With God’s Help

To Professor Michael Segal, Dean of the Humanities

The study of memory constitutes a central academic and personal interest of mine. How do memories of the past shape the present? Alternatively, how do the complex circumstances of the present shape the way that we remember the past? Yet, while most memory researchers deal with the modern period, I research ancient Jewish history using memory studies’ various methodologies—something that has rarely been done before. My master’s thesis and my doctoral dissertation, my first scholarly forays into memory studies, deal with the ways that rabbinic literature remembers Second Temple period events. My doctoral dissertation, written under Isaiah Gafni’s direction, compares the ways that the First and Second Temple periods were remembered in rabbinic literature.

Just before receiving my doctorate, I started a yearlong postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard University, where I researched the characteristics of “the historical story” in the Babylonian Talmud [numbers 26,30]. At the end of this fellowship year, I began research on a project entitled “Between Josephus and the Rabbis,” conducted under the direction of Professors Tal Ilan and Vered Noam. It looked to identify and carefully analyze the corpus of Second Temple period stories found both in rabbinic literature and Josephus’s works. Over the course of the next four years, I worked intensively on this project; after this corpus was identified, I analyzed a substantial portion of it. Subsequently, I incorporated the 250 pages that I wrote on the theme of the project into a book on Second Temple period stories that I published with Ben-Zvi Press two years ago. Since publication of that book, I have expanded my research in three new directions.

1. I submitted a manuscript entitled *Sekher shikhehah: zikhronot ha-bayit ha-sheni be-shilhe ha-‘et ha-‘atikah* (A Dam of Forgetting: Second Temple Memories at the End of the Ancient Period) to a press that subsequently sent it out for external review. This manuscript is based on my doctoral dissertation, but it has been significantly reworked through incorporation of new insights gleaned through work on a variety of related projects over the course of the last seven years. The generous assistance of Ben-Zvi Press, which granted me a post-doctoral scholarship, enabled me to undertake these revisions. Additionally, I accepted an invitation from Oxford University Press to write a book surveying the Land of Israel and its Jewish population under Roman rule from the Great Revolt until the period of Judah the Prince. During the last few decades, archeologists have revealed new sources for historians to draw on and new methodologies for the treatment of history have been developed; my book will ground itself in both of these.
2. Vered Noam, Tal Ilan, and I have begun work on a comprehensive research project whose objective is to locate the numerous fragments of Second Temple literature and references to Second Temple literature found in rabbinic literature. An initial article that we have coauthored will soon appear in the series *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (CRINT). We are currently writing grants to financially support further work on this project.
3. Professor Michael Avioz of Bar Ilan University and I organized an international conference entitled “Josephus: Between the Bible and the Mishnah” that took place in March 2019 thanks to the generous support of the Israel Science Foundation. A portion of the papers delivered at the conference are currently being reworked and expanded for publication as articles in the peer-reviewed journal *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal*.

In the future, I am interested in expanding the scope of my research on memory and historical consciousness in ancient Jewish history in three ways: 1)Identifying memories and historical consciousness possessed by Jewish social groups in the Land of Israel and Babylonia besides the rabbis. I will undertake to do this through creation of a detailed catalog of how historical consciousness is expressed in liturgical and artistic sources. 2) Drawing on the detailed catalog that I will produce to conduct comparative research on perceptions of the past and historical consciousness in Jewish, Christian, and pagan cultures at the end of the ancient period. 3) Reexamining the methodological approaches and theoretical questions tied to the study of memory in the social sciences, neuroscience, and history to more effectively approach ancient texts and understand how they might respond to trauma and the memory of trauma and cope with them. In one way or another, I have touched upon most of these approaches during my earlier research, as the attached letter describing my research plan details.

**History and Memory Today: Teaching and Public Engagement**

As my introductory statement hinted, I view questions of memory and historical consciousness as more than just subjects of esoteric academic research. I believe that they have a meaningful and direct impact on contemporary life. Consequently, I have become actively involved in changing how the Israel educational system teaches history. Since 2013, I have taught education classes at Sha'anan College dedicated to the teaching of history. I stress the importance of historical literacy and acquisition of the skills necessary for it; I work to sharpen my student’s understanding of how contemporary forces affect and transform historical memory. In addition, I teach at the Open University, where I participated in the reworking of the course "Yerushalayim le-doroteha” (Jerusalem Throughout the Ages). I have also advised students writing their master's theses on the Second Temple period, the Mishnah, and the Talmud at the Open University.

In addition to these teaching activities, I strive to impact other areas of the educational system by sharing the ideas behind my research and conveying my professional values to others. Thus, I joined the committee charged with overseeing history instruction within the National Religious educational stream six years ago. This led to my development of a new middle school curriculum for this stream; I also reviewed and approved additional curricula for it. The new curriculum I developed emphasizes interdisciplinary learning and honest efforts to understand the past while remaining conscious to how ideology and culture can distort one’s understanding of it. I hope and believe that recognition of the past together with a critical view of memory and the public image of the past will help nurture citizens conscious and aware of their past and the way that it shapes their present. Moreover, I try to set aside time for educational activities and instruction intended to edify the general public. In the last few years, I have lectured on a variety of topics related to my research at Yad Ben Zvi and in other educational fora. Recently, I served as an adviser to the Zalman Shazar Center and the Ministry of Heritage, and I helped them organize a seminar on Josephus and Yodfat. I am currently working with these bodies to develop a series of seminars, tours and workshops intended to make historical research and insights about the past accessible to university and pre-military preparatory school students and the general public.

As I previously noted, it is clear to me that our memories and the memory culture of society are not just windows to the past but also highly meaningful factors in the shaping of the present. Within academic frameworks, I try my best to understand how Jews at the end of the ancient period remembered their past, how their memories influenced their present, and how these memories were influenced by their present. Simultaneously, I hope that the insights that I glean researching these questions will aid us in remembering the past in a such a way that we will be able to create a better future.

**Research Plan**

Memory lies at the heart of my research; I endeavor to respond to questions like how Jews remembered the past, how memory shapes the consciousness and culture of contemporary people, and how concrete historical circumstances influence the way that the past is remembered and forgotten. When I started researching the subject of memory, the widespread view was that the rabbis were not interested in history; for this reason, their words could not serve as historical sources for events they discussed. Over the course of years, I developed a theoretical and methodological approach that I believe enables one to describe the historical consciousness of Jewish groups at the end of the ancient period, to characterize a portion of rabbinic stories as stories possessing an historiographical character and to judge their character and to concisely communicate “the history of memory.”

In my doctoral dissertation [number 1], I offered a model for description of historical consciousness according to four criteria: 1) awareness of the gist of what happened; 2) awareness of a specific event’s uniqueness; 3) provision of an explanation for the event and this explanation’s character; 4) the weaving together of the details into a coherent narrative. Examination of the memory of the destruction of the Second Temple in rabbinic literature through use of this model exposes substantial differences between various works. For example, while there is an almost complete absence of historical consciousness in the Mishnah, the Babylonian Talmud displays a highly coherent historical consciousness. During my postdoctoral studies, I delved into the perception of memory in the Babylonian Talmud [numbers 26, 30]. I published my findings about the relationship between historical consciousness in the Mishnah and historical consciousness in other Tannaitic texts in a separate article [number 27]. Subsequently, I compared the Mishnah’s perception of the dating of the Second Temple’s destruction to that of Josephus [number 29].

Scholars studying the rabbis’ awareness of the past need to reexamine rabbinic sources. Thus, I chose to join a research team examining parallels between rabbinic works and the works of Josephus being conducted by professors Tal Ilan and Vered Noam and their research assistants Ms. Daphne Baratz and Yael Fisch. This project demanded that I compare rabbinic sources with literary sources in Latin, Greek, and Syriac. This comparative analysis improved my philological skills and enabled me to better comprehend the sources. My insights can be noted in the research team’s publications. I composed most of the chapters dealing with materials related to the destruction of the Second Temple [numbers 12-16], and Alexander the Great’s meeting with the high priest [number 11].

The historical and philological findings that I made as part of this project underlie my book’s reexamination of a variety of textual sources where the Second Temple’s destruction is either referred to or goes unmentioned [number 2]. I drew on Jan Assmann’s coinage “cultural memory” to effectively convey the character of stories, ceremonies, and a variety of references to the Second Temple’s destruction. This term assigns great weight to the way in which the present structures the image of past in service of its needs up to the point where one can speak of an imagined past. The ideas behind this term integrate well with the widespread belief that rabbinic literature constitutes a form of belles lettres whose authors made no effort to remember the past. However, Amos Funkenstein and Barry Schwartz have critiqued this approach that views cultural memory as making no attempt to remember the past; they have asserted that an event from the past serves as the basis for memory and contemporary society is interested in both remembering it and assigning meaning to it. The historian of memory’s objective is to apprehend to what degree interpretive freedom and structuring participate in cultural memory’s construction. Funkenstein and Schwartz’s insights, together with the four dimensions of historical consciousness that I previously described, have enabled me to grasp Jews’ development of cultural memory in the late ancient period. It turns out that interpretation of rabbinic tales, liturgy, and memorial ceremonies in light of these theories enables one to better comprehend Jewish society of the time and its past. On the one hand different approaches to memories of the past expose the conceptual and ideological worlds of different groups (priests, rabbis, the patriarchate, homeowners), while on the other hand one can distill vestiges and echoes of these groups’ past from cultural memory.

In conclusion, I hope that I have established the history of memory as a productive research field for historians of ancient Judaism and that I have offered a productive theoretical framework for historical consciousness’s characterization. These two things serve as the foundation for a number of research directions that I hope to develop in the coming years:

1. **From Memory to History**—Exposure of the sources of cultural memory found in rabbinic literature and Jewish liturgy makes it possible to discern echoes of events and processes from the end of the Second Temple period [See numbers 14, 29], and these echoes can be employed to investigate the existing historical narrative. In light of this fact, I gladly accepted Oxford University Press’s offer to write a monograph on relations between Jews and Romans in the Land of Israel from 6CE to 200 CE that will be grounded in recent research on literary sources and newly unearthed archaeological evidence. I should complete this book manuscript in the next year and a half.
2. **The Jewish Library in the Late Antique Period**—Vered Noam, Tal Ilan, and I are currently preparing a research plan for location and identification of fragments from Second Temple period literature in rabbinic literature. We hope to present the written and unwritten sources that the Jews in the late antique period preserved and that constitute the foundation for their culture of memory. A coauthored article that summarizes our research findings to date and presents our future research plan will be published in an upcoming volume of the series *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (CRINT).
3. **Beyond the Rabbinic World: Cultural Memory in Comparative Perspective**—While rabbinic literature is primarily a window into rabbinic culture, it is more than that. I hope to successfully present overviews of the cultural memory of additional parts of Palestinian Jewish society through thorough in-depth examination of the rich liturgical and artistic evidence created in the Land of Israel during the rabbinic period. First, I intend to create a catalog of all references to past events found in the Jewish liturgy and art of the period and thereby create an anthology of materials pertaining to non-rabbinic Jewish memory. Second, the content of this anthology and the characteristics of its materials will be examined in comparison with the culture of rabbinic memory observable in rabbinic literature and the culture of Christian memory in the late ancient period Roman Empire observable in artistic evidence, the writings of the Church Fathers, and Itineraria literature. My book’s examination of the way Jewish liturgy constructs memory through its comparison with Christian memory of the Second Temple’s destruction and a lecture that I delivered on the Huqoq mosaic [number 33; an article basedon this lecture is currently undergoing peer review] constitute first signs of this project.
4. **Cultural Memory: The Horizon Widens**—It is clear to me that productive scholars of memory and historical consciousness in the ancient world need to engage with historical research on other periods and developments in other disciplines. In my article “Jaddus the High Priest and Alexander the Great – Fact or Fiction? Religion, Politics and Historiography in Late 17th Century England” [number 28], I display such engagement by showing how historiographical questions concerning the degree of reliability of Josephus’s texts and rabbinic literature shaped legal-religious debates during the Glorious Revolution. Similarly, in my article “Books, Commentators and the Democratization of Knowledge in the Geonic Era” [number 23] I treat sociological issues related to the transition from an oral culture to a written culture in the late Geonic period. Simultaneously, I have developed ties with researchers investigating Holocaust memory and neuroscientists studying cultural memory. I hope these are the first harbingers of fruitful collaboration with scholars researching different historical periods and working in different disciplines.

In my teaching, I look to teach my students the basic methods necessary for successful research. Hence, I train them to conduct thorough philological study of different types of ancient materials, including Jewish sources, non-Jewish sources, literary sources, and archeological sources. Following such study, one can advance to presentation of the “big picture” in both senses of the term. First, presentation of a picture of the past of the period being studied; second, examination of the methodology and the conclusions in relationship to the theoretical and practical aspects of developments in historiographical research.

In conclusion, the various research activities that I have been involved with up until now have convinced me that there are numerous reasons to examine the memory and historical consciousness of late antique period Jews with the understanding that these Jews were indeed interested in remembering their past. From here on out, I am interested in conducting additional research that will assist us in better understanding awareness of the past in the last antique period and that might also proffer us insights about our own memory.