**Nation Building through Memory Destruction**

**Building the Modern Jewish Nation on the Ruins of the Memory of the Jews from Arab Countries**

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**Hani Zubida[[1]](#footnote-1)**

*“It seems, based on reading the literature and poetry of the younger generation of emigres from the Arab countries and its dissemination, that in recent years the taboo against the discourse of erasure has been broken. Isn’t that so?”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

This article deals with the erasure of the memory/culture/history/presence of emigres from Arab countries from the collective memory of the State of Israel. The core of the article will examine the violent process of erasing the memory of the emigres from Arab countries from national sites of memory (*lieux de memoire*), the opposition to that process from environments of memory (*milieux de me'moire*), and the reaction that ensued in response to that opposition.[[3]](#footnote-3) That examination will take place on two levels: the theoretical alongside the practical, through several processes of erasure in the conversion of the memory of Jewish emigres from Arab countries into a folkloristic theme in Israeli collective memory on one hand, and, on the other, its conversion into the most significant obstacle preventing the establishment of the new identity of “Israeliness”; to many, this identity finds expression in the figure of the sabra. However, for many others, the socially constructed image of the sabra does not include or represent the Jews of Arab countries across the generations.

In the State of Israel, the male Jewish Zionist elite[[4]](#footnote-4) had a practice, whether formal or not, of making the memory of the emigres from Arab countries disappear, building a “national” memory that excises it from the collective memory. Hannah Arendt provided a fine description of such actions, paraphrased of course, as “the banality of evil”[[5]](#footnote-5)—a string of small actions by petty officials, politicians, and technocrats that in the end produced a “perfect” erasure machine. This complex activity was constructed from small and apparently minor action by many collaborators and a docile and submissive academic and political establishment, from the time when the state was a young nation until today. These small actions became establishments full of such wo/men, common here even now, whether *goal-suffused* academics, writers, educators, artists, and technocrats who felt, and still feel, a sense of higher mission and assurance that they are serving the national ideology. This ideology was Ashkenazi and Zionist in its inception, and their actions ossified and deepened the erasure of the part played by emigres from Arab countries from the Israeli collective memory.

Scholars who explore collective memory see it as a type of social knowledge that plays a significant role in people’s consciousness.[[6]](#footnote-6) History is the past to which there is no connection, while collective memory is the active past that constructs our identities in the present. Collective memory is a reconstruction of the past in light of present conceptions.[[7]](#footnote-7) Barry Schwartz argues that a society recalls the events of the past in accordance with its dominant values in the present.[[8]](#footnote-8) Memory as a social act is influenced by various forms and structures of power that precipitate a change in memories of the past in order to justify themselves in the present.[[9]](#footnote-9) Underlying the discussion in this paper are the definitions established by Pierre Nora, a French Jewish philosopher and historian whose writings on memory constitute a cornerstone in the study of memory and the creation of national collective memory. Memory, says Nora, is not history! History is a fluid concept that encompasses various deliberations and constructions; national memory, in contrast, is one of the foundations for the construction of the nation and the shaping of a people’s attitude toward its national past. Nora argued that there are two memory structures: **sites of memory** and **environments of memory.** Sites of memory are the established memory disseminated in a systematic, ordered fashion to the citizenry of a country or society by various governing institutions, among which Nora counts memorial days, museums, schools, textbooks, monuments, rituals, and more. **Sites of memory** are the dominant form of memory construction in Israel, based mostly on Ashkenazi Zionist Jewish memory, which is also mostly, but not exclusively, male. By contrast, at the level of structure and memory, the role of Jews from Arab countries is largely in **environments of memory**—which, according to Nora, are structures that challenge establishment memory and try to constitute a radical alternative that draws other, more expansive limits to memory—primarily as a counterweight to that hegemony that established realms of memory in its own image and used them to erase additional memories and force them out of the realms of memory. The use of these concepts, based on Nora’s thinking, does not commit one to accept his entire conceptual range or terminology. This paper variously adapts these concepts to a different place and time, sometimes without attribution to Nora’s own starting point.

According to Nora, the transition to constructed memory or sites of memory stems from a change in people’s collective status. The example Nora uses to flesh this out is that of Jews in Europe, whom he describes as follows: “We can think, for an example, of the Jews of the diaspora, bound in daily devotion to the rituals of tradition, who as ‘peoples of memory’ found little use for historians until their forced exposure to the modern world.”[[10]](#footnote-10) According to Nora, that process occurred mainly in the European Jewish communities as a result of European emancipation and Enlightenment; in turn, sites of memory were produced for “the Jewish people,” or, more precisely, for the Central European part of the Jewish people. That practice, I wish to argue, was “imported” directly into Palestine and later the State of Israel in order to establish here the Zionist sites of memory that are the basis of the male-Jewish-Zionist-Ashkenazi elite’s power. To round out the picture with the element of the radicalism of the environments of memory and their attempt to undermine the hegemonic sites of memory, I would like to add to this discussion Foucault’s conceptualization of “the discourse of war.” In Foucault’s view, a discourse of war exists among societies in which there are essential gaps in the construction of the social reference group. That discourse is, he argues, a discourse of class-based racism and symbolizes “a war between races” who are, in fact, citizens of the same society.[[11]](#footnote-11) A narrative of war between different groups/classes within the same society over the collective sites of memory and the existence of alternative radical environments of memory constitute another interpretation of that conceptualization. In Israel, one can quite easily apply that conceptualization to the ethno-class struggle embodied in the struggle over the national collective memory, from which the Jews of Arab countries are excluded.

Given that, the basic argument of this paper is: **the technique of constructing national sites of memory in Israel is a violent practice of erasing the memory of the Jews of Arab countries, mobilizing exclusionary language to strengthen the interests which have a common, basic goal: the creation of a narrative of memory, sites of memory, that is based on a desire to continue the hegemony of Zionist Ashkenazi Jewish men in the State of Israel (hereinafter, “the hegemony).** It is important to note that that the power of this construction of reality lies only in the violent act of erasing the memories of the “others” in society and cementing the basis of the present site of memory as the only “alternative” to reality—the ultimate force, perhaps, of this construction of reality is in making the hegemonic site of memory into a “**natural reality**”and mobilizing that dominant conceptualization in the interests of the hegemonic group. Thus, any act of protest against it is perceived as opposition to the “natural” order and, as such, illegitimate. Nevertheless, and despite the power of the establishment and its ability to shape generations upon generations of citizens through establishment sites of memory, an opposition movement arose that based itself in various environments of memory that challenged the hegemony. The relationship between sites of memory and environments of memory is **spiral-dialectical**, one that witnesses, time and time again, patterns of erasure and recalling between that hegemony and the suppressed groups—this is an “eternal” process, as is the nature of a spiral process that passes between oppression by the construction of sites of memory that deny the place of certain groups and the fight against that oppression through the agents of the environments of memory. Processes of this type follow two alternative paths. On one hand, the continued existence of this dialectical spiral of oppression, e.g., oppression as cooptation that creates the disappearance of the memory of communities, the erasure of the memory of the Holocaust of North African Jews, and oppression as the folklorization and pathologization of Mizrahi motherhood and the criminalization of the Mizrahi men such as Rabbi Uzi Meshulam and his supporters. On the other hand, the breaking of this pattern of oppression and an essential change in the composition of the elite and a takeover by an alternative elite of the instruments of constructing sites of memory. This is just how Nora portrays the change and the transition from constructed memory or sites of memory: as part of the change in people’s collective status, their conversion from individuals into a unit of memory. The constant fear of a reversal of hegemony over the sites of memory in the State of Israel, and the conversion of some of the environments of memory into an integral part of the sites of memory, makes this spiral process violent and unable to include those dissident environments of memory.

The argument proposed here can be illustrated with a few examples, some visual and others based on an analysis of events and their erasure from history. It can also be illustrated by the construction of environments of memory and the establishment battle, sometimes to the point of complete destruction, encountered occasionally by these environments at the hand of the sites of memory and their institutions.

The examples I will touch upon include:

* The Holocaust of North African Jewry – the violent erasure of the memory of the Jews of Arab lands from curriculum materials in the State of Israel.
* The kidnapping of children from Yemen, the Near East, and the Balkans, and the war by the establishment and its mobilized forces, primarily academics, members of the hegemony, in this environment of memory.
* The seminal work of Ella Shohat, *Forbidden Reminiscence*s, which bore the Hebrew subtitle “TowardMulticultural Thinking,” and the way in which she analyzes both the discourse and the texts that underlay the erasure of the environments of memory of Jews from Arab countries, as well as their removal from the Israeli sites of memory; and the visual work of Meir Gal, “Nine Out of Four Hundred (The West and the Rest),” which describes the erasure of the history of emigres from Arab countries from the school system.

**The Holocaust of Jewish African Jewry**

The sites of memory in Israel have all been framed through a Eurocentric Jewish lens; at its center stand support structures that do not necessarily present an actual portrayal of social reality: 1. Ashkenazi Zionism, which is not identical with the “love of Zion” more commonly found among Jews from Arab countries; 2. The Ashkenazi Jewish male—the sabra, “salt of the earth,”[[12]](#footnote-12) the “Israelis”; 3. the total negation of Arab identity and its framing as inferior. Those sites are given over almost completely to state control, since they represent the guiding light of the Israeli elite.[[13]](#footnote-13) They also set the central tone of Israeli sites of memory—the school system, ceremonies, language, music, and more.

Examples abound. For instance, let us look at some basic terms that do not garner enough attention, constituting as they do one of the most important sites of memory in Israeli society. “*Aliyah!*” What is that shopworn terminology? The modern Zionist ideological value statement that underlies this term is that “a Jew qua Jew has not fulfilled his destiny in the world until he has come to the State of Israel.” That is, arriving in the State of Israel elevates him to the level in which he becomes the complete Jew. That concept has become a tool for controlling memory and a cornerstone for a false and deceptive site of memory. First and foremost, the term is reserved only for immigrants from European countries, Ashkenazim. The term *aliyah* goes into the deep freeze after five waves of immigration and one more of Youth Aliyah; from 1950 on, they are instead “operations.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The concept is thawed out for reuse with the arrival of immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the seventies, and partially re-frozen with the arrival of Ethopian Jews in “Operation Moses” and “Operation Solomon.” The mass immigration of Jews from the FSU in those years does not receive the label “operation.” It is important to note that while *aliyah* is an active step, “operation” is a passive act. If we examine the reality of “active *aliyot*” after the establishment of the state, the most active “*aliyah*,” which took the most effort from the people who participated in it, is that of the Jews of Ethiopia. It, however, has not been preserved as an active event in the sites of memory. To the contrary, the terminology employed referred to the rescue of those immigrants by the Zionist state military establishment, to people who were passively whisked away to civilization. In recent years, with the maturation of the third generation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, that memory has been reformulated through collective environments of memory and the reframing of the story differently than in the sites of collective memory. Still, the widespread perception remains that at issue is an “operation” in which the Ethiopian Jews were passive bit players.[[15]](#footnote-15)

At this stage, let us turn to a discussion of another of the most important values of Israeli society, the Holocaust. Quite paradoxically, the Holocaust has become one of the central pillars of the sites of memory in Israeli society. Why paradoxically? Israel’s Zionist elite regarded Central and Eastern European Jews who did not immigrate to Israel but preferred to remain in Europe, and as a result experienced the Holocaust, as “human ash” or “human dust” and as “sheep led to the slaughter.” At the time of the establishment of the state, the attitude toward the victims and, especially, the survivors was shameful. That memory, though, soon underwent a transformation and became one of the basic values of Israeli society.[[16]](#footnote-16) The construction of that memory entailed a duality: on one hand, the Holocaust was cited as the number one moral justification for the the State of Israel’s existence as the state of the Jewish people; on the other, beyond the moralistic concept, in practice the Holocaust was embedded as a central component of Israeli sites of memory through compensation agreements and reparations from Germany, funds that served the heads of the young state in part for constructing and shaping the power of the dominant group.

On its face, it appears that we are dealing with a site of memory that can serve as a broad basis for the entire population of Jews who experienced the sufferings of the Holocaust, North African as well as European. However, even a cursory look at the practices that have come to surround that memory leaves the observer in a state of shock. At the institutional level, the State of Israel had a direct interest in acknowledging the fact that fascist Germany and Italy also committed atrocities in North Africa. Anyone with a modicum of sense can see that this fact provides a powerful justification for demanding recognition for the existence of the State of Israel as the state of the Jews. However, that is not what transpired. The State of Israel first recognized the Holocaust of North African Jews in 2010! The term “the Holocaust of North African Jewry” is derived from the hegemonic sites of memory and its primary function is not necessarily to describe the history of North African Jewry, but rather another attempt to coopt the memory of North African Jewry and integrate it into the hegemonic bloc. The Jews of North African have a different history, one that does not necessarily exist only in relation to that of the Jews of Europe. There are certainly Jews from North Africa who experienced the Holocaust, who were sent to labor camps and concentration camps, etc., and they are undoubtedly entitled to reparations. However, the attempt to use such terminology to assimilate them into a monolithic block is an oppressive tactic of the hegemony. It does not necessarily indicate recognition of the historical memory of this group and its place in the collective sites of memory. Even this oppressive recognition was achieved only after the community’s legal struggle against the state for its deliberate disregard of that issue. The Yad Vashem museum, whose primary function is to present historical documentation of all facets of the Holocaust, first displayed the work of an artist from the community of emigres from the Arab world, Nava Barazani, in 2016.[[17]](#footnote-17) A book that presents a portrait of **the Jews of North Africa during the Holocaust**, rather than the Holocaust of North African Jews, was published by Yad Vashem under the title *The Jews of North Africa During the Holocaust Period* in 2006, of course with the assistance of the Claims Conference and Mr. and Mrs. Edmond Asseraf and Mr. and Mrs. Emile Azoulay, two North African Jewish couples from France. A close look at the book reveals that nowhere in the entire volume does the phrase “Holocaust of North African Jews” appear even once—again, in 2016—even as the “Holocaust” constitutes one of the central pillars of the Israeli national sites of memory. It is evident that despite the establishment’s official recognition of the Holocaust of North Africa’s Jews, even today the part played by the Jews of North Africa in the Holocaust site of memory is minor and secondary.

Yvonne Koslowsky Golan’s book (in Hebrew), *Forgotten from the Frame: The Absence of the Holocaust Experiences of Mizrahim from the Visual Arts and Media in Israel*, presents shocking data about the establishment’s attitude toward the memory of the Holocaust of North African Jewry. The book reveals that the school system does not address the subject of the Holocaust of North African Jews. Since the establishment of the state, she argues, the Holocaust has been taught as a creation of the stereotypization of the Holocaust as a solely European “product” of suffering.[[18]](#footnote-18) Here we can mention the testimony of author Yossi Sukary, who relates that, as a child, he was called a “liar” by a teacher in front of the entire class when he said that his grandmother was a Holocaust survivor. An investigation reveals that the testimonies of North African survivors were collected by Yad Vashem as far back as 1956, but they were completely hidden until 2005, when a small memorial corner was set up at the museum. That exclusion stemmed from the conception that this is “a place that does not belong to them,” in Kozlowsky Golan’s words.

In response to this deplorable situation and the establishment’s opposition to any attempt to include the Holocaust of North African Jews as part of Israel’s sites of memory, artists, writers, and intellectuals of later generations created their own environments of memory of that event. Kolowsky Golan mentions three artists in her book: Joseph Dadon, Itzik Badash, and Nava Barazani, all of whom addressed the Holocaust of North African Jews, creating an environment of memory. In his books, Yossi Sukary has always related to this issue, whether through examples or in descriptions of his family’s personal tragedy, up until his 2013 book *Benghazi Bergen-Belsen*, which focuses on the Holocaust of Libyan Jews through the prism of his grandmother’s story.[[19]](#footnote-19) The Ben Zvi Institute, which has replaced Yad Vashem as the center for the study and documentation of the Holocaust of North African Jewry, continues with its work. This is despite the fact that it is Yad Vashem’s official task to study and document the Holocaust—it appears that at Yad Vashem they are busy documenting only the Holocaust of European Jewry and not that of North African Jewry.

This example is perhaps even more shocking than those that will be discussed below. After all, at first glance there is no conflict here between the state’s institutions and its central narrative on one side and the memory proposed by North African Jewry on the other. The contrary, in fact, is true: the Holocaust testimonies of North African Jews strengthen the State of Israel’s claim of the necessity of its existence as the state of the Jewish people and assists in the war against Holocaust deniers of all types. It would seem to be a clear and self-evident move to include the Holocaust of North African Jews in Israeli sites of memory. To our surprise and dismay, however, this is not the case. A consideration of this phenomenon leads to the following “split” insight: **either** the State of Israel does not regard the Jews of Arab countries as an integral part of the collective and its sites of memory, so much so that it is prepared to erase the horrors of the Holocaust of North African Jewry by adopting foolish practices, **or** the fear of undermining hegemony in the sites of memory prevents the introduction of the memories of Jews from Arab countries. Such inclusion would be an expression of a discourse of war by the Jews of North Africa against the sites of memory of the immigrants from Europe, the preferred subjects of the hegemony that constructs the national sites of memory. The second insight coincides with this paper’s argument for a “discourse of war.” Erasure is part of that discourse and the hegemony’s concern over the possible loss of control. In any case, this is a fascinating phenomenon: oppression goes hand in hand with attempts to coopt the Jews of Arab lands into establishment institutions. It also leads us to two additional examples that might provide a better explanation the second half of the insight above. The next example does not involve any attempt at cooptation; instead we find an adumbration of oppression as pathologization of women and criminalization of men from the community of emigres from Arab countries—another form of action undertaken by the mechanism of oppression operated by the people of the national sites of memory.

***The Kidnapping of Children from Yemen, the Near East, and the Balkans***

Another example of the powers of the sites of memory and the exclusion of Jews from Arab countries from that memory is the scandal of the kidnapping of children from Yemen, the Near East, and the Balkans.[[20]](#footnote-20) This scandal has plagued the State of Israel for many years. Thousands of the children born to immigrants from Yemen, the Arab countries, and the Balkans were kidnapped. The establishment, over the years, has treated this phenomenon with dismissal, covering up and silencing the discourse, despite mountains of testimony from parents and other family members whose children were taken from them.[[21]](#footnote-21) The involvement of NGOs, such as WIZO and others, has been airbrushed to the point of total erasure. However, history and testimony—the agents of the environments of memory have particular power—about the kidnappings have not disappeared, and appear again and again, to point that they interfere with the “proper,” “self-evident” management of life under Zionist-Ashkenazi hegemony.

The event that announced the breaking of the taboo—even if at an unbearable price to the Meshulam family and the creation of an environment of memory that has grown over the years—was Uzi Meshulam and his followers’ sit-in in his barricaded home in Yehud, demanding that the archives be opened and light be shed on one of the most regrettable affairs in the history of the State of Israel. That request was not accepted, of course, and through police trickery and lies and massive, across-the-board support from the media, Rabbi Uzi Meshulam was denounced as a violent psychopath and was arrested and jailed—and remained under complete supervision until the day he died. That is a classic example of the violent practices employed by agents of the sites of memory, which are a direct product of their fear of having the hegemony overthrown.

The missing children affair did not disappear though, from the agenda of families from Yemen, the Near East, and the Balkans. Over time, as Rabbi Meshulam had argued from the beginning, is became clear that there were instances of kidnapping from families of Iraqi, Bulgarian, and other backgrounds. Rabbi Meshulam’s activism came together, among other things, as a reaction to the establishment’s practice of ignoring appeals by the parents of kidnapped children as far back as the 1950s and 1960s. Because of the establishment’s stonewalling and its unwillingness to accept the demand for an investigation, in 1966 a “Public Committee for the Discovery of the Missing Yemenite Children” was established as a sort of environment of memory so that the children’s disappearance would not disappear. In its wake, a government commission of inquiry was set up in 1967, “The Commission for Discovering the Yemenite Children,” known also as the Bahaloul–Minkowski Commission. That commission’s conclusions were submitted in 1968, and they argued that most of the children had died, dismissing claims of children’s disappearance on “disorder…mass immigration… population migrations….” In the 1980s, as hundred more testimonies about kidnapped children were gathered, the topic returned to the public agenda, and in 1988 a second commission of inquiry was established, known as “The State Commission of Inquiry into the Disappearance of Yemenite Children,” headed by Judge Shalgi. This commission too found, unsurprisingly, that the reasons adduced by the previous commission were still valid and that no information had been found that would “lead to a suspicion of criminal action.”

These commissions of inquiry were not established in order to resolve the issue. Resolving or answering the disappearance of thousands of children was never on the table; instead, these are practices of violent silencing by the hegemony. The commissions of inquiry, which are the bedrock of the sites of memory, on the basis of which the actions, institutions, and symbols of the sites of memory are built and which constitute the data bases for the shaping of collective memory, at the same time also constitute a reaction to the environment of memory that seeks to challenge the hegemonic site of memory. Every time a protest erupts against the erasure of memory, the hegemony unleashes a reactionary response, in the form of new bases for memory and the erasure of the opposition. The latter vary from violent acts to arrests and from the use of police force against a rabbi and his followers to an official commission of inquiry. At the end of the day, the violent practices, both physical and institutional, form the new underpinning for the sites of memory. To this day, the “operation” against Rabbi Uzi Meshulam and his followers is perceived by the public as “the events at Yehud,” and the rabbi and his followers are considered a cult of crazies. As we will see below, additional oppressive practices constructing such foundations for the sites of memory will come to light, underlining the insight that the radical spiral of erasure and suppression of the memory of Jews from Arab countries continues.

The state establishes commissions of inquiry and confirms foregone conclusions, but mothers’ testimonies are not accepted as believable, just like the testimonies of North African Holocaust survivors; this stands in complete contrast to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors from Europe, who were given a place of honor in the State of Israel’s sites of memory. To the shock of many, Israeli government documents that completely contradicted the commissions’ findings—such as draft notices for missing children, voter registration information that arrived in their name, requests for National Insurance Institute payments, and others—brought about no change in the state’s official position. The hegemony’s strength is also rooted in its ability to delegitimize the testimony of those present, directed of course at only part of the testimonies, as described above.

Following the events at Yehud and rising public agitation, the State of Israel decided to establish a third commission of inquiry, the “State Commission of Inquiry into the Disappearance of Children of New Immigrants from Yemen Between 1948 and 1954.” At the head of the commission sat Yehuda Cohen, who was later replace by Judge Yaakov Kedmi. That commission, just like its predecessors, did whatever it could to whitewash the affair, to delay, and of course to deny any establishment involvement in the kidnappings. However, unlike the commissions that preceded it, which conducted their business behind closed doors, these proceedings were open and public.[[22]](#footnote-22) As Natan Shifris writes in his book *Where Have All the Children Gone?*, “in the commission, over a thousand pieces of evidence were presented… The materials that were assembled over the course of the commission’s work, especially the testimonies themselves, revealed to the public for the first time—after decades of silence, silencing, and concealment by the state—a broad corpus of data, a gold mine of information, that finally makes it possible to uncover the truth.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Here we must ask: In light of these thousands of testimonies, where is the academic establishment? Where are the intellectuals? Where is the media? Why is the same value not accorded to the testimony given by the families of the kidnapped children from Yemen, the Near East, and the Balkans and, for example, to that of Holocaust survivors? Of course, this question is likely to arouse great anger in some readers—since the outcry will be that there is no comparison to be made—but that argument is no longer valid after the first example discussed in this paper. After all, the testimonies of Holocaust survivors from Arab countries have been denied and shoved under the rug until today, and the establishment’s recognition of them came only after a continuous media and legal struggle; despite that recognition, the Holocaust of North African Jews is still not part of Israel’s sites of memory. Thus this question is relevant and important for understanding the rejection the memory of Jews from Arab countries in the Israeli national sites of memory. It is important to point out that the violent denial of the history of the Jews of North Africa preceded the denial of the Holocaust of the Jews of North Africa; active steps were taken to diminish the history, culture, poetry, art, language, and other features of sites of memory connected to that community. Of course, this background provides a better explanation of the following stage in the denial of the Holocaust of North African Jews—and from there it is a short step to denying the kidnapping of children. All these fit in surprisingly clear fashion into Arendt’s claim regarding the banality of evil: the machine operates in small increments, but the larger picture is horrifying.[[24]](#footnote-24) The question of the kidnapped children of Yemenite, Near Eastern, and Balkan families is more explosive than the issue of the Holocaust of North African Jews, and has the potential to damage the solidarity of Israeli society, the affair nevertheless remains in the public consciousness and has not faded over the course of more than seventy years. However, Nora’s claim regarding individuals who seek a common site of memory gains additional strength. The elite still actively and oppressively prevents any change in the group’s status. Similarly, the argument of class racism takes on additional force as well.[[25]](#footnote-25) Concern about the possible loss of the imagined “solidarity” of Israeli society, combined with the hegemony’s fear of the breakdown and restructuring of the sites of memory by Jews from Arab countries and others block recognition of the memory of Jews from Arab countries (the Holocaust of North African Jews) or an admission of the crimes committed by the Ashkenazi hegemonic establishment (kidnapping children or irradiating children with ringworm). The hegemony faces its ultimate fear: the breakdown and reconstruction of the sites of memory, a process that almost certainly would end with the denial of the ideological basis on which the privileges of the hegemonic minority regnant in Israel relies and the beginning of a process in which new sites of memory would be built with new data bases, ultimately resulting in changes in the hegemonic structure.

Quite true to form, most Israeli academics acted in this case just as they had vis-à-vis the erasure of the memory of the Holocaust of North African Jews. They lined up behind the establishment and became its mouthpiece, echoing its findings, erasure, and criminalization. Unlike the Holocaust of North African Jews, which was not delegitimized but only erased, here there were claims of “invented tales,” “old wive’s tales,” “an overdeveloped imagination,” and the like. It should be noted that such terminology did not surface regarding the Holocaust of North African Jews because such attitudes could provide ammunition for Holocaust deniers around the world. After all, the facts were known and clear to all; great caution was in order. The case of the kidnapped children, however, unleased an outpouring of derision from the establishment and its collaborators, including academics, journalists, and others, since these were crimes committed by the Ashkenazi Zionist establishment against immigrants from Arab countries.

Nonetheless, there are agents of environments of memory who attempt to break through the wall. For example, Tamar Kaplansky, a reporter for the daily *Yedioth Aharonoth*, who decided not to give up and instead to search out first-hand evidence of kidnappings. In her article of October 3, 2018, she interviewed Shoshana Shaham, 85, who had been in a course for child care providers at the tent camp for new immigrants at Rosh Ha-‘ayin when she “saw that toddlers of Yemenite background were taken by people ‘in Western clothes and nice cars’ and disappeared.” Despite her age, which many people used as an argument to undermine her claims (note that Yehuda Cohen took on the chairmanship of the second government commission of inquiry at age 80) Ms. Shoham goes into detail describing the events and particular instances:

“We saw that other people came before, dressed nicely, and took a baby boy or girl. They wrapped them up, took them, and went off with them in cars. Nice cars. We understood that something unseemly was going on here. But what could we do about it? We had no authority to intervene. We were only domestic workers.

“I asked the nurses: Why are they taking the babies? There are parents who say they are their parents. So they said: They’re taking them to improve their situation, to give them better conditions, a chance to stay alive. OK, that convinced us.

“I remember that they said they died. It seems to me that the parents didn’t really believe it. There were a few incidents of crying and shouting. Of course, we didn’t get involved in that.

“Afterward, when rumors started to spread around the country, I began to understand what was going on. Of course, it really confused me emotionally. I said to myself: I was party to something like that while there are parents here who are crying over children who disappeared and they have no chance of finding them.”

Imagine the testimony of a person who saw the horrors of the Holocaust, who he agrees to come to Israel and be interviewed and describe in great detail what he saw with his own eyes. How would people relate to his testimony? Would anyone mention his age? Would they marvel at the clarity of his memory? Pay attention to what Shoshana Shaham says in her interview:

Q. *But their parents were…*

“They didn’t know about it. They were not there.”

Q. *But their parents were alive. Did they know they had parents?*

“Yes.I said to myself, OK, if their situation will be better… OK. Something in me agreed with that. Something rebelled, along with that, because they were taking them away from their parents….”

Q. *Did you know they were taking them from away from their parents?*

“Yes!*”*

Q. *There was no doubt about that?*

“There was no doubt. It was completely clear. They also said: We are transferring them to a family where they’d have a chance to stay alive. We took that at face value. They said: They’re being taken to better homes, where they’ll get better treatment and they’ll stay alive. That satisfied me. I said, great. The truth is that one of my own dreams was they they would adopt me. Because I didn’t have a family. I thought to myself: a family like that, all set up, with a car and Western clothes—let them adopt me. That’s a child’s thinking. They were cute babies. I used to hug them and kiss them. Like a girl. Cute babies.

Q. *You saw for yourselves that they were taking them?*

“Yes. And then the biological parents came. They lied to them. That the children had died. We witnessed it. But there was no point in saying otherwise, because that’s what the managers of the place said, that the babies had died, and they’d buried them.

Q.: *And you [plural] knew that that wasn’t true?*

“We knew where the children were! That they took them away in nice cars and Western clothes.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Shoshana Shaham’s testimony continues to reveal more and more horrible details. As a result of the renewed public exposure of families of kidnapped children and new testimony, along with the derisive and dismissive attitude of the state toward that testimony, a group of young people decided to take on the task of gathering testimony from families, parents, and relatives about the kidnapping of Yemenite, Near Eastern, and Balkan children. The non-profit they established, known as Amram, was set up in response to the exclusion and the unconscionable erasure of this issue from Israeli society’s sites of memory. They established an environment of memory that is continually growing working on the issue and preserving it for the future. Amram’s website collects more than a thousand testimonies of parents, brothers, relatives, and others who challenged the establishment arrangement of kidnapping and the conspiracy of silence that surrounded it. The organization went on to create a DNA data base allowing one to test for a match between the families of the kidnapped children and men and woman who had felt throughout their lives that they didn’t belong, and created an archive of articles and information about this unfortunate affair.

The work of agents of this environment of memory encountered bitter opposition from agents of the sites of memory, the Israeli establishment first and foremost, along with people unconnected to the topic who present themselves as experts on the matter. This is so despite the clear statements of senior political figures regarding this issue, such as government minister Tsahi Hanegbi, who was appointed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to investigate the kidnapping of Yemenite children: “There was robbery of hundreds of children, by intent. Did the establishment know or did it not now, did it organize it or did it not organize it? We may never know. Over the last weeks and months, the public in Israel has begun to understand that this is not a fantasy.” To this were added the words of the Minister of Social Welfare at the time, Meir Cohen: “This is a [cancerous] growth on the Israeli public. I’m trying to think what would happen today if a mother were to go in to deliver a baby and they told her the next day that her son or daughter had died, and when she asks for evidence of that—nothing, not a thing…. To take children away from parents?! That’s a phenomenon that implies an awful lot of racism.” In conclusion, I will cite what was said by former Knesset member Nava Boker, who also testified that children were kidnapped from her own family: “I never got to know my older brother and sister, and it’s reasonable to assume that they are among the kidnapped Yemenite children… My mother never saw the body, never got a death certificate, and that sister who they said had died was never brought to burial.”[[27]](#footnote-27) After Hanegbi’s appointment, the torch was passed to MK Nava Koren, who also claimed that children were taken from her family. Surprisingly, though, under her watch as well the whitewashing, dismissiveness, and deliberate quashing of the issue continued. Agents and collaborators of the sites of memory banded together to make it impossible to get to the bottom of the matter and find answers. It seems that the establishment is intent upon not allowing that memory to be part of the national sites of memory. The spiral of oppression is at work again! It is important to note that in this instance, unlike the first example, the evil logic—but logic nonetheless—of making the matter disappear and papering it over is clear. It is another link in the erasure of the memory of Jews from Arab countries by the State of Israel’s Ashkenazi Jewish establishment.

***Nine Out of Four Hundred* and *Forbidden Reminiscence*s: TowardMulticultural Thinking**

The last example we will consider in examining the shaping of the “Israeli” sites of memory that exclude the memory of Jews from Arab countries is perhaps the easiest and clearest. While the first two examples are overshadowed by investigations, government assessments, and so on, the examples to follow are so clear and unconscionable that even discussing them seems banal. However, amazingly, in the State of Israel there are still disagreements about what is entirely clear. It appears that such is the power of socialization and the years-long shaping of collective memory by the sites of memory from which the Jews of Arab countries are absent. The following analysis will center on two works: the monumental photograph “Nine Out of Four Hundred” by Meir (“Miro”) Gal[[28]](#footnote-28) and the seminal book by Ella Shohat, *Forbidden Reminiscences*, subtitled in Hebrew “TowardMulticultural Thinking.” On the surface, these are two very different works: one a photograph accompanied by a brief text by the photographer, the other a collection of profound philosophical articles about identity, society, and exclusion. Nonetheless, it is marvelous to see how similar and complementary the two are.

First: Meir, Miro, Gal. In the photograph, the artist is shown holding in his hand a sheaf of nine pages of an Israeli high school history textbook. Those are the only nine of the book’s four hundred pages that deal with the Jews from Arab countries. With this photo, Gal arrives early at the insight of the erasure of the history of Jewish from Arab lands from young people’s textbooks by the Israeli establishment over roughly two decades. He writes, in English, in the year 1997 from New York in the United States, where he lives and works:

The book shown in the photograph is the official textbook of the history of the Jewish people in recent generations that was used by high school students (including myself) in the 1970’s. The nine pages I’m holding are the only pages in the book that discuss non-European Jewish history.  Hence the title: “Nine Out of Four Hundred (The West and the Rest).” My intention is to put an end to the speculative character of the argument whether or not Mizrahim have been discriminated in Israel. Today the Ministry of Education continues to erase the history of its non-European Jews despite the fact that they comprise more than half of the Israeli population. This is only one example of how the State of Israel continues to minoritize its non-European majority.

While Gal expresses the oppression in one picture and a short text, Ella Shohat does so in two different forms. First, the choice of a name with dual meanings for her book. The Hebrew title of her book is *Zikhronot Asurim*. This can accurately be translated as“Forbidden Reminiscences,” referring to their erasure and becoming an unfit subject of discussion, but it can also be understood as “incarcerated memories,” meaning memories that are tied up, imprisoned by force in the chains of social, cultural, and establishment oversight.[[29]](#footnote-29) This is a term that is essentially parallel to the term “environments of memory”—their absence, their erasure, and the oppression that the people of the environments of memory experience make them “forbidden/incarcerated memories.”

In her book, Shohat analyzes the forced absence of the Jews of Arab countries and their memories from Eurocentric Zionist discourse and, parallel to that, suggests new and important conceptualizations that have become more common in the intellectual academic sphere in Israel—concepts such as discourse, master narrative, and meta-narrative—and carries on a post-colonial theoretical discussion of the question of “the marginalization of the Jewish past in the Muslim-Arab world.” Shohat does not stop there, but continues to present the attempts to write the history of the Arab world’s Jewry by those whom she calls “the Jewish victims of Zionism.”

Gal and Shohat recognize the continued injustice of the Israeli sites of memory. They do not try to be contentious or to justify their starting point, and, unlike the first examples, here the situation is clear: the erasure of the Jews of Arab countries from Israel’s sites of memory is an established fact. Gal and Shohat, each is his or her own way, bring to the forefront the milestones of the erasure and the attempts to overcome them. The weak efforts of the state and its institutions to grapple with such distorted phenomena as the toothless Biton Committee, the establishment of a memorial day for the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries and Iran, and others like them did not create the desired change. That would require a slightly more significant and comprehensive revolution in Israel’s Ashkenazi Zionist sites of memory. For Shohat and Gal, making the practices of erasure present is the first step toward changing and repairing the present distorted situation.

We should emphasize here that, in the end, Gal and Shohat found themselves outside the State of Israel. Some think that their ability to criticize the establishment and the process of erasure in such a sharp, clear, and painful way comes from their having moved physically from Israel to the United States, where Ella Shohat is a senior professor at New York University and Meri Gal is a professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York and widely acclaimed creative artist. Some will argue that disengaging one’s work-life interface from the State of Israel gave them the space and the ability to express their criticism of the Israeli sites of memory.

**Afterword**

This article deals with the erasure of the memory of the Jews of Arab countries from the State of Israel’s sites of memory. Even so, the picture that emerges from the examples in the article is that no small number of environments of memory have been established in the wake of that erasure. These are communities of opposition. To paraphrase the title of Ella Shohat’s book, forbidden memories will always make their way into the world. Whether as sites or as environments of memory, they will not die or disappear as part of the Israeli Eurocentric-Jewish elite had hoped they would. Those communities incline to be preserved and not to disappear.

Concomitantly, though, the paper reveals a structure that should worry any intelligent person, a structure in which the creation in response of any environment of memory is met with an immediate reaction from the sites of memory and their agents in another attempt at erasure, exclusion, or oppression. In this paper, that topic has been examined using the concept of the **dialectical spiral of oppression**. Our analysis reveals that the sites of memory and their agents and the environments of memory and their agents maintain a discourse or a relationship of war between them, in Foucauldian terms. In most instances, the reason can be found in the sites of memory’s inability to accept the arguments of the environments of memory—arguments that, if they were to achieve legitimacy, would remove the ideological and normative basis for the existence of the sites of memory and their agents.

A second important point is that, while the discussion offered in this paper is philosophical and theoretical, there are very practical deliberations taking place regarding the memories and the construction of sites of Israeli memory in the 21st century. These include multiple and various subjects: textbooks, museums (see the founders’ museums set up by the Ministry of Culture and Sport in recent years),[[30]](#footnote-30) new historiographical writing about Jews in Arab countries by Jewish emigres from Arab countries or their descendants, changes in university programs such as a program in Arab-Jewish cultural studies,[[31]](#footnote-31) schools of Arabic music,[[32]](#footnote-32) alternative news sites, commissions of inquiry whose central purpose is to find a solution to such issues as the disappearance of thousands of children, alternative archives,[[33]](#footnote-33) and more. As long as they do not make it to the core of Israeli society and culture, though, and, in Nora’s terms, do not become an integral part of the Israeli sites of memory, they will remain environments of memory that oppose to suppression, oppression, and exclusion of the memories and culture of Jews from Arab countries. It is hard to predict whether those environments of memory will someday become an integral part of Israel sites of memory, but the need for them and their relevance for discourse are clear and beyond doubt.

It is also important to note that the struggle of the sites of memory and their agents against the environments of memory and their agents is preventing a change in collective status of those who are excluded. Such a change would necessarily entail a change in the collective status of the hegemony, as well as a significant change to the social structure. That is the justification for the spiral concept of the proposed model, since the hegemony has no option but to continue its oppression in order to allow the hegemonic group to preserve its place at the top of the hierarchy. This is also the reasoning underlying the choice of epigram that opens this paper: “It seems, on the basis of reading the literature and poetry of the younger generation of families from Arab countries and their diaspora, that in recent years the taboo against the discourse of erasure has been broken. Isn’t that so?” It is only a matter of time until the sites of memory and their agents attempt to erase that environment of memory as well. The only way to interrupt the action of the dialectical suppression spiral is by breaking the structure of the sites of memory and establishing an alternative that comes from the environments of memory and, by dint of that change, removing the hegemony. The pattern, then, is clear: every time there a protest by an alternative environment of memory, there is a response of violent “erasure,” whether on the basis of cooptation or whether on the basis of folklorization, pathologization, or criminalization: commissions of inquiry, the Biton Committee, and more; or an oppressive and violent response such as arrests, the use of police force against a rabbi and his followers; or erasure from textbooks and history books.

In conclusion, while this article emphasizes various attempts by the establishment to erase the memory of Jews from Arab countries, we should note that, as the years go by, the voices of Jews from Arab countries are heard louder and clearer in Israeli society. Amazingly, the deniers of the Holocaust of North African Jews enjoyed a more prominent status than the stories of Jews from North Africa who lived through the Holocaust. While they succeeded in suppressing the memory of the Holocaust of North African Jews, the testimonies of Jews from North Africa earned a minor place in the Israeli sites of memory. This process is underway even now with regard to the kidnapped children of Yemenite, Near Eastern, and Balkan origins, even as the testimonies of the family members of those kidnapped and eyewitnesses who condemned the phenomenon are excluded from the Israeli sites of memory. The deniers merit a prominent stage for their claims. In addition, in recent years a new theme of suppression of environments of memory has arisen. This criticism focuses on the activity of those environments and the “militant” language they use. The core of the argument is this: the days of struggle over memory and the image of the collective are over, and we are now one people, one memory, one entity. That marks a return to the days of the worn and discredited melting pot theory. Those at the head of that camp and its members should read, in conclusion, the word of the actor Jesse Williams:

If you have a critique for the resistance, for our resistance, then you better have an established record of critique of our oppression. If you have no interest, if you have no interest in equal rights for black people then do not make suggestions to those who do. Sit down.[[34]](#footnote-34)

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2. This quotation is taken from an email communication dealing with the erasure of the memory of Jews from the Arab world in the State of Israel, received on September 28, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This terminology follows the usage in Nora 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the concept of *Aḥusalim* in Kimmerling 2001. “*Aḥusal*” is an acronym formed from the Hebrew words for Ashkenaziness (*ashkenaziyut*), secularism (*ḥiloniyut*), socialism (*sotsi’alizm*) and jingoistic nationalism (*le’umanut*). *[[נכון שמדובר ב״לאומנות״ – או שמא ״לאומיוּת״?* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Arendt 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Olick 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Halbwachs 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Schwartz 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Foucault 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nora 1993, 8. PLEASE ADD PAGE NUMBERS FOR ALL CITATIONS. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Foucault 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is surprising that, of all possible expressions, this one has been adopted by Israelis/Jews as referring to the Ashkenazi Zionist Jewish men who are the Israeli elite. Why? The origin of this expression can be found in the New Testament, in Jesus’s blessing of his disciples in the “Sermon on the Mount”:“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot” (Matthew 5:13, NRSV). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, e.g., Kimmerling 2001, Shapiro 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It should be pointed out that the story of the waves of *aliyah* contains a historical lie, since the first immigrations to the land of Israel were of Jews from Arab lands. The same is true of the myth of the founding of the first Hebrew city, Tel Aviv, which was actually established by emigrants from North Africa and Yemen in the two neighborhoods of Neve Tzedek and Kerem Ha-Temanim. But that history was erased by the Zionist Ashkenazi male hegemony and was forgotten, and only in recent years has there been a movement, primarily intellectual, attempting to revive that memory and rebel against the false commonplace. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of a false institutional construction of immigration to Israel, see Zeltzer-Zubida and Zubida 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Here it is important to note an event that became one of the foundations of that memory—the Eichmann trial. That event was broadcast live and in full on Israeli television. *[I’m not sure this is accurate. The trial was in 1962, but Israel’s Educational TV went on the air in March of 1966, and the Israel Broadcasting Authority’s first television transmission was in May of 1968.]* The testimony, the story of Eichmann’s capture, and the glorification of the trial as a historic event transformed the memory of the Holocaust into one of Israeli society’s cherished values to this day. According to Nora, this is one of the basic elements of the modern Israeli nation’s sites of memory. If so, it is important to note at the same time that that memory completely excluded the Jews of North Africa’s share in those atrocities. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Elias 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kozlowsky Golan 2010. *[2017? See bibliography.]* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sukary 2013. Note the terms “Libyan Jews” and “Libyan Jewry.” The terminology of the hegemony would combine all the world’s Jewish communities into one monolithic block in which the primary tone is European Jewry, which Yossi Sukari’s book tells the specific, unique story of Libyan Jewry. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. By the same token, one could examine the irradiation of children suffering from ringworm and the erasure of that event from the Israeli sites of memory — and the glorification of the racists who took part in those irradiations, such as the eugenicist Chaim Sheba and his colleagues. Thus, this example is just one among many that could be discussed. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Shifris 2019; Gamliel and Shifris 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. A critical analysis of what was produced by the commissions can be seen in Sangero 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Shifris 2019, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Arendt 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Foucault 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kaplansky 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. From Green 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Gal 1997. *הלא צילום זה ולא פירסום?* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Shohat 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For an example (in Hebrew), see <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3098021>. It should be noted that these museums emerge from Zionist and “pioneering” assumptions and are not intended to change the status quo, but it has nonetheless been claimed that they represent the beginning of a change. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. A link to the website of the program at Ben Gurion University: https://in.bgu.ac.il/humsos/ajc/Pages/default.aspx. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. A link to the website of the school in Musrara: <https://www.musrara.co.il/newmusic>. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. There are a number of examples of alternative archives. Among them are these two:

    The Arch-Parchi Archive, the civil archive of social struggles: %D7%94%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%9B%D7%99%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%90%D7%96%D7%A8%D7%97%D7%99-%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%91%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%97%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%91%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9C-1138677502982593/

    The Mizrahi information data base:

    -%D7%94%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%9B%D7%99%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%90%D7%96%D7%A8%D7%97%D7%99-%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%91%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%97%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%91%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9C-1138677502982593/ [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Williams 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)