nation's decision for partition (November 1947). What remained was a small and separate Arab public, lacking all social institutions and social and political power. The Palestinian collective memory deals with a national trauma, expulsion, and defeat, as well as pointing an accusatory finger at the Arab nations who failed to help expelled Palestinians, and made false promises about their imminent return to a country empty of Jews (Gelbar, 2004; Kabha, 2010; Morris, 2010).

The Jewish collective memory of the 1948 War emphasizes the small number of fighters, their relative lack of training, and their courage and determination. Much of the cultural debate about the 1948 war recycled perceptions of "the few against the many," demonization of the Arabs, an emphasis on stories of slaughter and killing by Arabs, and attempts to shunt to the edges of the consciousness grim stories about IDF soldiers' deeds. The 1948 war was described as the War of Liberation / the War of Independence, so even semantically the war's name left no room for the Palestinians' tragedy. Zionist historiography of those years ascribes the "disappearance" of the Arabs as the result of flight or willing departure, for which the Mufti or fear of the Jews was responsible.

The film **Hill 24 Doesn't Answer** (Thorold Dickinson, 1955) describes four people dispatched to defend Hill 24 on the eve of the UN's ceasefire declaration. After their death in battle, the UN representatives declare that the hill belongs to Israel. One sequence focuses on David Amram, a rough-

and-ready Sabra (Israeli-native), who encounters an Egyptian officer, during a skirmish in the Negev. After a struggle, Amram takes him prisoner and drags the wounded officer to a cave. Films at that time defined morality as a trait of native-born Israelis, and accordingly Amram does not kill him, though the Egyptian tries to kill him, but tends him. When he removes the Egyptian's shirt, he sees a swastika tattoo on his body. He turns out to be a former SS officer who joined the Egyptian army. The aim of that implied connection with Nazis was to clearly show Western audiences which is the totally good side, and which is the totally bad one in the Jewish-Arab conflict, and to foster a negative attitude toward the Arabs, the great enemy not just of Israelis, but of the whole West. Furthermore, creating the image of a fighting Israel that punishes its enemies, past and present, instilled Jewish spectators with a sense of vengeance. The revelation that the Arab officer is a Nazi also maintains the film's silence about the motives and rights of Arabs in Israel. The only Arab who gets a full monolog in the film is a Nazi who makes a Nazi speech, and does not engage with the interests of the Arabs in Israel and in Arab nations. Thus the superficial representation of Arabs in the film ignores any discussion of their motives, wishes, or rights to the country (Shohat, 1991). Ultimately, at the end of the sequence, the Nazi collapses and dies. This maintains the moral aura of the Israeli soldier, who deals with him fairly even after he has revealed his true origin. Past and present are drawn together, in private victory and national victory.

The Hero's Wife (Peter Frye, 1963) focuses on Rachel, a Holocaust survivor and war-widow, now living in a kibbutz. Her husband, who extricated her from DP camps in Europe and brought her to the kibbutz, was killed in the 1948 war. The double tragedy in Rachel's life renders her symbolic of the connection between Nazi and Arab violence, nurturing a constant sense of threat in the audience. Her dual mourning is also reflected in her actions: at night, she awakes screaming from nightmares about Mauthausen. In the daytime, she devotes herself to commemorating the fallen of Israel's wars, and has transformed a shelter that is meant to protect kibbutz residents during war, into a museum commemorating the fallen. In the scenes depicting the Syrian attack, the director intensifies the hints by implying ties with the Holocaust. The women, older men and children run to the shelter, where they lie on long wooden pallets arranged in two levels, and camera scans their exhausted, worried faces, in close-up (Steir-Livny, 2009).

Cairo Campaign (Menahem Golan, 1965) describes a campaign by Israeli security forces against a missile factory built by German scientists in Egypt. **Entebbe: Operation Thunderbolt** (Menahem Golan, 1976) dramatizes the case of the hijacking of an Air France plane to Entebbe, until its release by Israeli special forces. Here, the terrorists are presented as an updated version of the Nazis, helped by familiar associations. For example, one of the hijacked passengers is a Holocaust survivor, and the camera focuses on the number tattooed on his forearm (Avisar, 2011).

The dual trauma: the awareness to the Nakba and the Israelis as oppressors:

Juxtaposed with the cinematic and journalistic narrative that clung to comparisons between Arabs and Nazis from the 1940's to the late 1970's, the literature, poetry and theatre at that time displayed slightly more layered attitudes. Alongside Zionist narrative equating Arabs with Nazis, prominent artists tried to diverge from that narrative, broaden the boundaries of the narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict, making place for consideration of both Jewish and Palestinian traumas, and sometimes starting to invert the comparison between Arabs and Nazis.

During the Yishuv era (pre-statehood Jewish Eretz-Israel) and in Israel's first decade, literature was for mostly didactic and enlisted. Many authors and critics of the period, as well as filmmakers, assumed that literature had a social role. It should educate for national values, reflect the Zionist project, encourage positive social phenomena, and disregard negative ones. It was broadly accepted that literature must describe the Jewish people's destiny and engage with major national themes: making the desert bloom, immigrating to Israel, battling the enemy, building settlements, pioneering and so on. Most authors presented the Zionist reality in a positive light, and the focus of their narratives were protagonists with moral ideas and a world of clear values, fighting for Zionist objectives (Mendelson-Maoz & Gertz, 2010). In literature for adults, Arabs were generally depicted as cowards, treacherous, physically and culturally flawed, and lacking national motivation. Overcoming the Arab enemy fueled the Israeli fighter's heroism: the voices of Arabs themselves were unheard (Oppenheimer, 2008). Comparison between Arabs and Nazis was found in children's literature and newspapers which was enlisted like that of adults (Bar-Tal, 2007).

Dominick LaCapra relies on Freud and distinguishes between two forms of remembering trauma. The first results in “acting-out.” In this mental state, people who undergo a trauma have a tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it. They tend to relive occurrences, or at least find that those occurrences intrude on their present existence. In the second, “working-through”, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. The victim can't entirely disengage himself from it, but he can tell the difference between past and present (LaCapra, 2001).

These two forms of remembering define not only individuals, but collective remembrance as well. 'Acting out' are uncontrolled repetitive elements of the trauma that appear in the political, social and cultural life of a group. 'Working through' is the group's will and ability to control a collective trauma and not let it take over the present

To use LaCapra's definition, I claim that even in these early decades of the Israeli state, alongside the narrative that acted out the Holocaust and presented Arabs as the Nazis' successors, Hebrew literature, poetics and theatre presented, what I would like to call a 'counter acting out' – the trauma of the Holocaust was blended with the political conflict, but refrained from victimization. It changed the perspective and represented the Israelis as the oppressor. This cultural narrative claimed that, in the past, Jews in Europe were expelled and became refugees, and now in the present (1948) Arabs in Israel are expelled and become refugees.

S. Yizhar is a major author who not only “rebelled” as early as 1949 against the notion that Arabs are Nazis, but also offered a contradictory narrative. In his novella *Khirbet Khizeh*, he confronted the Zionist narrative that dealt with “the War of Independence” and dared to discuss an untold story: the fact that the founding of the State of Israel was a disaster for the Arabs. Yizhar's writing does not represent the literary and ideological taste of most authors from the “1948 generation,” principally Moshe Shamir, Nathan Shaham, Aharon and Matti Megged and others who engaged with the heroism of the Jewish fighter. Yizhar portrays the group of IDF soldiers as tough and insensate, tasked with evacuating an Arab village. On entering the village, they discover that only old people and children remain. They round them up, load them onto trucks and dispatch them to an unknown future.

Here, unlike the Zionist narrative, the soldiers are not depicted as heroic and they are stringently criticized. Only Micha, the protagonist, is beset by dilemmas and tries to protest the expulsion: his comrades conduct the expulsion coolly and indifferently. The Arabs are perceived as part of the natural landscape, while the Israeli soldiers are presented as invaders who violently destroy nature. Inherent in that criticism are parallels between both traumas: in the past, Jews in Europe were expelled and became refugees, and now in the present (1948) Arabs in Israel are expelled and become refugees. The soldiers' perceptions of the Arabs are saturated with anti-Semitic undertones [for example "...these stinking Arabs...with their flea-bitten desolate suffocating villages" (p. 26), "a mood of beggary, pus, and leprosy" (p. 101)]. As the expulsion proceeds, Micha undergoes a sort of enlightenment.

In LaCapra's opinion, the 'acting out' form of remembrance tends to relive occurrences, by using words from another situation, in another place, that are taking on different connotations (LaCapra, 1998). One of the strongest examples of Micha's unique gaze is his use of the loaded Jewish term "exile" (in Hebrew: *galut*), to describe the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs. In doing so the narrator creates a link between what he has learned about Jewish heritage—the terrible experiences of the Jewish exile—and the plight of the Arab villagers:

"Something struck me like lightning. All at once everything seemed to mean something different, more precisely: exile. This was exile. This was what exile was like. This was what exile looked like. [...] I had never been in the Diaspora [...] it had entered me, apparently, with my mother's milk. What in fact had we perpetrated here today?" (p. 104)

Yizhar does not at first build a connection between the Holocaust and the Nakba. Micha's words invoke a different exile, that of the First Temple era;

"I passed among them all [...] I wanted to discover if among all these people there was a single Jeremiah mourning and burning, forging a mouth of fury in his heart, crying out in stifled tone to the old God in Heaven, atop the trucks of exile"(p. 105).

But as the "exile" unfolds, Micha's opinions grow more extreme:

"But they were already there on the trucks [...] My guts cried out [...] Khirbet Khizeh is not ours. The Spandau gun never gave us any rights. Oh, my guts screamed. What hadn't they told us about the refugees. Everything, everything was for the refugees, their welfare, their rescue...our refugees, naturally. Those we were driving out -that was a totally different matter. Wait. Two thousand years of exile. The whole story. Jews being killed. Europe. We

were the masters now. [...] a single wail rose aloft and was inserted into the sobbing of the heavy truck... (p. 109-111)

Yizhar also phrases identification with the victims in terms familiar from characterizations of Holocaust survivors – “the confused innocence of dazed sheep” as Micha says (p. 109).

Therefore Micha's trauma acts out but in a reversed way, in what I would like to call 'a counter acting out' – he relieves the past trauma in the present, but from a complex point of view – those who were victims in the past but became, according to Yizhar, oppressors in the present. This 'counter acting out' is the complete opposite of the 'victimization' and can be found in the public sphere even in these early stages of the Israeli state.

S. Yizhar is a Zionist author. While writing *Khirbet Khizeh*, he also wrote *Midnight Convoy*, an anthology that is a paean to the Zionist project and creative endeavors in Israel. In *Khirbet Khizeh*, Yizhar engages with the question of justification for war. He did not intend to undermine Zionism's moral foundations, but rather to present the dilemma between the two sets of values he was raised on – the demand for simple human justice, and the national interest. While he did not rule out defining the 1948 war as a war life-and-death, he was contemptuous of the power-driven methods applied in it. In the novella, Yizhar protests the injustice, and the lost humanity of the expellers, but leaves unanswered the question if it could have been done otherwise (Shapira, 2000).

Published in Fall 1949, immediately after the 1948 war, *Khirbet Khizeh* soon became a bestseller and one of the greatest treasures of Hebrew literature. Alongside its acceptance, bitter arguments, explicit and implicit, raged around the questions it asked. Among critics, predominant tendency was admiration for Yizhar's revelations and his daring in openly taking issue with negative incidents among the "fine youngsters" who fought in 1948. Some thought that baring old wounds was pointless, and damaged the name of the Jewish fighter. Others said shocking scenes had been common, and yet others contended there had been no alternative. Besides public debates on the matter, youth movements and the kibbutz movement conducted “literary trials” of the novella (Shapira, 2000). The story's success and the extensive discussions it triggered off reveal that, as well as recycling the schematic equivalency between Arabs and Nazis, the culture was also presenting more complex attitudes.

Examples can also be found in the realm of Hebrew poetry, that did not always align itself totally with the Zionist narrative that was struck

dumb by the Nakba. Major poets stood by their opinions, even when they were directly opposed to majority views. In the poems of Nathan Alterman, Lea Goldberg, Yakov Orland and others, one sees how it was possible - from a Zionist perspective - to express shock and compassion for Palestinian refugees, and to call for public inquiries into brutal acts by IDF soldiers during the war (Hever, 2009; Rogani, 2010).

Within that lyrical atmosphere, Avot Yeshurun¹ wrote his poem *Pessach al kochim* (Passover on Caves) that was first published in Haaretz on 23 May 1952. In the poem, he not only mourns the loss of the Palestinians, but also uses the Zionist comparison of Arabs = Nazis to invert it, and links the Nakba with the memory of the Holocaust and the legacy of the Jews of Poland. Yeshurun compares the Palestinians to the Scriptural Jewish forefathers, and the Nakba to what was done to his father and mother in Poland. Those deeds fly in the face of the conclusions that Jews should have learnt from the Holocaust. Unlike Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh*, *Pessach al kochim* sparked off harsh debates, and Yeshurun was accused of hating and betraying the Jewish people. Nonetheless, in 1956 he repeated that the Holocaust of the Jews and the Holocaust of the Arabs are, for Jews with consciences, one. Helit Yeshurun, his daughter, explains:

“He did not make the comparison, but yes, he gave the name of Holocaust to what happened to the Arabs, and that in itself was sacrilege. He thought that we, the Jews, because of historical developments, had brought calamity on another people. And as Jews, it should not have happened” (Sela, 2009).

In the theatre of that era, Hanoah Levin—Israeli theater’s “bad boy”—rebelled against accepted conventions. His work in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s highlights the pointless and insoluble wars that he believed Israel was fighting with the region’s Arabs [*You, Me and the Next War*, (1968), *Ketchup* (1969), and *Queen of Bathtub* (1970)]. The latter satirizes the euphoria that gripped Israelis after the Six—Day War (1967). It explores the public’s use of the Holocaust in order to rationalize and justify racism towards Arabs (Handelsaltz, 2006). For example, The “*Samatocha*” section deals with racism towards Arabs. Four elderly, educated Israelis - Tovaleh, Yoffileh, Menucha and Shalva – are discussing “the Arab;” their conversation reveals that they see him as a transitional stage between a human being and an animal. “Their Arab” is “obedient, doesn't bother Jews”. “Surprisingly,” they claim, he can walk on two legs “just like us.” Levin emphasizes that the Jews in Israel have become masters and the

¹ Yeshurun received the Israel Prize for Hebrew poetry (1992).

Palestinians are their servants, and he connects it to awareness to the twisted collective memory of the Holocaust: Yoffileh says that “as the mother of three children one of whom is a combat soldier and as the daughter of Holocaust survivors, I'm authorized to say: don't harm the Arab.” Her attempt to protect him doesn't stem from humaneness or having absorbed the Holocaust's lessons. On the contrary, she streamlines the binary division between "the supreme race" and its servants –“My husband is a contractor and needs cheap workers to build apartments with 2, 2.5, 3 and 4 rooms, with central heating, and infrastructure for a telephone.”

The Council for Film and Drama Criticism didn't approve the play's staging, but reneged on its decision when asked to give the grounds for it. Like the commotion around *Passover on Caves*, Levin's play aroused unprecedented public turmoil. It was performed during the War of Attrition, when IDF soldiers were being killed daily on the Suez Canal.² Audiences demonstrated and ran amok during the performances, and the government threatened to withdraw its funding for the Cameri Theater. Critics attacked the play too. Following public and governmental criticism, the Cameri Theatre decided to fold the play after only 19 performances. After the decision, a record album with 11 songs from the show was printed (without the name of the company that produced it) and became one of the rarest albums in Israeli history (Handelsaltz, 2006).

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In conclusion, examining cultural representations of the equivalency between the Holocaust and the Israeli-Arab conflict in the first decades of the Israeli state, shows that the relationships are complex and ambivalent. The Holocaust acted out as a political lesson, but it was reflected in two different and even opposite narratives. On the one hand, the memory of the Holocaust was politically manipulated in order to represent the Arabs as Nazis successors and Israel as an eternal victim. But, on the other hand, one can find in those early decades a counter-narrative that creates awareness to both traumas – the Holocaust and the Nakba and even represented the Israelis as oppressors and the Arabs as the ‘victims of the victim’.

² A war between Israel and Egypt, that began in March 1969 and ended on 7 August 1970, when the two nations agreed on a ceasefire. Egypt tried to damage Israel's occupation of the Sinai Peninsula through a war of attrition against IDF forces, with incessant bombing of the outposts along the Suez Canal.

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