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ESSAYS

HOLOCAUST SATIRE ON ISRAELI TV: THE BATTLE AGAINST CANONIC MEMORY AGENTS

LIAT STEIR-LIVNY

Sapir Academic College, Department of Culture
The Open University, Department of Literature, Language and the Arts (Israel)

The Holocaust is an unhealed trauma that constitutes a pivotal experience in Israel. For many years, Israeli culture recoiled from dealing with the Holocaust from a humorous or satirical perspective. The perception was that a humorous approach to the Holocaust might threaten the sanctity of its memory or evoke feelings of disrespect towards the subject and hurt the survivors' feelings. Official agents of Holocaust memory continue to make use of this approach, but since the 1990s, a new unofficial path of memory has begun taking shape in tandem. It is an alternative and subversive path that seeks to remember – albeit differently. Texts that combine the Holocaust with humor are a major aspect of this new memory (Steir-Livny 2014).

This paper analyzes the changes in the attitude towards Holocaust satire and humor in Israel. The case study includes three skits by *The Chamber Quintet* (*Habamishia Hakamerit*, “Matar” Productions, Channels 2-Tela’ad, Channel 1, 1993-1997) which were the first that dared to use satire in order to criticize Holocaust memory agents in Israel. This paper focuses on this primeval critique through theories of trauma and secondary trauma. Contrary to perceptions that these satirical skits disrespect the Holocaust and its survivors, this paper maintains that these skits do

not engage at all with the Holocaust itself, but rather with the question of Holocaust memory: the skits criticize the way in which collective memory agents exploit and disrespect its memory.

Holocaust Humor in Western Culture

Between the 1940s and the 1980s, very few films were produced that dared touch on the theme in a humorous manner [for example, *The Great Dictator*, (Charlie Chaplin, 1940), *To Be or Not To Be* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942), *The Producers* (Mel Brooks, 1968), *Yaakov the Liar* (Jurek Becker, 1969)].

The worldwide debate about combining the Holocaust with humor first began in the 1980s. Disagreements on the subject broke out over Art Spiegelman's graphic novels *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986), and *Maus: Here My Troubles Began* (1991) in which Spiegelman rendered his Polish-born father's biography in the Second World War into a world of cats versus mice. The novel achieved tremendous success, and Spiegelman was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in a Special Citation for Letters (Huysen 2001). From then on, the combination of the Holocaust with humor was discussed more and more freely in Western research and popular culture (Kaplan 2003; Morreall 2011; Lipman 2008). The film *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni 1997) spearheaded the way towards a deeper debate on the theme and its silencing. The feature film tells the story of an Italian Jew, Guido Orefice, and his son Joshua, who are deported to an extermination camp in 1943. Guido tells his son that they are playing a complicated game, which they can ultimately win by using their imaginative powers and will. In debates about the film, some argued that Benigni made a joke of the Holocaust, and many of its viewers and critics felt disquieted by a comedy ostensibly unfolding in an extermination camp, but which hardly addressed the atrocities of the Holocaust. Still others held that Benigni managed to instill a touching tragic-comic aspect into the film, which generated a powerful sense of the absurdity of the racial theories (Niv 2000; Zand 2002; Bartov 2008).

In the last decades, artists, comedians and satirists have dismantled the sanctity of the theme, and have introduced Holocaust memory into mundane comic situations, in a way aimed at protesting against the untouchable nature of the theme, by secularizing it in movies, stand-up appearances, TV sitcoms, Youtube videos, and more (Steir-Livny 2014).

Holocaust Humor in Israel: From Taboo to Debate in Popular Culture

Debate on Holocaust humor in Israel was minimal and remained on the margins from statehood in 1948 until the 1990s. The prevalent position was that the combination of humor and the Holocaust disparages the Holocaust's status and decreases the magnitude of the trauma and suffering.

Ways for jointly featuring humor and the Holocaust were first broached in Israel in the 1990s. In 1997, Israelis fumed when it transpired that on Holocaust Day, young people swapped coarse jokes on the internet. The reactions were divided into two groups: those who saw it as a healthy way of coping with the Holocaust in the present, and others who took issue with breaking the unyielding taboo on the subject (Loshitzky 2001).

The screening of *Life is Beautiful* in Israel in 1999, again placed the subject on the public agenda, and reactions in Israel were divided into groups that were for and against. Some viewers walked out demonstratively. Others maintained that representations of the Holocaust do not have to be realistic or possess documentary qualities, and objected to opinions, which supported shaping Holocaust consciousness with its own ceremonial language and reflexive automatic responses towards it. Those who supported the film contended that the angry critics of *Life is Beautiful* in America righteously claimed that it was impossible to create a comedy from the Holocaust. Apparently they were not aware of the tradition of Jewish humor and its ties with pain and persecution, or about the unique role of humor and fantasy in attempts to survive, or at least to preserve a semblance of normality and humanity during the Holocaust, and the tradition of black humor, gallows humor, and concentration camp humor in literary and cinematic representations of the Holocaust (Steir-Livny 2014).

In the 1990s and 2000s, the subject began to be addressed also in research. For example, Ruth Bondi (2002), a Holocaust survivor who documents the Jews of Czechoslovakia under Nazi occupation, described the contribution made by humor and satire for Jews in the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto. She described the songs, sketches, cabaret shows, and the satirical newspaper that were an integral part of life there. The 1990s and 2000s saw the publishing of comprehensive books in Israel, dealing with the importance of humor for Jews under the Nazi regime (Cohen 1994; Levin 2004; Ostrover 2009). Today the debate on the subject in Israel is addressed in films, theatre, TV sitcoms and satire, stand-up appearances, internet clips etc. (Gertz 2004; Steir-Livny 2009; Ofer 2013; Ne'eman Arad 2013).

Television, alongside other forms of mass media, is a major player in the battle over Holocaust memory in Israel. It has an important role in the politics of recognition and in shaping

the identity of individuals and groups. It is a dominant arena in the battle over the Holocaust collective memory (Bourdieu 1984a; Bourdieu 1984b). Since television in Israel is owned and managed by power groups in society (particularly the three main channels – 1, 10, and 22), it attempts to conserve, even in this multicultural era, a sort of tribal campfire that helps shore up the sense of national pride as well as endorsing Jewish and Zionist values (Yuran 2001). But television also provides opportunities for change. Contemporary cultures examine themselves through their art, and television is a spectrum along which controversial, diverse issues and points of view can be openly discussed almost without punishment (Fiske 1980; Newcomb and Hirsch 1994; Shifman 2008).

The Chamber Quintet (Habamishia Hakamerit) was the first TV program that broke the taboo of Holocaust memory and used a satiric approach to criticize the national memory of the Holocaust. The 69 episodes (five seasons) of the program were broadcast, during the 1990s, on Channels 1 and 2 as well as the cable stations. *The Chamber Quintet* became a foundation of Israeli satire, and the content it presented can be seen as signifiers of the changes and new trajectories of collective memory regarding various subjects, including that of the Holocaust.

Acting out the Holocaust in the Israeli Presence

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The problematic way in which Israeli society experiences, in the present, the trauma of the Holocaust is clearly discernible in the skit “Ghetto”, which focuses on a young man from Tel Aviv trying to get to a party. In the skit, actor Rami Heuberger asks actor Shai Avivi for directions to a party. The directions reveal that all the street names are redolent with death – the names of heroes who sacrificed their lives for the State (“Hanged Men Street”, “Eli Cohen Street”), or are in some way tied to the Holocaust: “Take Warsaw Ghetto Street, then a U-turn onto Concentration Camp Avenue, then park in Dachau Square”, directs Avivi. “Is it nearby?” Heuberger asks. “Dachau? Dachau is right here, just around the corner”, answers Avivi.

The skit can be analyzed through the research regarding trauma and secondary trauma. Trauma in the mental-psychological sense was first cited in the late nineteenth-century; Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, was among the first to develop it. Freud (1978, 2002) considered that one of the central concepts in trauma was “repetition compulsion” – returning to a trauma while blurring the boundaries between past and present, and thus re-experiencing the trauma. This repetition causes suffering and works against the desire of the sufferer. Freud’s disciples broadened the debate on trauma and its immediate and later symptoms. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an extremely common mental disturbance among people who have

undergone traumatic incidents. Its sufferers continue to experience the traumatic events for years afterwards (for example: Herman 2004).

But a trauma can affect wider circles. In research, it is called “Secondary Traumatic Stress” – indirect exposure to the trauma by friends and relatives who are emotionally involved with the traumatized persons or indirect exposure to the trauma through intense debate in the media (television, radio, journalism, internet, etc.). Charles Fygley (1995) argues that PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) symptoms, like stress and anxiety, can appear in people who suffer from “Secondary Traumatic Stress”, albeit less intensely. Collective memory researchers claim that the danger inherent in the disintegration of distinctions between different times and the merging of the traumatic past with the present is relevant not only for those who experienced the trauma in the flesh but also for those groups that are linked with the people who underwent the trauma. Both groups and societies can become trapped in a situation that co-mingles past and present and reconstructs the trauma, or certain aspects of it, in different ways. Such post-traumatic symptoms can affect the group’s behavior in societal and political spheres (LaCapra 2000).

Clinical research addresses Holocaust survivors as people who suffer from PTSD and there are many debates over the question whether Holocaust survivors have transferred traumatic symptoms to their children (second-generation Holocaust survivors) and from them to their grandchildren (third-generation Holocaust survivors). But the trauma lives in much wider circles and affects all Jewish-Israelis through an intensive Holocaust awareness imbued by official memory agents.

The Holocaust was and remains a central trauma in Israel’s national consciousness. The memory of the trauma does not fade over the years; on the contrary, Holocaust representations and the public discourse regarding the Holocaust have only grown stronger in recent decades. From the late 1940s onward, Israel’s official collective memory of the Holocaust was relentlessly integrated into the Israeli collective memory. Moreover, the traumatic memory of the Holocaust was and is integrated in the representations of the Arab-Israeli conflict, in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular. Researchers claim that the Israeli media, educational and cultural fields, and public discourse in Israel frame the Holocaust as a current, ongoing local trauma, rather than an event that ended decades ago in another place (Bar-Tal 2007; Meyers, Neiger and Zandberg 2014).

Surveys reveal that among the Jewish-Israeli population in general, since the 1940s, the Holocaust has been assimilated as a central event, and young Jewish-Israelis perceive the Holocaust as the historical event that has had the greatest impact on them and their future, even

more than the founding of the State (Porat 2011). Studies in Israel have shown that Holocaust memory has a very powerful presence, does not have just a one-generational impact, and is a cross-generational defining trait of the Jewish population in Israel. Therefore, in Israel, the terms “second-generation Holocaust survivors” and “third-generation Holocaust survivors” refer not only to the offspring of Holocaust survivors, but represent the Jewish Israelis who were born after 1945 in Israel and grew up in an environment that focused on the Holocaust as one of the most important features in Jewish Israeli identity (Milner 2004; Solomon and Chaitin, 2007; Steir-Livny 2014).

Every group builds a collective memory that shapes its unique identity and emphasizes it as opposed to other groups. There is no group, society or state that can exist without a collective memory as this is what unifies people who, in the most part, are not acquainted with one another. (“imagined communities” in the words of Benedict Anderson). Collective memory is based on a selective processing of history and is aimed to serve the group’s interests (political, social, national). The shaping of collective memory involves forgetting and marginalizing certain themes while emphasizing others. This is how society builds its narrative as opposed to its “others”. Memory agents, such as historians, filmmakers, educators, official ceremonies and urban planners build national collective memory (Halbwachs 1992; Young 1993, Zerubavel 1995). Jeffrey Alexander (2009a; 2009b) claims that any event – as horrendous as it may be – will turn into a trauma for the collective only if members of the elite define and construct it as such. He explains that “memory agents” construct collective trauma – members of the hegemony who feel this event will affect the collective memory and identity in the present and in the future. These “memory agents” construct the trauma as “collective” through a long cultural process of narration and signification.

In the skit “Ghetto”, the creators use satire in order to protest against the way memory agents in Israel have increased the secondary trauma of Jewish Israelis. It reflects how collective memory agents relive the trauma of the Holocaust through street names. This part of urban planning reflects the problematic situation of Holocaust remembrance in Israel: the past and the present combined.

The therapeutic importance of black humor (also known as horror humor, sick humor, gallows humor, and grim humor) and self-disparagement for traumatized individuals has been frequently studied, in a wide range of contexts (among victims of abuse, crime, disasters, and more) and in particularly in the context of Jewish humor. Black humor has been presented as an effective defense mechanism for an oppressed minority to withstand attacks by their oppressors; in the Jewish context, it constitutes the defense mechanism of an entire people (for example:

Blacher Cohen 1987; Davies 1991; Ziv 1993; Epstein 2002; Brook 2003; Greenspoon 2011; Wisse 2013; Sover 2015).

Through black humor, the skit reflects the way memory agents in Israel relive the trauma in the present and, sub-textually project the Holocaust on the Israel-Arab conflict. Since Israel's founding, the Holocaust has been connected with the Arab-Jewish-Israeli conflict, creating cultural-media representations that have drawn parallels between Arabs and Nazis, between Israel's wars and the possibility of a "second Holocaust". Researchers contend that Holocaust memory was and remains a crucial factor in the perceptions of the reality of the conflict. It intensifies anxiety levels among Jewish Israelis and their sense of victimhood. The politicization of the Holocaust has created a situation in which the trauma of the Holocaust is integrated within Israeli present-day reality also through the protracted Arab-Jewish-Israeli conflict. This, in turn, has engendered a situation of collective awareness of fear, insecurity, and constant anxiety stemming from the sense of existential danger (Bar-Tal 2007). The skit reflects these notions by showing that the street names commemorate the intertwining of the Holocaust and the Israeli wars, thus creating eternal victimhood.

However, from the earliest days of the State and particularly after the Six Day War (June 1967), left-wingers have suggested a counter-discourse, initially in moderation, but from the 1980s with growing intensity. It is an inverse political memory that criticizes Israelis and the way in which the historically victimized have become the present-day perpetrators (Steir-Livny 2012). Television satire, much of which is written by members of the left wing, reflects those positions and combines the Holocaust with satire to protest the way in which the right-wing memory agents exploits the Holocaust to strengthen its political agenda. Reliving the Holocaust in the present creates a situation of constant fear. This victimization is used in order to justify violent policies against the Arabs in Israel and the Palestinians in the occupied territories, as well as blocking any opportunity for a peace treaty with the Palestinians (Bar-Tal, 2007).

The Holocaust as a Tool to Leverage Political Achievements

Satire tries to repair a society by using humor. It indicates the absurd in an existing situation and attempts to influence people to change their attitudes. Since satire takes a humorous approach, its use makes it easier to get the message across than some didactic propaganda attempt that might create resistance (Ziv 1984, 1998; Bergson 1999). In recent decades, satirists in Israel have observed how the Holocaust became a way to leverage political achievements. The scriptwriters

of *The Chamber Quintet* aimed to show how the Holocaust became a tool for politicians and public figures who want to create an impression and chalk up achievements.

In the skit “This Terrible Place”, the Israeli Prime Minister and his entourage are shown touring Poland with a crew of security guards and photographers and using the site of mass murder as a photo opportunity. The Prime Minister wants to be photographed next to a specific tree “in this terrible place”, as he demands. He is not really sad or touched when the camera doesn’t work. He is all smiles, cracking jokes, totally detached from the significance of the site. When the photographers start filming, he puts on a serious face. All he can do is repeat the mantra, “In this terrible place, in this horrible place, Jews were slaughtered”. In broken English, he mumbles a series of clichés in the style of “Look at this tree. This holy tree was watered by blood”. His movements are ludicrous, he pushes his wife aside, tries to find a place in center-frame of the stills photographers crowding around him. As he is swept away by the metaphor of a tree symbolizing the Jewish people, its roots emblematic of the roots of the Jews whose scions were killed next to that tree, a security guard takes a few steps away and discovers that they have the wrong tree. The tree they wanted to film is a few yards away. His embarrassed advisors ask the delegation and photographers to move to the correct tree and start again. The politician’s wife smiles her awful smile. When they arrive at the right tree, the politician resumes the exact same speech, cliché-ridden and detached, and with the very same pathos, he repeats his speech about what happened “in this terrible place”. The skit shows the cynical and hegemonic manipulation of the Holocaust by politicians who are emotionally detached from the subject; for them, it is just another political tool, nothing else.

By transferring the Prime Minister from one tree to the other, satirists unveil the way the Holocaust has become a “master paradigm”, as Tobias Ebbrecht terms it: a series of well-known, repetitive visuals that have appeared so often in Western popular culture that they have almost become clichés. In Western memory, the combination of Poland, forests and Jews is enough to create a Holocaust association. These objects migrate into popular culture as emblematic signs to convey contemporary themes. By revealing the visual “master paradigm” of the Holocaust, the satirists hope to expose Holocaust memory as a political tool and, as such, dismantle its power.

Uzi Weil, a screenwriter for *The Chamber Quintet*, asserts that such manipulations of the Holocaust have intensified and have swelled into unpleasant and disproportional dimensions: “Someone says ‘Holocaust’ and everyone shuts up”. He believes the Holocaust has become a mechanism for forcing people’s consciousness to stand at attention whenever the word is spoken; he links this phenomenon to that of the “Holocaust industry”, which encompasses the de rigueur school trips to Poland, the selling of right-wing politics in the guise of sensitivity to the

Holocaust, and so on. Weil says that using humor to highlight the Holocaust's commercialization is a way to counter hypocrisy, and to close the gap between people's fine words and their genuine emotions (Shifman 2008). The skit strives to indicate the debasement of words connected to the Holocaust and the total lack of understanding about what happened "there". Beyond that, satirists aim to take issue with the process in which the Holocaust in Israel has become a series of images that gain political-personal-social capital. It is meant to pull back the curtain of hypocrisy from the memory agents of the Holocaust in Israel.

The skit, "Fledermaus at the Olympics," repeats the same idea in a different way. It is set in Stuttgart, Germany during the world athletics championship. Two Zionist wheeler-dealers have managed to enter the area alongside the running-track and in broken English, spiked with Hebrew and Yiddish, they demand that the judge give the Israeli runner an advantage to reduce the "historic injustice" and "to reduce the humiliation". The athlete, Zion Cohen, is the antithesis of the Zionist model of "muscular Judaism": he is short and scrawny, he has "legs like ice-cream sticks". Since he seems incapable of competing with the other athletes through physical strength, he calls on a familiar Jewish trait – lobbying – accompanied here by an Israeli quality – chutzpah. The latter quality is expressed by the fact that the wheeler-dealers burst into the running track area and then demand benefits for the Israeli – not as a favor but because of the rights he deserves due to historic injustice, because of the Holocaust. In the case of the wheeler-dealers, they are continuing the tradition of the Jewish *schnorrer* (beggar), twinning it with Israeli aggressiveness that deteriorates into curses and threats, yet ultimately manages to convince the judge.

The skit shows the cynical and hegemonic manipulation of the Holocaust by politicians who are emotionally detached from the subject. Ami Amir, producer of *The Chamber Quintet*, maintains that skits citing the Holocaust are aimed at showing how it has been enlisted for political and emotionally manipulative needs to justify actions in the present (Blau 2004).

In conclusion, the satirists of *The Chamber Quintet* hold up a mirror to emphasize, through humor, how ridiculous and wrong is the pathos-ridden canonic memory of the Holocaust and its political use in Israel. They strive to explain how extreme and destructive it is for the Holocaust to be injected into everyday life and transformed into an integral facet of Israeli identity.

The satirists do not ridicule the Holocaust or condemn it; on the contrary, they express how Holocaust memory is an integral part of their identity. It is tattooed on their souls and they use satire, not because they have detached themselves from the memory but because they cannot stand the way memory agents use the trauma in a manipulative and cynical way. The skits are their way of protesting against the violation of the trauma. They use satire in order to go against

memory agents who insist on reviving the Holocaust in the present. Against the introduction of the Holocaust into everyday life and its transformation into an integral facet of Israeli identity, they strive to explain how extreme and destructive this actually is.

Representations of the Holocaust within the medium of satirical TV shows allow for different, contradictory readings of these texts. Zandberg (2006) claims that the skits do indeed criticize the banalization of the Holocaust and its instrumentalization, but the fact that such critique appears in a program of television skits, together with skits relating to many other subjects, undermines its own criticism and makes the addressing of the Holocaust in the program banal and mundane. In this way, the medium and the context themselves create a trivialization of the subject. In my opinion, the fact that the satirical critique of Holocaust memory that appeared in *The Chamber Quintet* in conjunction with other skits that confront official Israeli memory agents in other fields and shatter major Israeli myths (such as the Israeli army, Israeli wars, the Israeli macho image, religion, gender relations), only strengthened its criticism. The secularization of Holocaust memory in these skits did not turn Holocaust memory to banal, but on the contrary, turned it into a complex memory with different facets and numerous problems that must be discussed for the sake of Holocaust memory for future generations. Because of this, the medium did not undermine its critique, but rather strengthened it. The satirists exposed, for the first time, the ways memory agents use the Holocaust in order to establish constant victimization. Through these skits, *The Chamber Quintet* positioned itself as a groundbreaking program that set the ground for a future generation of TV satire like *Wonderful Country* (*Eretz Nehederet*; Keshet Productions, Channel 2-Keshet, 2003-2015) and *the Nation's Back* [*Gav Hauma*, Channel 10 2014-present, formerly, *The State of the Nation* (*Mazav Hauma*), Keshet Productions, Channel 2 2010-2014] who also use Holocaust satire in order to protest against the hegemonic Holocaust remembrance in Israel, and for a new generation of artists who use black humor in different cultural fields towards Holocaust-related issues in order to protest against Israeli political, social and economic wrongs (Steir-Livny 2014).

Contrary to hegemonic perceptions that a satirical approach towards the Holocaust is degrading, the skits do not deride or scorn the Holocaust. In fact, they do not engage at all with the Holocaust itself, but rather with the question of Holocaust memory and its perpetuation in Israel. The satirists aim to take issue with the process in which the Holocaust in Israel has become a series of images that gain political-personal-social capital. The skits demonstrate how Jewish-Israelis, raised in the shadow of Holocaust memories, use satire on television to undermine the hegemonic politicization of the Holocaust, and can thus be perceived as basic, satirical critiques of the memory of the Holocaust in Israel.

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ABSTRACT

Holocaust Satire on Israeli TV: the Battle against Canonic Memory Agents

For many years, Israeli culture recoiled from dealing with the Holocaust from a humorous or satirical perspective. Since the 1990, a new unofficial path of memory has begun taking shape in Israel. Texts that combine the Holocaust with humor are a major aspect of this new memory. The case study includes three skits by *The Chamber Quintet* (*Hahamishia Hakamerit*, “Matar” Productions, Channels 2-Tela’ad, Channel 1, 1993-1997), the first who dared to use satire to criticize the Holocaust memory agents in Israel. The paper analyzes the changes in the attitude towards Holocaust humor in Israel through theories of trauma and secondary trauma. Contrary to perceptions that these satirical skits disrespect the Holocaust and its survivors, the paper argues that these skits do not constitute cheapening mechanisms, but are nurtured by pain and criticism of a post-traumatic society.

KEYWORDS

Holocaust, Satire, Holocaust satire, Holocaust humor, Israeli culture, Israeli Television, Post-trauma, Cultural representations

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