



# Historiography and Collective Memory: a discussion on Yerushalmi's *Zakhor* and its interpretations

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## Abstract

*Zakhor* is the commandment of remembrance often repeated in the Torah. It is also the title of an indispensable book for reflection on Jewish identity in relation to historiography. In this article, I will start with the thesis of the Jewish historian Yerushalmi to discuss the relationship between memory and historiography in the Jewish context and beyond. Yerushalmi pointed out a distance between collective memory and historiography that is an interesting starting point for reflection on the possibilities of a non-westernized historiography. The text is divided into an introduction, three topics that aim: to present Yerushalmi's book; to present the main comments to the book; to reflect on the place or non-place of the national element in a Jewish history; and a conclusion. Thus, I will question the tension between memory and history and a possible approximation that goes beyond the modern notion of historiography. Thus, reading Yerushalmi's thesis as a possibility of rethinking the instruments of historiography.

## Keywords

Collective Memory. Historiography. Judaism.





## Introduction

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Deuteronomy 6:12-10).

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws, and his decrees that I am giving you this day (Deuteronomy 8:11-18).

Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you (Deuteronomy 32:7-7).

Devotion to memory takes in Judaism the form of a pact with God. This specific relationship between memory and the existential commitment to be Jewish happens because Jewish identity is not formed as in other monotheistic religions: being Jewish does not just mean having a certain religion. An example of this can be found in the difference of the terms *judaité* and *judéité*, as claimed by Elisabeth Roudinesco (2009, p. 22). *Judaïte* refers to the identification with the Jewish religion and the maintenance of their rituals, while *Judéite* refers to the Jewish identity, even for those who renounce their religion. Jews are a people that form a nation not necessarily binded to a territory, which does not disconnect each and every Jew from their people and their history and also does not exclude Jews who renounce Judaism or even those who do not see themselves as Jews. Seligmann-Silva (2003) points out that Judaism is a religion structured around the cult of memory, as can be seen from the fact that the main festivals are rituals of remembrance – like *Passover*, when the reading of the *Haggadah* seeks to transport readers and listeners to the regarding moment, or *Purim*, when the salvation of the Jews from the persecution of *Haman* is remembered, and also in the Jewish wedding, when a glass is broken to remember and enact the destruction of the Temple.

The word *Zakhor* in Hebrew refers to the biblical commandment of remembrance and appears frequently in the Torah both urging the people of Israel to remember and, consequently, forbidding forgetfulness. The objective of this article is to understand how this appeal to memory intends to overcome the place of history and historicity. For such an undertaking, it is interesting to start from *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, a book by the Jewish-American historian

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932-2009). The book was released in 1982, just two years before the release of the collection *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984), organized by Pierre Nora. *Zakhor* deals with the relationship between historical knowledge and Jewish collective memory. Yerushalmi begins with a claim that might at first appear to be a contradiction:

at the very heart of this book lies an attempt to understand what seemed a paradox to me at one time – that although Judaism throughout the ages was absorbed with the meaning of history, historiography itself played at best an ancillary role among the Jews, and often no role at all; and, concomitantly, that while memory of the past was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. xxxiii).

The book deals with the relationship between historical knowledge and Jewish collective memory, but it is significant that it is a book produced in a post-Holocaust context in which countless other discussions about the relationship between history and memory emerged, notably those dealing with the notion of an “event at the limits”. It instigates and offers new elements for the broader debate on memory and history. *Zakhor*, therefore, is a work produced after the trauma of the Shoah. In this sense, Yerushalmi (2002, p. 87) warns that a critique of historicism cannot start from simplistic premises such as that modern historians cultivated an inherently flawed hyperpositivism and were not aware of their own subjectivity and contingency. Even so, historical objectivity was, with the advent of the Holocaust, questioned in an unprecedented way and in an unprecedented circumstance and generated numerous different responses. The variety of these responses will not be my object of analysis in this article. Taking this into account, I will address the relationship between collective memory and historiography from the Jewish experience. By presenting Yerushalmi’s work and some of the long academic debate on Jewish history and memory caused by *Zakhor*’s publication, I will not seek to just present the state of the art, but rather to put Yerushalmi’s thesis into perspective as a possibility of rethinking the instruments proper to the modern writing of history.

### **Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor* and the thesis of the divorce between memory and historiography**

*Zakhor* has become significant for the study of Jewish thought and identity. Moreover, it instigates and offers new elements to the broader debate on memory and history. The work was well-received among scholars and lay audiences, Jews and non-Jews, and was translated into several languages. In *Zakhor*, Yerushalmi gathers propositions that he had been presenting



in previous works such as *Clio and the Jews* (1980). One of the main arguments is that the commonly replicated assertions that Jews are the most historically oriented people – or that they have a long-lived memory – are by no means accurate depending on what is meant by “memory” or “history” (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. xxxiii). Therefore, the relationship between Jewish collective memory and historiography has to be explored from antiquity to the modern era. This path led him to the realization that modern historiography is just one of the alternatives betaken by human groups to organize their past and not necessarily the best of them. This historiography could even threaten the place of collective memory by nullifying its privileged proximity to the past.

The first chapter of the book explores the biblical and rabbinical foundations of the function of memory and history for the Jewish people. Yerushalmi distinguishes meaning in history, memory, and writing of history in relation to the *Zakhor* imperative (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 5). The mandate to remember is unconditional, regardless of the problematic character of memory, and points to the role of memory in the survival of a people in global diaspora. Yerushalmi (1996, p. xxxiv) wrote in line with the concept of collective memory coined by Maurice Halbwachs (1990). Jewish memory is not a metaphor or an archetype, but a social experience sustained and transmitted by conscious collective efforts. The specific dynamics of the functioning of Jewish memory were not examined by Halbwachs, who discussed the collective memory of religious groups dealing with Christianity. From this perspective, religious groups guarantee their stability in material ways, having to rely on an object, a durable reality, without which the group itself could not last (HALBWACHS, 1990, p. 155). The immutability achieved through material stability was not always a reality for the Jewish people. The persecutions and sufferings were always present in the Jewish memory that continually recalled them – at least until the rise of Zionism – awaiting the moment of its entry into history. It is not the connection with a spatial framework, but the very commitment to memory that makes the Jewish condition possible. It is necessary not to forget and to forge the pact with God that makes memory a duty and a condition of existence. What interests Yerushalmi is how this command to remember relates to the writing of history, since it would not have been mostly through historiography that the history of the Jewish people has been told. Yerushalmi takes up the assertion that the Greeks, with Herodotus, were the “fathers of history” to affirm that, despite being considered as such, they did not see a meaning for history as a whole, as well as they did not aim at a concept of universal history, unlike the Jewish people, the fathers of meaning in history (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 8).

Assigning Jews the role of fathers of meaning in history means that biblical religion is not detached from history. On the contrary, it is in human history that God’s will and purpose are evidenced: God is known when he reveals himself historically (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 8-9). Once the divine purpose is manifested in history, the encounter with the human leaves the realm

of nature for that of history. The attribution of a decisive meaning to history forms a worldview that had its main premises incorporated by Islam and Christianity: the focus on the struggle between the will of the omnipotent Creator and the free will of the creature in the course of history (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 8).

Yerushalmi (1996, p. 11-14) does not understand the Bible as writing fiction, but as a mode of historical perception and interpretation in which meaning in history, memory of the past, and writing of history are interconnected elements. The Hebrew Bible contains a description of the acts of God, but also of people, and builds a historiography that expresses the awareness that history has a meaning and that it is necessary to remember, although that meaning and memory are not necessarily dependent on history. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that collective memory is transmitted much more actively via ritual than chronicle, given that Jews wrote less history after the closing of the biblical canon and that classical rabbinic literature departs from historiography. Flavius Josephus (38-100), despite the recognition he carries today as a historian, is an exception. His work did not last among the Jews and it took hundreds of years before a Jew called himself or was called by someone a historian again.

Theorizing the distance between rabbinic literature and historiography is essential to understanding the development of this complex bond between history and memory in Judaism and the aforementioned distance between collective memory and historiography. The rabbis set out from the will of exploring the meaning in history, as they would already possess the (biblical) history. They do not deal with time chronologically, but rather anachronistically: they are silent about the events of their own time and apprehend the Bible as a pattern for all history, not a repository of past histories. A new conception of history is not needed to accommodate history where the Bible left off. After all, the catastrophes were like the previous ones (due to sin) and the biblical narrative was still able to illuminate any subsequent contingency (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 19-24). Memory, in this sense, is selective and so is the imperative to remember. Biblical history has a meaning that is revealed by prophecies, but not all history needs to be remembered. Rabbis are neither prophets nor historians: their hermeneutics are antithetical.

Yerushalmi deals subsequently with Jewish memory in the Middle Ages, especially the impact of Talmudic Judaism on medieval Jewish communities, the advances in fields of study, and the concomitant little interest in recording their own history. While reading and producing historical chronicles was seen as a Christian custom, for Judaism the fundamental literary genre was the transmission of rabbinic law and doctrine through the Talmud. The history of the Gentiles, the wars between other nations, or even the recent past and the current condition did not generate interest. But the remote, the origins of the sins that generated the exile and current sufferings were important (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 31-36). Memory continued to be indispensable for



the maintenance of Jewish identity, and historiography did not serve as a primary vehicle for remembrance. After all, historiography is not, or cannot be, exclusionary, like memory. The remembrance rituals took place according to different chronological systems that were related to historical time in more than one dimension. That is why “cyclical” or “linear” would be insufficient categories to define a proper chronology.

Past events were, in fact, experienced, marking the fusion of past and present in memory. They were no longer the mark of remembrance, but of a reactualization, so those contemporary sufferings were repetitions of the past. For example, the answer to one of the greatest catastrophes in the Middle Ages was not a chronicle, but the composition of a *shihot* (penitential prayers) and its insertion in the synagogue liturgy. This shows the primacy of ritual liturgy over historical narrative and the power of commemoration to preserve the essential memory of an event without necessarily describing historical details (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 44-51).

Salo W. Baron (1928) was one of the first to claim that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was a resurgence of historical writing among Jews on the occasion of their expulsion from Spain and forced conversion in Portugal. This idea was developed by Yerushalmi. In that context, several exiles became authors of their stories of suffering. We can raise two important questions here: why does the Spanish expulsion instigate a return to historiography and what makes these works historiography? Yerushalmi understands the expulsion from Spain as the last expulsion, the event that altered the history of the Jews, the culmination of the process of displacement from east to west, and the emptying of Western Europe of Jews. The historical crisis was what stimulated historiography and made the meaning of events for the present and future to be recognized. An indication that the writings produced can be characterized as historiography is the admission that the fate of Jews is affected by their interaction with other nations. Also, that the chronological and geographical scope goes beyond what could be found before that period, that is, the admission of the impossibility of apprehension with the focus turned to the past. Furthermore, it features a detailed narrative that does not just focus on a specific persecution but seeks a coherent and consecutive account of several centuries. The interest went beyond biblical times and formed a perspective of exile (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 58-66). These Jewish historians did not introduce new methods or new conceptual frameworks, they continued to utilize apocalyptic and messianic elements, but they also did not fit into an already existing genre.

Finally, Yerushalmi analyzes modern Jewish dilemmas regarding historiography and identity. Yerushalmi himself, as a Jewish professional historian, would be a new figure in Jewish history, which was born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time when much more would be known about the past, and the sense of identity and continuity is milder than in earlier times. To speak of Jewish historiography is something recent. Yerushalmi (1996, p. 81-83) reminds us that the first

professorship of Jewish history at a secular university dates from 1930, held by Salo Wittmayer Baron. To call it recent does not mean to say that the history of the Jews was not being told, but that the initial post-biblical historical accounts about the Jews were written by non-Jewish historians, and that what generated modern Jewish historiography was secularization, making it the “faith of the fallen Jews” (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 86).

Historiography as the faith of fallen Jews is an assertion that is linked to *Haskalah* (or Jewish Enlightenment), symbolized prominently by Moses Mendelssohn (1726-1789). *Haskalah* was an intellectual movement inspired by the European Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the ideas commonly associated with *Haskalah* can be identified in German Judaism long before Mendelssohn, such as the quest for greater social and cultural exchange with Gentiles. However, it was only in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that such ideas found the basis to transform themselves into a broad sociocultural movement. A movement that introduced changes in Jewish culture and way of life and aimed to modify or replace some rabbinic cultural structures and practices to create a *Haskalah* Judaism. Social integration projects led to an openness to secular education, which required a representation of Judaism as a rational, non-dogmatic faith more receptive to modernization. This included giving importance to historical knowledge. For Yerushalmi (1996, p. 82-85), however, it was not precisely the *Haskalah* that generated the tolerance of history, but the secularization that spread itself from Germany to the whole of Europe. Modern Jewish historiography emerges, then, from exterior assimilation, not as a mere academic curiosity, but as a response to the crisis of Jewish emancipation and the struggle to achieve it. In the Jewish case, emancipation refers to the granting of citizenship rights and the suppression of other legal injustices against them. A purpose that never failed to meet resistance.

In 1822, Immanuel Wolf published an article in the *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* with the title *Über den Begriff einer Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which was published within the so-called *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, a 19<sup>th</sup> century movement that emerged under the premise of critical investigation of Jewish literature and culture, including rabbinic literature. The aim was to use scientific methods to analyze the origins of Jewish traditions. In evoking the term *Wissenschaft*, Wolf had in mind the historical methodology that was spreading across Germany and would soon become one of the hallmarks of 19<sup>th</sup> century European thought. From that moment, it was no longer history to prove its usefulness for Judaism, but Judaism to justify itself historically, which shows an absorption of the Jews to the historicist perspective. Thus, *Haskalah* and assimilation proved to be inseparable: the decline of the Talmudic faith would be what paved the way for the emergence of a new intellectual elite of Jews who, by opening up to the Enlightenment, sought to adapt to the Christian environment. While Jewish thinkers used the works of non-Jewish philosophers to rethink Judaism, Mendelssohn sought to reconcile faith and





reason. Such ventures started from the attempt to institute common rationality in monotheistic religions to guarantee sufficient tolerance for Jews to become and remain citizens. Despite Mendelssohn's little interest in historiography (HESS, 2007, p. 4-5), the same assimilation and secularization that traced the contours of his thought later led the first modern Jews to define themselves as historians. The *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had to deal with fundamental questions: should the Jew, committed both to the *Wissenschaft* and Judaism, deal with two systems of values that, internalized, modify each other, or even deny each other? (MEYER, 2007, p. 73). This search for a balance between emancipation and tradition is at the heart of the attempt to replace collective memory with historiography.

### **The debate generated by Yerushalmi's *Zakhor*: historiography and Judaism**

In a 1988 article entitled *How Golden was the Age of Renaissance in Jewish Historiography?* Robert Bonfil dedicates a few pages to a critique of Yerushalmi's book based on the assertion that, by substituting the phenomenological question for the ontological one, Yerushalmi changed the terms of reference. For Bonfil, the contrast between Jews and non-Jews would not provide a sufficiently adequate context as a framework to understand Jewish historiographical production unless it was related to Jewish alterity (BONFIL, 1988, p. 83). According to Collingwood, there would be no historians before the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it is this statement that Bonfil takes up to argue that Christians and Jews were not producing historiography during the Middle Ages so the production of Jewish historiography would only be part of the general resurgence of historiography in the West. From this perspective, Yerushalmi isolates Jewish historiography without presenting a definition of what is history or historiography and without an operational differentiation between history and memory. Without this differentiation, he would fail to refer to the emergence of historical science and to include Jews in the general framework of the emergence of modern historiography (BONFIL, 1988, p. 80). Bonfil (1988, p. 83) called a "commonplace" the notion that the 16<sup>th</sup> century was a culmination of Jewish historiography. For him, in the name of this statement, numerous literary works produced by Jews and vaguely related to history would have been grouped. Thus, considering the so-called Golden Age of Jewish historiography as a normal expression of reality, inserted in the context to which it belonged, would be more appropriate than assuming it as an exception. As already shown in its title, the article aims to challenge the very conviction that Jewish historiography had a golden age during the Renaissance and Baroque periods.



Bonfil then asks: if the ideology of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and its interaction with modern historicism were what gave rise to Jewish historiography, then how could the accounts made during (and because of) the expulsion from Spain and Portugal be characterized as historiography? For him, Yerushalmi had abdicated from dealing with changes in the conception of the scientific method to emphasize the association between assimilation and historiography and pursue the aspiration of dissolving the borders between history and memory by reintegrating them (BONFIL, 1988, p. 78-83). According to Bonfil, during the Renaissance Christians adopted a humanist conception of history, manifested at first as political history. This conception was unfeasible for Jews due to the constant situation of exile, and the absence of a State or military power. The Jews had not have embraced the secular historiographical regime initially because it would not have served to encompass the Jewish reality at the time, causing them to return to ancient models and rabbinical chronologies that were more important for mysticism than for history (BONFIL, 1988, p. 87-90). To support this claim, Bonfil disregards what not only Yerushalmi but numerous historians called Jewish historiography of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Bonfil aspires to break with the supposed convention of treating Jewish history as belonging to the realm of the "other", disconnected from general history. For that, he does not deny the historical character of some productions but highlights the structural similarities with the Ecclesiastical History, the work of Eusébio de Caesarea. I consider, however, that contextualization does not necessarily refute Yerushalmi's assertion about the specificity of the Jewish way of dealing with memory and the distance from historiography. It is plausible to consider that the Jews did not initially adopt secular historiography due to the Diaspora, a reality very different from that of the Christians, and also that elements of Christian historiography have been incorporated by Jews who set out to narrate events. Yet collective memory is (still) a privileged way in which Jews access the past, and which does not correspond to the Christian way.

Another comment on Yerushalmi's work worth to be mentioned is the article by Amos Funkenstein entitled *Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness* published in 1989. Funkenstein's disagreements with the book *Zakhor* sparked a debate with David N. Myer, former disciple of Yerushalmi and historian of Jewish history. Funkenstein (1989, p. 6-7) tries to demystify what he defined as collective entities, in particular collective memory, which he considers not convincingly explained in terms of how it is expressed and how it differs from written history or theories of history. For this reason, Funkenstein introduces another concept into the equation, that of historical consciousness. This introduction places memory and consciousness as interrelated, but only as individual mental acts, which does not mean that consciousness and memory are disconnected from the context. Memory connects the individual and constant act of remembering to the language and symbolic system shaped by society over generations. Funkenstein concludes



that it would not be a mistake for the historian to use the concept of collective memory as long as its limitations are clear.

Historical consciousness is, from his point of view, a new type of historical image that emerged from collective memory in Western culture and whose essence resides not only in remembering the past to create a collective identity and cohesion but in the attempt to understand the past and make sense of it. The concept should function as a dynamic heuristic construction regarding the degree of creative freedom in the use and interpretation of the content of collective memory, which would change at different times in the same culture (FUNKENSTEIN, 1989, p. 12). It is in dealing with Jewish historical consciousness that Funkenstein presents his greatest divergences from Yerushalmi. Not anymore to the commandment of remembrance, he goes to another type of connection with the past: the consciousness of its historical origins since the Scriptures. For Yerushalmi, the Bible offered enough archetypes for the Jewish people to analyze contemporary events. Funkenstein does not disagree that a historiographical tradition was lacking until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but, like Bonfil, understands that there was no considerable difference in the conception of history of Jews and Christians. In this way, if historiography almost did not exist in the sphere of traditional Judaism, historical consciousness developed among Jews and could be observed in the discussions and commentaries on *Halakhah*<sup>1</sup>, from which a continuous and chronological record of innovations emerged and were preserved – that could not yet be considered a Jewish achievement, as the Romans had long paid attention to the circumstances of the legal texts, the period, the location (FUNKENSTEIN, 1989, p. 16-19). Funkenstein, like Bonfil, does not share the negative connotation that accompanies the notion of assimilation as explained by Yerushalmi. According to Funkenstein, historical consciousness is not opposed to collective memory, but is a developed and organized form of it, so that historical consciousness, collective memory, and historiography would express the same mentality. For him, the historicization of Judaism did not remove 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish historians from the collective memory. On the contrary, it would faithfully express the image of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jews, eager for emancipation, adopting the culture of the time, and showing themselves as possessors of an open Judaism (FUNKENSTEIN, 1989, p. 20-21).

David N. Myers defined *Zakhor* as a work that contributed to the reformulation of Jewish identity in a secular age, expanding the temporal and epistemological limits of modernity in the Jewish experience. His commentary was written ten years after *Zakhor's* publication in

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<sup>1</sup>*Halakhah* refers to the set of laws and rules that, from biblical times, evolved and regulated the daily life of Jews, preserving oral traditions. *Halakhah*, commonly called Jewish law, is the path, the set of rituals and beliefs that gives a people the possibility of identity and a sense of their destiny. Judaism guides not only religious practices and beliefs but countless other aspects of life.

response to Funkenstein. For him, *Zakhor* fostered important debates, but among his critics, there was a group eager to point out supposedly unfounded historical generalizations without even understanding the panoramic view that Yerushalmi offered in *Zakhor*. Myers included Funkenstein in this group for suggesting that there is no need to place Jewish memory in opposition to Jewish history (MYERS; FUNKENSTEIN, 1992, p. 129-130). The category of historical consciousness was not conceptually explained by Funkenstein either and did not indicate a rupture. He agrees that historiography was practically absent in the sphere of traditional Judaism and adds that, on the other hand, a well-developed historical consciousness existed elsewhere in Jewish literature. He presented the example of the interpretation and application of *Halakhah* in a confusing historical reference. That is why Myers questions the need to differentiate the two concepts. What would qualify a phenomenon as historical consciousness and not collective memory? Another problem, for Myers, is the parallelism between this Western historical consciousness and *Halakhah* (MYERS; FUNKENSTEIN, 1992, p. 131-132). What Myers considers the great symbol of the fragmentation of collective memory in modernity is something that Funkenstein admits, namely, the lack for Jews of the essential inspiration that German and French historiography had, causing the Jewish past to be constructed with the national element practically suppressed.

If there was, as Funkenstein argues, a continuity between the historical consciousness of modern Jews and traditional Judaism, how can one justify the fact that history as a science that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century rejected some of the essential pillars on which Jewish identity was built, especially the providential nature of the relationship with the past? The Reformation, referred to as Reform Judaism, or Liberal Judaism, was a movement in response to the events of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the increasing political centralization that ended up undermining the social structure of traditional Jewish life. At that moment, a tension was felt between the way many Jews began to lead their lives and their tradition. In an attempt to reconcile these two realities, the Reformation emerged as a response to the changes caused by emancipation, defending that the change in religion is legitimate and that Judaism changes as society changes (SKOLNIK, 2007, p. 165-167). The "liberal-bourgeois" Judaism to which Funkenstein refers would only demonstrate how turbulent the process of redefining Judaism was in a secular era, an era when the demand for emancipation intended to relegate Judaism to the private sphere, that of a merely religious domain (MYERS; FUNKENSTEIN, 1992, p. 133-137).

## **The place of the Diaspora and the place of Zionism**

Funkenstein goes beyond Yerushalmi when he addresses the transformations in Jewish memory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the height of the struggle for national rights. The example used by



Yerushalmi (1996, p. 97) to show the anti-historical attitude in Hebrew literature is the character of Haim Hazaz (1898-1973), Yudka. The tale of Hazaz is the exposition of a sermon given by Yudka, a Jewish common man, before the council of his *Kibbutz*. The language used demonstrates anger and anguish turned against Jewish ideas of impotence and passivity. Yudka does not hesitate to tell the council that he opposes Jewish history, the "shame of his ancestors", a history that was not written by Jews, only accepted by Jews, and that shows not only passivity in the face of pogroms among other outbreaks of violence, but a desire for suffering. The Jew, for Yudka, does not simply accept suffering, but yearns for suffering, because that is how he could be defined as a Jew. This attachment to tragedies is designed to prevent redemption so that the very messianic idea of Judaism and Jewish history would actually serve to prevent Jews from being redeemed (HAZAZ, 2005).

The teaching of history, therefore, is associated with a chronicle created by non-Jews, a narrative tied to the idea of suffering and massacres of a people in exile. Myers returned to some questions previously addressed in his doctoral thesis entitled *From Zion will go forth Torah: Jewish Scholarship and the Zionist Return to History* (1991). For him, contrary to Yudka's mission of erasing history, Jewish historians, who emigrated from Europe to Palestine at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had deliberately decided to forge a new collective memory for the Jewish people, redefined in political-national terms (MYERS; FUNKENSTEIN, 1992, p. 138). To illustrate this encounter between Jewish memory and modernity through Zionist historiography, the main example used is the historian Ben-Zion Dinur (1884-1973), who defended a "Palestinocentric" history, that is, a history guided by the essential connection between the Jews and their ancestral land. According to Myers (1988, p. 174-176), Zionism emerged, for Dinur, as a response to a concrete historical situation, reflecting the social reality of a particular stratum of Jews in Eastern Europe and, later, in Palestine. Assimilation causes the Talmudic way to be abandoned as the exclusive way of living. Contrary to what the fictional Yudka defended, a Palestinocentric history could not give up the Diaspora, a phase of the return to *Eretz Yisrael*. Dinur argued that recovering the Diaspora narrative would evidence the manifestation of an inherent Jewish identity, linking past and present. Such an identity was made explicit by the functioning of community institutions during the Diaspora that gave unity to Jewish history and enabled the emergence of the Zionist movement. In this way, the previously suppressed national element offered the necessary ideological impetus to reassess the past, which was soon instrumentalized for the construction of a triumphant Zionist teleology. Within the Zionist project of reshaping Jewish memory, Dinur recognized the imposition for providing historical continuity, placing Zionism as a response to the fragmentation of Jewish identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by uniting Jewish identity and the national question (MYERS; FUNKENSTEIN, 1992, p. 138-140).

Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, in an article published in 2007 entitled *Jewish Memory between Exile and History*, admits that he shares some of the criticisms directed at Yerushalmi's book, but believes that its central thesis – that of the distance between collective memory and historiography in modernity – is essential to understanding Jewish historical consciousness in the West. For him, however, the insistence on a category of providence – as done by Myers and earlier by Yerushalmi – fails to explain the tension between memory and historiography in the Jewish case. Funkenstein would not have advanced as much because in his distinction between history and memory he reproduced a modern concept of history and not examined it from a Jewish point of view (RAZ-KRAKOTZKIN, 2007, p. 530-531). What Raz-Krakotzkin proposes is an examination of Jewish history writing from the central concept of exile and in a perspective in which accepting the paradigm of modern historiography would mean rejecting the historical consciousness expressed by exile. Exile is, in this sense, what defined Judaism.

The concept of exile, at its most basic level, refers to the dispersion of Jews, their inferior political status, and their lack of place in the world outside of their homeland. It also refers to the condition of the whole world: the exile of God from history, a state of absence that highlights the imperfection of this world. The concept alone rejects the existence of meaningful history. This means that, for Raz-Krakotzkin, the explanation for the absence of writing of history beyond the Bible lies in exile. Providence would have played an important role, as concrete events were interpreted as manifestations of a divine plan, but even in most canonical texts, exile from the Earth is what brings about the end of history. It would still be possible for each community, subject to the most diverse contexts, to have its own history, but these local traditions could never be structured as a global history. The historical consciousness of exile can be illustrated by the transition from biblical historical narrative to rabbinical discourse. In the Middle Ages, Jews and Christians shared numerous aspects of historical consciousness, for example the idea of the present as a time of transition. They would distance themselves, however, while relating present and past. While, for the Jews, the world was in exile and their existential condition was proof of this, Christian authors developed the notion of historical progress from the Old to the New Testament. Thus, a definitive rejection of history in the context of salvation was incorporated into the concept of exile. To produce historiography, following its modern concept, would mean not only moving away from Jewish conceptions of history but also adopting a Christian one. The concept of exile did not simply depart from history but engendered a historical consciousness of its own that permeated rabbinic literature and communal rituals. Christian authors argued that history would only reach its completion when Jews returned to it by accepting Christianity. This same idea of redemption is adapted in the Enlightenment context, when progress by divine grace is replaced by a rational version, implying not only the denial of the essential elements of the Jewish and medieval way of



relating to the past but the adoption of a Christian vision of history, even if a secularized one (RAZ-KRAKOTZKIN, 2007, p. 531-537).

According to Ginzburg (2001, p. 141-148), the historical perspective that is familiar to us could only have been formulated by a Christian, such as Augustine, who reflected on the relationship between Jews and Christians, between the Old and the New Testament, and pointed out the crucial element of modern historical consciousness: that the past must be understood in its own terms and as a link. The Old Testament is at once true and superseded. This element came from the Augustinian realization that it is necessary to read the Bible, both figuratively and literally, prophetically and historically. That is a notion that reconciles divine immutability and historical change. Augustinian exegesis (reading the Bible with care not to project customs of the time and place where one lives) is very far from the Jewish tradition. This exegesis combines distance and continuity and is expressed by the Christians' claim that they are the *verus Israel*, a Christian self-definition that is the matrix of the conception of historical truth (GINZBURG, 2001, p. 154-155). Thus, the ambivalence felt by Christians towards Jews is posed by Ginzburg and accepted by Raz-Krakotzkin as the origin of a new, non-cyclical perception of human history. The modern historiographical paradigm is a secularized version of the divine accommodation model.

Through the Zionist movement and the new contours of Jewish memory, Raz-Krakotzkin presents a different perspective on how history with a national and Zionist element is described by Myers. The idea of returning to history is briefly discussed in the article. Thereby, in the modern Jewish context, particularly in Zionism, the ambivalent relationship of Jews with history was replaced by a sense of progress concerning the past and a consequent denial of the characteristic aspects of the time and life in exile. A process of westernization of Jewish history that functioned as a symbolic conversion. For Raz-Krakotzkin (2013, p. 37), the idea of a Zionist return exists in the consciousness of the denial of exile, so that the return to history is an attempt to transfigure Jews dispersed around the world into a national actor responsible for their existence and their destiny. In one fell swoop, the return of the Jews to history would resolve Jewish existential questions, answer the expectations of centuries, and restore political and national sovereignty. The path found for this, however, was the total denial of the past in exile, symbolized by Jewish passivity, and the acceptance of the Christian perception of history. The very idea, now widespread, of a Western civilization founded on Judeo-Christian values is questionable from the perspective of the persecution of Jews in the Christian West. The term arises, especially, from a non-Jewish origin. That is, the use of the term Judeo-Christian comes from a Christian culture that admits its origins in the Jewish tradition and comfortably suggests that Judaism develops into Christianity; that the incomplete Jewish religion is naturally replaced by Christianity. David Nirenberg (2013)

argues that the main values of Western civilization are built in direct opposition to Jewish values, so calling it Judeo-Christian is to eliminate Judaism by defining the West as the conqueror of Jewish tradition. Judaism may share its basic religious concepts more with Islam than Christianity, but the Israel-Palestine conflict and the political-theological creation of a Judeo-Christian junction in defense of a conservative agenda (morally and economically) establish a false symmetry between Jews and Christians against groups that supposedly threaten Western values, especially the Arabs, great representatives of the mystical and imaginary East.

The historical consciousness of exile is presented to show the rupture caused by Zionism. Zionism accepts the presupposition that there was, before the return, a history from which only the Jews would have been excluded for their "stubbornness". Accepting the Enlightenment version of historiographical work means accepting the attitude whose rejection defined Jewish identity in exile, the attitude of superiority of Christians over Jews. There is no contradiction here, because as much as the idea of exile included the end of history after the destruction of the Second Temple, it never meant that Jews were left out of history, but it certified a condition of history in the Jewish view (RAZ-KRAKOTZKIN, 2013, p. 39-40). A second question refers to the orientalist dimension of the secularization of the concept of history, showing that the West is in opposition to what was then considered outside of history and has the European as its only bearer whose definition is given by the alienation of the other. Raz-Krakovitzkin borrows Edward W. Said's concept of Orientalism to show how the Zionist movement, by accepting the notion of history as a term referring to the Christian West, wrongly defined Jewish identity as European as opposed to the Muslim East. Returning to history means accepting the terms and principles that caused, in the first place, the very exclusion of Jews from Europe and, also, the obliteration of the multiple local histories of the different Jewish communities in exile, as well as the suppression of the history of the land (Palestine) and its inhabitants. In the context of the Enlightenment, was the "Jewish question" reformulated in terms of a centralized State? Would it be necessary to restore the Jews to history, to make them citizens without the previous restrictions, to civilize them? The Jewish question appears, then, linked to Orientalism and parallel to the question of whether Judaism is just a religion. In other words, whether Jews would be able to be integrated into European civil society, or form a distinct, oriental nation alien to European values. The Zionist reaction offered what seemed to them an authentic Jewish alternative to assimilation and Orthodox Judaism, founded on objection to the return. Zionist thinkers insisted that the Jews were an autonomous but Western nation. They created the narrative that the return should take place outside Europe, in the East, but treated it as a return to what would be common to Judaism and Christianity, to the source of the West, inevitably succumbing to assimilation by the Western narrative (RAZ-KRAKOTZKIN, 2013, p. 39-47). The very study of Jewish history as an autonomous field was





initially suggested by Protestant theologians and developed in an adaptation of the Jewish religious imagination to the modern model of national history, with a division between ancient, modern, and medieval periods. Exile was reduced to the history of Jews in the Middle Ages and Zionism to the manifestation of modernity and redemption. This project of denial of exile and rabbinic tradition, despite gaining prominence in current narratives about the State of Israel, was not fully accepted not only by the Orthodox branch of Judaism, but also by Zionist historians such as Yitzhak Baer, Gershom Scholem, and Ben-Zion Dinur who interpreted the culture of exile as crucial for the formation of a new identity and the construction of Zionist thought. While these historians mentioned adopted what they called a romantic rhetoric, perceived by them as neutral from the religious point of view and dissociated from the Christian aspect of European culture, for Raz-Krakotzkin, the incorporation of the scientific methods of a historiography that emerged in Europe would already mean submission to a Christian perception of history.

Back to Yerushalmi, it is possible to problematize the passage from Jewish memory to Jewish historiography. This passage does not simply indicate a rupture, but the need to reinvent historiography, to create a new way of dealing with the past. Through nationalism, Jews found a way to enter historiography and build new collective identities. However, this process had to involve a rewriting of history and the suppression of pluralities in the tradition of the different exile communities. Understanding the national element is essential to think about Zionism in its various expressions, as well as the historical consciousness present in the current Israeli discourse. At the same time, the national is yet another element challenging historians of Jewish history (who are usually Jews) in their task of balancing forces. These forces are the historical methodology, which considers external social pressures and comes from a periodization and other criteria that are often completely alien to Jewish identity; and the tradition itself that can resort to mystical explanations. It is of course possible to argue that the work of all historians, regardless of their involvement with the object of research, will reveal identity and ideological traits in tension with the methodological commitment, but the case of Jewish historiography is exemplary. Such exemplarity reveals an impossibility shown by Yerushalmi (1996, p. 81): the way in which he, a Jewish historian of Jewish history, delves into the past means a rupture with this past. Before the second decade of the 19th century, there was no such thing as organized and self-defined Jewish historiography, but rather a way of relating to the past guided by memory and expressed in a variety of literary genres, such as liturgical poetry and hagiography.

Meyer (1967, p. 8) defines the modern Jew as one for whom Judaism constitutes only a part of his identity, one of his multiple loyalties at a time when external pressures and internal attachments have made him more aware of these identifications and of identity segmentation

itself. This segmentation is approached by Yerushalmi in terms of history and memory. Some of the different views on this tension could be glimpsed through the comments on his work. When Yerushalmi pointed to the resistance that Jewish collective memory imposes to historiographical treatment, he made room for the analysis of a series of concepts such as memory, history, and historical consciousness in the context of Jewish existence and its numerous particularities (such as the ones related to the Zionism and anti-Semitism). He did even more by allowing us to glimpse how these instances (history and memory) relate to the historiographical statement in general. With the possibility of thinking about the national issue in Israel, the Jews re-entered the narrated history, but their perception of how they got there would be much more mythical than real. As a condition and expression of life-sustaining myth and memory, Jewish identity is still being reinterpreted in our time.

## Conclusion

It is true that Yerushalmi's thesis is far from being the only one that leads to reflections on the possibility of overcoming the European modern formulation of historiography. There is a vast bibliography critical of a specific way of writing history that could be confronted with Yerushalmi's work. Bringing and discussing this bibliography was not one of the objectives of this article, which aims to point to the distance between Jewish memory and historiography as a paradigm for thinking about an alternative to historiography. Still, the references briefly mentioned below give a sense of how the different temporalities of memory and of history have been discussed from other starting points. Chakrabarty, for example, stated interesting criticisms of Western historiography, pointing out its limits through the idea of "provincializing Europe". The author places history as the site in which the modern seeks to appropriate different configurations of memory, after all, memory can indicate other constructions of the self and the community that do not provide metanarratives or a teleology and even unveils an antihistorical consciousness (CHAKRABARTY, 2000, p. 37). From a postcolonial approach, Chakrabarty (2000, p. 40) shows how antihistorical constructions of the past often provided very powerful forms of nonmodern collective memory. This argument forms part of a larger piece on how approaches to history in Western thought shape theories, so that they do not reflect non-Western experiences. Experiences such as those that can't be reduced to the association between modernity and secularism.

Bevernage and Lorenz (2013, p. 8-16) discuss how historians differentiate past, present and future and, with that, offer another interesting example of criticism of historiography as a hegemonic way of knowing the past. If modern history assumes the existence of the past as an object that can be studied objectively, different cultures position the boundary between past,



present and future in different ways. Memory as a different way of dealing with the past can be illustrated by exposing the need for historians to start reflecting on how they divide time after the so-called memory boom. In agreement with Yerushalmi, the book by Bevernage and Lorenz can show how the temporal distance between past and present is challenged by memory, by the very presence of the past in the present. Meanwhile, Mudrovic (2019) problematizes the Western conception of the present placing periodization as a way of acting in time: not just a description of historical time, but the discrimination of what belongs to the past or the present. Time politics construct an anachronistic “other” that belongs to the past and is excluded from the present. Temporal alterity is artificially constructed in history.

The Jewish people, especially, are commonly presented as having a special connection with memory. However, for all their technical and literary achievement, they failed to preserve events in their facticity. The reason for this is the fear that history could corrupt the divine message, how faith is shared, and even Jewish identity itself. This is because memory is kept alive through transmission from generation to generation and the historian's work (transforming memory into narrative) is capable of displacing and even interrupting tradition (RICOEUR, 2007, p. 409). In the last chapter of his book, Yerushalmi takes up the claim of the distance between collective memory and historiography and warns of the damage that history can inflict on collective memory. Only from the modern age onwards would the divorce between Jewish historiography from Jewish collective memory can be verifiable. The conclusion is: those who expect the historian to be able to restore memory are attributing to him powers he does not possess. Historiography cannot replace a collective memory that, in the first place, never depended on history. A memory that shared a function with the faith of a group that transmitted and recreated its past through a whole complex of interconnected social and religious institutions (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 93-94).

The decline of Jewish collective memory in modern times is only a symptom of the unraveling of that common network of belief and praxis through whose mechanisms, some of which we have examined, the past was once made present. Therein lies the root of the malady. Ultimately Jewish memory cannot be “healed” unless the group itself finds healing, unless its wholeness is restored or rejuvenated. But for the wounds inflicted upon Jewish life by the disintegrative blows of the last two hundred years the historian seems at best a pathologist, hardly a physician (YERUSHALMI, 1996, p. 94).

Memory and historiography are entirely different ways of relating to the past. The historian could not restore, or “cure”, memory, but only diagnose (like a pathologist) its end and create a new form of remembrance. Those who chose, at some point, to examine Jewish history from the angle of Western historicism, would be threatening – with their quest to account for the entire past

– memories that for a long time remained intact. Historical science, as it emerged in Germany, serves the quest for cultural and political unification. Many intellectuals of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* suppressed the national element of the Jewish past, an element that was dear to the historiography of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the awakening of modern nationalism the impetus for German and French historiography was extracted, and from the emancipation of the Jews emerged the demand that they cease to consider themselves a nation.

At this point, Nietzsche's (1999, p. 273) defense of the need to feel ahistorically can serve as an analogy to Yerushalmi's concern. The motivation for such criticism in historiographical work indeed comes from the same notion of what history is for historicism. But would memory have been able to provide a counterpoint to all modern philosophy and culture? Considering the imperative that evokes the Jews not to forget their past, there is no point in encompassing all this past, there is "a time to keep and a time to throw away" (Ecclesiastes 3:6). However, even if memory can relate to the past in another way, the "power to forget" evoked by Nietzsche is not desirable for the conservation of Jewish identity. Even if it is, for the latter, a distinct preoccupation, not with memory but with a present obsessively taken over by a dead past. The disintegrating blows to which Yerushalmi refers – many of which came from Jewish intellectuals in search of integration – made it impossible for Jewish memory to remain immune to the onslaughts of modernization. Modernization was brought about by a historiography that aimed to be recognized as an empirical science and also to present itself as an alternative for many Jewish thinkers. For Yerushalmi (1996, p. 96) this historiography ultimately had very little influence on modern Jewish thought, receiving resistance from various circles and generating less influence on the perception of the past than literature. Jews who rejected this history sought not the historicity of the past but its eternal contemporaneity. Many continued to seek the past but not the past offered by historians.

Ricoeur (2007, p. 408-409) understands that *Zakhor* is a book capable of allowing us to access a universal problem through the existence of a Jewish singularity. A singularity that reveals the resistance that all memory can oppose to the historiographical treatment by which the historian can affect memory in the most varied ways: contesting, correcting, displacing, interrupting, or even destroying. Special attention is given by Ricoeur to the idea of meaning in history, since meaning in history can be found in genres alien to the concern of explaining historical events. The injunction to remember and not forget makes explicit that the survival of Jews as a group depends on memory but does not imply the obligation to narrate historical events. So that the place of the narrative is next to the laws and this is what makes explicit the concern with the meaning of history. Thus, for Ricoeur, it is only with a retrospective look that Yerushalmi can point



out the non-equivalence between the meaning in history, the memory of the past, and the writing of history. It is precisely because the difference between poetry and erudite history is ignored that meaning in history can ignore historiography: it is possible that the historical character of biblical faith originated from a reconstruction of historiography (RICOEUR, 2007, p. 410). The distance between collective memory and historiography is, therefore, paradigmatic, since the relationship between historiography and secularization is undeniable. The discontent that Yerushalmi claims to suffer from as a professional Jewish historian is also exemplary, and not just for Jewish historians, for that “these discontents are perhaps our own, all of us, the bastard children of Jewish memory and of the secularized history of the nineteenth century” (RICOEUR, 2004, p. 401).

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