

The featured essay | Israel-Gaza war

A year later: How Israel has made trauma a weapon of war

Monday 7 October 2024, by [KLEIN Naomi](#) (Date first published: 5 October 2024).

A year later, memorials to the 7 October attacks use art, virtual reality and dark tourism to stir support for limitless violence. But there is a different way to remember

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Aslick, high-priced television production. Speeches from top officials. A live audience of thousands. A unified show of collective sorrow and military resolve.

That is how the Israeli government hoped to mark the passing of one year since Hamas's surprise and bloody attacks last 7 October. But little has gone according to plan.

Many of the families of people killed or taken hostage on that day have come out forcefully against the state-sponsored event, saying pageantry can wait until after the government secures a hostage deal and faces an independent investigation of its own failures before, after and on that day. [Some parents have forbidden](#) the government of Benjamin Netanyahu from using their children's names and images.

Several of the kibbutzim that suffered the greatest losses have [said they will boycott](#). Instead, they will gather in their communities to collectively grieve their loved ones, and remember their hostages, in "intimate, sensitive" rituals. In response, the minister responsible for the ceremony has nixed the live audience while seeming to [dismiss the families' objections](#) as "background noise". This has led to even fiercer denunciations on social media, with some of Israel's top [celebrities pledging their support](#) to a rival commemoration.

For the government, "everything is a show", [said Danny Rahamim](#), a member of Kibbutz Nahal Oz.

That may be, but it seems certain that on 7 October, the official show will [go on](#). Indeed it is nearly impossible to imagine a world in which the Netanyahu government - and the legacy Jewish organizations that echo its messaging around the world - would resist the chance to use the potent date as a megaphone to broadcast the same story about the attacks that we have all heard many times before.

It's a simple fable of good and evil, in which Israel is unblemished in its innocence, deserving unquestioning support, while its enemies are all monsters, deserving of violence unbounded by laws or borders, whether in Gaza, Jenin, Beirut, Damascus or Tehran. It's a story in which Israel's very identity as a nation is forever fused with the terror it suffered on 7 October, an event that, in Netanyahu's telling, will be seamlessly merged both with the Nazi [Holocaust](#) and a battle for the

soul of western civilization.

In Germany, they speak of a [Staatsraison](#), or reason of state – and in recent decades, its leaders have said that reason is protecting Israel. Israel has a *Staatsraison* too, related but different. Officially, it is Jewish safety. But integral to the state's conception of safety is Jewish trauma. Building shrines to it. Erecting walls around it. Waging wars in its name.

And so, as sure as the sun will rise over Jerusalem, Netanyahu *will* tell his avenging story to the world on 7 October – and no meddlesome, grief-struck families can stop him.

These clashes over commemoration tap into deep underlying debates about the uses and abuses of Jewish suffering, conflicts that date back to before Israel's founding, and that stretch well beyond its notoriously undefined borders. They are over a series of unresolved but increasingly high-stakes questions.

What is the line between commemorating trauma and cynically exploiting it? Between memorialization and weaponization? What does it mean to perform collective grief when the collective is not universal, but rather tightly bound by ethnicity? And what does it mean to do so while Israel actively produces more grief on an unfathomable scale, detonating entire apartment blocks in Beirut, inventing new methods of remote-controlled maiming, and sending [more than a million](#) Lebanese people fleeing for their lives, even as its pummeling of Gaza continues unabated?

With a full-scale regional conflagration looking more possible by the hour, focus on the mechanics of how Israel heightens and manipulates Jewish trauma may seem irrelevant, even insensitive. Yet these forces are profoundly interconnected, with the particular stories that Israel tells about Jewish victimhood providing the rationale and cover story for the shattering violence and colonial land annexation now on such stark display. And nothing makes these connections clearer than the ways that Israel chooses to tell the story of its own people's trauma on 7 October – an event that has been memorialized continuously since nearly the moment that it occurred.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the response to 7 October inside Israel and much of the Jewish diaspora was the speed with which it was absorbed into what is now called “memory culture”: the artistic, technological and architectural methodologies that transform collective traumas into educational experiences for others, usually in the name of human rights, peace, and against the scourge of denial or the oblivion of forgetting. For mass atrocities, it usually takes decades before a society is ready to reckon with the past honestly. Claude Lanzmann's landmark documentary about the Holocaust, Shoah, for instance, came out 40 years after the end of the second world war.

In Israel's case, there was a near instant move to graphically re-create the events of 7 October as mediated experiences, sometimes with the goal of countering false claims that deny any atrocities occurred, but often with the explicit goal of reducing sympathy for Palestinians and generating support for Israel's rapidly expanding wars. Before the one-year mark, there was already an off-Broadway “[verbatim play](#)”, called October 7, drawn from witness testimony; [several art exhibitions](#), and at least two 7 October-themed fashion shows, [one of which](#) saw models who had survived the attacks or lost loved ones adorn themselves with prosthetic wounds, fake blood and dresses made of shell casings. A model whose fiance was killed in the attack, for instance, “wore a white wedding dress with a ‘bullet hole’ in her heart”, [reported the Jewish News](#). “Israel's back in fashion,” read a dissonant headline about the show in the [Jewish Chronicle](#).

Then there are the 7 October films, already an emerging subgenre. First came the Israeli military's Bearing Witness, which compiled the most graphic and horrific moments captured on video that day. Within weeks of the attacks, it was being screened to curated audiences of politicians, business leaders and journalists everywhere from [Davos](#) to the [Museum of Tolerance in LA](#). This was followed by a slew of more professional documentaries, including [Screams Before Silence](#), about sexual violence, fronted by the former Meta COO Sheryl Sandberg; [#Nova](#), which uses phone and body-camera video to create a "minute-by-minute" account of the "bone-chilling atrocities"; and the BBC's [Surviving October 7: We Will Dance Again](#), which does much the same. "America's most-watched faith network", [TBN](#), [aired](#) a four-part special about the attacks that was seven hours in total.

Dramatic treatments take a little more time, but there are several in the works, including October 7, a [feature film](#) from the creators of Fauda, as well as the [scripted series](#) One Day in October, developed by Fox, slated to air this month.

Most unusual is the decision by the Israeli director Alon Daniel to make a realistic film [entirely out of miniatures](#). His team spent months painstakingly re-creating a dollhouse of horrors: everything from the barbed-wire fence that Hamas breached, to the burned-out cars and bullet-riddled portable toilets at the Nova music festival. A member of the production [told Haaretz](#): "We printed these little stall models in 3D and painted them, and initially it was fun to see it. But it was equally horrifying. There was such a dissonance here between the cute and the horrific."

A scene from Alon Daniel's film 06:30. Photograph: Alon Daniel/Go2Films

Because ours is a world riven by violence and injustice, there is a huge body of literature about the ethics of memorializing real-world atrocity. How do you evoke horror without exploiting it? How do you avoid reinscribing the idea that some kinds of bodies are destined for violence, and thereby make it more likely? How do you avoid asking survivors to relive their worst traumas over and over again? How do you prevent a traumatic response in the viewer, who may have a history of facing violence themselves? Is there an accompanying process for reparation and healing? Relatedly, how do you avoid evoking dangerous emotions, like hate and revenge, which can only lead to more tragedy and more trauma?

Amy Sodaro, a sociologist and author of *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, told me: "These are questions that people who are engaged in memorial work are constantly engaging with. It's deeply political work."

During the weeks I spent researching the sprawling memory culture that emerged post-7 October - the bloody wedding dresses, the tiny burned-out cars and the looping final voicemails - I searched in vain for evidence that these questions have been wrestled with at all. Nor did I find any reckoning with the reality that many facts are still unknown, which is why so many victim families are demanding an independent investigation.

With very few exceptions, the primary goal of these diverse works seems to be the transference of trauma to the audience: re-creating terrifying events with such vividness and intimacy that a viewer or visitor experiences a kind of identity merger, as if they themselves have been violated.

A New Yorker who [watched the "verbatim play"](#) October 7 reported: "I felt I was actually living the experience ... I felt there and [the play was] able to transfer to me the feeling." The producers were so pleased by the reaction they shared it on social media. A screening of the Israeli military's 7 October compilation "left the audience in shambles. People walked out of the room in silence, either crying or simply shellshocked," the Anti-Defamation League's Jonathan Greenblatt [told](#) the New York Times - and that, too, was a compliment.

All efforts at commemoration aim to touch the hearts of people who were not there. But there is a difference between inspiring an emotional connection and deliberately putting people into a shellshocked, traumatized state. Achieving the latter result is why so much 7 October memorialization boasts that it is “immersive” – offering viewers and participants the chance to crawl inside the pain of others, based on a guiding assumption that the more people there are who experience the trauma of 7 October as if it was their own, the better off the world will be. Or rather, the better off Israel will be.

Nowhere is the trauma transference goal more explicit than in Israel’s booming “dark tourism” sector. For months, synagogues and Jewish federations from around the world have been sponsoring trips that take their supporters on [“solidarity missions”](#) to southern Israel. Their tour buses line the edges of the site of the Nova festival, which is now filled with memorials to the hundreds of people who were killed and kidnapped there. And, much to the consternation of some locals, they also step over the rubble to crowd into the still ravaged kibbutzim.

Last February, the reporter Maya Rosen shadowed several of these tours for an extensive [Jewish Currents](#) article on the eerie phenomenon. She saw decimated homes preserved like mausoleums, including one of a 23-year-old couple killed in the attack. The tours wander through its rooms where “screenshots of [Sivan] Elkabetz’s last, frantic WhatsApp conversations with her parents had been printed out and tacked to the walls, alongside letters that her mother had written to her after her death.”

This goes beyond a drive to “touch ‘the real’”, [a term used](#) by the Queen’s University Belfast scholar [Debbie Lisle](#) to describe the crush of tourists who flocked to Ground Zero after the September 11 attacks. Because of the extraordinary volume of intensely personal communications now preserved through voice and text messages (and many in these communities texted and called continuously for many hours, waiting for help that never arrived), combined with access to physical locations where blood and signs of struggle have been left untouched, the participants on these missions almost feel like they have themselves been through the interminable attack.

“An American rabbi who led a trip for her community told me about hearing story after story of people who were killed,” Rosen writes. They learned everything, “‘step by step, where it happened, how it happened, how many hours people were locked in their safe rooms, when people were shot through their window or taken out of their house’. These images gave her nightmares for the next five nights, she said.”

There are other such embodied experiences on offer, including in Tel Aviv’s “Hostages Square”, where tourists [have been able to enter](#) a dark, 30-meter-long concrete “immersive mock [Hamas tunnel](#)”. To simulate the experience of a hostage, the structure was equipped with the sound of ambient explosions from fighting overhead.

An installation in the form of a Hamas tunnel is displayed at ‘Hostages Square’ in Tel Aviv in February. Photograph: Roy Rochlin/Getty Images

It is hard to believe, given the volume already available, but far more 7 October memorializing is still to come. Despite a worsening [economic crisis](#), last month, the [Israeli cabinet approved](#) a proposal from Netanyahu to spend \$86m on future memorialization projects related to 7 October and the multi-front military campaigns that have raged since. The money will be spent on the preservation of “heritage infrastructure” (AKA damaged buildings); the creation of a new commemorative site, the establishment of an annual national holiday, and much else.

In the meantime, for those not able to make the trip to Israel, there are VR experiences available –

including the [VR “Gaza Envelope 360 tour”](#), a 35-minute video, offered in English and Hebrew, that guides viewers around Israeli communities that came under attack on 7 October. In a portion of the tour posted online, the brother of one of the victims leads the camera around the house where the attack occurred and points to blood still on the floor. This, too, is a 7 October subgenre: one “immersive storytelling platform” invites visitors on a selection of 3D tours of homes. As you navigate from one debris-strewn room to another, audio plays terrified messages sent to relatives from safe rooms.

There are also more tactile traumatic experiences travelling the world. Most prominent (and controversial) among them is the Nova Exhibition. The vast, dimly lit installation is designed to re-create the music festival down to the sand, camping tents and the burned cars – and to transmit the bodily feeling of having that trippy experience suddenly interrupted by horrific violence. The show, which is still touring, and includes real objects collected at the site, attracted more than [100,000](#) visitors in New York alone, including several politicians.

This, once again, is a departure from the way recent traumatic events – from mass shootings to climate disasters – are generally memorialized by artists. Usually, the work is far more elliptical, mindful of re-traumatizing families, terrifying visitors and disrespecting the dead. For instance, memorialists do not tend to bring spectators en masse into darkened high school hallways strewn with fake blood and the sounds of weapon fire and children’s desperate cries in order to motivate action about gun violence.

The Nova Exhibition in New York in April. Photograph: Alexi Rosenfeld/Getty Images for The Nova Music Festival Exhibition

[One review](#), for the art site Filthy Dreams, compared the Nova exhibition to a bizarre cross between a campfire singalong and one of those evangelical Hell Houses, designed to scare teens about the dangers of premarital sex. “Do we *really* need to stand on victims’ yoga mats to feel the horrors of people at a music festival being butchered?” asked the art critic Emily Colucci. “Is straddling an upturned lawn chair while gawking at blurred-out bodies *truly* the best way to remember the dead? And why is it so goddamn dark in here?! I understood October 7th was bad without doing *this*.”

There is a difference between understanding an event, which preserves the mind’s analytic capacity as well as one’s sense of self, and feeling like you are personally living through it. The latter produces not understanding but what [Sodaro has called](#) a “prosthetic trauma”, which, she writes, is highly conducive to “a simplistic dualism between good and evil that has important political implications”.

Consumers of these experiences are encouraged to feel a distilled bond with the victims, who are the essence of good, and a distilled hatred for their aggressors, who are the essence of evil. The traumatized state is pure feeling, pure reaction. Vision is narrowed, tunneled.

In this state, we do not ask what isn’t included in the frame of the immersive experience. And in the case of the deluge of immersive art being produced to commemorate 7 October, what is not included is Palestine, specifically Gaza. Not the decades of strangled conditions of life on the other side of the wall that led up to the attacks – and not the tens of thousands of Palestinian people, including wrenching numbers of infants and children, whom Israel has killed and maimed since 7 October.

An injured Palestinian man hugs his sister after surviving an early morning Israeli airstrike that destroyed their house in Khan Younis, Gaza, on 2 October 2024. Photograph: Haitham Imad/EPA

And that is precisely the point.

When Jewish tourists from [New York](#) or [Montreal](#) attempt to merge with the trauma at the Nova festival site, or at a destroyed kibbutz, they are close enough to Gaza to hear the explosions from the Israeli bombs in Jabaliya and Khan Younis – to see the smoke, and on particularly heavy days, feel the vibrations in their bodies. But as Maya Rosen reported, despite this intensity, it is as if they cannot hear, or cannot register what it is that they are hearing. A staff member working on these trips observed that participants are “deep within their own trauma, and that trauma is crowding out the suffering the war is causing”.

These tourists, like the consumers of so many of these gory, immersive (if highly selective) experiences, say they are there to “bear witness”, the mantra of modern memorialization. But it is unclear exactly what they mean. When experts in mass atrocities speak of the importance of “bearing witness”, they are referring to a specific way of seeing. This kind of witnessing, often of crimes that have been long denied or suppressed by powerful states, is an act of refusal – a refusal of that denial. It is also a way to honour the dead, both by keeping their stories alive, and by enlisting their spirits in a project of justice-seeking to prevent a repeat of similar atrocities in the future.

But not all witnessing is done in this spirit. Sometimes witnessing is itself a form of denial, marshalled by savvy states to form the justification for other, far greater atrocities. Narrow and hyper-directed at one’s own in-group, it becomes a way to avoid looking at the harsh realities of those atrocities, or of actively justifying them. This witnessing is more like hiding, and at its most extreme, it can provide rationalizations for genocide.

It is in this context that some of the most fraught debates this past year in the anti-war camp have been over the politics of mourning, producing a novel and painful lexicon of grief. While many ([including me](#)) openly grieved the Israeli civilians killed in the 7 October attacks, many also pointed out that Palestinian lives are systematically treated as “ungrievable” ([invoking a phrase](#) from Judith Butler). In contrast, Israeli lives are, in the [words](#) of the historian Gabriel Winant, “pre-grieved”, because “an apparatus is already in place to take their deaths and give them not just any meaning, but specifically the meaning that they find in the bombs falling on Gaza.”

*Tourists, mostly from the US, visit the site of the Nova festival in Reim on 25 January 2024.
Photograph: Alexandre Meneghini/Reuters*

The Lebanese Australian anthropologist [Ghassan Hage saw](#) a “supremacist mourning” at work after 7 October, since “unlike Palestinians who are murdered all the time, the murdered Israelis were special. They were superior dead people who needed to be revenged in a way that reminds everyone, but particularly the killers, of how superior they were.” The Palestinian scholar [Abdaljawad Omar wrote](#) a blistering essay in which he pointed out that the very posture of mourning implies a measure of distance from the traumatic event, a distance not available to Palestinians facing Israel’s genocidal fury. “Until there is a real ceasefire, one that allows us to commence the work of mourning, our resistance will fight for our right to mourn.”

Art and vengeance

Though the speed (and, yes, the kitsch) with which Israel has transformed the suffering of 7 October into media and tourism products is impressive, it is not without precedent. Photos of Ground Zero and the September 11 attacks were also immediately aestheticized and turned into gallery shows, and the disaster movies weren’t far behind. The debate about how to memorialize Ground Zero began almost instantly, as did tourist pilgrimages to the site.

More importantly, just like in Israel today, these moves to turn 9/11 into an experience that would provoke specific emotions – grief, pride, patriotism – happened in parallel with the ferocious US military response to those attacks. And the more jingoistic post-9/11 films and TV series, in which Arabs and Muslims were almost invariably portrayed as bloodthirsty terrorists, formed a cultural front in the so-called war on terror, playing a critical role in justifying the US’s worst abuses, from the battlefields of Falluja to the dungeons of Guantánamo Bay.

Even more striking parallels can be found in older, colonial history. For instance, when I discussed this research with my colleague Kavita Philip, a scholar of technology and literature, she encouraged me to look into the wave of British art created in response to the Indian rebellion of 1857-58. It was like gazing through a portal in time.

In 1857, Indian sepoy soldiers rose up against their commanding British officers as part of a wider rebellion against the tyrannical regime of the British East India Company. The rebellion expanded well beyond the military, to include peasants and landholders suffering under colonial rule. As on 7 October, the strength of the uprising took its targets by surprise: the rebels quickly reached Delhi, overtaking the British arsenal. British troops responded with furious violence, burning villages to the ground, and sepoy soldiers also committed [atrocities](#): in the most notorious incident, roughly two hundred British women and children were taken hostage and eventually massacred.

In the months that followed, a subgenre of horror-filled [propaganda art](#) emerged in Britain and went on tour throughout the empire. In sketches, lithographs, and engravings, rebelling Asians were portrayed as simian savages or ferocious tigers, while murdered British women were angelic and Ophelia-like. Most impactful were huge [360-degree panoramas](#), some with moving tableaux, which gave viewers an immersive experience of being on the battlefield – a low-tech precursor to the VR trauma experiences offered today.

Then as now, speed was of the essence: while the battles still raged on the subcontinent, Londoners could go to Leicester Square, pay one shilling, and be surrounded by Robert Burford’s panorama painting, *The Action Between her Majesty’s Troops and the Sepoys at Delhi* – or the gorier [lithograph](#) *The Treacherous Massacre of English Women and Children at Cawnpore* by Nena Sahib.

Thomas Packer’s lithograph The Treacherous Massacre of English Women and Children at Cawnpore by Nena Sahib. Photograph: Thomas Packer

The shocking scenes stoked a desire for revenge, building vital support for the British repression that followed the uprising, which included roving [lynch mobs](#) and such spectacular displays of imperial dominance as executing rebels by tying them to cannons. The campaign would eventually kill at least 100,000 Indian civilians, with hundreds of thousands more dying from starvation and epidemics that formed part of Britain’s retaliation. Imperial soldiers didn’t have TikTok to share their atrocity porn back then, but [painters vividly captured](#) the rebels strapped to the mouths of cannons, and [political cartoonists in the UK](#) showed mighty British “Justice”, sword in hand, crushing brown bodies under her feet.

History is crowded with chapters in which Indigenous peoples, starved and immiserated by colonial oppressions, finally rebel, with those rebellions at times including atrocities. This, in turn, becomes the pretext for their colonial overlords to unleash unhinged “exterminate all the brutes” rampages, to the point of genocide. As Israel ramped up its genocidal threats on Palestinians it termed “human animals” one year ago, scholars of anticolonial history such as [Ghassan Hage](#) and [Shailja Patel](#) pointed to these parallels on social media and in small journals – drawing on histories of “colonial punitive expeditions” everywhere from Namibia to Minnesota. But they rarely had access to large platforms in North America and Europe to provide this context.

That's unfortunate, because it would have helped place 7 October and its aftermath into historical perspective – not as an excuse for Hamas's war crimes, but as a warning against the weaponization of Israel's shock and humiliation for imperial aggression and grotesque rights violations. Yet we heard little about these suppressed histories. Even the obvious parallels with September 11 – ubiquitous in the early days – quickly faded.

Fusing 7 October to the Holocaust

In their place, at least in Israel and much of the western press, was a singular historical reference point for the attacks. I am speaking, of course, about the persistent and repeated comparison between 7 October and the Nazi Holocaust. In an inversion of actual power relationships, this analogy casts stateless Palestinians – living under prolonged Israeli siege, [illegal occupation](#) and [apartheid](#) – as the Nazis, and casts Israel – with one of the most powerful armies in the world, backed by the United States hyperpower, and a clear [policy of expanding](#) its land mass and erasing Palestinian presence in a baldly colonial manner – as their helpless victims.

This is a profoundly inflammatory story since, in the minds of many Israelis and their supporters, a return of a Holocaust-level threat justifies almost any response. As [Abdaljawad Omar put it](#): “This colonial form of mourning transforms Palestinians into modern-day equivalents of the Amalekites, fueling a yearning for power, autonomy, and unchecked militarism. It engenders a racialized discourse that redirects the grief and anger of the Holocaust onto a people who simply existed where the state of Israel was to be established.”

And playing an outsized role in cementing that upside-down story is the cascade of 7 October memorial art and installations, which follows the well-worn grooves and methods that have been honed in Holocaust education and memorialization over many decades.

The mimicking is evident on many fronts. It is there in the persistent choice of language to describe the memorial work (“never forget”, “never again is now”, “bearing witness”). It is there in the decision to create so many “immersive” opportunities to “experience” 7 October, which builds on the move in Holocaust education towards hyper-realistic immersion and simulation, from school trips to walk-in cattle cars equipped with holograms of Jewish prisoners, to giving schoolchildren mock passports so they can imagine themselves being loaded on to those cars.

The fusing of events is ubiquitous. The [website](#) offering “Gaza Envelope 360 tours” also offers Auschwitz 360 Tours. The traveling Nova Exhibition includes a display of shoes “lost and found” at the festival site, a deliberate echo few can miss. “The rows of shoes recall a similar display at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, symbolizing the 6 million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust,” [NBC reported](#). The merging is there, too, in the dark tourism: in fact, some of the trips to southern Israel route through Poland, making stops at Auschwitz as an [“optional pre-mission”](#).

People look at ‘lost and found’ tables with personal items collected from the Nova festival site at the Nova Exhibition in Tel Aviv on 12 December 2023. Photograph: Alexi J Rosenfeld/Getty Images

In case anyone missed the point, the influential advocacy group Combat Antisemitism Movement chose to observe Holocaust Remembrance Day by [promoting](#) a video filmed at Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Over the dark concrete slabs symbolizing the Nazis' slaughter of millions, the “digital artwork” uses drones to float a giant pair of sweatpants stained with fake blood, meant to symbolize sexual violence on 7 October. Other drones hold up a yellow star asking: “Never Again?” There, in one tableau, the two traumas are visually merged into a single all-encompassing

wail, collapsing oceans, centuries, power, peoples and scale.

This, it must be said, is odd behaviour. But not as odd as a detail I came across in an article about the recent Israeli trend of 7 October-themed tattoos. One artist, quoted in [Hadassah Magazine](#), said a client came up with a “concept” that would have the date of the attack “1072023 written like the serial numbers that prisoners received at Auschwitz”.

Some of the most significant institutions charged with protecting the memory of the Holocaust for future generations have willingly participated in this conflation. The invaluable Shoah Foundation, for instance, which houses a vast archive of video testimony from Holocaust survivors, added a [new](#) category this year: “Interviews with October 7 Survivors”. And at this year’s March of the Living to Auschwitz, organizers made a point of inviting “Israeli Holocaust Survivors who survived the attacks of October 7th”.

The date of the attack is tattooed on the arm of an Israeli cameraman, in memory of a friend killed in Kibutz Be’eri. Photograph: Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

Incidents like these prompted Marianne Hirsch, a professor emerita at Columbia University and a highly respected scholar of traumatic memory and commemoration, to write an [influential essay](#) challenging her colleagues in Holocaust studies to question the wisdom of methods of memorialization based on passing traumatic memories on from one generation to the next (a process she has described as the creation of “postmemory”).

In an interview, she told me that memorializing traumatic histories can be done in ways that encourage collective healing and a sense of solidarity across divides. But there are also times when, for political actors within these groups, healing isn’t the goal – keeping trauma alive, despite the passing of time and changing conditions, is infinitely more useful. “In its beginnings, Holocaust studies has mostly been about how to keep the wounds open and transmit the trauma as directly as possible,” she said. It has also been about presenting antisemitism as an immovable and omnipresent force of nature, a hatred in a class of its own – a worldview that the rabbi and scholar [Shaul Magid terms](#) “Judeopessimism”.

This, Hirsch says, has a great deal to do with how tightly Holocaust memory has been tethered to Zionism, with the creation of the highly militarized state of Israel cast as “redemption” from the destruction of the Holocaust. In this narrative, dominant in Jewish schools, summer camps, synagogues and Birthright trips to Israel, “healing only comes from the ‘homeland’”. That means that when the homeland comes under intense attack, as it did on 7 October, all of the trauma – implanted through those films and museums and memoirs and horror stories – comes rushing back and the threat feels existential. If it’s true that the Holocaust can return at any time, and Israel is the only safeguard against that happening, “it creates a kind of alibi for whatever Israel wants to do” – an alibi whose horrific implications we have seen in relentless action over the last 12 months.

Hirsch is intensely disturbed by these historical conflations, both as a scholar and as the daughter of Holocaust survivors herself. In her view, one-to-one comparisons between the Nazi’s industrial-scale slaughter and Hamas’s day-long killing spree serve to “diminish the Holocaust”, she said. “And that dishonours the victims. And it’s historically completely wrong.”

But it does raise the question: why does it seem that so many prominent Jewish leaders *want* Israel to have suffered a modern-day Holocaust of its own, enough to indulge these false and dangerous comparisons?

On one level, it makes little sense: Israel’s [Staatsraison](#) is its claim that it alone can guarantee

Jewish safety in the face of Jew-hatred, cast as a primordial force in the human psyche that can rise up with genocidal fury at any moment. The 7 October attacks were brutal, but they did not represent an exterminatory threat to either Israelis or Jews as a people. Why, then, would Israel want to undercut its core mission by advancing a narrative that makes it seem less safe than it actually is?

Here is one theory: the wound at the heart of Israel's founding is that Palestinians have been forced to pay for Europe's crimes. Forced to pay with their land. Their homes. Their freedom. Their blood. Over and over again, in what many Palestinian scholars and political leaders, from Hanan Ashrawi to Joseph Massad, have termed the "ongoing Nakba". However, if Palestinians are the new Nazis, or worse than Nazis (as we have heard this year), and if 7 October is a new Holocaust, or an extension of it, that would even the score after the fact. Put differently, in the new national identity being forged around that traumatic day, Israel might be less physically safe than it has long claimed, but it believes it is more politically safe, since it would, within this logic, not be founded on the crime of ethnically cleansing a people who never posed an existential threat to the Jews. And that means it would be safe to finally [finish the job](#) of the Nakba, which looks very much like what is under way in Gaza and large parts of the West Bank.

This dangerous derangement found what may be its most explicit expression last December, when David Azoulay, head of the Metula Council in northern Israel, [told an Israeli radio program](#) his idea for what should happen to Gaza and the 2.2 million Palestinians who live there. In the view of this local politician, the Israeli navy should transport all the Palestinians left "to the shores of Lebanon, where there are already sufficient refugee camps" so that the strip "should resemble the Auschwitz concentration camp ... The entire Gaza Strip should be emptied and leveled flat, just like in Auschwitz."

He added: "Let it be a museum for all the world to see what Israel can do. Let no one reside in the Gaza Strip for all the world to see, because October 7 was in a way a second Holocaust."

The idea of invoking Auschwitz in order to call for a new genocide - including the creation of new concentration camps - in the here and now, while somehow passing it off as a call for commemoration, was too much for the actual people who run the Auschwitz memorial. They [responded](#) with a social media post stating: "David Azoulay appears to wish to use the symbol of the largest cemetery in the world as some sort of a sick, hateful, pseudo-artistic, symbolic expression.

"Calling for acts that seem to transgress any civil, wartime, moral, and human laws, that may sound as a call for murder of the scale akin to Auschwitz, puts the whole honest world face-to-face with a madness that must be confronted and firmly rejected. We do hope that Israeli authorities will react to such shameful abuse, as terrorism can never be a response to terrorism."

Israeli authorities did not reject Azoulay's incitement. Perhaps because, even if the details don't line up precisely, he was describing what the Israeli government has been doing continuously since 7 October: using a genocide in the past to justify a genocide in the present - all while its supporters use art, film, virtual reality, dark tourism, and even fashion to transfer Israeli trauma across the globe.

Marianne Hirsch calls this kind of official militarized remembering "monumental memory". But there is also something that, after Michel Foucault, she refers to as "counter-memory" - expressions of grief and mourning that bubble up from below, and are often connected to struggles for justice, collective healing, and transformation.

Though they will probably be drowned out by the monument-makers, the coming days will also see many such counter-memorials: groups of people who recognize that, despite all the wrenching double standards and dangerous weaponizations, grief is a powerful, insistent and unruly emotion. It needs somewhere to go, and it needs to be held collectively.

So, the kibbutzim will have their private rituals, in their cemeteries, while remembering the hostages they pray are still alive. IfNotNow, an organization of progressive young Jews, is [holding gatherings](#) across the US under the banner of “Every Life, a Universe”, calling for a weapons embargo, an end to Israel’s attacks on Gaza and its invasion of Lebanon, and freedom for all the captives. “Our tears are abundant enough, and our hearts are big enough, to grieve for every life taken – every universe destroyed – whether Israeli or Palestinian. It is not either, or. We need one another: Jews cannot be safe if Palestinians are not safe and free.”

Members of Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow hold a protest calling for a ceasefire inside the capitol in Washington DC on 18 October 2023. Photograph: Alex Wong/Getty Images

Before that hope can become more than a slogan, there will need to be some kind of common history about how we arrived at this wrenching place, which is the work of the remarkable Israeli-Palestinian group [Zochrot](#). For two decades, they have been quietly educating Jewish Israelis about why the histories that they grew up with are dangerously incomplete, because the triumphant and redemptive story of Israel’s founding is inextricable from Palestinian dispossession and forced exile – the Nakba. And so they lead tours to destroyed and depopulated Palestinian villages, distribute alternative maps, hold courses and workshops, and [call for](#) “a joint future for all the inhabitants of this land and all the refugees.”

In Hebrew, *zochrot* means “remembering”, and unlike the re-traumatization currently passing for commemoration, remembering in its truest sense is about putting the shattered and severed pieces of the self together (re-member-ing) in the hopes of becoming whole. Re-membering the land. Re-membering the people exiled from the land. Re-membering earlier colonial genocides that [shaped and inspired](#) the Nazi Holocaust, which in turn shaped the state of Israel. Re-membering that Israel is right now in the grips of a nuclear-armed colonial revenge frenzy in the lineage of earlier colonial punitive expeditions, ones that also used art and collective sorrow as potent weapons of annihilation.

Identifying these deep historical throughlines – what the UCLA Holocaust scholar Michael Rothberg has [termed “multidirectional memory”](#) – is work of re-membering, and it holds out our best hope of exiting what increasingly feels like an endlessly recurrent genocide loop. Yet this work grows more difficult every day, as Palestinians face what the feminist scholar Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian [has described](#) as a cataclysm of *dismembering* at its most literal: dismembered bodies, dismembered geography, and a dismembered body politic.

Meanwhile, in the streets of Gaza and Beirut, crowds continue to gather in ululation to honour their dead, knowing that not even their [funerals](#) are safe from the next wave of Israel’s carnage.

Naomi Klein

P.S.

• The Guardian. Sat 5 Oct 2024 14.00 CEST:

https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/oct/05/israel-gaza-october-7-memorials?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other