

Author: Bruce Rosenstock

Session: Approaches to Teaching “Introduction to Jewish Studies”

History and Memory in Jewish Studies

I am not going to try to describe a syllabus or attempt to distinguish between the introduction to Jewish Studies course and the Introduction to Judaism course. Rather, I want to think about how to teach students about one specific topic as it is played out in the Jewish context, namely, the difference between history and memory. I choose this as my starting point because it seems to me to be a common concern of many Jewish Studies scholars today, whether their disciplinary matrix is history, literary criticism, or cultural studies. My own colleague, Michael Rothberg, has just published a very fine study, *Multidirectional Memory*, that stands out as one example of this concern. I also choose this topic to talk about as a way to remember the achievement of Yosef Yerushalmi, who died at age 77 on December 8 of this month and whose 1982 *Zachor* has become a classic in the field of Jewish Studies. In my remarks, I'll offer a few sample readings that might make up part of *some* introductory course in Jewish Studies, and then I'll say a few words about how to categorize this material, whether as part of an introduction to *jewish studies* or as part of an introduction to *judaism*, and what it says about these categories that this topic, as I think we'll see, seems able to fit in either course.

How to teach about history and memory as part of a course in Jewish Studies? I think I might begin with a short essay that appears to be the first to raise the general topic. In a talk given in 1934 before the American Historical Association, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (*Journal of Philosophy* 32.4 (1935: 93-100)) distinguished between what he called memory or tradition on the one hand and the writing of history on the other. Rosenstock-Huessy focused on memory as the memory of a nation, the collective memory of a collective experience. This collective memory is selective, it is in the service of the survival of the group or nation. Memory, to do its work, must select out features of experience and

repress others. Rosenstock-Huessy suggests that in the modern world nations and groups have such an accelerated pace of change that memory has no time to organize experience. The gap in memory, Rosenstock-Huessy says, is often filled by refurbishing older myths or inventing new ones. An additional threat to memory comes from the experience of such traumas as can no longer be processed by memory. Speaking of the Great War, he writes that “it has left memory paralyzed by prejudice” (95). The historian's honor, he goes on to say, is “to heal wounds” by looking directly at the way that collective memories are formed or fail to be formed, the pressures that warp collective memories, and the dangers faced by groups when collective memory no longer seems to function. “Let us reconcile history and memory,” Rosenstock-Huessy concludes. “Otherwise there may be neither history nor memory” (100). I would ask students to think about what has led Rosenstock-Huessy to make this warning address to historians in 1934, but also about what it might look like for historians of the Jewish people to answer his call to “reconcile history and memory.”

Perhaps as a first stab at looking at how historians of the Jewish people have actually responded to this challenge, I might have students study one case, the collective memory of Masada. Masada is not only part of one of the most consequential events in Jewish history, it happens to be the part of one of the first pieces of Jewish historical writing, Josephus's *Jewish Wars*. And, even better from a pedagogical standpoint, the Masada narrative in Josephus and the evolution of the collective memory of Masada happens to be the topic of two of the best essays on Jewish history and Jewish memory that I know: Pierre Vidal-Nacquet's 1978 essay, “Flavius Josephus and Masada” and the 1985 essay, “Flavius Josephus and the Prophets,” both of them found in the collection of Vidal-Nacquet's essays entitled, *The Jews: History, Memory, and the Present*. The first essay begins with a brief description of the way that Masada has come to be figured in modern Israel and how this figuration was aided by the site's archeologist, Yigal Yadin. Vidal-Nacquet goes on to examine the way that the Josephus's narrative of the suicide and the pre-suicide speech of the Sicarii leader Eleazar is constructed to contrast with an

earlier speech against suicide, Josephus's own speech to his soldiers. The contrasting speeches represent Josephus's judgment that the war leaders were inflamed by an apocalyptic ideology that did not have redemption as its goal, but the death of the Jewish people. According to Josephus, the war leaders were caught up in what Vidal-Nacquet dubs "an apocalypse of death." In the second essay, Vidal-Nacquet looks at how Josephus saw his task as an historian to be that of replacing prophetic leadership with a new kind of leadership, a leadership based on a commitment to the survival of the Jewish people and letting God take care of the rest. In that sense, Josephus was in tune with Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai, and Vidal-Nacquet finds it quite apt that the story that Josephus tells about his own confrontation with Vespasian is also told much later about Jochanan ben Zakkai. Vidal-Nacquet goes into more detail in the second essay about the construction of the myth of Masada and its place in the Zionist slogan "Masada shall not fall again." "From the Middle Ages to Modern Times," he writes, "myth surrounds the birth of nations." The narrative of Masada begins as part of a Jewish historian's repudiation of an apocalyptic war ideology and ends with a different war cry, "Masada shall not fall again." This study of the intersection of history and memory in the formation of the myth of Masada, I think, will show students something about how both history writing and collective memory are imbricated with the most pressing issues of Jewish national identity and survival.

After the case study of Masada, I would ask students to read chapter 4 in *Zachor*, the chapter entitled "Modern Dilemmas." It allows us to return to the challenge that Rosenstock-Huessy raises, the challenge of reconciling history and memory. Yerushalmi quotes from Rosenstock-Huessy's essay and structures much of his remarks in chapter 4 as a response to it. Yerushalmi offers no answers to how to meet the challenge of healing the rift between history and memory, but he does suggest that Rosenstock-Huessy was on the right path when he spoke of the danger of myth filling the gaps of collective memory and the historian as someone who must at least fight against the evils of myth in a world where memory and tradition no longer allow us to identify and fight evil in all its multifarious

forms, a point that the opening sequence of the Coen brother's new movie, *A Serious Man*, also seems to be making. Or, maybe I put it this way: in a world where myth disguised as tradition is used to justify violence as a battle against evil. I would, by the way, also ask the students to see the movie *A Serious Man* after reading Yerushalmi's chapter. The movie is a great piece of both memory work and also historical exposition, both healing and intensifying the gap between memory and history by weaving the threads of one American Jew's childhood into the life of the Jewish people as a whole while at the same unravelling those threads.

It seems pretty clear that the topic of history and memory seems basic enough that anyone who has taken an Intro to Judaism course or an Intro to Jewish Studies course should be familiar with it, whether through the approach I have outlined or through some other set of readings. I can also see how this topic would fit differently into the two courses. Perhaps in an intro to Jewish Studies course one would want to read more of some of the figures that Yerushalmi mentions in his essay, Zunz and Graetz, for example, or Rosenzweig, or even Kafka. Such readings would perhaps be out of place in an intro to Judaism course, where one would want to pursue in greater detail some of the ways that Jewish ritual works to give meaning to time and history. Clearly, there is a place for both courses, but they are not radically separate from one another. There are topics that overlap, and perhaps the theme of history and memory is the foremost one. I think we should not be too keen about separating the two courses and keeping the boundaries clear between them. I think, rather, that it may be of more benefit to explore how the courses are, ultimately, two intertwined ways of approaching one subject. If the movie "*A Serious Man*" can fit within either course, as I think it clearly can, this perhaps tells us that we ought to be flexible in thinking about what it means to teach any introductory course dealing with the Jewish experience.