



# GLOBAL HUMANITIES

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Editors Frank Jacob and Francesco Mangiapane

## *Identity and Nationhood*

**Editorial by**  
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**Texts by**  
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# ISRAEL'S FAILURE TO PRODUCE A NATIONAL WAR MEMORIAL SITE

## FRAGMENTED NATIONAL MEMORY IN AN INCLUSIVE SEMIOTIC SPHERE

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**ABSTRACT.** The article researches the Israeli pioneer attempt to establish its national war memorial—a significant test to Israeli solidarity and its society's ability to uphold an agreed commemoration discourse and narrative. The multitude of tensions, disputes and conflicts raised since the project's led to its cancellation. The article illustrates the sociological tensions characteristic of Israel's army-society and political relationship and the failure of creating an "all-inclusive semiotic sphere" in an era in which discourse communities uphold their "memory work" within exclusive spaces.

**KEYWORDS:** Mount Eithan, Semiotic Reduction, Israel, Memory Communities, Commemoration, Collective Memory, Fallen Soldiers, Victimization, National War Memorial Site.

### 1. ISRAELI COMMEMORATION OF ITS FALLEN SOLDIERS: BOTTOM-UP, SPONTANEOUS AND COMMUNAL

A leaflet issued by the 'Golan' Regional Council in northern Israel listing tourist attractions in the area also included an article proposing a tour entitled "Post war road marks." The article opened with the following paragraph: "It is impossible to tour the Golan region without encountering memorial monuments every step of

the way... that integrate almost naturally with the extraordinary landscape and nature of the Golan" (*Eretz HaGolan* 2013: 32). This is not a unique proposition. Nearly every touristic book or instruction leaflet about Israel, whether intended for tourists or students, families or individuals, includes tours of memorial monuments. Israel holds a world record for the commemoration of its soldiers. In 2013, 2,900 memorial monuments and sites



were counted throughout the country, meaning an average of one monument for eight fallen soldiers, while in Europe the parallel ratio is one monument per 10,000 fallen soldiers (Aharoni 2013). This statistic does not include monuments not embedded in the landscape but rather those built within institutions and organizations in memory of their students and workers (such as in schools, universities, youth movements, sports associations and workplaces), nor does it include physical commemorations that are not monuments (such as the naming of clubs, synagogues, schools, town squares and streets after fallen soldiers or military operations). Commemoration is an integral part of the pronounced identity of every Israeli community: every settlement, city, regional council or youth movement commemorates its members who have fallen during their military service, and this commemoration serves as testimony to the community's contribution to national security.

This notwithstanding, it is interesting to note that no common national commemoration site exists for all fallen soldiers of Israel and its wars. Of the total number of memorial monuments, 47% were established by bereaved families, 5.5% by military units, 1.7% by NGOs to commemorate underground organizations that operated before the establishment of the State, 22% by municipalities in memory of their residents who have fallen during the various wars, and the rest by other initiatives (Aharoni 2013). The State of Israel has never built a national war memorial. The majority of commemoration practices were created "bottom-up," following civilian or military initiatives (memorial monuments established by army units and divisions). Although a large number of these monuments are maintained through institutional funding and support, they were built thanks to voluntary, extra-institutional funding. This facilitated an interesting process by which all these commemoration initiatives were part of what is known in semiotics as "the lan-

guage of nationhood" (Keane 2003) – a language that envelopes wars, sacrifice, casualties, loss and suffering under a cloak of collective allocation of meaning. In parallel, however, we can also identify differences between such initiatives, not in their national semiotics but in their myths and battle stories that are based on the relative weight of their contribution to the national project and language as depicted by their initiating communities. In fact, this process can be seen as a "democratization of commemoration," which in itself enabled the reproduction of a national language. The emerging competition between these distinct memory groups and communities is aimed at determining who holds more seniority and therefore more rights over the national language. This form of democracy serves to reinforce, rather than undermine, national semiotics.

No form of organized national commemoration was established following Israel's War of Independence in 1948. In 1959 the State founded the 'Public Council for Commemorating Soldiers' at the Ministry of Defense, whose members included bereaved parents and public figures. Dr. Ziva Shamir, the Council's historian, noted that only a small number of memorial monuments were initiated by the Council and that most of its activities were characterized by what she referred to as a "non-intervention policy" consisting of the adoption of a "democratic commemoration pattern" which has characterized the State of Israel since its establishment. Hence, the Council only decided whether to support commemoration initiatives and coordinated between them (Shamir 1996: 16).

Effective collective memory from the standpoint of the national-military establishment is one that relies on the de-politicizing discourse. Commemoration taking place within this discourse gives meaning and productiveness to bereavement and sacrifice while expropriating memory from daily life and transforming it into something "holy" and separate

from daily disagreements and rifts (Hermoni and Lebel 2012).

Allegedly, forms of commemoration that are nearly entirely “bottom-up,” as opposed to those carried out by the establishment, could be expected to lead to the politicization of Israel's bereavement and memorial discourse, as different groups have different ways of perceiving battles and wars. Veterans of various underground organizations from the pre-State era are convinced that their actions are responsible for the establishment of the State of Israel, while other organizations only hindered the national effort. Likewise, specific military divisions perceive themselves as responsible for victory while marking other divisions who fought alongside them as having hindered the war effort.

In parallel to these initiatives, Israel's political right, led by former leaders of revisionist underground organizations – the Etzel and Lehi –, was not part of the political leadership at the time and was likewise removed from the collective memory. The names of their fallen warriors, most of whom fought against the British, were not a part of the national pantheon. However, they fought this by erecting their own monuments, building their own museums, publishing their own books of commemoration, and holding a range of independent memorial ceremonies, through independent funding, where they were able to present their narrative regarding Zionist history, which according to them would not have led to the establishment of the State of Israel had they not operated underground movements who battled the British colonialists and chased them from the land. This historical epos was completely absent from history books studied at schools, which were written exclusively by the ruling socialist party until the revisionist movement came to power toward the 1980s (Lebel 2013: 190). These two movements are in fact “counter semiotic movements” (Solik 2014), the first having referred to Israel's War of Independence for years as “the war of restoration,”

illustrating their view of David Ben-Gurion as the “restorer” of the State, while the revisionist movements aimed to promote (culturally, but also formally and legally) the term “the war of liberation,” emphasizing the approach by which the underground organizations brought about an act of liberation: the liberation of the land from the Mandate of the British colonialists (Lebel 2009).

This type of confrontation is relatively marginal in Israeli memorial discourse, precisely because of the State's “non-interference” policy. Thus, each individual “memorial community” (Welzer 2008: 291) has a monument built through communal initiatives, and so, on the national Memorial Day, each community turns to its “own” memorial monument, thereby creating its unique narrative. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the case of parents of soldiers killed in a training accident. While on Memorial Day some of them attend the memorial monument of the division in which their son has served, so as to pay tribute to his memory in a “traditional” national ceremony, others prefer to visit a unique monument built by parents of the soldiers who died in that accident, where they attend a ceremony characterized by victimological attributes and the pointing of accusing fingers toward the State. Due to the extent of options and level of fragmentation, memory and commemoration discourse are publicly perceived as apolitical and consensual, with no confrontations between members of different memory communities, in the absence of a common monument. Instead, there is a mosaic of memory, a corporation of monuments. As mentioned above, while there may be different versions of the past, the semiotic language is relatively uniform, and even when there are differences, they do not lead to crisis because the different semiotic communities are not obligated to stand side by side and on the same stage in national days of remembrance. Hence, fragmentation is what enables remembrance days to proceed without conflicts, because differ-



ent communities create inclusive stages for their unique languages. Had all of these been required to mix together on the same stage or fill the same space, it would have led to a crisis, or, in Bowden's words, would have led to reaching "the limits of containment" (Bowden 1993).

And although the State provides financial support for these communal monuments, it does not attempt to create a common language between them. This condition of the State can be explained by three central reasons. The first is the fact that a national, hegemonic, all-controlling Zionist language had been adopted by everyone from the start, the only competition remaining being who is more committed to it than others. Second, the existence of an allegedly spontaneous advantage for groups who identify with the narrative promoted by State authorities makes it superfluous to create something formal when versions supported by the State spontaneously take the lead. And third, even when narratives of commemoration languages which may be perceived as counter-hegemonic are promoted, the very fact that they have their own separate commemoration space further enables a public sphere that is devoid of clashes and conflicts, resulting in a semblance of quiet solidarity and consensus. Thus, contrary to most areas of public life that the State of Israel has nationalized during its formative years, the area of war memorial monuments has from the outset been perceived as one that should remain within the realm of civil society, operated and initiated by NGOs and voluntary initiatives, thereby preventing memorial disputes or confrontations.

## **2. METHODS AND AIMS**

This paper will examine a unique initiative in Israel: the establishment of an Israeli National War Memorial. This is an interesting initiative, both because it was considered after years in which Israel was devoid of any official national war memorial, and also because it was initiated at a time in which Israeli society began developing post-modern and post-heroic attributes: privatization, individuation,

globalization, fragmentation and even post-nationalism. In terms of the commemoration discourse, it evolved "from domination to competition" (Lebel 2015). The attempt to establish, for the very first time, a "top-down" national memorialization at this time was a significant test of Israel's solidarity and society's ability to uphold an agreed commemoration discourse and narrative. The multitude of tensions, disputes and conflicts raised since the project's initiation illustrate the sociological tensions characteristic of Israel's army-society relationship, tensions which ultimately prevented the implementation of the national memorial initiative. This paper will examine whether this nationalization attempt did in fact lead to a de-politicization and formation of a solidary and consensual memory arena or, alternatively, if it evoked tensions and rifts that reinforce the magnitude of politicization.

The paper will illustrate the various confrontations and disputes raised in the attempts to develop the Mount Eithan initiative as an official national war memorial site by analyzing the Mount Eithan archives (MEA), which include many files, protocols, expert opinions and correspondence that took place during the historical periods in which the initiative was being developed. In addition, we shall offer an analysis of the discourse about Mount Eithan as found in the Knesset archive in Jerusalem, the Ministry of Defense archives and through interviews conducted by the authors with senior officials involved in the project. Using discourse analysis combined with a positivistic analysis, as is acceptable in historic political discourse studies (Wodak 2001), we shall extricate the main barriers to reaching a common agreement for a united, solidary national war memorial and will attempt to reach conclusions regarding the existence of war memorialization in present times as well as Israeli society's collective memory. In doing so, this study implements the accepted tools toward identifying competing narratives in the study of collective memory (Goodson and Choi 2008).

### 3. THE MOUNT EITHAN WAR MEMORIAL INITIATIVE

In 1974, public figures, architects and bereaved families presented the idea of establishing a National War Memorial to Shimon Peres, Israel's Minister of Defense at the time. They protested that the scattered nature of the Israeli commemoration of fallen soldiers was counterproductive to the existence of ceremonies attended by all government ministers, forcing national leaders to attend different monuments and resulting in certain monuments remaining without any government representation on Memorial Day. The establishment of a national monument commemorating all wars and all fallen soldiers would prevent this situation. Peres expressed his support for the idea of a central memorial site that "would express Israeli heroism... and will serve as a central monument for commemorating our sons" (Peres 1974) and its establishment at Mount Eithan.

Mount Eithan is one of the Jerusalem Mountains, reaching a height of 788 meters above sea level. It is a historical spot in which archeological remains have been found of a population that lived there 6,000 years ago. Until Israel's War of Independence, there was a Palestinian village called Hirbat Luz on the mountain, whose inhabitants fled following the war. During the first years of the State the site was used for absorbing new immigrants from Yemen, but the harsh weather conditions eventually led to their resettlement. The idea was that the establishment of the Mount Eithan memorial site would complete the "Israeli memorial triangle," topographically located on the mountains surrounding Jerusalem. Had the project been implemented, it would have been possible to take an aerial photograph of three memorial sites that form the three vertexes of an isosceles triangle on the mountains of Jerusalem and thereby semiotically would have presented a central element of Israeli identity. The triangle was supposed to be marked by the following spots: "Yad Vashem" – the Holocaust memorial center situated on the

Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem; Israel's national cemetery on Mount Herzl, where prime ministers and presidents are buried; and the National War Memorial site, which was planned, as aforesaid, to be established on Mount Eithan, giving the "memorial triangle" its heroic military side. The military identity of the Israeli nation would consequently have been inscribed into its nationhood, as the State of Israel was born out of a sense of "defense." Minister of Defense Peres confirmed that the site would extend over 30,000 square meters and be surrounded by a 4,600 square meter national park.

After Peres approved the initiative in 1974, some initial steps were taken toward the project's initiation, most of which involved the establishment of committees asked to form the project's pedagogical and architectural conceptualization. In 1977 the Likud Party won Israel's general elections and Menachem Begin was elected Prime Minister. Begin, who was informed of the initiative, approved it and decided that it would be established during his office. He transferred the handling of the project to the Ministerial Committee on Symbols and Ceremonies, and on 29 December 1982, the Committee declared "the establishment of Mount Eithan," referring to it as "The National Center for Heroism and Commemoration." According to the Committee's decision, historical documents began to be written to serve as the theoretical foundation for the establishment of the site and to stress its semiotic meaning for the nation, as until that time Israel did not have an official, central memorial site, nor an official military history for that matter, and a conceptual foundation had to be developed to define which events and which military operations would be included in the commemoration destined to take place there.

However, a number of transformational events took place during Menachem Begin's term as Prime Minister, namely the war in Lebanon and the resulting financial crisis, meaning the government was unable to fund the project,

and it was essentially put on hold. Only in 1991 did Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir complete the inclusion of the “Mount Eithan Law” in Israel’s book of laws, alongside the State’s financial commitment to fund the project. The work commenced, but again the government was replaced when, in 1992, the Labor Party leader Yitzhak Rabin was elected Prime Minister. The Rabin administration continued to support the project even after Rabin’s assassination, as when Shimon Peres served as Prime Minister, he continued to fund the host of committees that acted to promote the project, including historians, sociologists, educators, architects and former army officials all working to form the site’s conceptual and esthetic foundation. Even after a further political upheaval resulting in the Likud returning to power with Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister in 1996, support for the initiative continued, and a special Ministerial Committee was appointed for its implementation. On 27 January 1998, the Knesset voted in favor of the government decision: “The Knesset once again adopts the decisions made by the four previous Israeli government administrations, that the Commemoration and resistance center would be established at Mount Eithan, opposite Yad Vashem and Mount Herzl.” In 2001 Mount Eithan’s management presented, for the first time, a proper plan for its establishment, with a proposed budget of US\$ 100 million. The government, then headed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, committed to grant the required funds, and in 2002 the cornerstone for the project was laid by Sharon in a ceremony attended by many officials. It was then decided that the site would be called ‘Mount Eithan Museum: The Israeli National War Memorial.’ At that stage, neither the Prime Minister nor the public were aware of the fact, in addition to the millions of dollars already invested, countless disputes, unsolvable disagreements, and huge tensions surrounding the formation of the initiative, that representatives of the various memory communities, including bereaved

families, academics and representatives of the existing commemoration organizations, had for years been unable to reach agreements as to the concept of the commemoration to take place at the site and, moreover, that behind the scenes, the heads of civil and military commemoration organizations had been asserting their extensive influence to convince senior politicians to stop the planned initiative that was threatening them both financially and conceptually. This multitude of tensions and pressures eventually resulted in the cancellation of the initiative in a way that we believe encompasses the “politics of Israeli memory.”

#### **4. RIGHT VS. LEFT: HISTORICAL-POLITICAL CONFRONTATIONS**

Before the establishment of the State of Israel, during the British Mandate in the region, a number of Jewish underground resistance organizations were operative, the largest being the “Hagana” that operated under the auspices of David Ben Gurion, later the leader of the Labor Party (“Mapai”) and Israel’s first Prime Minister and at the time the head of the representative Zionist organizations. The Hagana attracted mainly youths from Kibbutzim belonging to the “Kibbutz Hameuhad” movement, while its daughter organization – the “Palmach” – mostly attracted youths from Kibbutzim belonging to the “Kibbutz Haarzi” movement and reported to the leadership of the “Mapam” Party. These two underground movements, operating on behalf of the two Jewish socialist parties, were perceived as “legitimate” underground movements, focusing mostly on fighting against the Arabs and not on opposing the British rule. In parallel, on the right side of the political map, underground movements were identified with what is referred to in Zionist-nationalist history as “the revisionist ideology,” later to be followed by the “Herut” Party that formed the opposition to the socialist parties. These revisionist underground movements – the “Etzel” and “Lehi” – were committed to anti-colonialism and therefore acted against the British rule. Members of these under-

ground movements were considered by the Zionist leadership as “dissidents” for not following the authority of the elected institutions (which collaborated with the British) and for acting on behalf of opposing political groups, leading to the perception of their acts as illegitimate.

For many years following the establishment of the State of Israel, the Labor Party headed the country, and in an act intended to use the collective memory to its benefit, its leaders opted not to recognize “Etzel” and “Lehi” soldiers, injured and fallen, while those of the “Hagan” and “Palmach” were very much recognized, and they and their families were thus granted financial and symbolic benefits (Lebel 2013). Israeli legislation led by the Labor Party did not allow funding for the rehabilitation of families of revisionist underground movements and prevented them from being eligible for military tombstones at the cemeteries. The purpose of this exclusion was to ensure that new immigrants and Israeli youths continued to perceive the Israeli political pantheon as being comprised of only socialist parties, holding exclusive legitimacy for governance. Of course, the establishment of commemoration sites for revisionists was not prevented, but these were largely ignored by the State. Only after the political transformation of 1977, when Menachem Begin, a former “Etzel” commander, became Prime Minister, was this situation remedied. Fallen warriors from the revisionist underground movement gained national recognition, military tombstones were placed on their graves, national symbols were added to their memorial monuments (national flag, army emblem), and government officials attended these sites on Memorial Day.

Due to the unique nature of Israeli commemoration, it has never before been examined whether the historical opposition of the political left to recognize the contribution of right-wing movements to the establishment of the State have in fact been abated, mostly because each community tended to focus on its “own” memorial monuments. The

Mount Eithan project was the first opportunity in which the ability to establish a national war memorial commemorating the pre-State era had been put to the test, requiring common agreement by all political movements in Israel.

The most extreme opposition and tension centered around “the Resurrection Pavilion” – a wing within Mount Eithan that was supposed to be dedicated to the pre-State efforts prior to the establishment of the State and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The group of experts appointed to plan the concept of the Pavilion, representatives of the various museums commemorating the underground movements and museums that had operated independently since the establishment of the State, fell almost instantly into past disagreements, as if 50 years had not elapsed since the events in question.

The first confrontation took place over the question of the framing of the revisionist underground movements. “Hagana” and “Palmach” veterans in the group viewed themselves as “gatekeepers” whose role was to prevent the distortion of what they perceived as “historical fact,” demanding that the Mount Eithan guide books refer to members of the revisionist underground movements as “dissidents” and that it should be clearly stated that “These people refused to accept national order and did the unthinkable: established their own militias, and in fact acted as theorists, undermining the national efforts” (Resurrection Pavilion 1). Conversely, the veterans of the revisionist movements demanded that the museum present their fallen warriors alongside those of the “Hagana,” claiming that the question should not be political and should be devoid of any subjective-retroactive judgment: who contributed to the resurrection of the State? Who fought? Who sacrificed?

As expressed by one of their members: “We discussed the resurrection pavilion. By all means, the resurrection pavilion should teach that we all contributed to the resurrection of the State. Were we loyal to the authority of the official Zionist leadership? Does it matter? The main



thing is the contribution to resurrection” (Resurrection Pavilion 13).

### **5. THE BEGIN ERA: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REHABILITATION**

A further disagreement concerned the commencement of commemoration, defining the historical period covered by the Resurrection Pavilion. This question is deeply rooted in the history of the State of Israel. Since the establishment of the State, the socialist establishment has preached that 29 November 1947 should be the official date on which the War of Independence began, the reason being that, prior to this date, the revisionist underground movements fought against the British rule, a confrontation which the socialist establishment wished to exclude from the history books and from the Israeli consciousness. Here, too, the “Hagana” representatives demanded that the Pavilion cover the War of Independence commencing on 29 November 1947 since, to their understanding, all events that occurred before that not only were not a part of the war effort but were even detrimental to its success. Conversely, “Etzel” veterans claimed that “Etzel’s struggle against the British was a war of liberation against a foreign rule, and not, as has been written... terrorism against the British” (Avinoam 1994). Their socialist counterparts responded to this letter as follows: “Their offenses against the British are a stain on the Zionist movement, and there was no reason to commemorate them or include them in Israel’s story of resurrection. At the most it could be mentioned as part of Jewish acts of fascism that went on at the time” (Resurrection Pavilion, Authors’ Interview 2016).

But disagreements were not limited to defining the period of commemoration. Questions were also raised regarding the scope of the contribution of each underground movement, with veterans of the “Hagana,” the largest of the pre-State underground movements, emphasizing the balance of power between the organizations, while “Etzel” and “Lehi” veterans opposed the idea of presenting the size of the forces, alleging that it is quality

and not quantity that determines the true contribution of their acts (Frank 1994).

Due to the parties’ inability to settle their differences on this matter, there was never a single document expressing the full agreement of all members of the Resurrection Pavilion committee, and many of them wrote to the Minister of Defense or to the Prime Minister declaring their wish to withdraw their participation in the committee due to unbridgeable disagreements.

### **6. CONSERVATISM VS. POST-MODERNISM**

In 1992, when Yitzhak Rabin went into office as Prime Minister, Israel suddenly had a leftist government that signed the Oslo Accords (1993) and aspired to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Contrary to previous governments, this administration included extensive representation of parties having neo-liberal, dovish, cosmopolitical and even post-nationalist positions. For instance, the Ministers of Education in that government were Shulamit Aloni and, later, Yossi Sarid from the leftist “Meretz” Party, who believed in human rights, social activism and an anti-militaristic critical pedagogy. This government, upon entering office, appointed new members to the Mount Eithan work teams, i.e. people identified with its general worldview on peace, neo-liberalism and secularism. This, of course, led to further unsolvable disagreements.

#### **6.1. NATIONALISM: ESSENTIALIST TRUTH OR SOCIAL CONSTRUCT?**

To illustrate the extent of the commitment of the Mount Eithan initiative to the nationalist idea as perceived in conservative Zionist thought, it is worthwhile to note that since the establishment of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century, its founders have perceived it as a continuation of biblical Jewish history. Zionist ideologists viewed the terms “people” and “nation” as objective and essential concepts which need to be empowered and disseminated through Zionist work. The new government established in 1992 included, as aforesaid, members that held critical views toward the nation-

alist idea in its republican form. This was expressed, for instance, in Shimon Peres' book *The New Middle East*, published during that period. In his book, Peres illustrates his vision of Israel as a nation that would be above nationalism, with a place for "all citizens of the world" (Peres 1994: 171). Many of those appointed by the government that Peres was a part of expressed their rage and clear opposition to the idea that Mount Eithan would serve as a nation-building instrument, as had been the general direction of the committees since their formation in 1982.

Back in 1982, when the then right-wing government drafted the goals of the Mount Eithan initiative, it was stated that: "The period to be covered by the national center will include the people of Israel's wars in the land of Israel since the time of Yehoshua Bin-Nun [biblical leader of the Israelites after Moses] to the beginning of the resurrection in present times" by creating "a historical continuum from biblical times and the heroism of the Maccabees" (Ideological Committee 1982). Prof. Mordechai Gichon, one of the founders of military intelligence in the IDF and among Israel's senior researchers of military history and archeology, was appointed head of the team responsible for carrying out these goals. Gichon requested that Mount Eithan be called the 'National Center for Israel's Wars' and that a special pavilion illustrate the continuum of military history from biblical times to present times. To this end, he planned a number of wings, covering the wars of Israel in ancient times, in the times of the second temple, etc., marking 27 military wars since the occupation of Jericho through to the beginning of the modern period, all to be illustrated and commemorated at Mount Eithan. Furthermore, it was decided that the biblical story would be mentioned in a number of points on Mount Eithan, emphasizing the message that "[t]he land of Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people, and the Jewish people have remained faithful to their land" (Ibid.). The team also selected a number of events

from the biblical period of judges and kings, the Hasmonean period and the Bar Kokhba revolt, all examples of nationalist wars, chosen for their "historical importance and heroic message," the purpose of which would be to illustrate the connection between "the warriors of our times and past stories" and to frame "the consciousness journey of the Jewish warrior" (Museum Conceptualization 1994).

Naturally, committee members appointed by the Rabin-Peres administration could not accept this type of conceptualization, perceived by them to be a nationalistic indoctrination. For instance, Prof. Irad Malkin, a historian who was asked to join the committee, wrote that Prof. Gichon's propositions were a part of a "political manifest that consists of an outdated rhetoric and historical lie" and that "there is no historical presence and no historical continuity of combat from biblical times to present day" (Ibid.). A similar position was expressed by Asa Kasher, a professor of philosophy, who during the Peres administration was asked to author the Israel Defense Forces' Code of Ethics, a code that ignited substantial anger from traditionalists for being a universalist-cosmopolitical code that defined Israel as a democratic and not a Jewish State, and did not include the value of "the love of Zion." Moreover, Kasher had previously been one of the ideologists of a movement that supported the selective refusal of military service in Lebanon and was identified with Israel's extreme left (Hauser 1997). He too was invited to join the Mount Eithan committee, where he stated that "[t]he relationship between the Jewish people and the land of Israel cannot be an underlying principle of the museum" (Meeting of the Academic Consulting Committee, 17 August 1994, Mount Eithan File). Kasher was joined in his position by writer Amos Oz, one of the leaders of the peace movement and among the first opponents of war since 1982, who stated that "under no circumstances should a war be presented as if motivated by the memory of the Bible or the Holocaust" (Oz 1994).



## 6.2. WAR OR PEACE?

A further disagreement between the representatives of “the Oslo government” and those of the previous administration regarded the basic goals of Mount Eithan. The new members of the “site’s treasures” team demanded that it be committed to a new purpose: “Presenting peace as a central goal of the Israeli people and the IDF, and demonstrating the hope that each war will be the last” (Publicity Leaflet 1994). Contrary to the original idea that the site would only demonstrate the values of combat and the memory of wars, they wished to teach that the ultimate purpose of sacrifice and fighting is peace. In line with this belief, the museum team decided that one of the wings to be built would be called “the Peace Gallery,” presenting the various peace accords and armistice agreements signed by Israel and its neighbors, as well as historical quotes and sayings by Israel’s political and military leaders in favor of peace. Semiotics researcher Dalia Gavrieli-Nuri referred to the peace discourse in Israeli society as an “oppressive discourse” (Gavrieli-Nuri 2010). It is identified with the Israeli left, and in the relevant era even parts of the Zionist left tended to avoid it (as a discourse, not a political aspiration). During this period, many on Israel’s left began to perceive the Oslo peace accords signed between Israel and the PLO as having had no likelihood to lead to actual peace due to the PLO’s steadfast commitment to terrorism. In the context of Mount Eithan, many on the Israeli left attempted to diminish the “achievement” of the peace accords, while the political right demanded that victims of the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians be recognized as “Oslo casualties,” thereby not only refusing to acknowledge the accords as a peace agreement but also presenting Israel’s leadership that signed them as victimizers responsible for the death of thousands. There were, of course, many representatives of the left who continued to perceive the Oslo Accords as peace agreements and who insisted that “The Peace Gallery” should be established as

originally planned – both for the sake of historical precision as well as for the purpose of promoting the discourse of peace in which they strongly believed. Supporters of this idea wished to “[c]onvince critics that to justify the development of a strong IDF and the various military operations since the establishment of the State, we need to achieve peace and security. The soldiers did not fight for the sake of fighting ... the main goal and aspiration is peace” (The Peace Gallery 2012).

The representatives of the new administration believed that the establishment of Mount Eithan as a war museum was in contrast to the spirit of the Oslo Accords as it preserved militaristic values instead of replacing them with values of peace. They believed that this would lead to a situation in which instead of educating the young generation about peace, visiting the site would educate them to love war and refuse to perceive it as a problem, thereby thwarting future peace accords. They demanded that at the end of the tour, in each pavilion dedicated to one of Israel’s wars, a way would be found to “[e]xpress the hope that this would be the last war,” emphasizing the “[h]eavy price of war and our continuous strive for peace, despite its price” (Ibid.). Right-wing members of the museum team as well as from the political arena argued in opposition to what they viewed as

[a] distortion of the entire Israeli military history ... we have never fought for peace, we fought for our existence. We have never sent soldiers to battle and risked their lives for peace ... it is a manipulation to present peace as a national aspiration worth dying for, and this actually happened during that period, when Palestinian terrorists murdered Jewish soldiers and civilians. We could not have agreed to this level of distortion. (The Peace Gallery 2012)

## 6.3. WAR: AN EPOS OF HEROISM OR VICTIMHOOD?

A related issue involved the focus of the site on heroism and presenting fighting as the foundation of Israeli heroization. Some of the new members of the

various committees were not pleased with the connection between heroism and militarism and raised a number of proposals intended to “illustrate a different face of the war experience, one that does not require heroization” (Museum Concept, April 1994). Thus, for instance, these members demanded that the site also present the war experience while explaining “the misgivings and fears of a soldier in battle” (Ibid.) or the psychological effects of fighting – clear post-heroic representations. In this context, it is interesting to note that letters were received from bereaved parents whose sons did not fall in battle or military operations (hence, there is no heroic story behind their death), who are the majority of fallen soldiers (Lebel 2014). These parents not only requested that the site should not focus on heroism but that it refrain from mentioning the circumstances of soldiers’ deaths. They asked that the site establish a policy of “equality among the fallen,” as “the very mention of their sons would provide support to the bereaved families” (Bereaved Parents, Correspondences, March 1994).

Representatives of anti-militaristic political groups expressed their clear opposition to the site’s focus on values of heroism and sacrifice. At the beginning of the 1980s, Israel began to be exposed to a culture of globalization, post-modernism and post-nationalism. This was expressed during the first Lebanon war (1982) when a number of new concepts were introduced into Israeli society: groups of bereaved parents protesting against continued war, soldiers and officers establishing military refusal movements, and most of all, the individual – whether a parent to a soldier, a bereaved parent or himself a soldier or fallen soldier – became the center of public discourse.

This trend, consisting of the victimization of army-society relationships, is part of a political culture in which the soldier began to be perceived as a child whose parents must protect him from the army that may send him to his death, leading to the establishment of social move-

ments of parents to soldiers and mostly bereaved parents who now defined the death of soldiers as a social problem and cause for moral panic (Lebel and Rochlin 2009). This, in turn, led to a growing tendency for the army to adopt post-heroic doctrines characterized by “casualty sensitivity.” It is a “discourse of trauma” that is centered on the victimization not of the collective, but the individual; not of the hero, but the victim.

As stated above, Mount Eithan was intended to serve as Israel’s ultimate heroic site. Opposite Mount Herzl, where the nation’s civil leaders are buried, and Yad Vashem, representing the period of the Jewish people’s victimization, its ideologists wished to establish Mount Eithan as a place of collective heroism in its republican sense. A place where the commemoration of soldiers would have a collective rather than a personal nature while praising the heroism of their ultimate sacrifice. The semiotics of the place would thereby create a sense of community, a sense representing the Israeli nationhood. These two ideological attributes were criticized and opposed, leading to harsh confrontations involving perceptions of critical pedagogy intending to civilize society and opposing the militarization of culture. Referring to such positions, Knesset member and army general (reserves) Ori Orr said:

For the Jewish people in the State of Israel it is much easier to commemorate the Jew as victim. We have yet to find the way to commemorate the warrior Jew fighting for the resurrection of his land ... we need to delve into the depth of the idea of the Jew that has fought and is still fighting for resurrection, and I fear... that still our conscience, after two thousand years of exile, has not given us the ability to stand and truly want to commemorate resurrection as it deserves to be commemorated ... it cannot be that there is a “Yad Vasahem” museum to commemorate the Jew as victim but there is no museum or site to commemorate our resurrection since the onset of the Zionist movement until today. (Orr 1998)

He also opposed the connection between focusing on the ethos of heroism and accusing the initiative of excess mil-

itarism: "We are not militaristic. Does the Jew hate war? ... the Jew... recites a prayer for peace every single day ... the consciousness and sacrifice have made victory possible... so that all our ill-wishers shall know that they will not be victorious over us ... the project... will be... a memorial for that heroism" (Ibid.).

#### **6.4. FOCUSING ON THE INDIVIDUAL OR ON SOCIETY?**

A further aspect of the disputes over the concept of Mount Eithan related to the question of whether the site should focus on society or the individual. These disputes were expressed in all discussions regarding the site's goals. Those in favor of focusing on the individual saw it mainly as a soldiers' memorial site, while those who preached for a more social focus did not view personal commemoration as being part of the site's goals and instead opted for a social memorial site that would give national meaning to the wars fought by Israel.

During the Menachem Begin administration, the two primary goals of the initiative were praise for the heroism in Israel's military history and teaching visitors of Israel's various wars and military confrontations. Commemoration of the fallen was relegated to third place and sometimes even lower than that (Ministerial Committee on Symbols and Ceremonies 1982). Since the beginning of the 1990s, official bereavement organizations have been formed (Yad Labanim – representing bereaved parents – and the IDF Widows and Orphans Organization) to ensure that the principal goal of Mount Eithan would be the commemoration of fallen soldiers. And in fact, in 1994, during the Peres administration, the primary goal of the initiative was defined as follows: "To commemorate all the soldiers that have fallen in military operations or during their military or national service" (Goals and Purposes 1994). One of the supporters of dedicating the site to the personal commemoration of the fallen was Prof. Asa Kasher, himself a bereaved father. Loyal to his views of opposing the transformation of the initiative into

a national instrument per se, he stated that the site should be dedicated to the personal commemoration of the fallen soldiers, believing that this was the most effective strategy for "coping with forgetting and the erasure of memory ... emphasizing the individual rather than the general level (Drori and Lebel 2005: 79).

Opposed to this approach were members of the Steering Committee, who reminded everyone that the original purpose of the initiative was not to be a memorial for fallen soldiers that would improve the wellbeing of their families but the formation of a social ethos, involving the development of a discourse on collective issues such as the meaning and discourse of sacrifice. Moshe Netzer, who chaired the Mount Eithan commemoration committee at the time, stated that as a bereaved father, it is enough for him that his son's name is "displayed in other memorial sites" and that he believes that the uniqueness of Mount Eithan requires it to be "an official, national commemoration site that will give a wider, more general meaning to my son's death" (Netzer 1998). Others mentioned that the Mount Eithan initiative was envisioned "because there are so many memorial monuments built by families, which are focused on the fallen, but there is no central, national place that focuses on society" (Bereaved Parents, Correspondences 1998).

Yet it appears that the individual ethos gained momentum among many of the decision-makers of the time. Even Reuven Rivlin, at the time a Knesset member on behalf of the Likud Party, who was among the strongest proponents in the Knesset for funding Mount Eithan, argued that

the collective ceremonies and big words have been replaced by individual acquaintance and intimacy ... young Israelis today are much more interested in the personal story of a pilot whose plane was bombed in the Suez canal, a tank crewman from in the Golan during the Yom Kippur War, a warrior from the Golani brigade who died in the Beaufort during the first war in Lebanon, or a navy commando man who died on the Lebanese shore.... The identification with the fallen, that amorphous concept... is much more difficult for today's youth to grasp. (Rivlin 1998)

For this reason he proposed that the Mount Eithan concept be updated so as "to relate to the Israelis of the mid 1990's ... with the personal stories of the fallen ... this is how the Israelis of the 1990's identify with the big national ethos, with the memory of the fallen.... Commemoration in the 1990's is breaking down the big words into personal details ... and this is the importance of Mount Eithan" (Ibid.).

## 7. HISTORICAL TRUTH OR NATIONAL MYTH?

In Israeli historical-sociological research, the 1990s are considered formative years for "historical revisionism." Schools of thought referred to as "new sociology" or "new history" began studying Israel's military past without hesitating to challenge "sacred cows" while shattering many myths (Shapira 1995). More and more studies published during those years presented theories that contradicted past perceptions regarding the Israeli army, exposing operational failures, corruption, the abuse of prisoners, the expulsion of Palestinians, and more (Morris 1995). This atmosphere permeated the discussions of the Mount Eithan committees, especially in light of the demands made by military commemoration and heritage organizations, fearing 'new' versions of history that would undermine their own.

Dr. Elad Peled, a Major General in the IDF reserves and a member of the team discussing the historical approaches of the Mount Eithan initiative, expressed his opinion that "[t]hings should not be whitewashed, even if they are difficult ... a few generations from now the truth will be exposed and if it would become apparent that this type of museum has whitewashed history, they would not believe even the truthful things. We need to present the entire range of opinions, and the public will be the judge" (Peled 1994). Writer Amos Oz joined this position by saying that we must not lend a hand to "transforming the museum into an instrument of propaganda" (Oz 1994). Even the agreement of many of the team members that the IDF's history division would make the final decision in case of

disagreements and disputes – clearly a conservative approach – did not palliate the old commemoration organizations, if only because until then no "official military history" had been written in Israel, and the army's history division had never exposed its research to the public.

Using a range of strategies including discrete meetings with Prime Ministers, Ministers of Defense and Knesset members, the publication of newspaper articles, and furious appearances in front of the Mount Eithan work teams, leaders of the military commemoration organizations worked to prove that the project was unnecessary. Heading these attempts were the leaders of various military commemoration organizations, including the Yad La-Shiryon memorial site for fallen soldiers from the armored corps, the Ammunition Hill national memorial site, the Paratroopers Heritage Association, the Association of the Intelligence Corps Community, the Airforce Museum, the Givati Brigade Museum, the Artillery Corps Association, the Engineering Corps Association, and the Communication Corps Association. All of these organizations were headed by retired Generals or current or past senior officials in the Ministry of Defense, who not only feared the loss of visitors who would prefer to visit Mount Eithan but also losing the foundation of their own versions of national consciousness and historical truth. Israeli military history is laden with many events, the necessities of which are under continuous dispute between various military corps or divisions. The members of the Mount Eithan Steering Committee decided that it would be "a site of open dialogue that will encourage research on security related topics while presenting a pluralistic variety of opinions and attitudes towards the historical materials" (Presentations 1995). When this goal was revealed to the heads of the commemoration organizations, this only served to accelerate their opposition to the project, as up to that time the controversial archives of battles had not been exposed to the public and



no official institution acted to encourage this type of military research.

### **8. A HIERARCHY OF HEROISM**

A further issue that caused the heads of the commemoration organizations to perceive Mount Eithan as a threat was the influence of its future establishment of the “hierarchy of bereavement” or “hierarchy of Israeli heroism” within the public consciousness. The commemoration organizations represented military corps and divisions that are associated with Israel’s political and financial elites, a fact that had helped them to obtain budgets and gain increased visibility for the commanders and fallen soldiers of the corps commemorated by them. The establishment of Mount Eithan could have disrupted this trend. As explained by Shevach Weiss, the Knesset Chairperson at the time, in a Knesset discussion on the opposition of the commemoration organizations toward the project, “the establishment of equality among the dead and equality among the bereaved families is a central concern ... there are more prestigious corps ... there are centers of commemoration for various groups that may be considered elitist, maybe they also had an easier time raising the money. Here we are concerned maybe with the common people” (Weiss 1997). He was joined by reserve army General Ori Orr who stated in the same discussion that “8000 IDF soldiers who died since the establishment of the State have no memorial site. Why? Because they were not part of the stronger corps like the Air Force, Armored Corps, Paratroopers, and others” (Orr 1998b).

Silvan Shalom, Knesset member and deputy Minister of Defense at the time, told the Knesset members after the project was canceled that its cancellation was not a result of anti-militarist, anti-chauvinist, or anti-nationalist opposition, but rather the opposition of those who were allegedly the ideological partners for cultural militarism in Israel: “The greatest opposition to Mount Eithan did not come from the Ministry of Finance but from all those other commemoration sites scattered across the country ... they acted and sent letters

and did everything to prevent the project from happening” (Shalom 1998).

### **9. ABANDONMENT OF THE MOUNT EITHAN INITIATIVE AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A “NATIONAL MEMORIAL HALL FOR ISRAEL’S FALLEN”**

Initially, the Mount Eithan initiative was presented as a reflection of the national Israeli-Zionist consensus. On one of the occasions in which the Knesset once again voted for a legislative bill to fund the initiative, Ori Orr presented the decision as one that expressed “[t]he national agreement, the consensus on the importance of Mount Eithan.” The approval of the bill was received by a round of applause from the Knesset Plenum balcony (Knesset Meeting 171, January 27, 1998). However, and as illustrated above, even if there had been a national consensus on the importance of Mount Eithan, there was none concerning its conceptualization, a fact that ultimately led to its cancellation.

On 9 September 1997, the government of Israel decided to cancel the Mount Eithan project. Minister of Finance Yaakov Neeman explained that “[a]ll of the basic work done is being kept and will be maintained in a format that would facilitate its use at any time in future” (Neeman 1998). This was the first but not the last time that the government of Israel declared the cancellation of the initiative. In later years, various government administrations attempted to resurrect the project. One of the project’s managers explained why it was canceled:

It’s true that the cancellation of the initiative can be attributed to financial reasons or others, but in practice – it was a ‘political swamp’ – a no-win situation. Any decision by any government would have ignited the fury of parties that no one wants to be perceived as their enemy: bereaved families or decorated warriors, commemoration organizations of army corps or decorated generals. So everyone preferred not to decide, not on the conceptual level and not on the matter of the identity of the commemorated, or any other areas, leading in practice to the cancellation of the project. No one predicted the outrage and struggles that this initiative would lead to. All of a sudden

the entire world of commemoration and memorials became a world of conflict, politics, disputes ... who needs it? Maybe the idea was good, but it caused the exact opposite. (Management 2015)

His words correspond with those of Israeli poet Haim Guri, who had expressed his opinion of the project three years previously. Guri believed that the initiative was a "social and political minefield," explaining that "[r]egarding such concepts as 'the release of Jerusalem,' 'the release of the territories,' 'the occupied territories'... who has the authority to rule what is right and what is wrong? ... how can we prevent the transformation of a place that should represent consent, into a place that is entirely disputed [especially when] everyone is entitled for representation?" (Drori and Lebel 2005: 5).

In April 2012 the government of Israel approved the establishment of a "National Memorial Hall," budgeted at NIS 40 million. This was a return to the Mount Eithan idea, albeit a somewhat more modest one. This time the initiative was supposed to be limited to commemorating all fallen soldiers without dealing with historical contexts, values, or narratives about the past. The Ministry of Defense had already selected the architects to design the project and stated that the works were about to begin. However, immediately following the publication of the press release reporting the project's initiation, families of civilians killed in terror attacks appealed to the Supreme Court, alleging that as the Ministry of Defense was the initiator of the project, clearly those who would be commemorated by it would be soldiers, not civilians murdered by terrorists. In parallel, many social organizations protested that while Israel's welfare policy was crumbling, there was no justification to invest funds in unnecessary military monuments.

The initiative was delayed for an indefinite period of time. Eventually, in 2018, next to Mount Herzl in Jerusalem, as a replacement to the Mount Eithan project, without much prior warning or

planning, the government inaugurated a "National Memorial Hall for Israel's Fallen" – a structure made of thousands of bricks, each engraved with the name of a fallen soldier and their date of death. This "semiotic reduction" (Popova, 2004; Rahman and Mahdi, 2014; Dimitriadis, 2017) of memory consists of avoiding any feature which may create disagreements and lead to disputes. Had the texts also included the name of the battle or war, this would have led to disputes, as each community allocates different names to specific wars and battles. Even including the place of death would have led to a polemic – would it be Judea and Samaria? The Western Bank? The occupied territories? Therefore, in view of all these possible semiotic, rhetoric, and linguistic struggles – which are nothing but a capsule that contained not only the politics of Israeli memory but also the fragmentation of Israeli society –, decision-makers ultimately chose to abandon the Mount Eithan initiative, replacing it with a site that tells no story and therefore cannot serve as a place of memorialization or commemoration for Israeli society, only as a collection of bricks engraved with names and dates. As such, it is desolate and devoid of narrative, rhetoric, and semiotic values for Israel's public space. Although it was intended to "whitewash" memory struggles, in reality it whitewashes memory itself so that it is finally completely concealed.

## 10. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This paper followed an initiative that began in 1974 when the government of Israel launched the Mount Eithan initiative: a plan for the construction of a national-military memorial site, following years in which communities, organizations, towns, and military brigades had engaged in independent spontaneous channels for creating collective memory and commemorating their fallen soldiers. Although these initiatives always maintained a "national language," this was done within exclusive spaces that enabled the creation of semiotic autonomy (Joslyn



1998; Raudsepp and Ventsel 2020) and discursive sovereignty (Scott 1996).

Contrary to bottom-up initiatives by communities, NGOs, towns, or military brigades commemorating their fallen, the proposed site aimed to create a uniform narrative of Israel's military history, complete with cultural content and museums depicting Israel's wars and commemorating its fallen through a representative national center for education purposes, diplomacy, ceremonies, and commemoration. In discourse research, such a challenge entails what Merrel (2014) referred to, following the semiotics of Charles S. Pierce (1994), as "an all-inclusive semiotic sphere." The failure of the initiative and the way in which politicians worked to create an alternative commemoration space can serve to illustrate the semiotics and rhetoric of nationhood in the communal and fragmental era of the State of Israel, and maybe even beyond it.

Hannah Arendt pointed to the etymological link between "author" and "authority" (Arendt 1977: 91-141), and Roland Barthes declared the "death of the author" and the birth of the reader – or a transition of power from the writer of the text to its interpreter (Barthes, 1977). The present study could have pointed to (Israeli) society refusing to accept the authority who would write its national story, but this would not be completely true. The Israeli language of memory does not lack authority and therefore is not devoid of its story. However, both its authority and its story are communal. Community semiotics links individuals with national semiotics. The ultimate failure of the Mount Eithan project lies in the belief that this mediation between the individual and the nation can be discarded. The nation is able – and in fact this ultimately occurred – to create a bureaucratic index of names and dates. Beyond that, it does not have the legitimacy to form a language, narrative, discourse, or memory. This would be done for it, or on its behalf, by the community, by each individual and their own epistemic community (Lebel and Orkibi 2019). In fact, the failure of the Mount

Eithan initiative serves as testimony that the nation state needs national discourse communities in order to maintain and preserve itself through crises and challenges not only on the symbolic but also the political and civil levels.

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