

Introduction

On November 4, 1995, Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's prime minister and minister of defense, was assassinated in Tel Aviv as he and his bodyguards made their way to a bullet-proof car at the conclusion of a rally in support of the emerging peace process with the Palestinians—a policy Rabin had led since 1993. His assassin, an Orthodox Jewish law student, who belonged to the radical Israeli Right, took his skullcap off his head some time before the shooting and waited for Rabin in the dark. The rest is history; some would say hysteria.

Following the official death announcement made by Rabin's personal assistant at the entrance of a nearby hospital, thousands of Israelis gathered at the assassination site and in front of Rabin's private home in north Tel Aviv. The mourners lit candles, sang sad and nostalgic songs and cried. In Jerusalem, many waited to pass in front of Rabin's coffin before the funeral which took place forty-eight hours later. The funeral itself was attended by local and international dignitaries including the leaders of eighty nations from around the world who came to pay their respects to the slain leader and to show their support for the Israeli state.¹ By the end of the traditional Jewish week of mourning (*shiva*), the process of commemoration had begun.

In the thirteen years since the assassination, numerous squares, neighborhoods, promenades, parks, gardens, office buildings and streets throughout Israel (and around the world) have been named after Rabin.² In July 1997, the Israeli parliament (*Knesset*) enacted a law establishing an official memorial day. Another law ensured the founding of the Yitzhak Rabin Center which will operate—in the words of its well-known architect Moshe Safdie—"in the grand tradition of American presidential libraries."³ Mass annual memorial ceremonies in which hundreds of thousands of Israelis participate take place at the Kings of Israel Square—where the fatal demonstration took place—now renamed Rabin Square. A monument has been erected at the spot where Rabin was shot, and metal coins—marking the exact spots where Rabin, his body guard, the assassin and some others stood when the shots were fired—have been permanently placed in the ground. The monument

in Tel Aviv and the gravesite in Jerusalem have become pilgrimage sites for many Israelis on Rabin's memorial days as well as on other symbolic dates. Numerous forms of media and a variety of artists⁴ have expressed their emotions and worldviews concerning the assassination. Bumper stickers (e.g., "Shalom, Friend," "Friend, I remember," "Friend, you are missed," and "11.4.95") and other artifacts commemorating Rabin abound. Scores of books and picture albums have been published. Songs have been composed and performed. Art exhibitions have been dedicated to the event. Rabin's assassination has featured in the foreground and background of films and television shows. Around the tenth anniversary of the assassination, even a musical about Rabin's life and death was produced. Hardly a week goes by in which either Rabin or his assassination is not mentioned in the media in one way or another. Some joke that eventually people will live on the corner of Rabin Street and Rabin Avenue. Even those who are worried about the current and future content of the memory of Rabin's assassination, have a hard time complaining about its presence. Rabin is, in effect, a highly present absence.

The ample forms of commemorations for Rabin enacted in the public sphere draw considerable crowds and attest to the significance of Rabin's assassination. Taken together, the mnemonic activities and artifacts form a dense "map of memory,"⁵ which creates the impression of an entire nation commemorating the assassination of its elected prime minister and sharing a unified perception of this tragic and painful past. In one sense, this map of memory requires no explanation: As Kertzer has observed, the "deaths of political leaders are always heavily ritualized" (1988: 139)—all the more so if these leaders were assassinated. The quantity and diversity of mnemonic practices, however, should not mislead us. A closer examination of the various mnemonic forms commemorating Rabin's assassination suggests that they are far from shared as the past involved is a difficult, controversial, and painful one.

As is the case in many other societies around the world where monuments, historical museums, and apologetic memorial ceremonies commemorating the nation's difficult past have emerged, the commemoration of Rabin's assassination has been accompanied by anger, accusations, politics, power, tears, confusion, and a refusal to let go. Based on a study of Rabin's commemoration in Israel from 1996 to 2006, this book develops a sociology of commemoration where the content is a difficult past and the context is a split society. However, this book also identifies the building blocks of commemoration more generally and suggests that in order to fully understand any societal commemoration, it is essential to unpack its ingredients, to examine its boundaries and limits, to consider both those who wish to remember as well as those who wish to forget, and to analyze

the variety of mnemonic moments, including the festive and well-planned ones, the forced ones, and the banal ones. In addition, by examining the changing contours of constraints and opportunities that have developed with the passage of time, this book highlights the importance of introducing a temporal dimension into the study of commemoration.

However, before I turn to a discussion of the sociology of commemoration, a few words about difficult pasts, fragmented commemorations and collective memory in general are in order.

Difficult Pasts and Fragmented Commemorations

While the twentieth century—or more accurately, the second half of the twentieth century—may be characterized as the century of “the memory boom” (Winter 2006),⁶ over the last two decades or so, the preoccupation with the past has become less about a paradise lost and a nostalgia for heroic leaders than about skeletons in the closet and wrongdoings. The past threatens to penetrate the contemporary social and political scene, to change the hegemonic narrative, to encourage new voices, to demand justice and recognition. The reasons for this social change—from a quest for heroism and pride to a recognition of (perhaps even a pursuit after) defeats, disgrace, atrocities and shame—are interesting and important⁷ but are beyond the scope of this book. What is worth noting, however, is that more and more societies and nations around the globe have found themselves—willingly or not, justifiably or not—coping with the same social challenge: How to commemorate (if not compensate for) their difficult past.

The term “difficult past” does not necessarily refer to political turmoil, economic hardship, warfare, genocide or any other particular type of event. Difficult pasts are not necessarily more tragic than other commemorated past events, although some times they are. Rather, a difficult past, and its associated commemorative challenges, is constituted as a result of an inherent moral trauma,⁸ disputes, tensions, and conflict. World War II for Germany and Japan, the Vietnam War for the United States, the Spanish Civil War for its citizens, the Algerian War for France and human rights violations in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina are but a few examples of the kind of social challenges and traumas to which I refer. Since it seems that ignoring difficult pasts has become less and less legitimate, almost a nonoption, for many nations and political leaders,⁹ the question becomes one of how to mnemonically represent such difficult pasts.

Two different forms of commemoration of a difficult past have been detected. The first one, suggested by Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1991), is a multivocal commemoration, which is about a shared mnemonic space,

a shared mnemonic time or a shared mnemonic text that carries diverse meanings and thus can be peopled by groups with different interpretations of the past. The second form is a fragmented commemoration, which includes multiple commemorations in various spaces and times where diverse discourses and interpretations of the past are voiced and aimed at disparate audiences.¹⁰

Elsewhere I have suggested a theoretical model within which the likelihood of the emergence of both types of commemoration can be explained. The model focuses on the social context of commemoration and consists of three dimensions:

1. The political culture of the commemorating society
2. The timing of the commemoration, or, in other words, the relevance of the past event to the present agenda
3. The power of agents of memory.

A multivocal type of commemoration is more likely to emerge in a consensual political culture, when the commemorated past is no longer part of the present agenda, and when agents of memory have limited power and resources. In contrast, a fragmented commemoration will likely be engendered in a conflictual political culture, when a strong link exists between the past and present debates and where the agents of memory are powerful.¹¹

This book, however, is less concerned with offering models predicting which forms of commemoration are likely to emerge in which social context. Instead, this book is more interested in understanding and offering a model through which to analyze the structure and content of commemoration more generally. Based on a decade of research of Rabin's commemoration in Israel (1996–2006), I first unpack the fundamental ingredients from which commemoration is made: agency, space, time and narrative while emphasizing the ways in which they are used as resources through which to recollect a difficult past. Second, I discuss the limited ability of a fragmented commemoration to meet the social challenge epitomized by the event that constituted the difficult past in the first place. Third, I show how the fragmented nature of the commemoration has the ability to generate some social flexibility and thus enable the survival of informal and uninstitutionalized discourses that would probably have not found a place in a more unitary and formal commemorative context.

Finally, while the main objective of this book is to offer a sociological interpretation of commemoration, I also wish to treat commemoration as a lens through which to gain a better perspective on other social practices and phenomena. In other words, I endeavor not only to present a “sociology of

commemoration” but also to advance a “sociology through commemoration.” What I suggest is that we can learn much about a society by understanding how it performs its commemorative activities. Commemoration in a sense can highlight the deep social currents, or what author David Grossman calls “the intimate grammar,” of a society. In advancing this argument, I borrow from Schwartz’s (2000) distinction between memory as a lamp and memory as a mirror, or in Geertz’s (1973) terminology, memory as a model *for* society and memory as a model *of* society. As a lamp—or a model for society—commemoration shapes and frames meanings, understandings, agendas and dreams. As a mirror—or a model of society—commemoration reflects past events “in terms of the needs, interests, fears and aspirations” of the society (Schwartz 2000: 18). Taking the view of commemoration as a mirror one step farther, I suggest that it functions not merely as a reflection of present needs or past events but that it also offers us insights into the deep structure out of which the social fabric is woven. While I certainly do not claim that commemoration is the only way through which one can learn about a specific society, I do propose that understanding commemoration is one way through which to gain better insight on other social processes and phenomena in society more generally.

Commemoration and Collective Memory

Collective memory—and the (more or less) synonymous terms “social memory,” “popular memory,” “cultural memory” and “official memory”—is probably one of the most popular concepts to be shared (even if only at the semantic level) over the last two decades by “ordinary people,” political and social elites and scholars from diverse disciplines. This preoccupation with collective memory is hardly the result of a special attraction to history (although the latter’s relationship to memory is complicated and has already attracted much discussion).¹² Rather, as two sociological reviews of the field demonstrate,¹³ the effect of the use and abuse of the past on a wide range of issues related to the present fuel this interest—from the formation of collective identities (whether national, ethnic or gender based) to questions of politics and power, traditions and myths, social solidarity, accuracy and authenticity, continuity and change, social order, meaning-making and culture in general. In other words, collective memory matters.

Collective memory is important and timely both as a societal and as a sociological concern. As a model for society¹⁴ it represents its ethos and myths, setting its dreams, future visions and programs. As a cultural system,¹⁵ collective memory is probably as crucial for understanding society as any other sociological tool of this magnitude. Intellectually, collective memory

is a tempting concept to work around and think with in an ever-changing world that is, for better or worse, so preoccupied with its past. Collective memory has what one may term contemporary qualities in that it is more of a process than a stable and fixed entity; it is changeable, tricky and malleable; it is located somewhere between present needs and past commitments; it includes both individual understandings of past events as well as knowledge of the past that transcends the individual;¹⁶ it refers to the relations between individual beliefs, history and commemoration;¹⁷ and it is articulated through history and commemoration as two different ways in which the past is expressed and known to present generations.¹⁸ Even Maurice Halbwachs—the founding father of the term and of the field—did not quite define it. For him, collective memory lay somewhere between historical and autobiographical memory.¹⁹ Much like its subject matter—the past—collective memory seems to be “in between,” impossible to touch and feel and quite difficult to study. Moreover, collective memory as a form of knowledge of the past is an end result, an outcome and product of another project, be it historical or commemorative.²⁰

As elusive as it is, collective memory is of course out there. Many scholars have deciphered and studied it at the macro and micro social levels. Many have documented the changes that have taken place in the content of social memory over time and have argued about the power of the past versus the power of the present in shaping this outcome.²¹ Similar to other abstract concepts (such as the state), one cannot see, touch or feel collective memory. This is where the role of commemoration comes into play. Commemoration, as the tangible public presentation and articulation of collective memory, includes—as Schwartz (2001) reminds us—written texts (e.g., poems and eulogies), music (e.g., anthems and inspirational songs), icons (e.g., visual representations in the form of photographs and films), monuments, shrines (e.g., birthplace), naming practices (e.g., streets), history books, museums and mnemonic rituals. All of these will be analyzed and used as examples in this book. Behind each of these final products lies the day on which certain representations of the past were enacted; some of which were perhaps more convincing, more difficult to ignore and more powerful than others. Some of these representations shed new light on past events; some felt more like revelations. In other words, mnemonic practices always play a role in demarcating whether collective memory is maintained, changed, transformed or invented. It is of little wonder therefore that many empirical studies of collective memory are made up of examinations of various forms of commemoration.²²

By analyzing the struggle over the way in which Rabin and the assassination have been commemorated, this book is interested in commemoration and its sociology. Because collective memory is of utmost importance, it is

crucial to unpack the ingredients from which its texture is made. While a specific type of past—a difficult one—stands at the center of this book, the sociology emerging about it is much more generally applicable.

Sociology of Commemoration

The sociology of commemoration involves four central components from which, and through which, it is made. These building blocks include the agents of memory, time, space, and narrative. While these dimensions can be found in any mnemonic reality, within the contour of this study, their appearance, impact and significance when fragmented commemoration is involved will be especially emphasized.

Agency

Agents of memory are those individuals without whom commemoration fails to come into existence or to persist. While the literature often discusses the end products of the work of agents of memory—commemoration itself—or the struggles between those who wish to remember and those who wish to condemn or forget, in many ways, the work of agents of memory is taken for granted and is hardly examined.²³ This book, however, is not only about paying respect to the agents of memory (although many probably deserve that) by documenting the work behind mnemonic practices and artifacts. Rather, it is about acknowledging and emphasizing the crucial role played by those who are in charge of designing the shape, form, and meaning of commemoration. In other words, agents of memory make a difference and this difference is affected both by broad social structural currents as well as by the political, economic, cultural, and social capital at their disposal.

In order to unpack the dimension of the agency, this book first identifies the characteristics of agents of memory (number, composition and power) and proceeds to show that while all agents of memory may share a commitment and dedication to the past, the kind of commemoration enacted is largely dependant on their relative power and capital combined with their diversity and number. Second, the book draws attention to the ways in which struggles with the state and struggles between agents of memory affect the character of commemoration. Here I show that while struggles with the state serve to ensure the official formalization of memory, struggles among the agents of memory themselves generate and enhance the fragmentation of commemoration.

In analyzing the work of the agents of memory, this book integrates two different theoretical perspectives on collective memory:²⁴ Politics of

commemoration (the more conflict-oriented perspective) and commemoration as a cultural system (the more consensus-oriented perspective). This is done through an understanding of the ways in which agents of memory operate both as “manipulators” who force their perception of the past on various collectives as well as “priests” who merely express and represent collective views about the past. My claim is that, depending on the perspective of the particular audience in front of whom commemoration is enacted, these agents may be seen simultaneously as manipulators and as representatives of the past.

Time

The component of time consists of two dimensions. The first concerns the specific times dedicated to the commemoration of an event or person while the second focuses on the time elapsed since the event and its commemoration.

The first dimension regards time as a resource and analyzes the moments chosen for commemoration. While struggles over remembrance often center around the establishment of some form of a mnemonic time, this study documents and analyzes the emergence, meaning and fate of two memorial days for the same event. In the case of Rabin's commemoration, these consist of two memorial times during which different rituals and discourses are expressed. The first is the Hebrew date of the assassination (the official memorial day) when national rituals are held and a more restrained and consensual narrative is offered. The second is the Gregorian date of the assassination (the unofficial memorial day) which is characterized by sharply political events and by a more exclusive mnemonic narrative that appeals to a narrower collective than that which is articulated at the state-run events.

The second temporal dimension involves the time elapsed since the event and the onset of its commemoration.²⁵ The effect of the progression of time is evident in the amount of time taken by many societies to commemorate their difficult pasts. It took the United States, for example, almost 60 years to dedicate the Lincoln Memorial in remembrance of his assassination.²⁶ In Austria, forty years elapsed after the end of World War II before the Monument against War and Fascism was erected in the center of Vienna.²⁷ Germany waited and debated even longer before constructing a monument to commemorate the murder of European Jews in the center of Berlin.

When a monument is erected or a memorial day set decades after the actual event, those for whom the memory is “an autobiographical one” (Halbwachs 1992), are either dead or at the very least middle-aged.

Few of those who attended the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial had experienced the American Civil War. Similarly, most Germans who attended the dedication ceremony of the new monument in Berlin were born after World War II. Perhaps what enabled the United States, Austria and Germany to cope (at least in the spatial and temporal sense) with their difficult pasts is precisely the fact that by the time the dedication ceremonies took place, the burden of those who bore the marks of the past on their bodies and in their souls had become the social yet once-removed memories of others.²⁸ To borrow again from Halbwachs (1992), with the passing of the generations, commemorative events move from the level of autobiography to history in that they are mediated not by personal experience but by public commemorations.

The passing of time and its associated generational change is a fundamental dimension in any examination of memory work. As a rule of thumb, the longer a society waits to commemorate, the better the chances of a relatively conflict-free mnemonic landscape. But the effect of temporal duration must be qualified since time does not necessarily operate in a linear manner as far as memory is concerned.²⁹ As such, events that occurred in the distant past can be awakened after hundreds, even thousands, of years and can generate much controversy.³⁰ While the controversies may have little to do with the past and much with the present, their existence and emotional character attest to the fact that commemoration is affected not only by the length of time that has elapsed since the event, but also by the fact that there are certain pasts that are still part and parcel of present partisan politics and social realities. In practice then, it is often quite difficult to discern whether a less tense commemoration is a result of the passing of time or changes in the present agenda. And yet, time does contain the ability to heal and one would generally expect the passage of time to be associated with a reduction in emotional turmoil around mnemonic practices.

This book, however, focuses on commemorations that began while the body was still—literally—warm. The first formal mnemonic act took place a week after the assassination. The people who lived through the trauma—especially Rabin’s family—were (and are) very much alive. No less important, those accused of culpability and responsibility (justifiably or not) for generating the context that enabled the assassination were leading the Israeli government within a short six months after the assassination. Many of Rabin’s political supporters characterize that May 1996 election night as the “night in which Rabin was assassinated for the second time.” It is no wonder that the commemoration was accompanied by a lot of emotion and tears.

A decade later, this book attests to a rather complicated mnemonic situation. On one hand, the contemporary agenda in Israel has not changed much since the assassination, in that the peace process with the Palestinians

(which was at the heart of the conflict) is still unresolved and remains on the docket of the current Israeli administration. On the other hand, as time has passed, some of the major players at the time of the assassination no longer occupy a center stage in Israeli public life. Furthermore, although Rabin's vision for a peaceful solution in the region is not consensually shared in Israel, many of his opponents now find themselves in a position where they support and implement policies that are very similar to those which he proposed.³¹ The claim of this book is that the passage of time and the contemporary context did not necessarily generate a more consensual way of perceiving the past. Instead, a more nuanced picture is painted whereby different constituencies have reacted in divergent ways, so that some have mobilized around the fragmented commemoration, some have found a more consensual way of perceiving the past, and some have disengaged themselves altogether from the event and its commemoration.

Drawing the two dimensions of time together, it is worth noting that as time has gone by, the official time has proved more resilient and enduring as compared with the informal memorial times. While this is not surprising, what is less obvious is that although the informal memorial time may not survive in the long run as it lacks the relevant institutional infrastructure, its discourse—which was marginalized and excluded from the practices characterizing the official memorial time—persists quite strongly. In other words, this study suggests that fragmented commemorative times may facilitate the emergence of specific discourses that would otherwise have failed to develop and survive. Elsewhere I have argued that the emergence of two different memorial times is a result of, and may even serve to enhance, social conflict.³² At the same time, however, such a fragmentation of mnemonic time does not force a compromise and thus enables a division of discourses including the appearance certain of voices that may otherwise have been completely silenced.

Space

The third pillar of commemoration is the space in which, and through which, memory is expressed and materialized. Space consists of two facets. The first one involves location where questions of whether a mnemonic space is placed in a central or a peripheral area are at the heart of the discussion. The second facet concerns whether a specific past is commemorated through a single space or through multiple spaces each commemorating the past with a different narrative and message. As we will shortly see, Rabin's memorial spaces are located in the most central places one can imagine. They are characterized by multiplicity and are divided between the reverence of the state-sanctioned gravesite in Jerusalem (Israel's capital) and the

monument at the site of the assassination in Tel Aviv, which has emerged as a political shrine belonging to the Israeli Left.

As with the issue of multiple commemorative times, the fragmentation in memorial space may enhance social conflict by granting specific collectives a place—that often turns into a sacred place—to meet. At the same time, however, fragmented commemorations may enable the existence of different discourses of the past which do not impose themselves on each other at moments where a compromise or a consensus seems impossible. While it is impossible to know whether a time characterized by mnemonic compromises will ever be reached, fragmented mnemonic spaces may serve a transitional period in situations where one space cannot contain the conflict without either erasing, offending or insulting too many collectives.

In addition, through an examination of these commemorative places, this book suggests that the design and character of mnemonic spaces may affect the content and form of mnemonic activities that take place in and around them. What can be enacted around a monument located at a center of city, for example, cannot take place around a gravesite in the middle of a distinguished cemetery. The process however is not closed as the meanings attached to the mnemonic spaces—meanings that in themselves may be quite distanced from those intended by the original agents of memory—are in a constant state of change. The changes can be generated both by groups who gain their power by physically occupying the mnemonic space as well as by groups who gain their power from sources outside of the mnemonic site. The meaning of mnemonic spaces can also change, of course, as collectives simply lose interest and abandon them altogether. Mnemonic space—much like collective memory—has an ever changing character.

As is the case with mnemonic times, sites that are institutionalized stand a better chance of sustaining a memory than sites that depend on temporary willingness and informality. Yet, this claim is qualified by what I call “the power of the place.” By the “power of the place” I refer to spaces where the actual event took place, where individuals and groups can visit and say “here in this place.” Thus, I wish to emphasize the power of the real space where the real commemorated event took place to present (not re-present) the past in a way that all other presentation (as effective and as institutionalized and as formal as they may be) cannot. Authenticity seems to still be a very powerful notion even in a world filled with make-believe performances, interactive museums and other forms of imagined pasts.

Narrative

All commemorations rely on a narrative. Narratives are never mere lists—assemblages of dates or facts—put together without logic or motivation.

On the contrary, narratives provide audiences with meanings, worldviews, perceptions and much more. This is even more pertinent and crucial in the case of a difficult past where it is clear that the narrative of the event offered by the agents of memory enjoys little agreement.³³ Moreover, these narratives often become objects of dismissal, criticism and even oblivion for various groups—some of whom may be dominant and powerful.

While the notions of mnemonic time and space exposed us to the idea that narratives of a difficult past can be fragmented and can thus cater to different collectives and agendas, a sociological analysis of narrative in the context of collective memory takes us further. First, in order to understand commemorative narratives, a sociological account must examine not only mnemonic narratives (whether a singular one or multiple ones) but also narratives that are outside the mnemonic framework. By discussing narratives that are offered by those who challenge, criticize, even mock the suggested mnemonic narrative, this research underscores the boundaries and limitations of commemoration. The various alternative narratives that will be presented in the book all point to the same conclusion in that no matter how fragmented the memory becomes, attempts to cater to the complexities and sensitivities of the commemorating society seem to be less than successful. Thus, with the passage of time, even a fragmented commemoration may no longer be able to encompass a conflict.

And yet, the ability to set limits on commemoration is hindered by two factors. First, those who object to any commemoration whatsoever often do so with much passion, thus reminding us that commemoration is not merely the construction of a certain narrative but that it is also constituted by mere reference to a subject. In other words, one of the major problems faced by those who wish to avoid the commemoration or to make others forget is how to say something that aims at distracting attention from a certain subject when the very act of speaking is itself a form of attention. Second, attempts to erase a past are restricted by what I call *banal commemoration*. Banal commemoration involves both various non-mnemonic contexts in which an event or a person is mentioned as well as various forms of commemoration that seem relatively nonintrusive and silent. Casual references to the simple pen with which Rabin signed the peace agreement with Jordan may be an example of the former, while driving past a street named after Rabin may be an example of the latter.

The second dimension of narrative involves the form, importance and constraints of the official—imposed—mnemonic narrative. As noted earlier, it should come as no surprise that formal and institutional forms of commemoration stand a better chance of preserving collective memory than informal and voluntary forms. Moreover, as long as nations remain the most popular way of organizing groups of people, the manner in which they

treat their past is of utmost importance for those who wish to maintain a specific memory (let alone its interpretation). As such, it is of little wonder that much of the work of agents of memory is about forcing the state to acknowledge a specific event or person.

While legislation is a first step in formalizing and thus forcing a transmission of memory, the most powerful arena in which forced memory operates is in the context of the educational system. This is probably the most primary and efficient vehicle of mnemonic socialization, with the possible exception of the family. Those who stand at attention during ceremonies from their first year in kindergarten to their last year of high school will never forget the experience and the event involved (although they may forget some of its details). In the case of a difficult past, this mnemonic socialization³⁴ is complicated as the past commemorated is neither heroic nor consensual. Thus this study first addresses the ways in which the educational system coped with the challenge of commemorating a highly problematic past by examining the form and content of school rituals that were performed once the assassination date became an official memorial day. As we will shortly see, shifting the emphasis between the three components of the narrative (protagonist, act, context) enabled the educational system to deal with the challenge.

And yet, as the research shows, school-based ceremonies are hardly stable and even official, state-based mnemonic narratives cannot be guaranteed to survive. Less than a decade after the first school ceremony took place, those who opposed the commemoration in the first place have managed to force the forced memory out or, at the very least, to decenter it. This discussion illustrates that even a centralized state educational system cannot monolithically impose the transmission of moral education on its teachers and students and that even forced memory has limitations. Furthermore, the discussion sheds light on the ways in which various groups operating within a centralized educational system can nonetheless claim normative and discursive independence and construct their own moral stories.

Rabin, the Assassination and Israeli Society

For the past decade, on Rabin's Memorial Days and at the assassination site, Israelis have been passionately declaring that they "will not forgive and will not forget." As such, it is worth asking what they mean by that slogan and why they are so emotional about the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. After all, political assassinations have taken place in many nations around the world, and even the history of Israel (before and after its establishment) is dotted by instances of political assassination³⁵ (although never before was a prime

minister killed). What was at stake during the 1990s? Why did so many people feel that something completely and dramatically wrong had taken place? Why did so many Israelis echo the sentiments of Rabin's personal assistant, Shimon Sheves, when, following the assassination, he declared that "my nation is gone"? For many Israelis, Rabin's assassination was not only a personal shock but—in Alexander's terminology—a "cultural trauma." A cultural trauma takes place, "when members of a collectivity feel that have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2004: 1). Indeed, a recent study on the perceptions of Israeli Jews of the past has found that Israelis tend to rate Rabin's assassination as the second most important event in the last sixty years, superseded only by the establishment of Israel. It ranked higher than the Holocaust, World War II, two major Israeli wars and two peace treaties.³⁶

While this book is neither primarily about Israeli society nor primarily about Yitzhak Rabin, the research is embedded in a particular time and place. As such, it is necessary to contextualize the commemorative practices that constitute the case in question. That said, providing an adequate context is extraordinarily difficult. First, in proposing such a background, I open the door to criticisms of linking ideology to sociology. Any narration of the story of a difficult past will inevitably be perceived as contaminated and biased by certain readers who will regard the words and description of facts used in this book (or their absence from it) as politically laden and unscientific. This is especially problematic in a book in which the construction and struggle over a narrative is one of the main themes. The second problem is one of superficiality, since no society and no historical actor can be described and understood in a few sentences. There are three possible reactions to these criticisms. The first is to write a textbook about Israeli society and Rabin and attach it to this book as its introduction. The second is to keep silent, and the third is to offer a short narrative and risk the potential criticisms. I have chosen to opt for the third.

While the roots of Israeli society are embedded in Jewish history,³⁷ and while the history of the conflict between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East can be said to be a hundred years old, for the purpose of this book, it makes more sense to begin the narrative with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. That narrative may be roughly divided into three stages. Rabin's biography can be seen to intertwine with each of these stages as he performed, represented and was associated with significant and fundamental moments in each of them. In Kimmerling's (2001) terms, such a narrative tells the story of "the invention and decline of Israeliness" or at the very least of the invention of the dream of Israeliness and its realization.

First Stage

The first stage begins with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and concludes with the 1967 Six-Day War. At the end of the 1948 War of Independence (following the conclusion of a thirty-year British mandate of the area and a United Nation's resolution to split the contentious area into two states: a Jewish one and an Arab-Palestinian one), one percent of the Jewish population in Israel had lost their lives. 700,000 Palestinians became refugees outside of Israel—with a small minority remaining within the border of the new Jewish state.³⁸ Gaining its independence within an era marked by nation-building ideologies, Israeli society was characterized by high expectations and much optimism. Early sociological writing on Israeli society expressed the same notions. Thus, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, the founding father of Israeli sociology, insisted “that Israel can be categorized as a modern, open, Western-style democracy” (Kimmerling 1992: 450)³⁹—a democracy that had to cope with the challenges of a constant national threat and the absorption of mass waves of Jewish immigrants coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds (including many Holocaust survivors).

In more ways than one, Rabin embodied these Zionist dreams, myths and ethos and represents the major events of that era. Rabin was born in 1922 in Palestine. He came of age in 1948 and served as a much admired military officer who commanded a brigade that fought in the Jerusalem area during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. Moreover, many Israelis explain the military success of the 1948 war by attributing it to the *Sabra* generation. The *Sabra*—a symbol of the myth and the ethos of the Zionist movement—represented the secular, Ashkenazi man who was born in Palestine, and who looked, behaved and thought in a different manner than diasporic Jews.⁴⁰ The *Sabra* spoke Hebrew, was socialized in some or other socialist youth movement and was willing to fight and die for his country.⁴¹ Rabin was the ultimate *Sabra* as he embodied the image of the “new Jew” that Zionism sought to create.

Second Stage

Following the 1948 war, Rabin remained in the army and served as the chief of staff between 1964 and 1968, thus becoming the commander of Israel's largest military victory during the 1967 Six-Day War. At the conclusion of the war, the eastern part of Jerusalem and the West Bank were captured from Jordan, The Golan Heights from Syria, and the Sinai Desert and Gaza Strip from Egypt (collectively referred to as the occupied territories). For better or for worse, the 1967 War is perceived as a milestone in the history of Israel. Even critical perceptions of the history of Israeli society

that view the Zionist nationalist movement as a project of colonization and that regard this period not as a turning point in Israel's history but rather as a new colonial phase, still view the aftermath of the war and the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories as the moment when "the seeds . . . for the hostility and later resistance, mostly of the 1948 refugees living in camps in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as outside Israel [were planted]" (Shafir and Peled 2002: 19). Regardless of the sociological perspective, what is clear and somewhat ironic is that the territories over which Rabin negotiated at the beginning of the 1990s were part of those very same territories occupied during the war over which he had been in command in 1967.

Following Israel's next major war in 1973, Prime Minister Golda Meir (Labor Party) was forced to resign, and Rabin, who has returned from being Israel's ambassador to the United States—and thus not associated with the surprise attack in which Israel was caught off-guard—became prime minister for the first time. Following a political crisis that involved relations of state and religion, Rabin resigned from his post in 1977, opening the door to early elections. Right before the election, and following a scandal involving his wife,⁴² Rabin resigned from his post as chair of the Labor Party and was replaced by Shimon Peres. The Labor Party lost the elections that followed, after having been in power for twenty-nine consecutive years. Ever since then, with the exception of a few elections, a political standoff between the Right (Likud) and the Left (Labor) has characterized the Israeli political system. Within this context, Rabin served as minister of defense from 1984 to 1990. During these years, and especially when the first Palestinian intifada ("uprising") broke out in the occupied territories, Rabin was known to be a tough minister of defense.

From 1967 to 1990, Israeli society seemed to be awakening from the dreams, fears, hopes and uncertainties of 1948. It found itself coping with the occupied territories and their Palestinian inhabitants, with powerful groups of Jewish religious nationalists insisting that this "land of their forefathers" (located in the occupied territories) needs to be settled by Jews, with economic crises, with groups that demand that the national, financial and cultural pie be divided differently, and much more. In their sociological writing, Horowitz and Lissak summarize the situation at the end of the 1980s' as "trouble in utopia" during which Israeli society seemed to be "overburdened with competing collective tasks and demands" (1989: 231).

Third Stage

The third stage, which began in the 1990s and continues into the present, is one characterized by the "evaporation of the image of a single, unified Israeli society" (Kimmerling 2001: 2) and in which various and separate

groups with little in common battle and disagree over the rules of the game. After many years in which immigration was no longer a major issue for Israeli society, the 1990s witnessed another mass wave of immigration, and today one in every six Israelis is a first-generation immigrant from the former Soviet Union; about one quarter of Jewish Israeli children receive their education in ultra-orthodox schools whose commitment and ties to state curricula is a constant source for battles; and close to one fifth of the population are Israeli Arabs.

Furthermore, formal wars, which were marked, among other things, by clear borders and defensive strategies were replaced by the first Palestinian intifada and the first Gulf War. The boundaries between war zones and civil zones collapsed as missiles easily traveled long distances and bombs (many of which were carried on the bodies of Palestinians) exploded in busses and restaurants. The continuing Israeli ruling over the occupied territories combined with Palestinian uprisings have come to be viewed, in the eyes of crucial components of the economic, political and military elite as incurring heavy costs in terms of the project of Israeli democracy as well as within the context of global economics (Shafir and Peled 2002: 338).

Within this context, in 1992, Rabin led the Labor Party to victory and became prime minister for the second time. In September 1993, the peace process with the Palestinians was officially initiated when Israeli and Palestinian leaders signed the Oslo Accords. Soon afterwards, Rabin was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (together with Yasser Arafat and Shimon Peres). The term “peace process” refers to a political process aimed at concluding the bitter hundred-year-old conflict between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. That Rabin was engaged in a peace process was evident to his political supporters, but it was not evident to all of his opponents, who perceived any withdrawal from the 1967 occupied territories as a nightmarish and fictitious peace—a disaster on both strategic and religious grounds.⁴³ The land around which much of the conflict revolves is perceived by the Right—and especially by the religious Right—as “the land of [our] forefathers.” The rift among various groups over the solution to the conflict with the Palestinians is furthermore linked to and embedded within more general views over the nature of collective identity, national goals and commitments in Israel and thus concerns a conflict between ethnic, religious and nationalistic views and discourses of identity versus civil, secular and liberal views and discourses of identity.⁴⁴ Thus it comes as no surprise that the Israeli Right which rejects the formula “land for peace,” is heavily represented by religious Jews (defined by Ram [1999] as “neo-Zionists”), while the Israeli Left, which advocates withdrawal from the occupied territories, is heavily represented by middle- and upper-middle-class secular Jews.⁴⁵ Moreover, the Israeli Right and especially the Jewish settlers in the

occupied territories have felt that in negotiating land for peace, the Israeli government has deserted them and endangered the future of Israel. These feelings were reinforced by Palestinian terrorist attacks—some of which were defined as retaliations for Jewish attacks (e.g., the Hebron Massacre in February 1994).⁴⁶

Thus soon after the famous handshake between Rabin and Arafat at the White House in September 1993, Rabin became the primary target of harsh vilification on the part of many elements in the Israeli Right, who conducted an organized campaign against him in which he was labeled a traitor.⁴⁷ Right-wing radical groups published posters in which Arafat's *kefiya* was superimposed upon Rabin's face. Other comparisons linked Rabin to Nazi collaborators. For example, a radical Right-wing attorney published an article in the settlers' newspaper in which he compared Rabin's shaking hands with Arafat to Marshal Pétain's alliance with Hitler.⁴⁸ In May 1994, over a thousand rabbis published a warning to Rabin's government in which they stated that since the agreement with the Palestinians poses a great danger to Jews, "anyone who can stop this 'agreement' and does not do so breaks the [biblical] rule 'you shall not stand idle when your brother is in danger'" (quoted in Sprinzak, 2000: 107). In one of the most provocative demonstrations against Rabin and his government, held in Jerusalem's Zion Square in October 1995, doctored posters of the prime minister wearing a Nazi officer's uniform were brandished on placards. The keynote speaker at that demonstration was Benjamin Netanyahu, the head of the right-leaning Likud party. Demonstrators promised that "with blood and fire, we will expel Rabin." This demonstration came to symbolize the ultimate campaign against Rabin. One month later he was assassinated. The Israeli Left strongly felt that the campaign of incitement against Rabin organized by the Right furnished the assassin with ideological and religious grounds for his action. "A straight line connects between Bar-Ilan [the religious university in which Rabin's assassin studied] and Teheran," said an MP from the Labor Party on television a few days after the assassination. Following these allegations, the Israeli Right strongly felt that it was a victim of the Left's blood libel.

National elections held six months after the assassination highlighted a long-standing bifurcation of Israeli society and the conflictual field in which Rabin was shot: Benjamin Netanyahu won the election by only 30,000 votes (0.1 percent of the ballots) and established a coalition with mainly right-wing and Orthodox Jewish religious parties. During his term, he led a withdrawal from some Palestinian cities in the occupied territories. In the summer of 2005, after the second intifada which broke in 2000, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who also forcefully objected to Rabin's policy led another withdrawal—this time from the Gaza Strip and a few small settle-

ments in the West Bank. For the first time in twenty years, Jewish settlers were evacuated from their homes in the occupied territories.

Without falling into the trap of working around historical ironies and trite symbolism, it is worth noting that Rabin—the ultimate *Sabra* who, in his body and soul, fulfilled many of the dreams (some would say sins) of the Zionist movement—was the one to make the first effort at the peace process with the Palestinians, many of whom were the children of those with whom he fought some fifty and thirty years earlier. Moreover, while one may never know what the public reaction to the assassination of any other prime minister might have been, the strong reaction to Rabin's assassination seems to have been magnified by the fact that he was one of the nation's chosen sons. For many veteran Israelis, Rabin represented their dreams that had materialized, that had become unstable, that had disintegrated and that were reformulated only to be shattered again. As such, they could not but scream that they “will not forget and will not forgive” and they could not but identify with the notion that “[their] nation was gone.”

Structure of the Book

The book travels along three separate yet related trajectories. First, at the center of the book stands the sociology of commemoration with a special emphasis on fragmented commemoration as a way in which a difficult past is dealt with in a split society. Thus, chapters 2 to 6 deal with the main dimensions of commemoration: agency (chapter 2), time (chapter 3), space (chapter 4) and narrative (chapters 5 and 6).

Within this theme, this book explores the ways in which even a fragmented commemoration is limited in allowing enough mnemonic space for the entire society. As such, the book discusses the boundaries of commemoration by examining challenging narratives offered by different groups for the same event within the same society (chapter 5) and the ways in which various groups cope with the memory forced upon them by the state (chapter 6). Thus, while the first part of the book (chapters 2 to 4) focuses mainly on those who wish to remember, the second part of the book (chapters 5 and 6) presents those who are forced to remember.

The second trajectory traces the evolution of the mnemonic forms and content over time. As such, the various forms of commemoration are examined in terms of their emergence in the shadow of the assassination and are followed as they developed through time in the decade following the assassination, as anger replaced tears. This journey escorts each chapter in an attempt to understand the effect of the passage of time on commemoration and by implication on collective memory.

The third trajectory conceptualizes commemoration as a lens through which one can learn about the society in which it operates (sociology through commemoration). As much as sociology can inform our understanding of commemoration, the study of commemoration can also enhance our understanding of social processes and society more generally. Commemoration, thus, can (and should) also serve as a way of deepening our understanding of the society in which it is embedded. Within this contour, and by using time, space and a unique social gathering (which I term a “memorial demonstration”) as prime examples, I discuss the fundamental and taken-for-granted place that death and mnemonic rituals occupy in Israeli-Jewish culture. Thus, the final section of the book (chapter 7) is dedicated to the context of the study, i.e., Israeli Jewish society. In addition, it discusses potential directions that are generated by this research endeavor. The appendix contains a discussion of the methodology and limitations of this study.

Since the assassination, on each and every Friday, a wreath is placed by an anonymous donor on the monument at the site of Rabin's assassination (see figure 1.1). The banner reads: “Remember and make others remember” (*zichru ve-bazkiru*).

This book is about the sociology of commemoration and the struggle to make others remember what many wish to forget.



Figure 1.1. The monument at the assassination site, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2000. (Photo by Miri Divish)