

Two Ways: Representations of the Holocaust in Israeli Art

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The subject of the Holocaust appeared in Israeli art from the establishment of the State and onwards. The integration of the Holocaust in Israeli art through the years was influenced by Israeli society and the Israeli art institutional attitude towards the subject and by local historical events. As a result, we witness a development of two directions in Israeli art concerning the Holocaust. One of them has two facets: a massive use of images emphasizing the enormous personal as well as collective destruction of the Jewish nation as the ultimate victim that “the entire world is against us”; While the other facet is that despite the Jewish people emerge battered and humiliated from the Holocaust, they built a country to be an immovable, permanent and safe place for the Jewish nation since “there is no one else except for us to do it”. The other direction regarding the Holocaust that developed in Israeli art, examining in an universal approach the Israeli response to the Holocaust through the prism of local historical events occurring since the establishment of the State. Therefore, we see imagery that examines the aggressive impression of the Israelis, as an internal as well as external criticism of what seems as aggression and violence against another nation. In Israel, as well as in other Modern states, art is used as a means for expression of different viewpoints. In this article, I am focusing on the artistic references to the above approaches to the Holocaust.

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Introduction

The subject of the Holocaust appeared in Israeli art from the establishment of the State and onwards. The integration of the Holocaust in Israeli art through the years was influenced by Israeli society, Israeli art’s institutional attitude towards the subject and by local historical events such as wars, Nazi criminals’ trials etc.. In the early years of the State, Israeli society and art had rejected the survivors’ artworks since they dealt with a difficult subject matter and the depictions were difficult to look at, also the artworks were not consistent with the mainstream style of the era—an abstract international style (Manor, 1998; Brutin, 2000; Brutin, 2005a). As a result, we witness a development of two directions in Israeli art concerning the Holocaust. One of them has two facets: a massive use of images emphasizing the enormous personal as well as collective destruction of the Jewish nation as the ultimate victim that “the entire world is against us”; the other facet is that despite the Jewish people emerge battered and humiliated from the Holocaust, they built a country to be an immovable, permanent and safe place for the Jewish nation since “there is no one else except for us to do it”. The other direction regarding the Holocaust that developed in Israeli art, examining in a universal approach the Israeli response to the Holocaust through the prism of local historical events occurring since the establishment of the

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The Entire World is Against us

In the early years of the State of Israel, survivor artists wanted to express immediately in their work the difficult experiences they endured during the Holocaust. Their goal was to show the brutal actions of the Nazis and their collaborators who harmed them simply because they were Jews, and to deal with the fact that Nazi Germany wanted the eradication of the entire Jewish people and the world stood by. The artists depicted the atrocities the Nazis inflicted on the Jews in ghettos and camps from a personal and collective perspective alike.

Moshe Bernstein, expressively described an emaciated, tortured and exhausted Muselmann from Auschwitz in despair (see Figure 1). He stares at us directly forcing us to confront his emaciated body, the blurred number on his arm and his scream. Bernstein, who knew that Muselmanns generally reached skeletal condition with a no expression stare and they were apathetic to their surroundings and unable to stand steady on their feet, tried to stay true to the reality by describing the figure lying exhausted. Bernstein also knew that the camp prisoners usually wore striped clothes, but this description replaced them with a fringed undergarment—"Talit Katan" to emphasize his Jewish identity and to express clearly the fact that he was imprisoned in Auschwitz and tattooed to erase his personal identity just because he was a Jew. This symbolic description combines tremendous personal pain of the death of the artist's family, with collective reference expressed by a cry of despair for the disaster of the Jewish people that the world turned their back on them and not come to help them (Basok, 1986; Brutin, 2000).¹

As opposed to Bernstein, Itzhak Belfer, depicted a group of camp prisoners with striped uniform seen in an angle showing only half of their body (see Figure 2). The front character appears with a shaved head, mouth open and eyes wide open looking terrified. The other prisoners are wearing striped hats, with their faces expressing suffering and fear, all introspective and with gazes down. The figures are gathered closely, their skinny bodies' volume is hardly substantial, and the unified description of the striped garments causes them to merge. The multitude of stripes in the clothes and hats conveys a sense of loss of personal identity and a message of a mass of people with a common fate. In this work Belfer seeks to tell the story of many Jews whose personal identity was stolen from them, they were humiliated, tortured and killed, and the world has given a hand to that in its silence (Belfer, 1995).²

Alongside with the depiction of the ultimate victim that "the entire world is against us", artists referred to the feeling that the Jews after the Holocaust, should take their own fate in their hands, recover their lives and build their own country.

¹ Author's interview with Moshe Bernstein, Tel Aviv, August 1999.

² Author's interviews with Itzhak Belfer, Tel Aviv, July 1999.



Figure 1. Moshe Bernstein, *The Cry (Auschwitz)*, 1950-1951.



Figure 2. Itzhak Belfer, *Muselmans in Prisoners Uniform*, the sixties.

There is No One Else Except for us to do it

The national social reality prevailing in Israel when Holocaust survivor artists arrived was that of a society wishing to start a “new page” (Brutin, 2000). We can read in the declaration of the State of Israel, “this right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be master of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign state”. [The declaration of the State of Israel, May 14, 1948 (five of Iyar 5708)]. The desire was to create in the land of Israel a just society, a nation like all other nations, around a common set of new values, such as farming, pioneering, cooperation and protection. The feeling was that only Jewish society in Israel could defend itself, because experience from the Holocaust teaches that Jewish society can only rely on itself.

Some artists described the rapid integration of Holocaust survivors in Israeli society, in establishing communities and protecting them. Naftali Bezem shows in the work *A Jewish Stonecutter* from 1953 (see Figure 3) his solution to integration in the Israeli society after the Holocaust through labor by depicting a figure of a pioneer holding a cutting tool in his hand, which has a prisoner number tattooed on it. The number represents the destruction and death and the cutting tool represents life, building and work. In this work, Bezem points to an optimistic result of the Holocaust: the remains of the Holocaust came to Israel and despite all they endured, rebuilt their life and built a state (Bezem, 1953; Amishai-Maisels, 1986; Amishai-Maisels, 1993). While the number on prisoners’ arms was tattooed on the left arm, in Bezem’s depiction it is tattooed on the right arm holding the cutting tool. It is customary to refer to the right side as a positive: thus the phrase “stood to his right” is interpreted as support or starting something “on the right foot” is interpreted as a good start. Bezem, by depicting the number on the right arm strengthens the positive idea he brings up in this work and it connects well to Bezem’s own wish as a refugee to integrate into Israeli life.

However, the cutter’s sad gaze is prominent, reflecting the difficult past hidden in his inner world, and his closed mouth implies to his powerful silence in effort to remember the past while coming back to life in the present³. The role of the red color in the background is to describe the past from which the cutter “emerged”. The choice of red is to symbolize powerfulness and aggression, destruction, death and blood—the Holocaust. The uniform red color in the background against the formal description of the cutter highlights and enhances the description and emphasizes the connection to the Holocaust. Bezem emphasizes here that survivors put aside the trauma of the Holocaust and actively participated in the establishment of the state of Israel and its development out of the understanding that only the Jewish state can protect them from another disaster if it will happen.

Pinchas Sha’ar also dealt with rooting in the land of Israel by working the land. He depicted in his work *Farmer Plows* from 1957 (see Figure 4) a farmer plowing his land at the foot of the Judean Mountains, wearing a round brimless hat to symbolize his Israeliness. The cypress trees characteristic of Israel are seen at the foot of the mountains and they symbolize the connection to the land and its sceneries. In many depictions and ritual articles from the 19th century, the cypress tree is seen alongside the Western Wall as a symbol to the connection of the Jewish people to their homeland. Sha’ar’s depiction of the cypress tree at the foot of the Judean Mountains, where Israel’s capital Jerusalem lies, conveys the message of return to the homeland and the plowing symbolizes the hold on it. The image of the cock on mountain tops is an ancient Jewish motif that symbolizes manhood. The call of the man as a Cockcrow symbolizes renewal and awakening, thus implying to

³ The sealed mouth motif appears in many artists’ artworks in order to express speechlessness following the Holocaust, an inability or lack of desire to speak about the past trauma of the Holocaust.

the renewal of agriculture in Israel by the Jews that arrived after the Holocaust. The color scheme in this work symbolizes the Joy of fieldwork.



Figure 3. Naftali Bezem, A Jewish Stonecutter, 1953.



Figure 4. Pinchas Sha'ar, Farmer Plowing the Land at the Foot of the Judean Mountains, 1957.

Pinchas Sha'ar highlights the necessity for cultivation as a message of belonging to the land and the Jews must to return to cultivate the land, a work they were banned from in Europe in order to establish a state of their own without outside assistance.⁴

Shraga Weil presents another way of creating a rooted connection with the homeland in his work *The Planter* From 1954 (see Figure 5) by depicting a farmer digging the land firmly with a shovel in order to plant the seedling placed beside him. The stem and the leaves of the seedling on the left and the vegetal decorativeness on the right and the ground at his feet, create a blooming frame that wraps around the planter. In this depiction the artist emphasizes the bond between the planter and his land and creates a fundamental link between them. Through the planting the farmer clings to his land and proclaims ownership.



Figure 5. Shraga Weil, *The Planter*, 1954.

The planter is busy with his work and his face is hidden to conceal his emotion, sadness and pain following his Holocaust experiences blended with the joy of planting. Weil highlights the planter's focus on working the land as representing the present—renewal of his relationship with land of Israel. In this work, he

⁴ Pinchas Shaar has decided to live a meaningful life and create a positive and colorful art about life, renewal, joy, Jewish culture and experience, all in order to compensate for the suffering he experienced during the Holocaust. Shaar passed away in 1997. An interview with his brother Mr. Joseph Schwartz and his former wife, Mrs. Eli (Elisheva) Shaar, January 2000.

illustrates his personal feeling toward his new country and at the same time expresses the feelings of many survivors that in spite of the pain and loss have found a home and hope in Israel after the horrors of the Holocaust.

Here, as in Bezem's work, the depiction of the survivor working the land expresses the understanding that only Jews can themselves build and develop their country. The outcome of the feeling in Israeli consciousness that "There is no one else except for us to do it" is the necessity to defend themselves and fight for Israel's existence and survival.

Israel's Fight for Its Existence and Survival

The catastrophe which befell the Jewish people and the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe clearly demonstrated the urgent need to solve the problem of the Jews' homelessness by re-establishing the Jewish state in Eretz-Israel; This would open the gates of the homeland wide to all Jews and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the comity of nations. Survivors of the Nazi Holocaust in Europe, as well as Jews from other parts of the world, migrated to Israel, undaunted by difficulties and restrictions, and never ceased to assert their right to dignity, freedom, and honest toil in their national homeland. (The declaration of the State of Israel, May 14, 1948 (5 Iyar 5708))

According to the declaration, the solution to the problem of exile is a rebirth. Indeed Jews fought fiercely for the establishment of Israel. The struggle for international political recognition and the military campaign to establish the state gave to the Jews according to this approach, compensation for powerlessness and helplessness that they were subjected to during the Holocaust, when they could not influence their fate. During the struggle for Jewish statehood, the Jews demonstrated their political ability and military power (Zertal, 2002).

In the national consciousness of the early days of the state, the fight for its establishment was identified with the rebellions in ghettos, as "two Jewish Wars led by Jews for a Jewish cause" (Yablonka, 1994; Yablonka, 2001). Opposed to it, Holocaust victims were identified as "Lambs to the slaughter", a reference which penetrated into public consciousness in the country with the arrival of the first of the survivors (Keshev, 1962; Yablonka, 1994; Yablonka, 2001). The source of this negative statement is a proclamation that was read at a meeting of the Pioneer Youth in Vilna ghetto on January 1, 1942: "Do not let us be taken as lambs to the slaughter... Hitler aims to destroy all the Jews of Europe. The Jews of Lithuania had to be first in line. Let us not be led as lambs to the slaughter!" (Kovner, 1981).

At the beginning of the state of Israel, the founders emphasized the revolt, the fighting and the resistance during the Holocaust, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in particular, and it played a central and essential role in integrating the Holocaust into Israeli consciousness and culture. Since the historical circumstances of the uprising were suitable to the myth of "a few against the many", it became a role model for Israeli existence and fighting for its survival.

One of the first examples is the *Mordechai Anielewicz* monument erected by Nathan Rapoport in 1951 (see Figure 6). The monument shows a huge strong young man, dressed like a Kibbutz member, his chest is exposed, a look of determination on his face and a hand grenade in his hand. Rapoport makes a connection between the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising heroism and of Kibbutz Yad Mordechai's members, who fought the strong and large Egyptian army during Israel's War of Independence. He does so by depicting Anielewicz—who was actually a lean, bespectacled lad—as a strong, young kibbutznik (Kibbutz member) and by positioning the sculpture in front of the war-damaged water tower (Young, 1993; Brutin, 2005b).

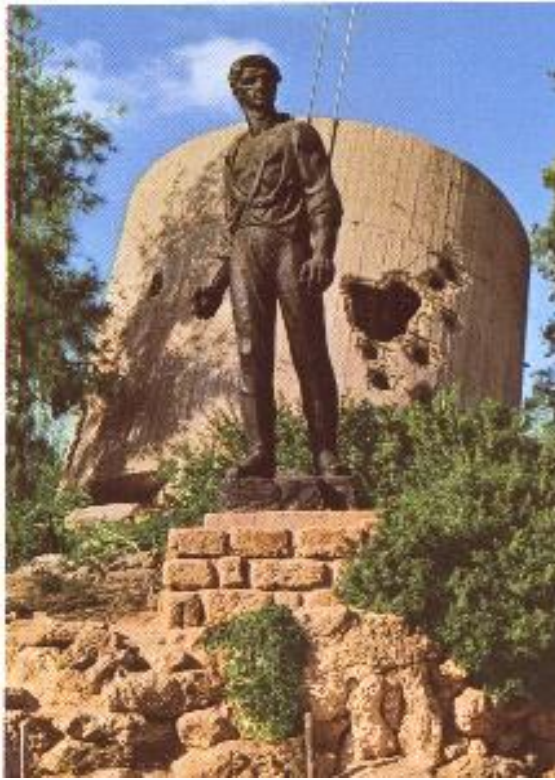


Figure 6. Nathan Rapoport, *Mordechai Anielewicz*, 1951.



Figure 7. Naftali Bezem, *Isaac sacrifice*, 1968.

Rapoport was undoubtedly influenced by Michelangelo's *David* of 1501-1504 for his depiction of

Anielewicz. The muscular body, the nodding of the head, the facial features and the hair are similar. The choice to depict Anielewicz as David was not indefinite because in the Jewish culture, David is a symbol of the weak fighting the mighty. Although the end of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the fight between David and Goliath stories are not identical, Rapoport “corrected” the story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising by equalizing it to the story of David and Goliath. He wanted to convey the message that the Jews in the past as well as in the present must fight for their existence.

Jewish artists used biblical imagery in the context of the Holocaust, not only because all know it and so their message will pass on clearly, but also because they had been brought up on the concept of the identification between past and present (Amishai-Maisels, 1993).



Figure 8. Pál Fux, Abraham and Isaac, 1982.

Naftali Bezem painted the Sacrifice of Isaac (see Figure 7) out of a sense that the Holocaust led to the establishment of Israel (Bezem, 1972). Bezem describes Isaac as a Diaspora Jew lying on the altar representing the Holocaust victims who perished and the pyramidal structure alongside his head symbolizes their commemoration. The pyramid is an accepted symbol for commemoration the dead since the erection of the Egyptian’s pyramids in the third millennium BC (Levin, 1983). The plant he is holding in his hands implies to renewal and life. Thus, the shroud enveloping his body become the cactus plant, a symbol of the Israeli sabra, a symbol of hope. The message in this description is that out of the ashes of Holocaust victims, who are a generation of exile, arises Israel’s new generation that represents the renewal. However, one cannot ignore the fact that Isaac is lying on the altar, the artist called the creation the Sacrifice of Isaac, and it was made after the Six-Day War. This description reflects Bezem’s concern for the fact that we did not sacrifice enough victims in the Holocaust; Israeli-born generation continues to make sacrifices in his war for the existence of the Jewish

people in its sovereign state.

Pál Fux refers in *Abraham and Isaac* (see Figure 8) to the Lebanon war of 1982 in general without a personal connection. He depicted Abraham as an Auschwitz survivor with a number on his arm dressed in white to highlight his purity and to emphasize him as the victim of the past. Abraham's hand touches a helmet that contains both a young soldier's face and a lamb to symbolize the victim of the present. This work integrates the victims of the Holocaust with the fallen soldiers of Israel's wars representing them as having sacrificed their lives for the nation and the homeland.⁵



Figure 9. Yaakov Gildor, *Targets*, 1993.

In order to deal with Israel's fight for its survival, artists used images from the Holocaust, integrated, and compared them to the local conflicted reality. Following the Gulf War (1991), which brought the issue of the Holocaust back to the minds of Israelis, Yaakov Gildor created *Targets* of 1993 (see Figure 9). For him, this war resulted in dealing with the Holocaust from a different perspective; he deals with the continuation of the struggle for existence of the Jewish people (Brutin, 2009).⁶ In this work, Gildor presents two separate

⁵ Author's interviews with Pál Fux, Jerusalem, October 1999.

⁶ Author's interviews with Yaakov Gildor, Tel Aviv, January 1998.

descriptions of two identities, which co-exist simultaneously in Israeli society. In the bottom, Jews are seen in the Holocaust, nude, packed and distorted, a depiction which expresses helplessness and vulnerability, and which is somewhat reminiscent of gas chamber descriptions (Amishai-Maisels, 1993). The hues of red the artist chose for painting the images and the background contribute to the atmosphere of disaster. In the top section, two soldiers, aiming their rifles at the viewer, are seen. The soldiers appear powerful, and in control of their space, but instead of depicting them standing, the artist has the characters lie at opposite directions, as is customary in army ambushes. Gildor used two-part, contradictory visual saying, by showing the soldiers laying down in an ambush, idle, instead of standing up, the artist actually emphasizes their control of space, while in the depiction of victims, standing up instead of laying down, they appear to rise from the dead, to sound their cry. The meaning of this artwork is that in order to not be victimized again, like in the Holocaust when we were vulnerable, now that we have a state and an army we can fight and defend ourselves.



Figure 10. Avner Bar Hama, *Generation to Generation – Continuity - Pure Hands!* 2005.

Avner Bar Hama used the iconic photograph of the Warsaw boy to convey a political and critical message concerning the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Bar Hama in the work *Generation to Generation—Continuity—Pure Hands!* of 2005 (see Figure 10) contends with the Israeli Palestinian conflict opposite the Holocaust by means of using hand positions. The background is the black and white photograph of the Warsaw boy with his hands up in surrender, to indicate the Jewish nation's experience of the Holocaust. Superimposed are images of a Palestinian with his blood-stained hands up as a victory sign immediately after he took part in the Ramallah lynch of 2000 and a Palestinian girl's photograph where she raises her hands soaked in red color, to her right a model of the Dome of the Rock and the colors of the Palestinian flag. Bar Hama stated that by placing the Palestinian photographs as opposed to the Warsaw boy photograph, he wished to present his one-sided

standpoint:

I present mine—our side. I clarify the differences between us and them, Judaism versus Islam. On one hand, the memory on which we educate is “Never Again!” and on the other hand, the Palestinian girl is being educated to more slaughter and more murder.

Conclusions

Living in the shadow of the Holocaust influenced Israelis personal as well as national existence and Israeli identity along the years. The Israeli artists referred to the Holocaust in various ways as seen in the artworks presented in the article. Some artists described their attitude towards their feeling as the ultimate victim that the entire world is against them. Other artists depicted how, after the destruction of the Jewish people during the Holocaust, the Jews in Israel built a country to be a stable, permanent and safe place for the Jewish nation since there is no one else except for themselves to do it. Israeli artists depicted their perception on the State of Israel’s constant struggle for its existence and survival. Will the Holocaust continue to be a significant component in Israeli art in the future? Time will tell.

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