

## Debates

David N. Myers

### Remembering *Zakhor*: A Super-Commentary

Ten years after its publication, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* stands as one of the most important works of historical synthesis and interpretation in twentieth-century Jewish scholarship. Yerushalmi's mastery of the vast terrain of the Jewish past, along with the lyricism of his introspective voice, have allowed him to illuminate with great erudition, insight and *pathos* the evolving relationship between Jews and their past over two millennia. The result is a book which resonates beyond the insular walls of the academy. Indeed, in his plotting of the significant turns of Jewish historical memory, Yerushalmi has contributed to the ongoing reformulation of Jewish identity in a modern, secular age. Such an achievement places in proper perspective the author's own modest description of *Zakhor* as "[t]his little book, part history, part confession and credo."<sup>1</sup>

In line with ancient Jewish literary tradition, Yerushalmi's important text has inspired a host of commentaries and now super-commentaries since its publication in 1982. Many readers have extolled its eloquent and sensitive exploration of the canals of memory – ritual, liturgy and commemorative literary genres – on which Jews in ancient and medieval times traveled in arriving at their past, and of the subsequent obstruction of these memory-canals in the modern era. A smaller number have seized upon one or another of the historical generalizations which abound in this small volume as baseless or feebly grounded;<sup>2</sup> in most cases, the historical vision of these critics fails to comprehend the panoramic vista which Yerushalmi offers in *Zakhor*. Nonetheless, even these harsher judges unwittingly (or even wittingly) acknowledge that Yerushalmi's *Zakhor* has opened up a new plane of discourse on Jewish collective memory, historical consciousness and

historiography, as well as on the temporal and epistemological boundaries of "modernity" in Jewish historical experience.

Among the ablest of Yerushalmi's glossators is Amos Funkenstein, whose commentary adorned the first number of this journal. Himself a historian of vast intellectual range, Funkenstein participates in the *Zakhor*-induced discourse by offering a challenge, and corrective, to one of Yerushalmi's most fundamental distinctions. Funkenstein suggests that one need not regard Jewish memory and Jewish history – the conceptual foils of *Zakhor*'s subtitle – in diametric opposition. In Yerushalmi's view, there is an unbridgeable gap between the participatory and emotive expressions of collective memory that sustained premodern Jews and the modern enterprise of critical history, whose provenance lies, in the Jewish case, in the birth of the "Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden" in Berlin in 1819. According to Yerushalmi, even the late eighteenth-century *maskil*, a sort of Hebrew *Aufklärer*, who first evinced an interest in history and biography, was separated from the early nineteenth-century Jewish scholar by a "span of forty years, a biblical generation" – a period whose passage witnessed "a drastic leap into a new kind of thinking."<sup>3</sup> This quantum leap ushered in a new era of methodological refinement in Jewish accounts of the Jewish past. More momentously, it signaled a rupture, deliberately fabricated by the new generation of university-trained scholars, between the subject and object of Jewish history.<sup>4</sup>

In his article in the opening number of *History & Memory* Amos Funkenstein takes issue with this distinction.<sup>5</sup> Yerushalmi's opposing categories – an atemporal and participatory collective memory and the highly contextualized act of critical historical recording – do not tell the whole story. A third analytical category, historical consciousness, is required in order to measure "the degree of creative freedom in the use and interpretation of the contents of collective memory" and to temper Yerushalmi's opposition between memory and history writing.<sup>6</sup> Funkenstein's introduction of the category of historical consciousness hints more at a continuum of mnemonic expression than at a dramatic rupture. Thus, whereas he concurs with Yerushalmi that "historiography

hardly existed at all in the sphere of traditional Judaism," Funkenstein nonetheless points out that "a well-developed historical consciousness existed elsewhere" in Jewish literature.<sup>7</sup>

An example of this "well-developed historical consciousness" was the interpretation and application of Halakhah or Jewish law. Funkenstein maintains that the medieval rabbis who shaped the Halakhah were quite aware of variances in customs, institutions and personalities in different Jewish communities and time periods, and that such an awareness, reflecting a sensitivity to historical context, was manifested in their legal opinions.<sup>8</sup> This is a tantalizing proposition, related to an earlier scholarly trend inspired by the work of the eminent social historian Jacob Katz to accept the utility of rabbinic responsa as historical sources.<sup>9</sup> Still, the question which Funkenstein poses is not quite the same as that posed by Katz. That is, it is not how much reliable historical data can be extracted from rabbinic material, but rather, assuming that there are historical data embedded in this material, what do they tell us about the "historical consciousness" of their presenters? Further pursuit of this line of inquiry could have fortified Funkenstein's intimation of a continuum of memory as against Yerushalmi's breach of memory. Instead, one encounters a hurried, and somewhat confusing, reference to a characteristic of the halakhic medium which putatively bespeaks a historical consciousness: the fact that Halakhah was defined through a series of juridical innovations (*hidushim*), which Funkenstein declares to be "genuine 'historical' happenings." The traditional Jew's awareness of the historicity of these "happenings" was assured by their compilation into a "continuous and chronological record" – an act performed, we are told, by "normative Judaism."<sup>10</sup> In attempting to decipher this claim, one must first question the use of the term "normative Judaism" whose value has been rendered dubious in the wake of Gershom Scholem's monumental reconstruction of Jewish intellectual history. More specifically, one must wonder, in the absence of any precise literary or historical reference, to which chronological record of halakhic innovations Funkenstein is alluding.

Perhaps he is referring not to a single work or genre, but to the broad tendency of halakhic innovators to appeal to scholarly luminaries of the past for validation. And yet, does this appeal reveal a dynamic sense of history? Or could it be argued with equal persuasiveness that halakhic discourse in general, and the process of validating innovation in particular, have taken place in a rabbinic vacuum, that the intellectual and religious affinity between a sixteenth-century decisor and a thirteenth-century predecessor was so powerful as to preclude a sensitivity to historical change?<sup>11</sup> One must ask whether the presence of a halakhic innovation (*hidush*) requires in and of itself historical consciousness, beyond a highly selective, perhaps hagiographic, recitation of one's favorite scholarly antecedents. One must also ask, as a matter of terminology, why such a recitation would qualify as an example of "historical consciousness" rather than simply as "collective memory." It is this latter category in which Funkenstein includes works of liturgy such as a nineteenth-century Reform prayer book – a work that manifestly expressed a change in historical context and consciousness on the part of its formulators.<sup>12</sup> Should not the same claim to historical consciousness be made for liturgical, as well as halakhic, innovation? If so, what is the value of the distinction between historical consciousness and collective memory?

Aside from these questions, it is necessary to note that neither the cataloging of rabbinic precedents nor the historical legitimation of *hidushim* is the same as incorporating historical *realia* in rabbinic responses. None of these phenomena is sufficiently explored, or contrasted, in Funkenstein's discussion of Jewish historical consciousness. Nor is it clear how any one of them is identical with "Western historical consciousness," as Funkenstein implies from the sequence of his argument.<sup>13</sup> For he jumps, in one sentence, from the matter of the validation of halakhic *hidushim* to a conclusion in the next that "Western historical consciousness" is not so much a contradiction as an elaboration of collective memory.<sup>14</sup> One is left with the rather bewildering equation of Halakhah and Western historical consciousness. More generally, the reader is left without a cogent explanation of a conceptual

category, historical consciousness, which was intended to mediate between collective memory and critical historical study.

A greater opportunity for clarification of Yerushalmi's thesis lies in Funkenstein's discussion of modern Jewish history and modes of remembering. Funkenstein perceptively draws attention to the role of nineteenth-century nation-states in stimulating a new "secular liturgical memory" to replace the sacred liturgical memory of old. He also observes the preeminent role of the professional historian in stoking the fire of national collective memory.<sup>15</sup> Although Yerushalmi himself was quite cognizant of these phenomena in nineteenth-century European nations, he saw no parallel among contemporaneous Jewry. To the extent that professional historical scholarship took root amongst the Jews, it lacked, he argued, the essential inspiration which German or French historiography of the period possessed. As a result, the first practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* "reconstructed a Jewish past in which the national element was all but suppressed, and the hope for national restoration seemed an anachronism." For Yerushalmi, this effacement of the national dimension of Jewish identity in *Wissenschaft des Judentums* both symbolized and deepened the rupture in Jewish collective memory occasioned by modernity.<sup>16</sup>

What Yerushalmi seems to deny here is that a new collective memory was being forged by nineteenth-century Jewish scholars who were not nationalists in any meaningful political sense, but who nonetheless maintained a close link between their research and present-day Jewish concerns. Funkenstein advances this thesis by suggesting that *Wissenschaft des Judentums* did offer up its own version of a collective memory, one in which Jewish history was cast as the progressive unfolding and dissemination of the ideas of ethical perfection and pure monotheism. This new collective memory was consonant neither with traditional religious beliefs nor with an image of Judaism as a political-national entity, but with Judaism as "liberal-bourgeois, open to its environment and to change." While noting the ascension of this new interpretation, Funkenstein spurns Yerushalmi's call to explore the "ruptures,

breaches, breaks" of a modern Jewish historical consciousness. Rather, he suggests an intriguing functional parallel between premodern and modern Jews: "The scope of the 'collective memory' of the average German Jew of the nineteenth century was no less than that of the traditional Jew: merely its emphases were different."<sup>17</sup>

In building upon this suggestion, one might profitably ask to what extent the reformulations of Jewish identity offered through *Wissenschaft des Judentums* reflected, or shaped, the consciousness of "the average German Jew" of the nineteenth century. Funkenstein's discussion relies upon the model of the scholar-activist who has been accorded a "special position in the establishment of ... culture and justification of the nation-state."<sup>18</sup> But it would be difficult to find among nineteenth-century German Jews a figure comparable to Michelet, to Sybel or Treitschke, or to the Czech nationalists Palacký and Masaryk – all of whom pursued their research and political interests within a public, national arena. This is not to suggest that practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* removed themselves from raging debates over the nature of Jewish identity or that they saw their scholarly mission as transcending such debates. Quite to the contrary, one of their leading representatives, Zacharias Frankel, regarded *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as the defining agent of Jewish identity in the modern age, as "the mighty lever without which there is no Judaism."<sup>19</sup> Frankel's adversary in matters of religious reform, Abraham Geiger, expressed a related sentiment when he declared that "[c]ritical inquiry now serves not only to make perceptible what was; its sources also enhance the appreciation, the shaping of the present."<sup>20</sup>

Still, several important differences between their fusion of scholarly and public missions and that of the scholar-politicians of nation-states must be noted. First, the process of redefining Jewishness in a secular era was a most contentious and fractious affair. By the early nineteenth century, many German Jews had internalized the implicit Emancipation-era demand to segregate their private religious lives from their public, national (e.g. German) lives. Hence, the *quid pro quo* for receipt of rights of citizenship was the relegation of

Jewishness to the narrow domain of a *Relionsgemeinschaft* – a community far more circumscribed in its function and authority than the premodern *kehillah*. Rather than seek out a common heritage in a Jewish *national* past, Jews in nineteenth-century Germany became "German citizens of the Jewish faith," with the latter portion of this designation reflecting a thoroughly denationalized Jewish identity. Within this cultural milieu, critical scholarship served not to unify but instead to deepen the divisions within the Jewish fold. To recall the case of Abraham Geiger, the only modern Jewish scholar whom Funkenstein mentions, scholarship dutifully advanced his program for religious reform. Geiger's *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel* of 1857 was a powerful articulation of the notion of an evolutionary Judaism, whose foundational source, the Bible, has been subject to persistent historical change and revalorization.<sup>21</sup> The audience to whom this idea might have appealed, scholars and advocates of religious reform, was hardly the same audience as that addressed by Zacharias Frankel in a seminal work of the same period, *Darkhei ha-Mishnah* (Ways of the Mishnah) (1859). There, Frankel attempted to trace, with a mixture of traditional reverence and historical criticism, the development of the first strata of post-Biblical Jewish literature. The tone and language (Hebrew) of the book indicate that he hoped to reach, and enlighten, a more traditional readership than did Geiger in his *Urschrift*, indeed, a more traditional readership than is implied in the notion of an "average German Jew" in the nineteenth century.

That Geiger and Frankel were scholarly and religious adversaries is hardly a novel insight. The point here is that their tendentiousness, typical of early *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, complicates the issue of the relationship of nineteenth-century Jewish scholars to a new and popularly rooted collective memory. In terms of their own self-perception, some, if not most, of these scholars clearly hoped to produce a new vision of the Jewish past.<sup>22</sup> But their own divisiveness over the historical contours of Judaism challenges the idea of a single shared vision. Moreover, it throws into question the holism of the collective memory of the "average German Jew" –

especially if we assume that scholarship exerted more than a marginal impact on the German-Jewish public. Conversely, it might have been the case that the collective memory of the mythical German Jew was more holistic than that of the critical scholar, which would seem to support Yerushalmi's claims about the inefficacy of the modern scholarly medium.

These brief observations are offered not as definitive critiques of Funkenstein's glosses to Yerushalmi, but rather as stimuli to further discussion of the relationship between history and memory in the modern Jewish historical experience. Such a discussion should remain, as does Funkenstein's, sensitive to contemporaneous phenomena of memory formation or invention in nineteenth-century Europe. But it must also take sufficient account of contextual differences. Unlike their nationalist counterparts in Europe, nineteenth-century Jewish scholars lacked not only a guiding nationalist ideology, but also a platform and position of power from which to propagate their respective visions. Neither Frankel nor Geiger, neither Leopold Zunz nor Heinrich Graetz (the last of whom came closest to elucidating a "nationalist" interpretation of the Jewish past) had a university post. Unlike Ranke at the University of Berlin or Michelet at the Collège de France, these scholars completed years of rigorous university training without ever gaining access to the professoriate in state-sponsored institutions.<sup>23</sup> Their only recourse was to accept employment in the modern rabbinical seminaries established in Germany beginning in 1854. These seminaries developed according to the emerging denominational fissures which divided German Judaism – i.e. liberal, positive-historical or conservative, and orthodox; the existence of each affirmed the regnant *religious* definition of Jewishness as well as the relegation of that Jewishness to a decidedly private sphere. The seminaries appear to substantiate David Sorkin's claim that a discrete German-Jewish "subculture" stood adjacent to, though not subsumed by, a larger non-Jewish culture.<sup>24</sup> As components of that subculture, the rabbinical seminaries became viable, in large measure, because well-trained Jewish scholars failed to gain employment in non-Jewish academic institutions in Germany.

Relegated to a private domain, and ideologically divided amongst themselves, nineteenth-century Jewish scholars in Germany lacked altogether the accoutrements of power which characterized their non-Jewish counterparts on the Continent. To be sure, Abraham Geiger was not the paradigmatic "national historian – who in the nineteenth century enjoyed the status of a priest of culture, and whose work, even professional, was still read by a wide stratum of the educated public...."<sup>25</sup> He was rather a partisan soldier in the battle to reform Judaism, who possessed neither the platform nor the moral authority to erect a collective memory embraced by all Jews. Lacking these qualifications, it is somewhat obfuscating to choose, as did Amos Funkenstein, Geiger's *Urschrift* as the sole Jewish analogue to nationalist historiography of the nineteenth century.

Despite the limitations of this parallel, Funkenstein's reading of Geiger and his contemporaries represents an important refinement of Yerushalmi's treatment of nineteenth-century historical (and historiographical) imagination. Even more significantly, Funkenstein proves willing to consider transformations of Jewish collective memory not only in the nineteenth century, but also in the twentieth century in which the struggle for Jewish *national* rights crystallized. In doing so, he again calls attention to a subject which Yerushalmi left largely unexamined. For in *Zakhor* it is the *anti-historical* strains of Jewish nationalist thought, as embodied in modern Hebrew literature, which are emphasized. Yerushalmi reminds us of the *cri de coeur* of Yudka, the protagonist of a famous Hebrew short story, "Ha-Derashah" ("The Sermon") by Haim Hazaz. Resorting to a base equation between the entirety of Jewish history and Jewish history in the Diaspora, Yudka declares: "I want to state that I am opposed to Jewish history."<sup>26</sup> Although Yerushalmi recognizes that Yudka's "opposition" is but one of several strains in Jewish nationalist thought, he nonetheless deems Yudka emblematic of the "radical 'breaks' that modern Jewish existence has entailed."<sup>27</sup>

However, as Funkenstein suggests in passing, the constructive role for historiography envisaged by Jewish scholars in Palestine, and the discovery of new national symbols, argue

against Yerushalmi's assertion of mnemonic rupture. Jewish historians who immigrated from Europe to Palestine in the first third of this century deliberately set out to forge a new collective memory for the Jewish people, now redefined in political-national terms. Their mission was hardly that of Yudka, who wanted to erase large chunks of the Jewish past from memory. Yitzhak Fritz Baer, the first professor of Jewish history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, observed in his inaugural lecture in 1930:

There is nothing to our history if we erase from its record one or two thousand years, or if there is a long era like this [the Middle Ages] which we consider only as an addendum to ancient history....

The majority of Baer's research was devoted to medieval Jewish history, in the main to Spanish Jewish history, though to a lesser extent to Ashkenazic Jewish history.<sup>28</sup> When his attention turned to the latter, Baer celebrated the medieval pious circles known as *Hasidim* of Northern France and Germany. He perceived in them an admirable mix of personal austerity, deep faith and a commitment to an egalitarian social order. In fact, the Hasidic type became a symbol of dignity, courage and national affirmation in the face of persistent hostility. Curiously then, Baer's historical heroes were neither warriors nor political leaders, as with other Zionist scholars and activists, but rather the simplest and most fervent religious believers.<sup>29</sup>

Informed by erudition and critical insight, Baer's canonization of the Hasidic type was not merely a scholarly exercise. It also offered an example worthy of emulation in the present. The forging of a vital link between past and present was central to Baer's mission of developing a new Jewish historical scholarship in Jerusalem.<sup>30</sup> This task was even more explicitly advocated by Baer's colleague in Jewish history at the Hebrew University, Ben-Zion Dinur.<sup>31</sup>

It was Dinur who developed the particular interpretation of Jewish history which has come to be known as "Palestinocentric," a perspective that stressed the unceasing

bond between Jews and their ancestral homeland. Despite his attachment to this principle, Dinur did not neglect the history of Jewish life in the Diaspora. It was a primary focus of his abundant monographic and anthological work. In his most renowned scholarly undertaking, the eight-volume *Yisrael ba-Golah* (Israel in exile), Dinur treated the millennial passage of Jews in dispersion not in ignominious terms but rather as prefatory to the ultimate fulfillment that would come with the return to Palestine.<sup>32</sup> Quite unlike the fictional Yudka, Dinur believed that retrieving the Diaspora past was necessary for at least two reasons: first, it revealed manifestations of an affirmative Jewish national identity (e.g. through the functioning of Diaspora communal institutions); and second, the accumulation of these manifestations validated the continuity of Jewish national identity, thereby lending unity to Jewish history and fortifying the emerging Zionist movement.<sup>33</sup> Thus, for Dinur, past and present were intertwined in a mutually reinforcing relationship. Zionism provided him with the ideological and institutional impetus to undertake a new evaluation of the past; conversely, the past played an invaluable instrumental role in his triumphant Zionist teleology.

Even more than Yitzhak Baer, Ben-Zion Dinur was convinced that his mission as scholar did not confine him to the walls of the academy. He was a prolific author of popular historical accounts of Jewish and Zionist history who was actively involved in the development of educational curricula for Jewish history in pre-state Palestine and later as Minister of Education and Culture in the State of Israel. A sense of Dinur's broad pedagogic mission can be gleaned from a personal reminiscence on the occasion of his seventieth birthday:

To the best of my ability, I have tried to instill in students the same link to our history that I believe is a vital condition for solving one of the most difficult problems facing us: how to revive the Covenant of generations. The force of 4,000 years of history is great if it is alive in our hearts, but if it is merely written in

books, then it has no value. If we want to be heirs of the people of Israel, then we must instill those 4,000 years into the heart of every person.<sup>34</sup>

Here Dinur acknowledges the imperative of providing historical continuity within the larger Zionist project of remolding Jewish collective memory. His desire to assert such historical continuity did not distinguish him from previous generations of Jewish scholars. But the content, and perhaps the scope, of his guiding ideology did. He saw Zionism as an antidote to the fragmentation of Jewish identity that had resulted from acculturation and religious denominationalization in the nineteenth century. Zionism also empowered him and others to imagine a community in which Jewish and national identity were not segregated but seamlessly fused.<sup>35</sup> Within the community which came to embody that vision, the Jewish settlement in Palestine, Ben-Zion Dinur assumed an important public role – as a teacher at the Jewish national university in Jerusalem, as a political activist and, eventually, as a Cabinet Minister. In comparative terms, Dinur (as well as his colleagues in Jerusalem) were accorded a degree of institutional and even political power of which Jewish scholars in Europe only dreamed. Given this power, it seems justified to offer Dinur, his colleagues and Zionist historiography in general as illuminating case studies in the exploration of the encounter between Jewish memory and modernity.

This is not to suggest that Zionist historians have instantly and successfully fashioned monolithic memories. Saul Friedlander's comment that "no mythical framework seems to be taking hold of the Jewish imagination," while uttered in a different context, seems to obtain for Zionist historiography.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, a considerable gap can be noticed in Zionist historians between programmatic assertions announcing a revolutionary rewriting of the Jewish past and nuanced scholarship that reveals strong continuities with earlier Jewish research.<sup>37</sup> Further, if one recognizes the differences in method, topical interest and temperament between scholars such as Ben-Zion Dinur and Gershom Scholem, or Joseph Klausner and Yitzhak Baer, the very notion of a coherent

"Jerusalem School" of historiography becomes problematic.<sup>38</sup> Unquestionably, a number of innovative themes appear in the work of these scholars which distinguish them from their predecessors (e.g. the centrality of the land of Israel in Jewish history). But it is no easy feat to reduce Scholem's anti-essentialist understanding of Judaism and Baer's essentialism to a Zionist "master narrative."

Even while observing this, we need not succumb to the view that modernity signals, to borrow the imagery of the Kabbalists, the breaking of a holistic vessel of memory, an *Ur-memory*, into minute historical shards. It may be more helpful to speak of the *counter-memories* which nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars, impelled by various ideological inspirations, have labored to forge.<sup>39</sup> The nomenclature of "counter-memories" recognizes the defiant iconoclasm (and fragmenting effect) of modernity. But it also permits us to avoid the assumption of absolute disjuncture between the memory constructs of premodern and modern Jews.

Such an approach finds support in the work of the German historian Hans Blumenberg. Blumenberg has argued that in the passage of historical time we can observe a process of functional "reoccupation" by which "totally heterogeneous contents ... take on identical functions in specific positions in the system of man's interpretation of the world and himself."<sup>40</sup> He has developed this insight to greatest effect in his discussion of the "legitimacy of the modern age" (*Legitimität der Neuzeit*) – a subject quite germane to our problem of Jewish historical memory in the modern age. He explains that although the modern age was characterized by an attempt to "carry out a radical break with tradition," its representatives

found it impossible to decline to answer questions about the totality of history. To that extent the philosophy of history is an attempt to answer a medieval question with the means available to a post-medieval age.<sup>41</sup>

Blumenberg's understanding of the functional reoccupations of modern thinkers does not entail an uncritical perpetuation of premodern paradigms of thought. Rather, his view is best

David N. Myers

seen in dialectical terms; the search for legitimacy is marked both by an urge to break radically with tradition and by an attendant revalorization of "traditional modes of activity."<sup>42</sup>

It seems to me that such a perspective can contribute much to a more refined understanding of the relationship between Jewish history and Jewish memory in the modern age. It can bridge sets of seemingly contradictory propositions: that Jewish historical consciousness inhabits a continuum of memory as opposed to the view that there is a radical breach marked by the rise of critical Jewish scholarship; and concomitantly, that the modern Jewish scholar has repeatedly sought to play a constructive role in forging a new Jewish collective memory (or collective memories) as opposed to the view that the enterprise of critical Jewish scholarship is doomed to an atomized and unproductive existence.<sup>43</sup> This kind of dialectical understanding should guide future analyses of the construction of Jewish memories in the modern age. For the moment, however, it can serve a more limited task: to mediate between one of the most important texts of contemporary Jewish thought, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor*, and one of the most important commentaries to have emerged in its wake.