Professor Michael Segal

Dean of the Humanities

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Dear Dean Segal,

The study of memory constitutes of my central academic and personal interests. How do memories of the past shape the present, and how do the complex circumstances of the present shape the way that we remember the past? While most memory researchers focus on the modern period, I use memory studies’ various methodologies to research ancient Jewish history —which 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 how 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 studied 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. This project aimed to identify and carefully analyze the corpus of Second Temple period stories found in both rabbinic literature and Josephus’s works. Over the course of the next four years, I worked intensively on this project; having identified the textual corpus, I analyzed a substantial portion of it. Subsequently, I incorporated the 250 pages that I had written 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 in Late Antiquity) to a press; the manuscript has been submitted for external review. This manuscript is based on my doctoral dissertation, but it has been significantly reworked through incorporation of new insights gleaned through my 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 ha-Nasi. My book benefits from and draws on the new sources revealed by archaeologists and new methodologies for the treatment of history that have been developed over the past few decades.
2. Vered Noam, Tal Ilan, and I have begun working on a comprehensive research project whose objective is to locate the numerous fragments of Second Temple literature and references to it 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 applying for funding 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 the memories and historical consciousness of other Jewish social groups in the Land of Israel and Babylonia, apart from the rabbis. I will attempt to do so through the creation of a detailed catalog of the expression of historical consciousness in liturgical and artistic sources. 2) Using that catalog for comparative research on perceptions of the past and historical consciousness in Jewish, Christian, and pagan cultures in late antiquity. 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. I have addressed these aspects in various ways in my earlier research, as detailed in the attached letter describing my research plan.

**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, and I work to sharpen my student’s understanding of how contemporary forces affect and transform historical memory. I also teach at the Open University, where I participated in the reworking of the course "Yerushalayim le-doroteha” (Jerusalem through the ages). I have also advised Open University students writing master's theses on the Second Temple period, the Mishnah, and the Talmud.

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. To this end, 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 that understanding. 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.

Finally, I also devote time to 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 late antique Jews remembered their past, how their memories influenced their present, and how these memories were in turn influenced by their present. At the same time, I hope that the insights that I glean from researching these questions will aid contemporary Israelis 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 about 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 began 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. However, I have developed a theoretical and methodological approach that I believe enables one to describe the historical consciousness of Jewish groups in late antiquity, to identify a portion of rabbinic stories as stories possessing an historiographical character and to determine its quality; in short, to describe “the history of memory.”

In my doctoral dissertation [number 1], I offered a model for describing 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 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].

My historical and philological discoveries in the context of this project underlie my book’s reexamination of a variety of textual sources in which 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 Destruction. This term assigns great weight to the way in which the present structures the image of past in service of its needs, even to the degree that one can speak of an imagined past. This approach dovetails 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, which sees cultural memory as making no attempt to actually 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 the construction of cultural memory. Funkenstein and Schwartz’s insights, together with the four dimensions of historical consciousness that I previously described, have enabled me to grasp the development of Jewish cultural memory in late antiquity. It turns out that interpreting rabbinic tales, liturgy, and memorial ceremonies in light of these theories enables one to better comprehend Jewish society of the time and its perception of the 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 that the history of memory is a productive research field for historians of ancient Judaism and that I have offered a productive theoretical framework for characterizing historical consciousness. These two areas 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 late antiquity 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 onto rabbinic culture, it is also more than that. I hope to successfully present overviews of the cultural memory of other groups in Palestinian Jewish society through an 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, thereby creating an anthology of materials pertaining to non-rabbinic Jewish memory. Second, the content of this anthology and the nature 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 antique Roman Empire, as evidenced in art, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the *itineraria* literature. My book’s examination of the way Jewish liturgy constructs memory though a comparison with Christian memory of the destruction of the Second Temple and a lecture that I delivered on the Huqoq mosaic [number 33; an article basedon this lecture is currently undergoing peer review] are the first fruits 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], exemplifies this engagement by showing how historiographical questions concerning the 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 instruct my students on the basic methods necessary for successful research. Hence, I train them to conduct thorough philological studies 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 two senses: first, presenting a picture of the past of the period being studied, and second, examining both the methodology and the conclusions in light of theoretical and practical developments in historiographical research.

In conclusion, my various research activities have convinced me that there are numerous reasons to examine the memory and historical consciousness of late antique Jews, with the understanding that these Jews were indeed interested in remembering their past. Moving forwad, I am interested in conducting additional research that will assist us in better understanding the awareness of the past in last antiquity that might also proffer us insights about our own memory.