A multitude canon: Shoah definitions

in Israeli encyclopedias

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The infinite amount of information amassed in the digital era challenges any public discourse, and undoubtedly creates a genuine impediment in the sphere of cultural creativity. Any factor, institutional or private, can add information that becomes universally available, and also freely consumes extant information available on the Internet. I seek to argue that the competition between narratives evokes a different response in the context of the canonical, similar to Maurice Halbwachs' thesis on memory: the canonical has a clear-cut leitmotif, but details are added or subtracted in accordance with the ever-changing spirit of its formulators.1 In other words, the canonical does not disappear – at times it even becomes more rigid – but it assimilates or excludes certain matters in accordance with the spirit of the times. Analogously, it is in a state of perpetual "oxygenation", enabling it to preserve its unique place, while also incorporating new approaches.

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[1] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago/ London: Chicago University Press, 1982): 52-83.

What would be "the right way" to manage this mass of information and works that are universally accessible? Will the page rating of Google, the world's most popular search engine, determine what is canonical in the future by the number of hits? Moreover, can the canonical continue to exist in an era inundated with information, in which the only governing rule is that of popularity? I believe that in the case of concepts that hold canonical value for society, society will adhere to them even when challenged by the digital. However, similar to Halbwachs' dynamic memory, the canonical will also become dynamic and will incorporate sub-streams that will gradually modify its contents.2

To examine this issue I chose to analyze the challenges posed by the digital era vis-à-vis the definition of the term 'Shoah' (Holocaust) in Israeli society. A priori I chose a concept which holds canonical value for Israeli society, and whose validity is subverted by only a negligible marginal minority. Looking up the term 'Shoah' on Google's Hebrew search engine brings up 440,000 results within three tenth of a second. Scores of the first results – all from institutions – illustrate that even in the digital era the chief formative powers are institutions, and are ascribed to society's powerful groups. Some of these results were employed in this study.3

The research corpus comprised two main bodies of knowledge: entries in the printed encyclopedias and those in online encyclopedias and on the websites of the main institutions that teach the Holocaust. I also located personal material and testimonies of survivors, some of which

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[2] Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, tr. by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-1998): 1-25.

[3] Retrieved, 1.11.2010:
http://www.google.co.il/#hl=iw&source=hp&q=%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%90%D7%94&meta=&rlz=1R2ADFA_enDE402&aq=f&aqi=&aql=&oq=&gs_rfai=&fp=30060c6a587d9588

were collected by Yad Vashem, Israel's leading institution devoted to memorializing the Holocaust, and others were collected by smaller bodies. Alongside the excessive similarity found when examining the encyclopedia entries, I also found that the canonical poses three challenges: multiplicity of testimonies; the addition of testimonies of young people who experienced the Holocaust through their studies; and open Internet discussions on the ways of defining 'Shoah' today in view of new studies and socio-cultural responses in Israel and throughout the world.

The public discourse on the 'Shoah' has modified immensely since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Many changes are rooted in the first decades of statehood. Beginning with the reparations agreement (1952), signed between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel, the issue of reconciliation versus remembrance took a significant place in Israeli discourse.4 In the following year the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance – Yad va-Shem Law (1953) for the documentation of the Holocaust was initiated. Six years later the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day Law (1959) reassured the central place of 'Shoah' in Israeli society. Another law enabled the presence of 'Shoah' through the use of judicial means. The Nazis and Nazi Collaborators – Punishment Law (1950) enabled the trial of Israel (Rudolf) Kastner, who had negotiated with the Nazis to save Hungarian Jews (September 1954 – June 1955; Kastner was murdered in 1957 and was exonerated a year later). The same law was activated following the abduction of the senior Nazi official Adolf Eichamann to Israel and his trial and sentence (1960-

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[4] Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), pp. 211-252.

2).5 In 1965 Israel and West Germany established full diplomatic relations.6

The Eichmann trial was the first time that the general public in Israel was exposed to life in the labor, concentration and death camps. Overt emotional handling of the charged past was a breakthrough. Until then it was obvious that public discussion of the Holocaust was limited to dealing with the courage of the few who rose up against the Nazis, courage compatible with the Zionist ethos.7 Thus, since the 1960s the subject is discussed more openly in the Israeli society through scholarly studies and various artistic works. Since the 1980s more attention is given to individual commemoration.8 The dawn of the 21st century was met with a growing awareness to the well being of the elderly survivors that are in need for physical, mental and financial support.

The printed encyclopedia I used was Encyclopaedia Hebraica which has been regarded the highest authority for Israeli society since the project was launched in 1948, until the digital era; The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust that was published in 1990; and the Yavneh Encyclopedia for Children, printed in 1992-1995. The online entries that served me were taken from the Hebrew Wikipedia; the Yad Vashem website; Ynet's

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[5] Leora Bilsky, 'In a different voice: Nathan Alterman and Hannah Arendt on the Kastner and Eichmann trials', *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, 1(2), IX. 2000. Retrieved 3.11.2010, from Law Module. See also: Hanna Yablonka, *The State of Israel vs. Adolf Eichmann* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004).

[6] Otto R. Romberg, *Forty Years of Diplomatic Relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel* (Frankfurt A.M.: Tribune Books, 2005).

[7] Anita Shapira, 'The Eichmann Trial: Changing Perspectives', *The Journal of Israeli History* 23.1 (2004): 18-39.

[8] Esti Rein, 'From General Memorialization to Individual Memorialization: Holocaust Memorials in Israel', [Hebrew] Gesher 38 (1993): 70-81.

Encyclopedia, which is operated by the largest entity in Israeli print media; and information from Amalnet, a large website of vocational and liberal arts high schools in Israel. In addition, I found testimonies of Holocaust survivors on various websites.

Despite Encyclopaedia Hebraica's overdue publishing of the volume containing the entry of the 'Shoah' (1979), it preceded all the other sources I used.9 The concept was formulated by researchers from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Dr. Aharon Weiss, and the internationally renowned expert, Prof. Yehudah Bauer, who later became a member of the Israel Society of Science and Humanities, a member of the board of Yad Vashem, and one of the editors of The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust. They based their explanation on contemporary studies and consolidated the basic model of definitions of the concept in Hebrew for future use, thus securing the concept as a canonical value in the eyes of generations of educators and students. It is worthy to note that by the time the entry was published, Israeli society had undergone significant changes in its attitude toward the Holocaust. From regarding the extreme anti-Semitism of the 1930s as the catastrophe of those who ignored Zionism as the real solution to the Jewish problem, attitudes changed, turning into admiration for the handful of Jews who organized the uprising during World War II in the ghettos and forests. From the mid-1950s, after witnessing survivors' testimonies in two public trials, the public's attitude underwent a complete turnabout. Thenceforth mental survival under arduous conditions in the ghetto was perceived as heroic.10

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9 *Encyclopaedia Hebraica* (Jerusalem/ Givaatayim/ Ramat Gan: Encyclopaedia Publishing Company, 1979), vol. 31, pp. 476-528.

10 Yablonka, op.cit.

The basic model chosen by those who worded the concept in Encyclopaedia Hebraica displayed a desire to dissociate research from emotional life and offer a historical-scientific concept. Their guideline was a fundamental definition and division into stages of action. The basic definition clarified that it was "a singular term for the destruction of European Jewry between 1933 and 1945,"[11] stressing the intention to annihilate it – Vernichtung, a German term which is incorporated in the Hebrew source. The five stages described are the persecution of Jews prior to the war; the establishment of the Generalgouvernment in Poland in 1939-1941; the Final Solution (Endlösung) in 1941-43; and the turning point of the war in 1943-1945. Information about the methods of persecution, the methods of killing, and Jewish resistance are also included.

A similar model can be found in the Wikipedia online encyclopedia.[12] The advantage of an online encyclopedia is in its immediate reference to other entries, the first being the etymology of the term.[13] Wikipedia devotes the etymological discussion to the meaning of the concept of 'Shoah' in the Bible, and its usage in modern history, from its appearance in an editorial in Davar daily newspaper of September 17 1939: "The Shoah of Polish Jewry has still not been shown in all its horror." The pattern of the historical entry 'Shoah' is similar to that appearing in Encyclopaedia Hebraica, and in addition to the entry, there is later information which includes a discussion of the reaction to the Holocaust,

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[11] *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*, op.cit. p. 476.

[12] Retrieved 14.4.2010:
http://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%90%D7%94

[13] Retrieved 14.4.2010:
http://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%90%D7%94_(%D7%90%D7%98%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%92%D7%99%D7%94)

its consequences (the displaced persons' camps, judicial procedures against the Nazis), memorializing the Holocaust and the customary reference to other Wikipedia entries. Despite the richness of Hebrew publications about the 'Shoah' – written originally in Hebrew or translated – the suggestions for further reading are poor. Saul Friedländer's monumental research The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945,14 was absent as well as other updated works. This weakness, which is surprising in itself, is even more peculiar with regard to the plenty references following the Hebrew entry 'Adolf Hitler'.

The discussion in the "Discussion" and "History" tags illustrates how the entry is assimilated among the scholars who participate in writing the online encyclopedia. From February 2006 to April 2010, 267 discussions on correcting the entry were published. The majority was published in the first months after the entry's initial appearance, and dealt with the terms that should be adopted. One of the participants claimed that the Jews "were murdered" and not "found their death," while another referred readers to the English entry in which 'killing' and 'extermination' were used rather than 'murder'. The debaters raised the question of whether the murder of Jews was more methodical than that of non-Jews, and suggested adding the entry "the role of the Holocaust in consolidating Israeli identity," a subject I will refer to later.

Hence Wikipedia borrowed its basic model from Encyclopaedia Hebraica, and in this sense expanded public knowledge of the canonical perception of the Holocaust in Israel. But the authors are aware of the dynamics of the study of the Holocaust and the attitude of Israeli society to the formative historical event, and relate to developments in both

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[14] Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2009).

research and society. Nevertheless, contrary to Encyclopaedia Hebraica, the Hebrew Wikipedia contributors did not pay much attention to the bibliographical section, and unlike the excellent references of the 1979 printed entry, the online entry of 2006 is insufficient and ignore its updating advantage.

The Yavneh Encyclopedia for Children offers a vocalized Hebrew explanation and consequently it may be assumed that it is designed for lower-grade students. The entry in this encyclopedia is also attributed to the Holocaust of European Jewry, and it too offers an historical sequence.[15] Although the division is not according to years but by subject matter, it is obvious that it follows significant historical events: persecution of Jews (including an error – dating the Nuremberg Laws to 1933 and not 1935); from Kristallnacht to the Evian Conference; the outbreak of the war; the occupation of Poland; establishment of the ghettos, etc., up to the next chapter heading – Epilogue, which assesses the number of Jews who perished in the Holocaust at six million, mentioning the Nuremberg trials, and ending with the canonical Zionist narrative regarding the survivors who decided to participate in the struggle for the establishment of the State of Israel. Even if it is not a complete copy of the model proposed by Encyclopaedia Hebraica, it is clear that the editors based the entry on its approach and turned the vocalized version into a kind of introduction for children who would read about it in Encyclopaedia Hebraica in later years.

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[15] *Yavneh-Encyclopedie Larousse des jounes* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1993), vol. 14, pp. 205-213.

A similar approach was adopted by the Ynet Encyclopedia, which is basically popular.16 The division is according to subjects and moves forward along the course of history. The basic difference between this encyclopedia and the others is the numerous links to articles published on Ynet's website on various concepts and people mentioned in the entry. It may well be that some of the references incorporated in the term 'Shoah' are the result of a desire to link the entry with articles in the collection of one of the most prominent media organizations in Israel. This insight sheds light on the canonical issue from a new angle: the most popular news website in Israel17 offers new ways to consume its products, in this case, through its online encyclopedia.

The Amalnet website, designed for thousands of Amal students, is different from all the others.18 The 'Shoah' entry is non-chronological, and evidently serves scholastic needs: the Kastner trial (1954-1957); the Eichmann trial (1961-1962); a Jewish journey over time produces a narrative of four Jewish families in Europe from the 19th century until the founding of the State of Israel; the Holocaust in literature; a database that

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[16] Retrieved 14.4.2010:
http://www.ynet.co.il/yaan/0,7340,L-21300-PreYaan,00.html

[17] A TGI survey indicated that 32.4% of the sampling saw the site in the last week. *Jerusalem Post*, 29.7.2010. The site's weekly exposure is 57.2% according to a TIM survey. *Globes*, 13.9.2010. In a private correspondence with *Y-Net* editors they estimated 1.2 million unique users surfers per day (and 1.6 million in a day of security tension). According to the editors, the *Nielsen NetRatings* estimate a monthly traffic of 8 million. It is important to note that by the end of 2008 the Israeli population included 7.3 million people of who 5.5 were Jews and 1.4 million were Arabs.

Retrieved 13.11.2010:
http://www.cbs.gov.il/www/yarhon/b1_h.htm

[18] Retrieved 14.4.2010:
http://www.amalnet.k12.il/Amalnet/ContentSites/%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%90%D7%94/

is appropriate to the needs of the Ministry of Education; the Holocaust in art – an entry that exists in most of the encyclopedias; and the Holocaust – that deals with the historical events, links to Israeli and worldwide websites, and access to the project of taking high school students to tour the camps in Poland. This website clearly does not adhere to the canonical narrative that developed in Israel, but is designed for students, making it easier for them to find relevant information for their homework in accordance with the Ministry of Education's curricula, which are constantly being changed.19

A completely different definition of the entry 'Holocaust' can be found in Encyclopedia of the Holocaust which is exclusively designed for explaining Shoah-related concepts.20 In this instance, the entry does not relate to the history of the Holocaust but explains it linguistically. The opening seems to challenge the prevalent approach found in Israeli encyclopedias. The author, Uriel Tal, who was a professor of modern Jewish history at Tel Aviv University, clarifies the source of the term 'Holocaust,' borrowed from the Greek (ὀλὀκαυστος, holókaustos, hólos), which means a victim who is totally consumed by fire. Only since the 1950s was the concept linked to the annihilation of European Jewry by the Nazi regime. Tal offers quotations from the first Hebrew expressions that related to the term 'Shoah' since 1940, and pointed out that one of the first to use the concept in the historical context was the historian professor Ben-Zion Dinur, Israel's third Minister of Education, the initiator of Yad Vashem, and founder of its periodical. The second part of the entry is devoted to its hermeneutic analysis.

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19 Ruth Firer, *Agents of the Holocaust Lesson* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989).

20 *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1993), vol. 5, pp. 1184-1185.

The full definition also appears on Yad Vashem's website. Besides the obvious conclusion – that the copyright in both publications belongs to the same body – this may illustrate what may become the status of the canonical in the digital age: it will become even more secure and set, and accessible to a wider population. Is this the only way, or the main way, that awaits the canonical in the digital era?

Despite the practical possibility that the digital era will encourage duplication of existing entries, it appears that it also offers another approach. The open discussions on Wikipedia show that even if the point of departure is the familiar conceptual canonical, the same canon comes into contact with new stances, and therefore in the future will change its tone or at least will have new layers. The most prominent example in this context is the addition of a new and complete entry, "the effect of the Shoah on the consolidation of Israeli identity," which began as a discussion between surfers and ended in a wide-ranging entry that went online about a month after the discussion began. In other words, digital tools will enable the interweaving of sub-topics within the canonical, similar to the process of folk narratives or the construction of memory.21 Nevertheless, the example I offered is an entry with minimal hits.

Another challenge emerged when searching for testimonies of survivors. The collection of testimonies is a meaningful project in Israeli society, since the big Holocaust trials took place in Israel, and even more so, since the 1980s. In my opinion, films such as Claude Lanzmann's, Shoah (1985), and Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List (1993), and his survivors' documentation project, have encouraged institutions and

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[21] On memory construction, see: Halbwachs, op.cit. and Nora, op.cit. On the narrative patterns, see: Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologization of the Word* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988 [1982]): 38-44.

individuals to act.22 It goes without saying that the advanced age of the survivors also promotes their documentation. Therefore, the canon of the concept of 'Shoah' in Israel is currently challenged not only by new studies and fresh insights of young intellectuals, but also by the collection of information from the last surviving witnesses. In November 2008 Yad Vashem completed the project of making Speilberg's recorded testimonies accessible, including copies of 52,000 testimonies of survivors and other witnesses. As of the end of 2009, Yad Vashem documented some 40,000 survivors and some 20-25 testimonies are added every week.23 It is therefore easy to understand why entries that appear on Yad Vashem's website are backed by a plethora of testimonies and letters of survivors. The most prominent example is the entry for 'Ghetto and isolation,' which comprises 126 passages from memoirs and letters, of which 23 belong to the survivor Shalom Eilati, and 12 to the survivor Masha Greenbaum.24

The documentation of survivors did not begin with the Internet. The entry 'Shoah literature' on Wikipedia states that 5,000 memoirs of survivors were published in Israel, and some 650 memoirs of the communities were scanned and are currently accessible on the New York Public Library site (this page is not operating);25 Thirty-seven natives of

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[22] On the role of *Shoah* cinematic narratives, see: Barbie Zelizer, 'Every Once in a While: *Schindler's List* and the Shaping of History', in: Yosefa Loshitzky (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997): 18-39.

[23] On Yad Vashem video collection of testimonies, see (retrieved 14.4.2010): http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/he/about/archive/about_archive_whats_in_archive.asp

[24] Retrieved 14.4.2010: http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/he/holocaust/resource_center/item.asp?gate=1-4

[25] Retrieved 14.4.2010: http://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A1%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA_%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%90%D7%94

Karpatrus documented their memoirs and placed a list of them on the web;26 The Claims Conference requests Holocaust survivors who have not yet documented their memories to do so;27 Motke's Forum of Holocaust Survivors is designed for the correspondence of young people who want to document survivors.28 In other words, school students or skilled researchers can contribute to building independent narratives, which may be guided by the canonical entries, but will also have independent interpretation.29

Has the digital world changed the canonical entry of 'Holocaust' in Israel? It is too early to tell. The specific examination that I conducted shows two main patterns. One is the possibility of duplication. This was also possible in printed literature, but it is clear that it is far easier to duplicate when using digital means. Copying the meaning of the term from Encyclopedia of the Holocaust to the Yad Vashem website is an extreme case, and the resemblance between the concept in Encyclopaedia Hebraica and Wikipedia is conceivable. Another pattern can be seen in the discussions on the subject of the Holocaust, the different approach offered by Amalnet's scholastic site, and the additional knowledge offered by it –

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26 Retrieved 14.4.2010:
www.subcarpathianjews.org/doc/memory_list.doc

27 Retrieved 31.10.2010:
http://www.claimscon.org/index.asp?url=allocations/RED

28 Retrieved 14.4.2010:
http://www.motke.co.il/SelectedForum.aspx?ForumID=31

29 Na'ama Shik has relied on autobiographies and other documentation for her research, which provides new insights that were unknown in institutional research. See: Na'ma Shik, 'Infinite Loneliness: Some Aspects Concerning the Lives of Jewish Women in the Auschwitz Camps According to the Corpus of Testimonies and Autobiographies: 1945-1948', in: Doris L. Bergen (ed.), *Lessons & Legacies*, Vol. VIII, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008): 101-124.

in the case I examined – through the documentation of survivors. This pattern brings the canonical closer to the familiar in the narrative or in the construction of memory: there is one key factor, a kind of guiding motif, which absorbs and emits sub-topics. To borrow from other disciplines, the canonical will undergo an oxygenation process. At times it will bring about additional layers – in this case, the addition of new layers of knowledge – and at times, it will bring about a composition that will radically change what was once canonical into something different, either canonical or not.