

# Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought

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*Original Essays on Critical Concepts,  
Movements, and Beliefs*

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# Memory

זכרון

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In Judaism, memory is a collective mandate, both in terms of what is recalled and how it is recalled. From the Deuteronomic injunctions to “remember the days of old” (32:7) and to “remember what Amalek did to you” (25:17) to the persistent theme of remembering “that you were slaves in Egypt,” the content of Jewish memory has been the collective saga as first recorded in Scripture and as later recalled in collective, ritual settings. Central to the meaning of the biblical past is the covenant, Israel’s guarantee that history will follow a divine plan. Thus, the tremors that register most clearly are the breaches of covenant that Israel has been guilty of: “Remember, never forget, how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the wilderness” (Deut. 9:7). The destructions of the Temple in Jerusalem, the exile from the land, and natural and national catastrophes are all seen as the consequence of God’s retribution for the backslidings of his chosen people. This theme of guilt, retribution, and exile is most forcefully articulated in the two *Tokhehah* (lit., reproof) sections of Scripture, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, which later generations invariably returned to in times of unprecedented disaster.

After the destruction of Solomon’s Temple (*ḥurban ha-bayit*) in 586 B.C.E., the biblical Book of Lamentations and prophetic consolation provided new forms of collective memory. The Book of Lamentations orchestrated a documentary account of Jerusalem’s siege and destruction into individual and choral voices ideally suited for ritual mourning, while the prophets of the exile, notably Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, viewed the exile archetypally, in terms of visionary battles (Gog and Magog), resurrection (the Valley of the Dry Bones), a new Temple, and a new Exodus. This visionary impulse was carried further by Jewish apocalyptic writers who flourished in Palestine from about 200 B.C.E. to 100 C.E. Through their pseudepigraphic approach, the apocalyptic writers projected a vision of the imminent End of Days as shaped by an esoteric and highly mythic reading of biblical prophecy.

With the destruction of Herod’s Temple in 70 C.E. and the subsequent failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt, the rabbis of Jabneh and Usha (the *tannaim*) triumphed as the sole arbiters of Jewish memory. Most of the apocalyptic writings were excluded from the biblical canon. Even the straightforward chronicles of the Maccabees were consigned to oblivion. Instead the rabbis proclaimed Scripture as the blueprint of history—past, present, and future. Through public fasts that celebrated God’s historical intervention in nature; through public sermons that sought to link Scripture with the concrete life of the everyday; through the creation of public rituals to commemorate the salvations and destructions of the biblical past, the rabbis were able to canonize, codify, and ritualize historical memory for all generations to come.

The rabbinic approach was to implode history, to cut it down to manageable size. Events were disassembled and reassembled according to biblical archetypes: the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Akedah (binding of Isaac), the Exodus, Sinai, the breaking of the tablets, the destruction of the Temple, the Exile, the restoration of Zion. The rabbis selected, combined, and arranged events to fit them on a continuum. Thus, the separate destructions of both Temples (in 586 B.C.E. and 70 C.E.) were telescoped together, combined with the capture of Bethar (in 135 C.E.) and the ploughing up of Jerusalem (*ca.* 130 C.E.), and all four calamities were then linked to the original day of treason in the wilderness, described in Numbers 14 and identified as the ninth day of Av in all cases (BT Ta’an. 4:6).

As part of the selection process, the rabbis never treated the individual as worthy of memorialization. There was no place for heroes either in the commemoration of the Exodus on Passover or in the three-week period leading up to the ninth of Av. This collective focus remained in force

throughout the Middle Ages, even in Christian Europe with its plethora of saints' days. Rabbi Akiva was remembered simply as one of the Ten *Harugei Malkhut*, the rabbinic martyrs during the Hadrianic persecution. This legendary construct was in turn refashioned sometime in the Byzantine period into a mythic tale with biblical antecedents (the selling of Joseph by his brothers), eventually to become part of the Yom Kippur liturgy (in the commemoration of the Ten Martyrs).

Indeed, it was liturgy that became the central repository of group memory in the Middle Ages. A number of historical chronicles were written in the wake of the Crusades, and the Expulsion from Spain was the major catalyst for the first serious attempts at postbiblical Jewish historiography, yet both national calamities were commemorated mainly in synagogue ritual: in memorial prayers for the dead, in penitential poems, in additions to the liturgy for the ninth of Av. Fasting and feasting remained the essential ways of recalling local events of special significance such as expulsions, plagues, or deliverance from danger.

Thanks to a system of dating events and of choosing representative places, it was now possible to create new linkages and historical clusters. Thus, the Cossack uprising of 1648/49 was followed by sixteen years of foreign invasion, but in Jewish memory, only *Tah vetat* (1648–1649), the period of pogroms, was recalled, while the destruction of Nemirov (May 1648) became the stand-in for the ruin of Jewish Poland. The anniversary of Nemirov's destruction, the twentieth of the Hebrew month of Sivan, became a commemorative fast day, linked by date to *gezeirat tathla*, the martyrdom of the Jews of Blois in 1171. As always, it was the subjective reality, not the verifiable facts of destruction, that set the norm and gave rise to new responses. What was remembered and recorded was not the factual data but the meaning of the desecration.

This meaning, in turn, was shaped and expressed by analogies with earlier archetypes. The Hadrianic persecutions had given rise to the archetype of *kiddush ha-Shem*, defined in the Talmud as the public act of sanctifying God's name in times of persecution (BT Sanh. 74). *Kiddush ha-Shem* emerged after the Crusades in combination with two other archetypes. The Akedah and the Temple sacrifice were enlisted by the survivors of the First and Second Crusades in order to view as vicarious atonement the voluntary death of those who had resisted forced conversion. Similarly, the Marrano experience in sixteenth-century Spain and Portugal was legitimated in terms of Esther hiding her identity—a pun on *Esther-hester* (Hebrew for "hiding")—from King Ahasuerus. With the spread of kabbalah in the seventeenth century and its enormous impact on Hasidism in the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries, the spiritualization of history and the search for archetypal structures were revived just when the modern, critical study of history began to take hold among western European Jews.

Scholars are divided as to the continued viability of Jewish group memory in the modern era. Some, pointing to the fragmentation of art and consciousness in the high culture of western Europe, conclude that group memory suffered an irreversible blow with emancipation. Others, drawing on the folklore, literature, art, and politics of Jewish eastern Europe, argue that group memory was transformed and revitalized in a secular mode. The anti-traditionalist revolt, launched in eastern Europe by such intellectuals as S. Y. Abramowitsch (Mendele Mokher Seforim) and Hayyim Nahman Bialik, rejected the theological premise of sin and retribution as the guiding principle of history, but continued nonetheless to disassemble the czarist pogroms, the expulsions, and the mass exodus in terms of the ancient archetypes. An apocalyptic mode of response gained momentum during and after World War I and the Bolshevik revolution, especially among cosmopolitan writers drawn to radical politics. These latter-day apocalyptic writers revived the mythic approach to history, reclaiming Jesus, Shabbetai Zevi, and Solomon Molcho as prophets of the millennium.<sup>1</sup> Events deliberately suppressed by the rabbis, such as the siege and defeat of Masada, took on mythic significance in this period of revolutionary upheaval.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, a neoclassical trend also took hold among those writers and political thinkers who focused on the fate of the Jews. The normative past yielded material for a spate of historical novels and family sagas, enormously popular in the interbellum period, while new meanings were discovered for the collective archetypes of *Kiddush ha-Shem* and the *Kehillah Kedoshah* (the holy congregation). Even when used ironically, as in the work of S. Y. Agnon, these archetypes rendered the immediate crisis of European Jewry transtemporal.

Both the apocalyptic and neoclassical modes of response came together in the Nazi ghettos. Here, Yiddish, Hebrew, and, to some extent, Polish writers drew upon modern and classical Jewish texts alike in an effort to withstand the Nazi terror. Jews of all ages and political persuasions recognized the ghetto, the yellow star, the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council, appointed by German occupying authority), and the myriad acts of sacrilege as something already experienced, and this pervasive sense of *déjà vu* strengthened the search for archetypes. The more brutal and unprecedented the violence became, however, the more the ghetto poets, songwriters, and chroniclers subjected the familiar modes of response to parody. As the full extent of the Nazis' genocidal plan became known, secular writers such as Itzhak Katz-

nelson and Abraham Sutzkever lent their voices to the cause of armed resistance while, paradoxically, they also revived the covenantal dialogue with God.

In the postwar era, to the extent that Jews have regrouped in large numbers, they have reshaped contemporary events into new archetypal patterns: *ḥurban* has given way to *Shoah* (Holocaust); the rebirth of the State of Israel has provided a concretized image of the ingathering of the exiles and of the return to Zion. More recently, the national reawakening of Soviet Jews is viewed as a latter-day exodus. Each of these three archetypes is celebrated with new communal rituals (public gatherings, parades, demonstrations), while the literary sources read at such occasions begin to take on liturgical significance. In particular, the phenomenon of *yizker-bikher*—memorial volumes to the destroyed communities of Europe—attests to the renewed vitality of group memory among the survivors of the Holocaust. In contrast to this traditional, collective focus, the exploits of individual heroes are celebrated in Israel by the issuing of memorial volumes to the fallen soldiers, in addition to legends that are told about Joseph Trumpeldor and other Zionist leaders.

The use of visual iconography—in painting, sculpture, and photography—is a new vehicle of group memory in modern times. Images of exile and martyrdom, revolt and rebirth, have made the archetypes accessible to an audience increasingly cut off from written Jewish sources. But given the eclectic nature of modern art and the dearth of icons in Judaism, borrowings from non-Jewish culture are inevitable. Chagall's Crucifixion Series (1938–1944) exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of using Jesus as an emblem of Jewish suffering.<sup>3</sup>

And so while the link between memory and covenant has been irrevocably broken, while individual actions are now celebrated along with those of the collective, while old archetypes are displaced by new ones, and while visual images supplant the written word, it would seem that group memory and archetypal thinking are still a viable form of Jewish self-expression.

## REFERENCES

1. See, for example, the early poetry of Uri Zevi Greenberg.
2. See Isaac Lamdan's expressionist poem "Masada."
3. Cf. David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (1984).

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