Reaffirming Remembrance: How Israel Disseminates Fantasy Themes Through Holocaust Commemoration

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The Holocaust has a haunting place in the history of the Jewish people. The forces of Nazism slaughtered millions of the sons of Jacob. This catastrophe was a black culmination of a series of events that had instigated the modern Zionist movement. The mistreatment of the Jews led them to seek a return from the exile of the Diaspora—a return to the land of their fathers in Palestine. The State of Israel, the result of decades of Zionist resettlement efforts in Palestine, declared independence soon after the Holocaust. Even with this triumph, however, the Jews of Israel still struggled after they achieved statehood—the Israelis experienced endless conflict with their Arab neighbors.

How did all of these events impact the way the Israeli public viewed themselves? What did it mean to be a Zionist Jew in Palestine? How did the Zionists in Palestine view the Jews still in exile in the Diaspora? How did the Israeli national experience cause those views to change? A rhetorical analysis can answer those questions. By using elements of Ernest Bormann’s Fantasy Theme Analysis to study Israeli Holocaust commemoration, one can track the changes in the rhetorical vision of what it meant to be a Zionist Jew in Palestine. Studying such texts teaches us the importance of national and personal commemoration: the importance of how reaffirming our memories reaffirms who we are.

The Israeli government has made numerous efforts over the years to commemorate the tragedy of the Holocaust. These efforts included the implementation of commemorative ceremonies in Israeli state education and the establishment of the national Holocaust shrine, Yad Vashem. These two efforts, considered as rhetorical large texts, have fluctuated in importance over the courses of their existence, as the Israeli public’s rhetorical vision relating Holocaust survivors of the Diaspora and the Zionist movement in Palestine has changed. As times changed, the messages of these two large texts changed as well, reflecting shifting fantasy themes that substantiated the rhetorical vision of Israeli public opinion.

A large body of scholarship has already discussed the Israeli public’s changing perception of the Holocaust. But to understand in a rhetorical sense how the messages of these large texts reflected this shift of public opinion, it would be useful to look at the messages given in these large texts through the lens of Ernest G. Bormann’s Social Convergence Theory and Fantasy Theme Analysis. Bormann stated “...in symbolic convergence theory, ‘fantasy’ refers to the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group psychological or rhetorical need” (Bormann, 1985). He claimed these “rhetorical fantasies...often deal with things that have actually happened to members of the group or that are reported in authenticated works of history, in the news media, or in the oral history and folklore of other groups and communities.” He argued that the elements of these fantasies manifest themselves in rhetorical “scripts” that can come together into a “rhetorical vision.” These “rhetorical visions are often integrated by the
sharing of a dramatizing message that contains a master analogy, which pulls the various elements together into a more or less elegant and meaningful whole.” In Bormann’s paradigm, fantasy theme provided a powerful persuasive force in symbolically constructing a rhetorical vision.

This paradigm provided the ideal means to categorize the symbolic messages sent by the large texts that commemorate the Holocaust. The large texts of commemorative ceremonies in Israeli state education and the Yad Vashem shrine provided demonstrative evidence of the shift in the Israeli public’s rhetorical vision. The symbolic messages of these texts reflected fantasy themes which themselves constructed the rhetorical visions by which the Israeli public viewed both the Holocaust and the Zionist State of Israel.

To understand the symbolic messages of the large texts, one must first appreciate the history of how the Israeli public viewed the Holocaust. The State of Israel was founded progressively over the course of several decades by Jewish resettlement of Palestine. The Zionist desire was to create a national Jewish identity separate from the Jewish communities of the Diaspora (the exile of the Jewish people). This led the Zionists to create a new fantasy type for the Zionist Hero (Ben-Amos, Bet-El, 1999). According to Ben-Amos and Bet-El, this Hero “was personified in the halutz [pioneer]: a proud tiller of the soil, frugal, ready for self-sacrifice, laboring for redemption of the land.” The themes of “heroism, readiness for self-sacrifice, the struggle of the few against the many, and the link between death, commendation, and national rebirth” were established as ideal Heroic fantasy types disseminated through Israeli memorial days. This vision of the Hero later evolved as the State of Israel declared independence and achieved nationhood. The Heroic Israeli’s highest obligation was now to serve, sacrifice for, and be loyal to the new State of Israel (Ben-Amos, Bet-El).

This theme was essential to the Israeli public’s rhetorical vision of their Israeli identity. In contrast, Klar, Klar, and Schori-Eyal (2013) argue the Israeli public held a low opinion of the Jews who fell victim to the Holocaust. The Holocaust was thought to be associated with the Diaspora, with the Victims being “passive and cowardly” (Klar, Klar, and Schori-Eyal, 2013). The phrase “led like sheep to the slaughter” could be considered the “master analogy” Bormann said tied together a rhetorical vision (Ofer, 2000; Bormann 1985). With this in mind, it became possible to see the contrast between the Israeli public’s perception of the Zionist Israeli Jew and the Diaspora Jew, Victim of the Holocaust. The Heroic fantasy type of the Zionist Israeli Jew embodied the ideals of Zionism, loyalty, service, and sacrifice. The Diaspora Jew fit the fantasy type of a passive, helpless, and cowardly Victim. This contrast encouraged the Israeli public to perceive the Diaspora through the Zionist lens: something to be escaped.

This divergence between the fantasy types of the Israeli and Diaspora Jew began to converge following the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War. Israel faced recurring existential threats from the Arab states that, at times, revealed the vulnerability of the Israeli State. As these military conflicts and constant hostility from the Arab states persisted, the Israeli public began to feel the reality of a constant external threat was incompatible with the original Zionist vision that Israel could secure the Jewish people through statehood and military force (Klar, Klar, and Schori-Eyal). This brought the Israeli public a sense of helplessness that had previously been associated with the Holocaust. In this way, the fantasy themes held by the Israeli public of Israeli
and Diaspora Jews began to converge, resulting in a rhetorical vision composed by both the Zionist notion of Israeli nationhood and the sense of danger engendered by the Holocaust that occurred in the Diaspora.

The Israeli Minister of Education from 1951-1955, Ben-Zion Dinur, claimed the Israeli state was responsible for the following duties: “[1] developing the personal talent of its future citizens (the human factor); [2] nurturing their social qualities (the social character); [3] shaping their national psyche (the spiritual heritage)” (Ben-Amos, Bet-El). His statement embodied the approach Israel took to the state education system. The state was to be responsible for maintaining the Zionist loyalty of the citizenry, said Dinur: “The state must educate its citizens for complete identification with it” (Ben-Amos, Bet-El). As such, the ceremonies used by the Israeli state school system provide a useful large text by which one can analyze the symbolic messages and fantasy themes relating to the Holocaust that were disseminated to Israeli children. According to Ben-Amos and Bet-El, a comparative survey of nine democratic countries taken in the late 1960s placed Israel in first in terms of ceremonies with a national slant in the schools, as well as for support and interest shown by pupils in their government’s policies. Many of these ceremonies were commemorations of important days such as Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day).

Initially, Yom HaShoah was not an important public ceremony. Schools placed far more focus on Memorial Day, a day of mourning, which honored Israeli war dead and heroism, and celebrating Independence Day. Independence Day was a school vacation the day after Memorial Day, and so the ceremonies blended the two symbolic messages of mourning and triumph. The Memorial Day ceremony included activities such as flag unfurling, a radio address from the Minister of Education, the singing of the National Anthem. These actions were clearly intended to disseminate the Zionist ideal fantasy type: an Israeli Hero is one whose loyalty to, service for, and willingness to sacrifice for the state were absolute. Sacrifice brought together both mourning and triumph.

This was the setting when Yom HaShoah’s importance began to increase. The level of effort put into ceremonies related to Yom HaShoah increased after the Israeli government passed the Holocaust Day Law in 1959 and after the Adolf Eichmann trial brought a renewed focus on the Holocaust. In 1963, the Ministry of Education created a curriculum for elementary and high schools, and schools were required to commemorate the Holocaust using candle lightings and poetry/prose readings. The increase in commemoration of Yom HaShoah did not change the fantasy theme that the Ministry of Education was disseminating. The Victims of the Holocaust were not emphasized as much as rebels in the ghetto uprisings who fought back against the Nazis. The rebels became the heroes of the ceremony, and in the process were framed as and reaffirmed as similar to the Heroes who were honored in the Memorial Day ceremonies.

The fantasy themes disseminated by the ceremonies did not shift until the Six-Day War and Yom Kippur War. As Israeli society began to feel the existential threat associated with the Holocaust, the ceremonies began to reflect the converging rhetorical visions of Zionist Israel and Diaspora Jews. The curriculum began to emphasize life in the ghettos and camps, and the Hero was joined by the Survivor, an individual who was oppressed by the regime, but fought to survive. The practice of sending Israeli students in delegations to visit old concentration camps exemplified
how Israeli educational tradition reflected the new message. This practice, which erupted in 1987, was a strong force for disseminating the new rhetorical vision that tied the Holocaust survivor and the Israeli Jew—students were now seeing the camps first hand and brought their experiences back to Israel.

Yad Vashem, Israel’s national shrine to the Holocaust, was created by the Israeli parliament in 1953. Intended “to gather into the homeland the memory of all those of the Jewish people who fell and gave their lives, fought and rebelled...because of their belonging to the Jewish people,” the site was an important means by which symbolic messages were disseminated (Feldman, 2007).

The written intent of the law in itself showed coherence with the emphasis on fighting and sacrifice seen in the Zionist Hero fantasy type. The official name of the memorial site also showed the emphasis on the rebels in the ghetto uprisings: “Yad Vashem to the Shoah [Holocaust] and the Heroism” (Feldman). Other evidence shows how the memorialization of the Holocaust was intended to be Zionist in nature. The Minister of Education, Ben-Zion Dinur, said: “Yad Vashem...designates, not only our desire to preserve the (victims’) memory and their deeds, their struggle, life, suffering and death, but also to see to it, that their memory will be preserved in our midst. This name also says, that Israel our land, and Jerusalem our city is the place and memory for them...” (Feldman). The symbolic power of this memorial echoed the Western Wall, as both sites memorialized catastrophe and redemption for the Jewish people. These themes of redemption recalled the messages of Zionism that defined the Zionist Hero fantasy type.

Yad Vashem’s location on Mt. Herzl demonstrated its importance as part of the Zionist rhetorical vision. It was located near the largest Israeli Military Cemetery and the tomb of Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism. Feldman explained how this location tied the commemoration of the Holocaust to Zionism—the only alternative to the Holocaust of the Diaspora was the State of Israel. In addition, Feldman discussed how Yad Vashem was set apart from the rest of the mountain by a barrier to reflect the missing Holocaust dead. Yad Vashem’s separation was crucial to separate the Diaspora as past to the State of Israel as future (Feldman).

The changes that impacted ceremony in Israeli schools did not leave Yad Vashem untouched. A path linking Yad Vashem with the rest of Mt. Herzl was constructed in 2003 (Feldman). Following the post Six-Day and Yom Kippur War trends toward converging the rhetorical vision of the Diaspora Jew with that of the Zionist, the path was inaugurated by a march of 1,500 youths (Feldman). The path contained significant symbolic meaning. The march began in a part of Yad Vashem representing Europe. The marchers then passed a cattle-car representing the fate of the Holocaust victims and ascended the hill, representing the immigration back to Israel. The path ended at the graves of Israeli presidents and prime ministers, which represent the State of Israel as the culmination. By using the path to connect Yad Vashem with other graves symbolizing the modern State in Mt. Herzl, the new path recognized the changing understanding of the Zionist and Diaspora rhetorical visions.

The fantasy types disseminated by these large texts are related and hearken back to the rhetorical visions of Zionism and Diaspora Jewry that were held at large in Israel. For example, both large
texts disseminated the Zionist Hero when commemorating the Holocaust by invoking the rebels in the ghetto uprisings. Both also framed their commemoration of the Holocaust as part of the greater Zionist struggle, especially before the Six-Day and Yom Kippur Wars. In contrast, Yad Vashem, as appropriate for the national Holocaust shrine, did honor the Holocaust Victims, while the school ceremonies glanced over the victims in favor of honoring the more Heroic rebels.

The 1,500 youths who marched on the new path at Yad Vashem provided evidence that the school concentration camp trips embraced by the Israelis as part of educational tradition were successful in making important the Holocaust, as well as the new rhetorical vision used to view it. These youth marched in part because the fantasy types, which formed their rhetorical vision of what is meant to be a Zionist or Diaspora Jew, had changed. By looking at the symbolic messages disseminated by the two large texts of Israeli state school ceremonies and the Yad Vashem memorial through the lens of Bormann’s Social Convergence Theory and Fantasy Theme Analysis, it was seen that the fantasy themes disseminated through both large texts trended congruently with each other and with Israeli public perceptions.

If future scholars used this lens to understand Holocaust commemoration in Israel, they would have the opportunity to compare the shifting rhetorical visions of the Holocaust in Israel with those of other nations. If this lens was used to understand the changing rhetorical vision of the Holocaust in Germany, for example, it might show an interesting relationship between those rhetorical visions of the Holocaust and the state of Israeli–German international relations. Regardless the nature of future research, it has been made clear that Holocaust commemoration in Israel has been an important and dynamic national issue—and one which will hold importance in the State of Israel for a long time.

References


