ANALYSIS OF HOLOCAUST DISCOURSE WHILE VISITING THE AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze a holocaust discourse between a jew and a non-jew visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum. It tackles the issue of ownership – who owns the memory of Auschwitz? A basic assumption is that the way people interpret the meaning of the holocaust is connected to the way they define their Jewish identity as well as the meaning of the state of Israel. Any holocaust museum can be a site where contesting powers and knowledge bases struggle over the ownership of its visitors' holocaust vision. A visit to a holocaust museum can also be seen as a quest for meaning and interpretation.

My first visit to Auschwitz was accidental. One usually doesn't go to Auschwitz by accident; it is usually a planned and organized trip.

Such a visit calls for significant psychological and emotional preparation, especially for a second generation daughter of survivors. Yet, I was invited to Krakow to lecture at a conference for rabbis and because everything was organized at the last minute, I didn't have time to prepare myself.

I called a non-Jewish colleague of mine to tell him that I would have a day off while in Krakow. He suggested taking me to Birkenau and Auschwitz since "both of us lost our relatives there." It was impossible for me to acknowledge the fact that a Polish non-Jew would show me Birkenau. When I arrived in Krakow, I told him that I preferred to go to Le_ajsk, but he insisted: "You can go to Le_ajsk with your friends, but to Auschwitz, you will go with me – one million Poles were killed there. It is not only a tragedy for the Jews; it is our tragedy as well."

This led to a discussion about the issue of ownership – who owns the memory of Auschwitz? The main question I asked myself was "does a non-Jew have a right to the memory of Auschwitz?" During our discussion, my colleague spoke about the *shoah,* whereas I referred to it as the holocaust in order to differentiate myself from him. Then I thought that this was a mistake; using the same name shows some commonalities in both our hidden assumptions and points of departure. There are several terms used for the holocaust: destruction [in Hebrew and Yiddish, *hurban*], holocaust [originally stemming from the Greek *holokauston*, a translation of the Hebrew words *korbam olah* meaning a burnt sacrifice offered whole to God ("Holocaust,"

Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009)]; shoah [catastrophe] and genocide. Poet Uri Zvi Greenberg, who views the holocaust as part of a continuum of disasters, uses the word *destruction. Holocaust* is the historical name for this event. The term *shoah* indicates that it is unique, while genocide makes the holocaust an event amongst others. Then I thought I should also use the term *shoah*. My colleague and I reached an important consensual point of departure by using the same term.

I explained to my colleague that for Israelis, the holocaust is the cornerstone of our identity; it is the main justification for the need to establish the state of Israel. I treated it as both a political concept and epistemological myth. He, on the other hand, treated the holocaust as an historical event.

When we arrived in Auschwitz and I saw a group of Israeli boys draped in the flag of Israel, I started to cry. It was the first time that I had an explicit emotional reaction during the tour. In Birkenau, I was frozen; in Auschwitz, I cried. The way they wrapped themselves in the flags and held them close to their bodies made it seem as if the Israeli flag was an anchor to keep them sane. I asked one of the boys why they did it and he answered, "Here we understand that the state of Israel is the only solution for the Jewish people all over the world."

This experience, which is also described in the literature (Herman, 1977; Oron, 1993), showed me that the way people interpret the meaning of the holocaust is connected to the way they define the meaning of the state of Israel. According to Neuberger (1994), there are six approaches to defining the meaning of the state of Israel: (1) a religious *(hallachic)* state, (2) a religious national state, (3) a national Jewish cultural state, (4) the state of the Jewish people, (5) a state of the Jews, and (6) a state of all its citizens. In the brief and casual conversations I had with Israeli adolescents I met in Auschwitz, they identified with the second, third, fourth and fifth meaning. This merits further investigation. Whereas the five first options describe an ethnic nationality, the sixth view refers to a political nationality. Each approach interprets the meaning of the holocaust differently. While the ethnic national approaches use a mainly epistemological interpretation, the sixth approach has a civic nature and uses a national political interpretation.

Research has shown that the holocaust was the major component of Jewish identity (Herman, 1977; Frago, 1989; Gross, 1999; Levi, 1987). Liebman and Don Yihye (1983) view the holocaust as the main component of civic religion in Israel. For the religious population in Israel, the holocaust is the most important component in the construction of Jewish identity. It strengthens the connections between the state of Israel, the Jewish nation and the Jewish tradition.

One of the main questions concerning the holocaust is whether to relate to the particularistic or to the universalistic aspect of the event. I questioned my own understanding of the narrative of the holocaust. Is it a narrative of destruction and redemption in keeping with the Zionist narrative that was constructed from the establishment of the state of Israel? Or is it a humanistic narrative that concentrates on the stories of individuals? Whereas my discourse was a national narrative of destruction and redemption, my colleague's discourse was humanistic because he concentrated on the story of his uncle. These two different viewpoints set us apart and made communication nearly impossible. While he told the story of his uncle, I told him about our nation, my people and the demographic implications of the holocaust. I saw myself in this moment as a representative of my country and my nation, whereas he saw himself as a simple human being who wanted to share his story. During the discourse, he referred to himself as "I" while I referred to myself as "we." He wanted to talk about the holocaust as a global narrative but I saw it as a particularistic narrative. I then asked myself why the shoah had become a case study of genocide. Standing in front of the ramp in Birkenau, I became overwhelmed and lost my patience. I wanted to be alone and I wanted the holocaust to be a particularistic-specific creation. I felt that if I shared the holocaust with other people, I would lose my intimacy with the concept and with it, my personal responsibility to my relatives who were killed. I understood while interacting with my colleague that in doing so, I was losing the empathy of the other meaning that the holocaust would cease to be a meaningful traumatic issue to other people. By making it a global issue, other people can share in it and cope with its viciousness. I soon understood that my exclusive approach also lessened the possibility of making the story of the holocaust a basis for anti-racist education.

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Trigano (2008) posits that the negation of the universal aspect of the shoah indicates that sympathy is for the victims of a human tragedy. In this case, sympathy towards the human beings and not toward the Jews. This distinction is important to the Europeans. They tend to blame the Jews for

using the holocaust as a reason for their particularism. For Trigano, Jews are only accepted in Europe if they are victims. Hence, in his eyes, Europe is ready for a second holocaust.

The the discussion with my colleague was a struggle to construct and deconstruct reality through the power of words. Using Michel Foucault's approach can be very useful to this end. According to Foucault, words construct realities. Language is the "direction of meaning." Thus, language hypothesizes a direct correspondence between signifier and signified; it pretends to be mimetic of the world. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Foucault continues his definition of discourse in terms of its effect. More than being merely a simple speech act, he interprets discursive practices as both verbal and non-verbal means of defining and manipulating the hierarchy of power within a society. They are both tools and weapons. In Foucault's view, "Discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behavior, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them" (1981, p. 61).

Foucault studied discourse as a system of representations (Hall, 1997). Foucault was interested in the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements. Discourse is not perceived as a linguistic concept. Foucault defines discourse as "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a way of representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment. Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language … Meanings shape and influence what we do" (Hall, 1994, p. 291).

We first went to Bikenau and then to Auschwitz. My reaction to Bikenau was very strong, I was shocked. Birkenau has been restored, you can see the barracks, the chimneys, and the railway lines. It was very cold. I wondered how people could survive naked or only wearing thin shirts in even colder weather. We then accompanied a group from Scandinavia who went into one of the barracks with a guide. The guide explained that this specific barrack had originally been used as a stable for 52 horses, but the Nazis used it to hold about 400 people. The guide tried to describe the everyday life of the prisoners, concentrating on the question of how they managed to keep themselves sane. The group was deeply moved. One of the participants asked how many people committed suicide in this barrack, the guide explained that she had no accurate information but suspected that no suicides occurred. Jews hardly committed suicide, she continued, as they were religious and suicide is forbidden according to Judaism. To me, this was a very special question. It reminded me of the fact that in Hebrew we talk about "shoah and gvura" [heroism]. When I was a child at school, the teacher used to tell us that heroism is embedded within the shoah. This also has to do with Viktor Frankl's theory in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1963) that those who found meaning in life could survive. Survival is spiritual, it is the victory of the spirit over the physical, which basically a religious view.

My main emphasis in our discussion was that we were victims. My colleague liked this notion even though he referred to us as shadows of God rather than Jews. We then asked ourselves if it could happen again. My colleague said that it was impossible in our time. I insisted that if we look at the current situation and the explicit words of Iranian president Ahmadinejad, it could happen again. This is the main justification for the need for holocaust education all over the world. I quote the words of Primo Levi, an Italian writer and a holocaust survivor, "we cannot understand the holocaust but we can and must understand from where it springs and we must be on our guard. If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative because what happened could happen again" (Levi, 1987, p. 396).

My colleague said there is a lot of mysticism surrounding the issue of the holocaust. I felt it was a mistake to use mystical conceptions in relation to the holocaust. In my eyes, it was a mistake to describe the Nazis as monsters; it is important to describe them as regular human beings in order to show that this monstrous potential resides in every human being. If it happened again, one could find themselves in any of the following roles; victim, perpetrator, collaborators, bystander, or rescuer. Only education can guarantee that the holocaust will never happen again. The term mystification was defined in relation to the holocaust by Yehuda Bauer (1982): "Recent treatment of the Holocaust has contributed much ambiguity and vagueness—and no wonder. The event was of such vast proportions that it cannot be grasped by a normal human mind. It is therefore natural to run away from the subject, to deny it, and to reduce it to forms and dimensions that we can understand from our life experiences. I refer, of course, to attempts at mystification that have no other motives" (p. 71). Bauer describes the paradox that lies within such an interpretation because it can sometimes be described with religious connotations. He believes that there is a need to find the balance between the unique borders of the shoah and to perceive it as a universal historic event with an existential interpretation.

We agreed that we have to foster holocaust education. The most compelling reason for studying the holocaust is to help to secure future generations from further violations of human rights, whether based on ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. As Short and Reed (2004, p. 2) claim, "At a time when many societies, culturally more diverse than ever before, are threatened by a rising tide of nationalism and xenophobia, study of the holocaust seems to deserve the highest priority." We also agreed that holocaust education is important as a means to combat holocaust denial. It is well known that much of the physical evidence of the camps was

deliberately destroyed by the Nazis in the latter stages of the war and as a result, their ideological heirs have felt free to maintain that all talk of death camps is a fiction invented by Jews for political and financial gain (ibid, p. 4).

As a daughter of holocaust survivors, who sees the consequences of the holocaust, imprinted on my father's body and soul as well as its impact upon my children's world view, I can tell you that for many years the words Nazi and German were synonymous in our private language. Polish people were included within the Nazi category, because they were all suspected of collaboration with the Nazis. Paradoxically, the visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau brought me to a site where I could attempt reconciliation with the perpetrators and the collaborators. It is perhaps the only place where such a thing could happen. We must raise awareness about the need to maintain and cultivate a culture of remembrance worldwide.

A holocaust museum, regardless of location, is a site where contesting powers and knowledge bases struggle over the ownership of its visitors' holocaust vision. The struggle is over the diverse possibilities of construction and deconstruction of the narrative (or narratives) of the shoah. This discussion begines with the museum designers who construct the message they want to convey and is accompanied and continued by the the visitors who interpret this message differently. The museum is an agent for education and socialization. Thus, according to Foucault, "any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledge and powers which they carry" (Foucault, 1981: 64).

A visit to the museum can also be seen as a quest for meaning and interpretation. The dialogue I had with my colleague in Auschwitz-Birkenau was a discourse of authorities and borders inspired by the sights. The museum enabled us to visualize sparks of the catastrophe, while challenging our historical perspective and competence. The ability to visualize made the discussion and our understanding of this issue more meaningful, powerful and profound.

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