CHAPTER 22

On Sacrifices, Victims, and Perpetrators: Israel’s New Historians, Critical Artists, and Zionist Historiography

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Introduction

Yellow taxis are streaming down what appears to be a major avenue in New York City. The scene switches quickly to the inside of an apartment where a young woman and her bearded and pony-tailed male partner enter. The man hears music and sees candles; he thinks he understands why his partner did not want to go to a party. How wrong he turns out to be! Dafna is in no romantic mood: seated behind the computer where the word yizkor (‘may He remember’, the opening words of the prayer commemorating the dead) is visible on the screen, her face expresses deep sorrow. A Hebrew text then flashes across our screen: ‘They will always remain Israelis. Their partners won’t always understand what that means. Help them return to Israel (הארץ)’ (Klitagov 2011a). This advertisement, sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Immigration and bearing the title Yom Hazikaron, was part of a campaign aimed at Israeli expatriates. It caused such uproar among the Jewish community in the United States that the Israeli government removed it quickly from the web, along with two other equally offensive shorts (Klitagov 2011b, Klitagov 2011c).¹ Yom Hazikaron, instituted in 1963 as Israel’s official Memorial Day, commemorates Israel’s fallen soldiers and victims of terrorism. The ad implies that mourning for the fallen, the victims, those who died for their country is essential to Israeli identity in a way that those who are not Israeli will never comprehend.

Israel is a country whose short history is punctuated by war, and as such, a focus on death and sacrifice should come as no surprise. That death and sacrifice have become central to Israeli ideology, self-understanding, and politics is a claim that has recently been made by a group of Israeli historians denoted as New or Revisionist Historians. These historians, along with several journalists and popular thinkers, have traced and critically analysed the historical

development of this phenomenon and subsequently drawn conclusions about the directions Zionism has taken since the middle of the twentieth century, about the chances for peace in the Middle East, and about the future of the state of Israel. In this article, I will present a selection of these writers whose works have made an impact both within and also—and perhaps especially—outside of Israel. In addition, I will explore how the themes of death and sacrifice have become the focus of the works of four major modern Israeli artists whose politically engaged paintings, photographs, and video films have gained international recognition. Open to multiple interpretations while at the same time extremely confrontational, their art reflects their personal experience, emotions, and criticism of what they too see as the centrality of death and sacrifice in Israeli society and present-day Zionism. Their work has transported the debates on the Middle East conflict to the art scene and broadened its dimensions, reaching a new public that is not necessarily familiar with the academic debates. Like the historians, their works also point to the consequences of the centrality of death and sacrifice for the future of Israeli society, the state, and its ideology. In turn, both the authors and the artists link these themes to questions of power and powerlessness and—therefore almost inevitably—to the contrast between the Diaspora and Israel in their work. Why and how they do this will be explored in what follows.

Zionist Narrative(s)

Normalization is a dominant theme in political Zionist ideology and history writing. Theodore Herzl, prominent among the founders of political Zionism, sought an answer to anti-Semitism—or what had become known in mid-19th century Europe as the Jewish Question—in his book Der Judenstaat (Herzl 1896). The Jewish Question, Herzl explains, is a political rather than a social question. Jews, despite assimilation, feel nowhere at home because they are ‘decried as aliens’ even in countries where they have lived for centuries. Their fate is determined by the majority populations of those countries in which they dwell, and this is a matter of power (Herzl 1970, 33–34). ‘The remote cause of anti-Semitism is the loss of assimilability in the Middle Ages; the immediate cause is that (. . .) on the lower levels Jews have become revolutionaries and on the upper level their terrifying financial power grows’ (Herzl 1970, 48). Jewish life in the Diaspora was abnormal. The Jews could, however, return to normality by forging their own state, thereby once more becoming a nation like all other nations. Accordingly, for Herzl it was neither a religious idea (as the practitioners of the Wissenschaft des Judentums and especially the religious