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Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bloomington and Indianapolis
3 Patriotic Sacrifice and the Burden of Memory in Israeli Secular National Hebrew Culture

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Modern nationalism is intimately linked to the ethos of patriotic sacrifice. Individuals' readiness to die for their nation is a social and moral act that defies their instinct for personal survival in the name of the future of the collectivity. This form of "altruistic suicide," to borrow Emile Durkheim's term, stems from intense identification with societal values and norms and a sense of moral obligation toward the collective (Durkheim 1951: 217–240). Idioms such as "to die on the altar of the country" and "sanctified death" reveal the sacred character of patriotic sacrifice as an important expression of "civil religion," highlighting the contribution of the sacrificial act as a symbolic reaffirmation of a nation's transcendental value (Bellah 1970: 168–186). The extreme character of patriotic sacrifice nonetheless introduces the need to curb the possible emergence of an excessive zeal that might lead to unnecessary loss of human life.

"Patriotic sacrifice" therefore requires the fulfillment of certain conditions: that the call to arms is justified and the military action involved is critical for the nation's survival, and that fallen soldiers are believed to have been aware of the risk to their lives and were ready to die for this cause (Bar-Tal 1993).

In the idealized configuration of altruistic suicide, then, the individual functions in the unique position of serving as both the sacrificer and the sacrificed. Such an extreme act of giving leaves the nation indebted to the fallen soldier for presenting it with the most significant gift possible. In return, the nation cultivates the memory of fallen soldiers through a variety of commemorative acts such as military funerals and burial in military cemeteries, posthumous citations and medals, annual memorial rituals for fallen soldiers, and monuments. The nation thus turns the fallen soldier into a collective representation and a national symbol.

Patriotic sacrifice opens an exchange relationship between the individual and the nation that evolves into a complex system of moral, economic, and social obligations between the bereaved family (as the symbolic extension of the fallen soldier), and the state (representing the nation). A soldier's death brings his
family into the community of the bereaved, and the state assumes the responsibility to act in the deceased’s place as a provider for the family. While the state supports the family in providing for the loss of income and the struggle to cope with the death, the bereaved family reaffirms the importance of the nation by its participation in official commemorations and activities of the bereaved families’ community. The patriotic ethos assumes that the fallen soldiers’ families and the state agree on the supreme significance of the sacrifice and form harmonious relations, united by their commitment to the dead and the values for which the fallen soldiers died.

The present chapter focuses on the attitude toward the ethos of patriotic sacrifice within the national secular Israeli culture from 1948 to the late 1990s. This ethos was an important foundation of Hebrew culture since the early years of Zionist settlement and struggle for the foundation of a Jewish state. Though it has remained central to Israel’s defense ideology since 1948, it has also undergone significant changes in recent decades. The chapter begins with a discussion of the hegemonic attitude toward death for the country and the commemoration of the dead during the formative years of Israeli society and the first decades of the state. The discussion draws on the analysis of select literary texts and popular expressions. It then goes on to examine changes in the attitude toward the sacrificial act within the framework of relations between the state, the fallen soldier, and the bereaved family in the post-1967 era and in the context of an increasingly divisive political scene and a volatile conflict situation. Given the fluidity of politics in the Middle East, the continued violence between Israelis and Palestinians, and the deadlock in peace negotiations, the attitude toward death for the country has remained at the center of the Israeli political discourse, yet its meaning is continuously reinterpreted and transformed.

In light of the multiplicity of voices regarding the patriotic ethos in an increasingly polarized Israeli society, it is important to note that this chapter focuses on those changes that have taken place within the national secular Hebrew culture that was constructed by Jews who settled in Palestine before the foundation of the state of Israel and their descendants, who are mostly secular and from European countries. This population constituted the mainstream of Israeli society that shaped its foundations and its national culture and took an earlier lead in the implementation of its secular ethos of patriotic sacrifice. The chapter therefore does not address the attitude toward patriotic sacrifice among religious Zionist groups who have emerged as a growing political force within Israeli society in the post-1967 era and whose patriotic ethos is deeply rooted in a religious framework; and it does not discuss other important groups within Israeli society, including Israel’s Palestinian and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish citizens, the large majority of whom reject Israeli nationalist ideology or its secular ethos and do not participate in the military service. Similar studies on these groups’ attitudes toward the ethos of sacrifice are clearly essential for arriving at a fuller view of the multiplicity of perspectives on these issues within Israeli society.

“With blood and fire Judea fell; with blood and fire Judea will rise!” is a verse from a famous poem by Yisrael Cahan, written after the Kishinev pogrom of 1903. This verse assumed a life of its own as a Zionist slogan representing a new ethos of self-defense (Cahan 1948). As a national movement, Zionism advocated Jews’ historical move from exile to the ancient Jewish homeland, and saw the process of national rebirth as entailing inevitable sacrifices by individuals. Readiness to die for the homeland was thus perceived as an important characteristic shared by both ancient and modern Jewish patriots. Jewish revolts against Rome during the first and the second centuries evolved into heroic national myths and served as an inspiration for the Zionist national revival. As Cahan’s verse articulated so clearly, blood—the symbol of both life and death—was perceived as a symbolic bridge connecting the national struggles of these two eras, otherwise separated by centuries of life in exile.

The romantic view of national struggles for liberation was popular in Europe, and the embrace of socialist ideologies by the early Zionist settlers further contributed to the emphasis on collective over individual needs. Moreover, the glorification of sacrifice was embedded within a linear narrative leading to a vision of national redemption. Hebrew poets and writers of that period articulated the significance of sacrifice for national redemption: “My brethren, this land demands our blood,” Avidgor Hameiri writes in 1927; and Yitzhak Lamdan expresses a similar idea: “In full jug of youth, do we carry joyful blood and first clusters of life in baskets of love / Everything is an offering for the battle and a dedication to Masada” (Hameiri 1926–1927: 93; Lamdan 1971: 209–210).

A heroic spirit and readiness for sacrifice constituted an important component of the image of the New Hebrew Man (see Almog 2000: 119–137; Elboim-Dror 1996; Fimer 1985). As early as 1911, the publication of a memorial book for several pioneers who were killed in clashes with Arabs signaled the process of turning the dead into heroic symbols of patriotic sacrifice (Frankel 1986: 355–384). The historical battle of Tel Hai gave rise to the first Hebrew national myth of settlement and defense, and the words of the dying hero, Yosef Trumpeldor—“It is good to die for our country”—represented the essence of the ethos of patriotic sacrifice. Soon after the event, a well-known writer and public figure, Moshe Smilansky, highlighted the symbolic value of a new sacred space, sanctified by the blood of the fallen (Smilansky 1920: 1). Trumpeldor’s saying became an important educational slogan and the defense of Tel Hai contributed to the ethos of patriotic sacrifice that shaped the foundations for the commemoration of fallen soldiers in Israeli culture.

The importance of patriotic sacrifice was transmitted through formal educational venues and political channels, and was also evident in children’s literature and popular culture, more prominently from the late 1920s to the 1950s. A children’s story tells of two lumps of soil that after observing Trumpeldor’s extraordinary commitment to building the land were ready to sacrifice themselves.
by jumping into the revolving knife of the plow (Bergstein 1955). A children’s
song describes an attack on a bee community by a vicious wasp and hails the
sacrifice of a small, heroic bee, who “died in order to save its people.” Hebrew
youth internalized this message. Ya‘ir, a young leader of an activist group and a
poet, writes in 1932: “Our desire—to always live as free people; our dream—
to die for our country” (Ya‘ir 1976 [1932]). And an Israeli man recalls as an
adult the centrality of this ideal to him as a child of the 1950s: “You know what was . . . my biggest dream as a young man? That I die in the battle for the homeland,
leaving a red [paratrooper’s] beret. And this wasn’t a nightmare, but an experience of self-fulfillment” (Rosen 1998: 62–63). A popular anecdote points out the
excessive success of this educational trend during the 1950s and 1960s, recounting how schoolchildren would write letters to soldiers expressing their wish that the soldiers would die for the homeland. Another anecdote tells of a
Palmach underground’s commander who reprimanded his soldiers by declaring
them unworthy of dying for the homeland.13

The breakout of an intense struggle following the United Nations’ resolution
in support of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine in November 1947 gave
a concrete expression to the “fire and blood vision” of national rebirth. With six
thousand casualties—the majority of whom were between the ages of seventeen
and twenty-five—the war marked a generational shift in those who carried
the burden of defense from the founders of modern Israeli society to their sons,
and contributed to the image of the Sabra (the Hebrew youth) as a fighter (Almog 2000: 119–137; Sivan 1991: 29–33, 120–125). That year, the poet Nathan
Alterman published his famous poem, “The Silver Platter,” in the daily paper
Davar. The poem depicts a young man and woman who, while falling at the
feet of a female figure representing the nation, declare: “We are the silver platter
on which you were given the Jewish state.” The poem addresses themes that
are central to patriotic sacrifice: the act of giving underlying the sacrifice, the
youth’s full awareness and acceptance of their imminent death, and the nation’s
imbued indebtedness to its fallen youth for this gift (Alterman 1947). The “silver
platter” emerged as a common metaphor for patriotic sacrifice, and the poem
became a canonical text in Israeli memorial ceremonies.14 The sacrifice
rhetoric also employed the family trope to convey intimacy in the new relation-
ship between the fallen soldiers, their families, and the nation-state: the soldi-
ers are referred to as “sons” of the nation, whereas their relatives become
new members in the national community of “the bereaved family” [mishpahat
ha-shekhol].15

The experience of the loss of sons raised the significance of the biblical story
of the Akedah, “the binding of Isaac,” as a paradigmatic text from the past that
helps interpret the present. The biblical text of Genesis 22 describes God’s test
of Abraham’s faith by presenting the demand to sacrifice his son Isaac, and
Abraham’s readiness to comply with this demand. In the biblical story, the
actual sacrifice is diverted when Abraham hears the voice telling him to replace
the bound Isaac with a ram at the moment he raises the knife on the boy. The
Akedah has been a highly valued text in the Jewish tradition (it is recited in the
synagogue on the high holiday of Rosh Ha’Shana) and generations of Jews
have turned to it as a model of behavior in extreme situations of persecution
and sacrifice.16 Although Israeli society followed this traditional pattern of turn-
ing to the Akedah as a paradigmatic text, modern Hebrew culture secularized its
traditional meaning by transforming religious martyrdom into readiness to die
for the homeland. Yet in using the biblical text, the analogy between the past
and the present is clearly incomplete: Whereas the biblical narrative provides
Isaac with a miraculous rescue, the modern secular version offers no such relief
as Israeli “sons” encounter their death in battle. In another departure from the
biblical text, Isaac is no longer portrayed as passive but rather as a willing par-
ticipant.17 This modern Israeli version of the Akedah therefore highlights the
collaboration between fathers and sons and the national solidarity around the ethos
of patriotic sacrifice.

Since 1948, the Akedah has emerged as a key symbolic text of patriotic sacrifice
in Israeli literature, art, theater, and film.18 The mythical narrative made it pos-
sible to express pain and guilt toward fallen youth, and at the same time offered
consolation in the broader framework of collective redemption: the biblical
account of God’s covenant with Abraham following the Akedah reaffirms the con-
ception of individual sacrifice as leading to collective survival. This redemptive
sequence thus reinforces the theme of death and rebirth. The poetic verse of the
national Hebrew poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik, “In their death they com-
manded us to live,” became another canonical phrase in mourning rhetoric, ex-
pressing the moral indebtedness by the community of the living to those who
died and the mobilization of their deaths as a renewed commitment to collec-
tive survival (Bialik 1966: 79). The prominent theme of the “living-dead” sold-
iers in Hebrew war poetry and Israel’s establishment of a direct temporal flow
from its official “Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers” to “Independence Day”
similarly diffuse the finality of death.19

The intense memory work and the emergence of a wide range of memorial
sites indicated the strong adherence to the ethos of patriotic sacrifice and the
deep sense of indebtedness to those who died for the homeland. In addition to
the establishment of an official Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers, Israeli
society commemorated fallen soldiers by an extensive production of monuments,
memorial books, songs, fiction, and poems, and through the practice of naming
settlements, streets, parks, and forests after a collective group or individuals.20
The cultural emphasis on moral indebtedness to the dead contributed to the
portrayal of the nation, the fallen soldiers, and the bereaved families as a tight
community that rallies around the ethos of patriotic sacrifice and cultivates the
memory of the dead.

The Six-Day War of 1967 introduced another turning point in the develop-
ment of the ethos of patriotic sacrifice in Israel. The extensive mobilization of
soldiers on reserve duty and, even more so, the voluntary return of citizens who
were abroad in order to take part in the battle, manifested a powerful commit-
ment to the patriotic ethos. The sweeping victory that followed weeks of acute anxiety, and the territorial expansion as a result of the war led to national euphoria and generated a new sense of security. A new heroic lore emerged soon after the war, commemorating the eight hundred soldiers who died in it and lauding the behavior of military commanders and soldiers (Shamir 1996: 89-102). Yet, along with the official and spontaneous creation of multiple commemorative rites that embraced the ethos of patriotic sacrifice, the war also generated first seeds of moral unrest. The publication of recorded conversations among kibbutz members who fought in the war did not challenge the ethos of patriotic sacrifice but revealed their moral anguish over the inhumane face of war and its impact on individuals (Shapira 1970; see Tsur 1976: 183).

Military clashes (primarily with Egypt along the Suez Tunnel) continued from 1967 to 1970 and brought a death toll of 721 persons, close to the total casualties in the “official” Six-Day War. Although these clashes were not officially recognized as a “war,” Israeli popular discourse related to this continuing military engagement as the War of Attrition,19 and news about those casualties and the 2,659 wounded marked some of the euphoria of the immediate post-1967 era. Nonetheless, it took the traumatic experience of the Yom Kippur War in 1973 to trigger a major political and ideological crisis. The unexpected attack and the anxiety over Israel’s ability to overcome the enemies’ forces, the duration of the war, and the high toll of 2,569 dead and about 7,000 wounded shook up Israeli society. In spite of Israel’s ultimate military success, the Yom Kippur War generated an atmosphere of disillusionment and demoralization. Public outrage at what was seen as the military intelligence’s and the government’s failures to properly assess the situation and prepare for this war led to an official investigation that focused on these issues. This public response thus challenged the government’s fulfillment of its obligation to protect citizens’ lives and minimize their loss in the struggle for national survival. The difficulties encountered in this war and the number of wounded and dead generated an atmosphere of intense mourning and grief and increased awareness of the impact of the battle experience on individuals (Bilu and Wiztum 2000: 8: 14-16).

The Yom Kippur War led to the deepening of ideological, social, and political rifts within the society and a greater polarization of Israelis’ positions about the conflict with the Palestinians and neighboring Arab countries. The dramatic war reinforced the feeling of besiegement and national isolation that gave rise to a new emphasis on historical continuity within the Jewish experience from exile to the homeland and to Israelis’ growing identification with the Holocaust and its victims (Gertz 2000; Yadgar 2004: 54-79). But the war also led to new skepticism about earlier expectations that patriotic sacrifice would be limited to a transitory phase and would end with national rebirth. While the patriotic and the educational discourses continued to promote national symbols and myths of heroism, sacrifice, and survival, growing doubts addressed the situation of a repeating cycle of wars, leading the Right and the Left to conflicting interpretations of its resolution.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the early seeds of morbid humor and politi-
cal satire that had emerged during the War of Attrition became more widespread.20 Jokes and popular songs, works of fiction, satirical plays, and films offered counter-narratives to the canonic national heroic lore and articulated a growing ambivalence toward the bloody reality and grim consequences of continuing wars. During this period, an anecdote that Trumpeador did not utter his famous saying “It is good to die for our country” but uttered a juicy Russian curse became highly popular. In spite of historical evidence supporting the validity of his expression of readiness for patriotic sacrifice, the anecdote now appeared more credible to those who were critical of the gaps between the national rhetoric of patriotic sacrifice and the reality of the battlefield.21

Morbid humor was largely produced by the young generation facing the immediate threat of death in fulfilling their military duties. Examples of such expressions include the high school seniors’ joke upon graduating that they will next meet on their school memorial plaque: the joking reference to the military cemetery “Saul’s City” (Kiryat Sha‘ul) as the “Youth’s City” (Kiryat ha-Noar); and the gruesome reversal of the song verse, “there was a ‘pale’ of guys on the grass,” that turns it to “there was a pale of grass on the youth.” In a similar vein, the film Summer Blues (directed by Rena Schorr, 1987) depicts a group of high school seniors who, following the death of their friend in the army shortly after being drafted, put together a macabre show of song and dance to the patriotic saying “it is good to die for our country.” During the War of Lebanon, Israeli television triggered a wave of shock, indignation, and disbelief following the broadcast of soldiers singing morbid lyrics about death and war injuries. The soldiers improvised these new sinister words to the melodies of naive folk songs or children’s songs, which highlighted through contrast the morbidity of the lyrics. Similar expressions of a cynical attitude and black humor by soldiers during their military service or in rehabilitation wards can also be found in memoirs, fiction, and film.22

Political satire became a venue for targeting the absurdity of war and disillusionment with the continuing conflict. The work of Haneh Levin, the most prominent playwright of political satire in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, expresses a highly irreverent attitude toward the glorification of war, heroism, and patriotic death. His cabaret piece, Victory Parade of the 11-Minute War, originally performed in 1968, was inspired by the Israeli General Gorodish-Gonen’s victory speech in the Six-Day War. In this piece, the general addresses his soldiers, officers, and comrades-in-arms with great pathos and congratulates them for their astonishing victory. As he wishes to salute them, he realizes that he is standing in front of an empty field, and directs his salute to heaven (Levin 1987: 13). In another piece, titled “The Fire and Blood Tango,” Levin mocks Yitzhak Rabin’s earlier glorification of sacrifice for national rebirth by describing the entire country engulfed by fire and blood (Levin 1987: 39).

The macabre humor can be seen as a form of indirect protest targeting the ethos of patriotic sacrifice: while it clearly has an aggressive edge, it falls short of open political confrontation. The deliberate use of debased language and shocking images stands in a sharp contrast to the lofty expressions and glorify-
ing heroic images of the national lore. By dwelling on the immediate and gruesome consequences of the war with references to bodily dysfunctions, blood, and death, the humor challenges the distancing strategy employed by the patriotic discourse. While these humorous texts allow the soldiers to express their anxiety about the war and diffuse some of their fears through laughter, they provoke intense anger and loud protest by those who consider these topics taboo and find this vulgar, absurd, or grotesque humor a repulsive form of sacrilege. Though such expressions were widely known among members of the youth movements and those in combat military service (i.e., youth who constituted the core of the secular national Hebrew culture), when they became widely publicized by the television broadcast in 1982 or were performed on stage, they stirred up an intense public outcry for violating the sacred and glorified character of patriotic sacrifice.

The growing awareness that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to present a demand for sacrificing the sons triggered a renewed interest in the symbolic and moral meanings of the Akeda. The repeated use of the biblical story demonstrates the role of the myth as a symbolic bridge between the past and the present. In this dialogic process, the traditional text serves as a lens through which the current reality is examined while the present modifies the interpretation of the traditional text. As in the past, the Akeda is applied to the interpretation of collective traumas in which individual Jews sacrifice themselves for the group’s survival. Yet increasingly, the biblical text serves as a venue to articulate doubts, guilt, pain, and anger about the continuing call for patriotic sacrifice. New interpretations of the Akeda therefore express diverse positions, ranging from painful acceptance to blunt criticism.

A poem titled “Heritage,” written by the well-known Israeli poet of the “1948 generation,” Haim Gouri, provides an example for an early reinterpretation of the Akeda. The poem opens where the biblical narrative of Abraham’s test ends, namely with the appearance of a ram. It goes on to describe the long life that Isaac enjoyed following that life-turning episode and concludes with the following verse:

Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed.
He lived for many years, saw what pleasure had to offer,
until his eyesight dimmed.
But he bequeathed that hour to his offspring.
They are born with a knife in their hearts. (Gouri 1981 [1961]: 565)

The poem thus suggests that the “binding of Isaac” is not a unique event in Jewish history but a recurring experience that is relived by every generation of Jews. Isaac becomes a collective representation of the Jewish people and the poem highlights his experience as key to the Jewish experience throughout the ages. With this interpretation, the poem defies the linear, teleological orientation of the biblical story that presents the Akeda as a singular occurrence with a redemptive ending and turns it into a cyclical recurrence. By implication, the poem undermines the redemptive orientation of the Zionist master commemorative narrative. Other texts, too, present a similar feeling of being entrapped within a cyclical recurrence of violence and express the fear that this situation makes sacrifice inevitable.

The playwright Hanoch Levin draws on the Akeda narrative in several of his satirical pieces. In a short piece entitled Isaac, written in a pseudo-biblical style, he describes how Abraham begets his son and when Isaac is twenty years old, he goes to war against the Arabs and is killed in action. Abraham buries him and begets another Isaac, who grows up and when he reaches the age of twenty, he goes to war with the Arabs, is killed, and Abraham buries him. The cycle is repeated with no other change in the text except for Abraham’s progressively older age. When Abraham reaches age one hundred, he decides to trick God and begets his own grandson, Jacob (Levin 1987: 149). The plot thus succeeds in getting out of the loop, and Abraham guarantees the continuity of his family line. By providing this absurd solution to Abraham’s plight, Levin wishes to accentuate the absurdity of the continuing conflict that produces death in the name of survival. It is interesting to note, however, that a similar theme appears in other Israeli literary works.

The continuing toll on young men’s lives shifted the focus of the interpretation of the Akeda from fathers to sons, enhancing the identification with Isaac. Levin presents another version of the story, written in the form of a dialogue between Abraham and Isaac:

Abraham: My son, Isaac, do you know what I’m going to do to you now?
Isaac: Yes, Dad, you are going to slaughter me.
Abraham: This is God’s command.
Isaac: I have no arguments, Dad, if you need to slaughter, do.
Abraham: I have to slaughter, I’m afraid there is no choice.
Isaac: I understand. You don’t have to make it hard on yourself, simply rise and pull the knife on me.
Abraham: I do this only as God’s messenger.
Isaac: Clearly as God’s messenger, Dad. Rise as a messenger and pull your knife as a messenger on your only son whom you love.
Abraham: Great, Isaac, make it hard for your poor father, spoil his mood, as if it not enough for him as it is.
Isaac: Who makes it difficult, Dad, rise quietly and finish off your miserable son with one fatherly gesture.
Abraham: I know, it is easiest to blame me. Never mind, never mind, blame your lonely father.
Isaac: Who blames? You are only God’s messenger, isn’t it? And when God tells you to slaughter your son like a dog, you must run and slaughter.
Abraham: Great, great, this is what I deserve in my old age. Put all the blame on me if it suits you, on your old, broken father who, at his age, has to climb up a mountain with you, bind you to the altar, slaughter you and, after all this still needs to tell your Mom about all that. Do you think that I have nothing better to do at my age?
When Abraham is about to pull his knife on Isaac, his son tells him that he hears a voice. Abraham first denies hearing any voice but after Isaac reminds his father of his deafness, Abraham accepts Isaac's plea to replace him by the ram:

Isaac: Dad, I swear, I heard a voice from heaven.
Abraham [after a while]: Nu, if you heard, you heard. I, as you said, am a bit deaf.
Isaac: Sure, you know that on my part I was prepared for the sacrifice, but a voice is a voice. (Levin 1987: 89-91)

Levin's Abraham is not the admirable, principled man of faith of the traditional myth but a pathetic, self-centered old man who focuses on his own difficulties in carrying out God's command and has no compassion for his son whose life he is about to take. Isaac's ironic voice presents a subversive reading of the Akeda. The conclusion of Levin's narrative leaves it ambiguous if Isaac indeed heard the voice or tricks Abraham into believing it so as to save his life (Baron 1998; Kartun-Blum 1995).

The new interpretive trend shifts Isaac's role from a "sacrifice" to a "victim." While these two concepts are encompassed within a single Hebrew term, korban, they convey different psychological, social, and moral implications for Isaac's role, and by extension, for the role of the fallen soldier. Here, Isaac is no longer the young man who proves his own readiness for self-sacrifice along with his father, as the literature of the Independence War depicts. Instead, he is portrayed as a victim of his father's excessive eagerness to comply with God's demand to sacrifice his son. The portrayal of Isaac as a skeptical participant or a reluctant victim challenges the appropriateness of the Akeda as a symbolic representation of patriotic sacrifice since it contests the assumption of the inevitability of the sacrifice as well as the willingness of the sacrificed to die for the collective cause.

Even when the Akeda does not serve as an explicit frame of reference, it often serves as the subtext. This is evident in literary works that portray fathers as too eager to make a sacrifice or embrace the role of a bereaved parent. A Levin poem, "My Dear Father," is written as a monologue in which a fallen soldier addresses his own father from his grave:

My dear father, when you stand next to my grave,
Old and tired and very lonely,
And you see how they lower my body into the ground,
And you stay on top of me, my father,

Don't stand there so proud,
Don't hold up your head, my father,
We are left flesh to flesh
And this is the time to cry, my father.

Let your eyes then cry over my eyes,
And do not be silent for the sake of my honor,
Something that is more important than honor
Is laying at your feet now, my father.

And don't say that you made a sacrifice,
Because the one who sacrificed was me,
And don't use lofty words
Because I lie very low now, my father.

My dear father, when you stand next to my grave
Old and tired and very lonely,
And you see how they lower my body into the ground,
Ask for my forgiveness, my father. (Levin 1987: 89)

The performance of this poem triggered the public protest against Levin's satirical show The Queen of the Bathtub, and forced the Cameri Theater to discontinue it after nineteen performances. In 1970, such blunt criticism of the ethos of patriotic sacrifice, and worse—of a bereaved father who lost his son in battle—violated sacred values of Israeli society. Yet Levin was not alone in articulating a critical attitude toward fathers' readiness to sacrifice their sons.

Amos Oz's short story "By Way of the Wind," written as early as 1962, describes a father to whom the bereaved father's role provides a relief from his growing frustration with his son. The father, a kibbutz founder and leading figure in the Labor movement, is deeply disappointed in his son's character, but when the son volunteers with the paratroopers, he feels vindicated. During a parachuting display performed in a field near their kibbutz, the son is eager to impress the watchful crowd of kibbutz members, and violates the army's instructions. As a result, his parachute becomes entangled in electric cables and, as he is afraid to follow the suggestion to cut the straps in order to let himself loose, he remains bound to the cables. The father, embarrassed by his son's behavior, scolds and insults him, and the son eventually throws himself on the electrical cable and dies, still bound to his parachute. The narrator's ironic voice ends the story with the observation that "the status of a bereaved father wraps a halo of sacred agony," thus implying that the new status might compensate the father for the public humiliation he suffered from his son's behavior prior to his death (see Oz 1986 [1962]).

A. B. Yehoshua's novella In the Beginning of Summer 1970 provides another example for this critical approach toward the embrace of the bereaved father role (Yehoshua 1974). Yehoshua describes a lonely, old, and beleaguered teacher who is alienated from his son and his colleagues at school, who receives the shocking news that his son has been killed in action. His new status as a bereaved father instantly transforms his colleagues' attitude and fills his life with a new meaning. The teacher imagines himself delivering a patriotic speech about death and bereavement:

Students, I don't want to overburden you with my sorrow, but I ask you to look at me, so that this [death] does not surprise you, because, here, in some way, I was prepared for his death, and this gave me my strength at this horrible moment. [30]

When summoned to identify his son's body, the father is shocked to find out that the dead man was misidentified. He is taken to a distant military camp where he finds his son alive and unaware of the confusion about his fate. The
father, who had little contact with his son and hardly knows his daughter-in-law and young grandson, fails to connect with all three even when he meets them face-to-face under these stressful circumstances. His eagerness to assume the public role of a bereaved father is thus ironically juxtaposed with his role as an absent father.

The critical depiction of a bereaved father is an important theme in Yoram Kencyk’s 1981 novel, The Last Jew (1981). Wishing to establish a heroic image for his fallen son, the father embraces a fabricated biography that his son’s friend produces in order to please the father. The friend describes heroic deeds that the son had never performed and assigns him to a more important battle than the one in which he encountered his death. He also credits the son with writing poetry, and even finds poems that he ascribes to the dead man. The father, an active participant in the bereaved parents’ association, accepts this invented biography in spite of his wife’s objections. Kencyk extends his critique of the cult of the dead through the use of the grotesque. The son’s friend begins to produce memorials for fallen soldiers based on this experience. Responding to bereaved families’ demands to create elaborate memorials for fallen sons, he develops a lucrative “memory industry.”

These literary texts thus question the ethos of patriotic sacrifice by using the Akeda as a paradigmatic narrative of sacrifice made in the name of the collective good. This reinterpretation of the biblical text assumes a highly critical stance that targets its repeated use as representing the ethos of sacrifice in contemporary Israeli culture. The use of the Akeda in reference to the present, however, is not limited to the literary sphere, but has become part of popular and academic discourse. Thus, for example, an article on women’s protests against the war and the continuing loss of lives characterizes the women’s approach by their opposition to the Akeda myth; and bereaved parents refer to the myth in discussing their own grief (Mazali and Livne-Freudental 1998: 34–35; Tamir 1993: 225).

The continuing use of the Akeda demonstrates the vitality of a symbolic narrative that is open to diverse (and at times, contrasting) interpretations. Thus, the Akeda continues to serve as the embodiment of social solidarity and as a supreme expression of patriotic sacrifice and reinforces the society’s commitment to remember those who died for the homeland. And at the same time, the Akeda also serves as a venue to express doubts, frustrations, and objections to the paradigm of sacrifice and its applicability to contemporary Israeli politics. With the deepening of social and political divisions within Israeli society, the protest against various aspects of patriotic sacrifice has increasingly become more direct and open, contributing to the further radicalization of the political scene.

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For the first time, the Lebanon War (1982–1985) broke the national consensus that the war was essential for the nation’s security and survival, a consensus that is a critical condition for the justification of patriotic sacrifice. The first Palestinian intifada that broke out in 1987 and the continuing Israeli military involvement in southern Lebanon deepened divisions between the Right and the Left in Israel: those who believed that the continuing control over the West Bank, Gaza, and Southern Lebanon guarantees for Israel’s future security and that Israel has a right to control these lands, and those who advocated the pursuit of peace negotiations with the Palestinians and argued that a peace agreement justifies the price of territorial concessions.

In 1982, doubts about the goals of the extended invasion of Lebanon challenged two fundamental beliefs that are at the core of Israeli national culture: that Israel engages in wars out of no choice and that these wars represent a fight of a few against many (Gertz 2000: 1–26). The harsh criticism from the Left that this was a war of choice (milhemet breira) intensified following the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by Christian militias that had been collaborating with Israel. The public outcry led to mass demonstrations against the war and its impact on the civilian population in 1982 and 1983. Soldiers in uniform took part in this public debate and a selective conscientious objection to participating in this war (as opposed to serving in the army in general) grew to about 165 soldiers, primarily those on reserve duty. Most famous among these was the early case of an Israeli career officer, Eli Geva, who refused to lead his soldiers in a war he considered unjustified. His refusal attracted much public attention, and he was demoted and dismissed from the army (Linn 1996: 36–37, 73–78).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Israeli Left was caught in a moral and an ideological dilemma, torn between its patriotic commitment and its opposition to the government’s policies. On the one hand, many of its members abide by a strong patriotic tradition of responding to the call to arms regardless of one’s political views and a code of personal loyalty to one’s combat fellows founded on years of shared military experience (Hellman 1993). On the other hand, participation in military operations that are governed by policies to which they are opposed requires these soldiers to risk their lives without accepting the goals for which they fight.

The proliferation of pro-peace organizations and protest movements in Israel from the late 1970s to the 1990s was underscored by organizational division and a lack of agreement on goals, agendas, and tactics. The centrist Peace Now, formed in 1978, advocated peace negotiations with the Palestinians and pursued civilian protests against the Lebanon War and other military actions, but expected its members to obey army rules when called to military service. The Four Mothers, which was founded in 1997 around the advocacy of a withdrawal from southern Lebanon, held a similar position. Their limited goal and the mass support it received led to the implementation of the withdrawal from Lebanon by Prime Minister Ehud Barak in May 2000. In contrast, the more radical movements Yesh Geval (literally, there is a limit/border), formed a few months prior to the War of Lebanon, and Women in Black (Nashim be-Shahor) which became
active in 1987, called to end the occupation of Palestinian territories and advocated the refusal to serve beyond the 1967 borders, even at the price of jail sentences. A relatively more recent movement, New Profile [Profile Hadash], rallied to legalize conscientious objection, supporting conscientious objectors' legal struggle in courts and those who received jail sentences (Bar-On 1985; Hellman 1993; Linn 1996).

The pro-peace protest movements thus represented a wide range of goals and pursued different tactics as they negotiated patriotic values and the call for sacrifice in this volatile political context. Groups such as Women in Black and The Four Mothers suffered from attacks by the Right and its members were confronted by hostile responses (Hellman and Rappaport 1997). The highly charged atmosphere around these issues led to two politically motivated murders during pro-peace demonstrations: A Peace Now member, Emil Grunzweig, was killed in Jerusalem in 1983, and Israel's Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was murdered in Tel Aviv in 1995.

In a society where security is at the center of public awareness and the army has direct and indirect influence over political issues and careers (Kimmerling 1993), a protest on issues relating to security either from the Left or Right are easily perceived as subversive and dangerous. To avert accusations of lack of patriotism, protesters often try to display their right to protest by referring to their military rank, combat experience, or relation to a fallen soldier as a proof of their patriotic past. In this context, women have a greater license to express their concern about the justification of the war and the call for patriotic sacrifice drawing on their roles as mothers and wives. This may account for the relatively high presence of women's groups within the protest movement. Yet the ideological and political divisions between the Right and the Left cut across gender lines. For example, the visibility of feminist Women in Black on the Left led to the establishment of an opposing women's group—Women in Green—that supports the Jewish settlements and the agenda of the Right.

Although it has attracted much public attention and has been on the rise since the outbreak of the second intifada, conscientious objection to military service on the Left is still relatively limited in scope among regular army recruits and reaches several hundreds among reserve soldiers. Israel's Supreme Court of Justice denied the right for "selective" objection (against military service beyond the green line) or exemption of military service on the basis of "universal" (general) conscientious objection to any military service (Gans 2004: 10-11, 22-23). Moreover, in recent years the army is more determined to persecute those who hold on to their objection to serve. Recently, the heated controversy about Sharon government's plan for withdrawal from Gaza and the dismantling of Jewish settlements has intensified the calls for conscientious objection on the Right and some of its leaders, including prominent rabbis, have made public their advocacy to refuse military orders to carry out this plan. Academic discussions and Israeli public discourse are currently engaged in analyzing and comparing the challenges that conscientious objection and civil disobedience on the Left and on the Right present to Israeli army, government, and legal system.31

The weakening of the patriotic sacrifice in the 1980s and early 1990s went hand in hand with enhanced awareness of the long-term impact of wars on individuals' lives. Such phenomena as battle shock and war traumas, wounded soldiers' and disabled veterans' ability to cope with their situations, and the experience of mourning and bereavement drew more public and professional attention. This trend reflects a significant shift from the earlier focus on the collective contribution of patriotic sacrifice in line with the collectivist ethos of the pre-state and early state periods. Although the scope of this article does not allow us to explore all these issues in detail, it is important to note that these topics are the subject of autobiographical writing, film, drama, and, art, as well as of growing academic research (cf. Bilu and Wiztum 2000; Friedman 1993; Malkinson et al. 1993; Naveh 1993; Shamgar-Handelman 1986; Weiss 1997; Y. Zerubavel 2003). The following discussion addresses some of the issues related to the bereaved family's responses and the commemoration of the dead as part of the examination of the relations between the state and the families of fallen soldiers.

The patriotic ethos assumes a shared agreement on the value of patriotic sacrifice between bereaved families and the state, and the compatibility of collective and private memories related to fallen soldiers. The perception of harmonious relations based on an exchange between the bereaved families and the state follows this assumption: The state rewards the dead soldier's family members by granting them the official recognition of "a bereaved family," by taking care of their needs, and by sanctifying the fallen soldier's memory. On its part, the family accepts its role as a member of the national community of the bereaved and takes part in official commemorations of fallen soldiers, thereby displaying and reaffirming its acceptance of the value of patriotic sacrifice.

The greater scrutiny of the call for patriotic sacrifice led to significant transformations in the perception of the relations between the state and bereaved families. Public demand for greater accountability was not only directed to the government but also to the army, and led to families' insistence on information about the specific circumstances of their sons' deaths. Legal suits against the army, especially in cases of accidents, drew much publicity and indicate the ways in which the legal discourse has become an alternative channel competing with the patriotic discourse. Moreover, the recourse to legal action demonstrates that the bereaved families and the state may hold incompatible views of the soldier's death that lead to adversarial relations.

Ownership of the memory of the dead has emerged as another point of contention between bereaved families and state agencies: Who has the right to decide on the appropriate commemoration of fallen soldiers? Who has the authority to decide on how the memory of the dead is shaped? Within this con-
text, the standardization of memory by the Defense Ministry became a contested issue. As the examination of private memorial books and school memorials for dead soldiers indicates (see Amit 1995), commemorative traditions involve the emergence of shared patterns even if the individuals who create these memorials may not be aware of this phenomenon. Yet in the case of state-sponsored memorials, a policy of standardization is obligatory and deliberate, and stems from the democratic ideology that emphasizes citizens’ equality. Furthermore, the standardization of fallen soldiers’ memorials highlights the importance of the collective over the uniqueness of individuals and reaffirms the value of patriotic sacrifice.

Yet some bereaved parents opposed the standardization of memory in official commemoration of fallen soldiers—manifested in uniform funerals, uniform tombstones and inscriptions—which had been accepted as a given. They argued that these restrictions limited the expression of their memory of the dead. Their demand to participate in the determination of the script on their sons’ tombstones resulted in lawsuits when the Ministry of Defense refused to grant room for the families’ input. In 1995, the Supreme Court accepted a bereaved family’s position, arguing that the official agencies’ collectivist approach is archaic and paternalistic. The court required the Ministry of Defense to allow families some flexibility in determining the inscriptions on tombstones within the framework of its guidelines (Rubenstein 1997; see Ha’aretz 28 March 1995).

In a challenge to the conception of a national community that unites bereaved families and the nation in their shared experience of loss and joint commitment to commemorate the dead, recent works of Hebrew literature depict bereaved families’ greater preoccupation with their private pain and memory work and their reluctance to take part in the state ceremonies that are public and impersonal in character (Rosenthal 2001: 59–80). The tensions between collective and individual memories defy the assumption of compatible and harmonious relations between bereaved families and the state, which underlie the ethos of patriotic sacrifice.

Two recent novels by well-known women writers, published by mainstream Israeli publishers, stand out as powerful examples of this recent trend. Yehudit Hendel’s The Mountain of Losses (1991) and Batya Gur’s Stone for a Stone (1998) focus on bereaved families and explore their response to their sons’ deaths during their military service. Gur’s novel is a fictional account inspired by the case of a soldier who was killed in an accident during a “roulette” game held by his unit. The novel portrays the bereaved mother’s desperate struggle to bring to court top officers in that military unit whom she sees as responsible for her son’s unjustifiable death. The mother, an artist, also bitterly objects to the standardized inscription of patriotic rhetoric on her son’s tombstone, which she sees as another manifestation of the army’s attempts to cover up the real circumstances of her son’s death: “It is all a lie. A big lie. And not even an accident. He was murdered and this will be written here now, as it ought to be. It will be written that he was murdered by his commanders, led like a lamb to the slaughter” (1998: 27). Her struggle with the state institutions and her demand that the high commanders will be prosecuted is nonetheless doomed to failure. During this process, she becomes increasingly isolated from her family and community, although she remains supported by other women in court. In an act of a private revolt against the state, she destroys the military tombstone on her son’s grave and replaces it with her own sculpture with the inscription that the son “was led as a sheep to the slaughter by his commanders.” The use of the Holocaust-related phrase “like sheep to the slaughter” in reference to a fallen soldier is highly subversive. It portrays him as a “victim” rather than a “sacrifice,” and implies an analogy between him and the Jewish victims of World War II. When the court rules in favor of the army, the mother commits suicide on her son’s grave, asserting her ultimate defiance of the state.

Yehudit Hendel’s powerful novel portrays one day in bereaved parents’ lives spent in the military cemetery where their son is buried. The novel describes the parents’ internal and social worlds, consumed by their private grief and total devotion to memory work years following their son’s death. The detailed portrayal of their visit to the military cemetery illuminates the bereaved families as a shadow community whose life is immersed in daily visits to their sons’ graves. The bereaved families continue to care for their dead as a way of maintaining their ties with them: they cultivate small gardens around the graves, bring food and other items that the dead had liked, and worry if the dead can still feel the heat or the cold or might get worried if they notice that their visitor is sick. In contrast to the conventional societal perception of cemeteries as the territory of death where time stands still, the parents feel that their lives in the outside world are meaningless and frozen, whereas they become alive in the cemetery where they reconnect with their dead sons. In this novel too, a bereaved mother who suffers from depression and growing isolation from her husband, friends, and the “bereaved family” community takes her own life.

These works and others address the continuing difficulties that the bereaved families experience in integrating their loss into their lives. As a recent study of bereaved parents indicates, “bereavement is a most, if not the most, key existential issue for the bereaved parent.” And in contrast to their assumption of gradual acceptance of the loss and return to normal life, the researchers identify “a continuing and intense engagement in the experience of loss and in [their] obsessive involvement with their dead son” (Rubin and Dichterman 1993: 54; see also Bilu and Witzum 2000: 11–14; Tamir 1993). Similarly, as I discuss elsewhere, literary works and films about war widows disclose their vulnerable position and the gaps between the ideology of patriotic sacrifice and their own experiences. While the war widow’s position as a part of the “bereaved family” bequeaths on her the symbolic status of a national symbol, she feels the pressure of public scrutiny and a judgmental attitude by those around her, and is likely to experience a decline in her social status.

Leah Aini’s novel, Sand Tide (1992), is written in the form of the widow’s interior monologue, which she addresses to her late husband. The young woman recounts with sensitivity and humor her pain and extreme isolation immediately after her husband’s death, as well as her later experiences as she finds em-
ployment and makes new friends. Even though her behavior presents signs of accommodation to her new situation, the widow refuses to depart from her dead husband. Eventually she makes a bold move to the cemetery, motivated by her wish to live next to him. In so doing, she rebels against what she regards as the society's coercive policy of separating her from him. The police remove the widow from the cemetery and bring her to a mental clinic.

These novels are, obviously, works of fiction, yet they address topics that touch on sensitive social and psychological issues that are part of contemporary Israeli life and express them in more subtle and complex ways than public discourse may allow. In sharp contrast to the state's designation of a specific time and space for commemorating fallen soldiers, these works show bereaved families' continuous involvement with the dead and how the loss re-shapes their lives. Bereaved parents, war widows, bereaved siblings, and orphans that are portrayed in Israeli fiction and film also demonstrate the unsettling gaps between their official status as a symbolic extension of a fallen soldier, and the social and psychological difficulties they face. The literature exposes the shortcomings of the national rhetoric of patriotic sacrifice that fails to provide adequate tools to help these individuals process this trauma. More gravely, the literature shows that the bereaved family members might face the risk of becoming increasingly marginalized; their families may break down under the pressure of loss; and at times, loneliness and despair and refusal to accept death might drive them to extreme forms of behavior (Zerubavel 2003). Thus, in contrast to the ethos of patriotic sacrifice that emphasizes the contribution of "altruistic suicide" to social solidarity and is demonstrated by the family's relation with the state, these works of fiction highlight tensions and dissention around the experience of loss and the destructive long-term effects on the family and society that they generate.

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This chapter has examined the ethos of patriotic sacrifice that was constructed in the pre-state period and the early years of the state of Israel. Through the analysis of literary texts and public discourse, it has also explored the changes that have been introduced to the interpretation of the patriotic pact from the 1960s to the late 1990s. During the formative years of nation building, the patriotic rhetoric of self-sacrifice was an important component in the development of a secular national Hebrew culture. In this historical context, the call for sacrifice was largely believed to be an inevitable part of a transitional phase leading to the formation of a Jewish state. Although the first decades following the establishment of the state indicated that violence continued, the victory in the Six-Day War of 1967 reinforced the belief in Israel's security and ability to survive. In spite of the gradual decline of the collectivist ethos in economic and social spheres, the military confrontations and wars reinforced the spirit of readiness to die for the country in the name of collective survival. The glorification of the fighting soldiers and the extensive commemoration of fallen sol-


diers strengthened this trend and the belief in the shared agreement about the inevitability of patriotic sacrifice and its value.

Early signs of skepticism regarding the cost of sacrifice appeared in the 1960s but became more noticeable in the post-1973 period. The growing political divisions in Israeli society during the 1980s and 1990s undermined earlier agreement on the fulfillment of the sacrificial act, targeting various aspects of the pact between the state and its citizens. The political debate on the justification of wars, the use of military force in the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, and growing insistence on families' right to know the particular circumstances of soldiers' deaths indicate a more skeptical approach to the definition of "patriotic sacrifice" as necessary and inevitable. The challenge of the state's control over the commemoration of fallen soldiers and the awareness of the long-term impact of war experiences, injuries, and loss on soldiers and bereaved families articulate the rise of a more individualistic ethos that questions the rewards for "altruistic suicide."

While the educational discourse continues to represent themes and texts that embody the spirit of patriotic sacrifice (Bar-Tal 1998; Furman 1999), popular discourse and artistic use of national myths, such as the Akeda and Trumpeldor's last words, challenge the once hegemonic ethos. The subversive version of Trumpeldor's patriotic saying, "It is good to die for our country," illustrate these changes. It has been turned from an affirmative statement into a question: "It is good to die for our country?"; it has been replaced by an affirmative statement representing an opposing view, "It is good to live for our country" or a curse in Russian that denies the dying person's sentiments toward patriotic sacrifice; it has served as a comment on the use of excessive force in the name of patriotism, "It is good to club [or: hit] for our country," and as an individualistic declaration, "It is good to die for ourselves."

This chapter has focused on those expressions that reflect the weakening of patriotic sacrifice as a hegemonic ethos of Israeli society, yet it is important to note that patriotic sacrifice still plays a considerable role in Israeli national culture. Although evading military service has become more acceptable among high school graduates and the number of cases of conscientious objection has risen, these are limited phenomena within a broader trend of compliance with the call to arms and the risk of death for the nation. The prestige assigned to service in selective combat units has remained high among Israeli youth, and voluntary recruitment to them has not declined, even if the motivation may be grounded in more individualistic goals such as proving oneself and self-fulfillment (Cohen 1997; Hellman 1993; Levy 2001; Linn 1996; Shavit 2000; Stern 1990). Similarly, the great significance attached to the army and the ethos of patriotic sacrifice is evident in the protest movements' attempts to negotiate between their political views with patriotic values.

Yet, as this chapter shows, attitudes toward patriotic sacrifice are in flux and continue to respond to changes in Israeli public's perception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Recent developments since the outbreak of the second in-
tifada in 2000 and the escalation of the conflict produced deep disillusionment from the prospect of peace negotiations and led to a stronger consensus about the justification of self-sacrifice as a means to guarantee collective survival. While these changes appear to have weakened the Left’s opposition to government policies, the government’s declared intention to evacuate Jewish settlements in Gaza might lead to a rise in conscientious objections to the call of military duty on the Right. Within this explosive situation, the intertwining of violence, nationalism, religion, and memory continues to shape and transform current attitudes toward patriotic sacrifice.

Notes

Please note that all translations of Hebrew texts are mine, unless otherwise noted. The bibliography provides the English translation of the Hebrew titles; transliteration is added in those cases where original titles may not be easily identified. All Hebrew sources are identified by [Hebrew] in the bibliography.

1. For the sociological definitions and analysis of sacrifice as a religious act, see Hubert and Mauss 1964: 1-13.


3. On the theory of gifts as a form of exchange, see Mauss 1967.

4. The early Jewish organizations of self-defense in Palestine, Bar-Giora and Ha-Shomer, adopted this verse as their slogan. See, Heilprin 1977: 242 and Shapiro 1992: 105-113. Cahan’s verse is also carved on stones at Ha-Shomer’s historic cemetery.

5. For the analysis of three major heroic myths—Masada, the Bar Kokhba revolt, and Tel Hai—see Y. Zerubavel 1995, Bitan 1996, and Shapiro 1992: 125-141. Although they were dissenting views to this trend, they were marginalized within the predominant emphasis on heroism and self-sacrifice. See Gordon 1952: 401-408; Gorny 1966.

6. On the symbolic bridge between Antiquity and the Zionist revival, see Y. Zerubavel 1995: 13-36. For a broader discussion of the construction of continuity between the past and the present, see E. Zerubavel 2003: 37-54. One of the most fascinating manifestations of the construction of a symbolic continuity between the ancient and the modern struggles for national liberation are the military burials that the State of Israel provided to bones identified as “ancient Jewish warriors,” similar to those given to its fallen soldiers. For a fuller discussion of such a funeral for the Bar Kokhba fighters, see Aronoff 1986: 105-130, and Y. Zerubavel 1995: 129-130, 185-191.

7. Note that Lammad uses here Masada as a collective representation of Zion, the ancient Jewish homeland, and does not refer specifically to the events of 66-74 C.E. reported by Josephus.


9. On the theme of self-sacrifice and its prominence in stories, poems, songs, plays, and rituals performed in the annual commemorations of Tel Hai, see Y. Zerubavel 1995: 86-95. On the impact of the Tel Hai Day commemorations on memorializations of Israeli fallen soldiers, see Ben-Amos and Bet-El 1999.

10. The anecdote on the Palmach commander is recounted in Netiva Ben-Yehuda’s memoirs of her experience in the Palmach underground (1981: 127).


12. For the concept “the bereaved family,” see Witztum and Malkinson 1993: 243-245. On the role of bereaved families in the commemoration of the dead, see also Azaryahu 1995: 123-132; Sivan 1991: 119-230. The name of the organization of the bereaved families, Yad Labanim (The Memorial for the Sons), ignores other relations with the dead such as spouses and children.

13. See Spiegel 1979 for a fascinating study of the transformation of the Akeda throughout the ages. Spiegel’s analysis suggests earlier subversive interpretations of the biblical text.


15. For a recent anthology of Hebrew poetry on the Akeda, see Ben-Gurion 2002. For further discussion, see Kartun-Blum 1995, 1999: 17-65; Ofir 1979; Steiner 1975.


18. It is not surprising, therefore, that the largest military parade took place on Independence Day in 1968. See Azaryahu 1999: 103.

19. These figures and the figures below are quoted in Schiff and Haber 1976. The War of Attrition was only recently recognized as one of the State of Israel’s official wars.

20. It should be noted that the rise of morbid humor at a time of war is not unique to Israeli culture. This phenomenon is also known as “black humor” or “gallows humor.” See Obellik 1942; Davidson 1972: 482; Dunides 1987; Shlomi 1974: 22, 49, 65, 68. Macabre humor was also known among the Palmach youth of the 1940s, as is evident in Ben-Yehuda 1981, and my recorded interview with M. Z. (1978, cassette no. 53).

21. The version about Trumpeldor’s Russian curse expresses a deeply held belief that he could not have possibly uttered such a patriotic statement while dying and hence this must be a fabricated story. For fuller discussion of this case, see Y. Zerubavel 1994: 105-123.

22. On the soldiers’ lyrics, see Halevi, 28 December 1982 and 29 December 1982; Michael 1982; Shenhav 1989. For examples of wounded soldiers'
macabre humor, see Ben-Amotz 1973; Ha'elyon 1973; and the film Repeat Dive, directed by Shimon Dotan, 1982.

23. The play was originally performed in 1970.

24. For a more elaborate discussion of these interpretations of the Akeda, see Ofr 1979: 63–64.

25. In Moshe Shamir's He Went in the Fields (1972 [1948]), the father’s first response upon receiving the news that his son was killed in action is to ensure that the son's girlfriend does not carry out her plan to have an abortion. In the movie version by the same title (directed by Yosef Milo, 1967), the last episode shows the grandfather greeting his soldier-grandson in the exact same manner he used to greet his son. This episode and the fact that the son is called after his dead father demonstrate the continuity of memory within the family. In A. B. Yehoshua's novel, Mr. Marni (1990), the father ensures the continuity within his family line after his son is killed by Arabs by impregnating his son's wife.

26. Thus, in a poem by Yitzhak Lao, “This Idiot, Isaac” (1985), the speaker reproaches Isaac for his excessive obedience to Abraham and suggests an alternative course of action, “[to] lock up his father, his only one, Abraham, in a prison, in an asylum, in the basement of the house so as not to be slaughtered.” To reinforce this point, the speaker warns Isaac not to trust Abraham’s fatherly instincts: “Isaac, Isaac, remember what your father did to Yismael, your brother.” This deliberate inversion of the Akeda presents the relations between Abraham and Isaac as adversarial and offers Isaac an alternative mode of action in the form of rebellion against his father. See Baron 1998: 21–22; Feldman 1998.

27. The Last Jew is a highly intricate novel with multiple subplots that show the recurrence of patterns in Jewish history. The subplot about the memory industry in this novel was used as the basis for an Israeli film, The Vultures, directed by Yaki Yoshe, 1981. In the present context, it is interesting to note that Kuyk's critique is not limited to the case of Israeli society, and it suggests analogies with German and American parents who lost their children. For further analysis of this novel, see Y. Zerubavel 2002.

28. The conformity to the patriotic ethos in spite of one's participation in civic protests is satirized in the film Late Summer Blues, directed by Renan Schorr, 1987.

29. In spite of the greater appeal of The Four Mothers' narrow agenda, this organization was subject to condemnation and ridicule. See, for example, Nekuda 211: 53 and 220: 63 (1998). On the political murders during peace demonstrations, see Feige 2002: 168–169, 204–218; and Peri 2000.

30. Among famous examples of this strategy are the open "officers' letter" to the prime minister in 1978 and a letter of reserve soldiers to the prime minister in October 1996. The publication of the "combatants' letter," signed by fifty-one reserve officers and combat soldiers who returned from their duty in the Gaza Strip in January 2002 led to the establishment of the movement "Courage to Refuse" which, according to website www.seruv.org consists of 628 signatures, half of whom have received jail sentences (as of 26 October 2004). Similarly, the "pilots' letter" of September 2003 is another example of selective conscientious objection to participate in the bombardment of civilian Palestinian population.

31. Since Fall 2004, Israeli media has frequently addressed this issue. See also the recent exchange on this subject in the issue of Alpayim magazine, an important intellectual forum. See Gans 2004a; Sagiv and Shapira 2004.


34. See Hannah Naveh's excellent essay on this novel as articulating a female discourse of bereavement, which is more private and nurturing and stands in opposition to the male military discourse on heroism, patriotic sacrifice, and loss (Naveh 1998).

35. For a more elaborate discussion of the literary representation of war widows, see Friedman 1993; Y. Zerubavel 2003.

36. In the original Hebrew, the deliberate distortions of Trumpeldor’s saying preserve either its original structure or sound, or both. See Dani Kerman’s cartoon of the Tel Hai monument (first published in Dvar Hashavnu [1979]; reprinted in Y. Zerubavel 1995: figure 17), which transforms the saying into an open question. For the use of “It is good to live for our country,” see Ben-Porat et al. 1974: 293. Linn (1996: 142) refers to a 1989 play entitled “It is good to club for our country” (“Tov nabat be'ed arsenu”) in the context of the Israeli response to the first Palestinian intifada. Finally, “It is good to die for ourselves,” was inscribed on the shirt of Aviv Gonen, a famous Israeli singer who did not serve in the army, described by Nahum Barnea (1996).

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