

# Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting

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Collective memory quite naturally brings to mind notions of mnemonic speech and representation. In this article, however, we propose that collective silences be thought of as a rich and promising arena through which to understand how groups deal with their collective pasts. In so doing, we explore two types of silence: overt silence and covert silence, and suggest that each may be used to enhance either memory or forgetting. We illustrate our conceptual scheme using data on the commemoration of slain Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

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The concept of collective silence quite naturally brings to mind notions of forgetting and amnesia. Collective memory is generally understood to entail the narration and representation of the past, while collective forgetting is antithetically thought to be a silencing and muting of the past. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that when nations, collectives or individuals wish to ensure that certain events, eras, people and experiences are remembered, they quite naturally turn to words and images. What can be heard, seen and touched has become the cornerstone of memory. As a result, absence and silence have often resulted in protest by groups who have shared the assumption that recollection is impossible without talk and representation (see for example Zolberg 1998; Scott 1996; Young 1993; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). While no one can guarantee the mnemonic maintenance and survival of issues that have received textual and narrative representation because memory is unstable, changing and unpredictable (Zelizer 1995), commemoration seems to amount—at least in its beginning stages—to words, narratives and much talk. In other words, speech, narrative and text seem to be perceived as necessary—if not sufficient—for ensuring collective memory.

Scholars of collective memory have focused much attention on such representations of the past and have paid attention to both the form and content of these representations. In terms of form, they have examined formal and informal rituals, historical museums, central and peripheral monuments, history books, school curricula and much more. In terms of content, scholars have paid attention to the words, texts and narratives that have filled the above-mentioned forms. In addition, scholars of collective memory have quite naturally taken note of what is missing and not talked about in representations of the past. In this way, they

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have drawn attention to distortions in what had hitherto been perceived as the truth about the past (e.g., Ben-Yehuda 1995) as well as to processes through which people and events were excluded and forgotten from collective memory (e.g., Armstrong and Cragge 2006; Stora 2006; Piterberg 2006; Choi 2001; Yoneyama 1999; Prost, 1999; Aguilar 1999; Sturken 1991; Ehrenhaus 1989). Thus, alongside analyses of mnemonic narratives, speech and representations, we have seen a growing scholarly interest in silences, omissions and exclusions. Although it is difficult to study those things about which individuals keep silent (Zerubavel 2006), scholars of collective memory have been able to examine official representations of the past in the aim of noting those topics that were left out and silenced. These silences have become the first indication that specific topics have stood a chance of being permanently sidelined, forgotten or denied altogether.

While acknowledging that silence is often tightly coupled with forgetting and talk with memory, we wish to expand on the ways in which silence can also be used to facilitate recollection, while talk can be used to enhance amnesia. In other words, we suggest that silence be understood as a complex and rich social space that can operate as a vehicle of either memory or of forgetting and thus can be used by various groups for different ends. We do this by extending the notion of silence in two ways. First, we argue that silence need not only be thought of as the antithesis of speech. As such, we suggest that silence be disaggregated into its overt and covert manifestations. By overt silences, we refer to a literal absence of speech and narrative. Covert silences, on the other hand, are silences that are covered and veiled by much mnemonic talk and representation. Such silences are not about the complete absence of talk, ritual or practice. Rather, they are about the absence of content. Because these absences are not immediately apparent as such, covert silences are often quite difficult to identify and critique. Second, we suggest that both overt and covert silences can be utilized in the aim of either memory or forgetting. In other words, we offer a typology of silences distinguished on the one axis into overt and covert silences and on the other axis into silences aimed at memory and silences aimed at forgetting.

Our analysis of the various forms and functions of silence is undoubtedly located within a contemporary mnemonic landscape where groups, sectors and entire nations are expected to recognize and confront their post-heroic pasts (Schwartz and Schuman 2005) and to examine their shameful histories and embarrassing moments (Olick 2007). For reasons that are beyond the scope of this article, celebrating a mythic and heroic past and ignoring "difficult pasts" (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002) seem to have become less and less legitimate in the contemporary mnemonic landscape. As such, keeping completely silent about certain issues is increasingly becoming a non-option for many nations (or, at the very least, an option with a high political price tag attached). This trend has not, however, meant that commemorative activities around these pasts are wholeheartedly embraced. Today, as in the past, certain constituencies do not wish

to remember and acknowledge certain pasts, especially if such memories bring up issues of accountability and guilt. However, unlike in the past, these groups often cannot withdraw into a complete and collective silence. How then do groups and/or nations that wish to forget the past, or at the very least not to talk about it, do so in an era where this is less and less acceptable (and, in some cases, where they are legislatively forced to “remember”)? Furthermore, how do groups that do wish to remember the past do so while minimizing conflict with other groups that do not wish to recollect its shameful aspects?

Using the case of the commemoration of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in Israel, we address these questions by showing how different actors in the mnemonic scene differentially engage in talk and/or silence in the aim of advancing remembering and/or forgetting.

### **Yitzhak Rabin’s Assassination: Background and Data**

Yitzhak Rabin was a much-admired military officer who commanded a brigade that fought in the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. He was the Israeli Defense Forces Chief of Staff during the 1967 War, at the conclusion of which 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). In September 1993, during Rabin’s second term as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, the peace process with the Palestinians was officially initiated with the signing of the “Oslo Accords” by Israeli and Palestinian leaders. The term “peace process” refers to the political attempt at concluding the bitter and bloody 100-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 occupied territories (by now populated with Jewish settlements) as a nightmarish peace—a disaster on both strategic and religious grounds. Thus soon after the famous handshake between Rabin and Arafat at the White House in September 1993, Rabin became the primary target of a vilification campaign organized by elements of the Israeli right who labeled him as a traitor (Ben-Yehuda 1997). The main accusation against Rabin had to do with his willingness to withdraw from territory that had been occupied by Israel since 1967.<sup>1</sup> The Israeli right, and especially the Jewish settlers in the occupied territories, who felt that the Israeli government had deserted them, organized many harsh demonstrations, which were often led and addressed by prominent right-wing political figures and religious rabbinical authorities.

In an attempt to respond to the campaign against Rabin, his government and the peace process, the Israeli left organized a demonstration in Tel Aviv on Nov. 4, 1995. As Rabin was leaving the rally, he was shot three times. Several hours later, Rabin’s personal assistant announced that the Prime Minister was dead. Soon enough, the assassination would come to symbolize a chasm deep in the

heart of the nation. The assassination tore open the right-left, religious-secular divides within Israeli society. While all (save several conspiracy theorists) agreed that Yigal Amir, an Orthodox Jewish Law student, had pulled the trigger, there was little agreement over what both the assassin and the assassination symbolized at a deeper level. For the religious right, Yigal Amir became something of “a bad apple,” a fringe lunatic who acted irrationally. For the secular left, however, Yigal Amir stood within a much broader context of a campaign of political incitement against the Prime Minister.

It should come as no surprise therefore that right-wing groups, and especially religious right-wing groups, including groups representing Jewish settlers living in the occupied territories, were less than enthusiastic about commemorating Rabin and the assassination, while left-wing groups were more inclined to do so. The commemorations of Yitzhak Rabin have thus been classified as “a difficult past” in so far as the commemorated event is disputed and divisive (see Wagner-Pacifi and Schwartz 1991; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). Within this context, many of those who wished to commemorate Rabin and the assassination did so on their own volition, forming voluntary associations and creating, for example, the annual memorial ceremony held in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv. These elective or voluntary commemorations are not the only ones. In 1997, the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) passed the Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day Law, which legislated that major social institutions (mainly the educational system) were required to commemorate Rabin. Additionally, an annual memorial ceremony at Rabin’s gravesite became institutionalized through this legislation. The law, in effect, forces certain individuals and groups to talk about Rabin and the assassination.

In this article, we illustrate our argument about the various forms of silence by drawing on data gathered by the first author over a period of close to 10 years. First, we make use of observations at various public commemorations for Rabin, including “coerced commemorations” (e.g., mnemonic activities in state schools, official ceremonies at Rabin’s burial site on Mount Herzl, Jerusalem) as well as “elective” ones (e.g., the annual memorial ceremony in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, near the assassination site). Second, we draw on 24 in-depth interviews with relevant agents of memory<sup>2</sup> including Rabin’s widow, his personal assistants, various political activists, memorial designers and others. Third, we analyze data gathered from observations conducted in 30 Jewish state and state-religious schools on Rabin Memorial Day in 1997 (the year in which the Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day Law was passed) and in 2005 (the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination). Finally, we draw on content analysis of all articles published about Rabin or the assassination from seven Israeli newspapers in three languages (Arabic, Russian and Hebrew). The texts analyzed include the entire population of articles published on the topic around the date of the Memorial Day (i.e., the anniversary of the assassination) in the selected newspapers in 1996 (the first anniversary of the assassination) and in 2000 (the fifth anniversary of the assassination).<sup>3</sup> While focusing predominantly

on the “public transcript” of commemorative activities, our data allow us some leverage in unpacking the “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990) articulated in schools and niche newspapers. Our analysis of silence in the commemoration of Rabin is thus grounded in both official commemorative activities directed at broad and diverse audiences as well as in more localized events and pronouncements targeting only “insiders.”

### Silence and Memory, Talk and Forgetting

Forgetting is of course an inescapable element in remembering. Schudson (1997:348) puts it succinctly when he states that “[m]emory is distortion since memory is invariably and inevitably selective. A way of seeing is a way of not seeing, a way of remembering is a way of forgetting, too.” As many have pointed out, in any recollection of the past, certain elements are always highlighted, some are ignored and all are interpreted (e.g., Crane 2000; Winter and Sivan 1999; Brink 2000). In effect, one of the major characteristics of commemorative activities is that they serve to elevate from historical records certain events and people that would otherwise be socially forgotten or buried in archives and other deserted social locations (Schwartz and Schuman 2005). Thus, memory, like narrative, is “constructed around its own blind spots and silences.” (Brink 2000:37) By the same token, the ability to converse at all may be predicated upon silences, such that saying anything at all entails silencing the multitude of other possible speech acts available in a given situation (see Gurevitch 1995). In other words, the ability to remember, to speak of or to commemorate one thing may implicitly be predicated on the ability to keep silent on others. Needless to say, many of these silences and exclusions are far from benign and often reflect real desires to mute certain aspects of the past in order to (re)present its other aspects in specific ways, often more favorable to those in power (Yoneyama 1999; Polletta 1998; Trouillot 1995; Spillman 1994; Sturken 1991, 1997). In this sense, the narration of certain memories and the silencing of others can oftentimes be conceptualized as the attempts of those with power to set the limits on what is speakable or unspeakable about the past.

In their examinations of unspoken or unspeakable pasts, Zerubavel (2006) and Cohen (2001) have theorized on ways in which psychoanalytic theories might be applied in sociological contexts. Accordingly they have pondered about how Freudian ideas of repression—whereby individuals subconsciously bury traumatic and painful memories below consciousness—might be said to operate at the inter-personal level. In moving to the social sphere, both Zerubavel and Cohen adopt the notion of denial over that of repression. This preference may indicate a sociological prioritization of voluntary, conscious and—at points—contingent processes of social acknowledgement or denial, over a psychological concern with unconscious, involuntary and inevitable processes of repression.<sup>4</sup> Having framed their concern in terms of denial rather than repression, both Zerubavel and Cohen proceed to identify moments of denial by analyzing the social configuration of

**Table 1: Types of Silence**

	Overt Silence	Covert Silence
Memory	Moment of silence	Bland commemoration
Forgetting	Pervasive silence	Cacophonous commemoration

silence. As in intra-personal processes of repression, the types of inter-personal processes of denial that they identify may help to avoid pain, bad memories, trauma, embarrassment, shame and stigma (see Stein 2009). All of these denials, however, are understood as closely associated with forgetting and silence.

In this article, we suggest that silence be understood more broadly. Thus, we argue that silence need not necessarily be about denial and forgetting but may in certain circumstances be the ultimate example of acknowledgement and remembrance. At other points, much talk may be the clearest indication of desires at denial and social amnesia. As such, we suggest that silences be distinguished along two dimensions: type and intention. In terms of the former, we distinguish between overt and covert silences. Overt silences are those types of silences that we quite normally think of. They are literal silences characterized by a complete absence of any narrative or speech and are thus usually quite easy to detect. Covert silences, on the other hand, are silences that inhere within speech. These are silences that are veiled by much mnemonic talk and as such are harder to decipher and identify.

In terms of the second dimension of our typology, silences vary in terms of the purpose they are intended to serve. Here we distinguish between silences aimed at memory and silences aimed at forgetting. Both types of silence (overt and covert) can be used as mechanisms through which to enhance either memory or forgetting.

The table summarizes our typology. In our analysis, we identify, illustrate and discuss four types of silences: (1. Overt and literal silences aimed at enhancing memory; (2. Overt and pervasive silences aimed at forgetting; (3. Covert silences that inhere in the mnemonic talk of agents intending to construct and maintain memory; (4. Covert silences used to enhance forgetting in situations where complete and overt silences are neither possible nor desirable.

### *Overt Silence in the Domain of Memory*

When nations, societies, agents of memory or other individuals wish to remember and make others remember, they often turn to total silence. That silence, however, is not unbounded, nor does it rest in a vacuum. On the contrary, the silence is intentional, purposive and planned in advanced, and its *raison d'être* is commemoration.

In many social and national contexts, the most sacred ritual saved for unexpected major tragedies, natural disasters, heroes, martyrs and deaths begins with a moment of silence. The aim of such moments of silence is introspection and reflection on that which is commemorated. These moments interrupt the usual flow of time,

of gestures and bodily movements, of speech, and of thoughts. Such moments of silence often repeat themselves at the precise time that the commemorated event occurred. There is probably no text that can perform a similar commemorative function by inscribing itself on one's body so powerfully. This is especially true if the moment of silence is enveloped by a siren heard all over the country and is accompanied by a normative requirement to stand still. Moments of silence that become part of an annual official memorial time and thus repeat themselves every year, are arguably the strongest manifestations of a desire to remember.

In Israel there are three moments of mnemonic silence that are announced with a siren heard across the country.<sup>5</sup> On Memorial Day for the Holocaust there is one siren which is heard at 10 a.m. This siren lasts for one minute. On Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers—which falls a week later—there are two sirens. The first, which lasts one minute, is heard the evening preceding the Memorial Day.<sup>6</sup> The second, which lasts two minutes, is sounded at 11 a.m. and marks the official opening of the memorial ceremonies at state military cemeteries. The normative imperative is that people stop whatever they are doing and stand still for the duration of the siren regardless of where they are when it sounds. The structured moments of silence constitute part of the mnemonic socialization of young children, who early on learn to discipline their bodies in the name of commemoration. Driving on the highway in Israel on one of these memorial days when the siren goes off, it is in no way uncommon to see people stopping their cars, stepping onto the road and standing still until the siren is over. The annual reenactment of the moment of silence is so powerful that individuals often find that when the siren sounds, they stand still, keep silent and contemplate the day even if the demarcated moment finds them alone in their homes or offices. The structured moment of silence thus becomes something that is difficult to ignore. Borrowing from Durkheim (1964) and Foucault (1977) one could say that the ritualized moment of silence becomes the ultimate manifestation of social control in that it comes to be internalized without external surveillance, creating “docile bodies” disciplined in the act of memory.

In the case of Rabin commemorations, we find the structure of the moment of silence observed during official memorial ceremonies on Rabin Memorial Day. However, while individuals stand and keep silent in the context of public gatherings commemorating Rabin, they do so in the absence of a national siren. The reasons for the lack of siren on that day are beyond the scope of this article. What is clear, however, is that decisions regarding the institutionalization of a siren ushering in a national moment of silence have served to create a hierarchy around national mnemonic importance in Israel (where commemorating the Holocaust and the fallen soldiers are of prime importance). The important point is that the overt literal silence of individuals and collectives, when framed within a commemorative context, can become the ultimate mechanism through which to promote memory.

### *Overt Silence in the Domain of Forgetting*

The second type of overt silence is frameless, unbounded and is not encapsulated within mnemonic activity as its aim is not remembering but forgetting. Unlike overt silences in the domain of memory that are introduced either by a verbal announcement or by the siren, overt silences in the domain of forgetting are not spoken of at all. They are characterized by a complete absence of any mention of the topic at hand. The passage of time may in itself increase the probability of finding this kind of silence as witnesses pass away or grow old, and collectives grow bored or tired.<sup>7</sup> The type of silence we analyze in this discussion, however, is not about collectives who have simply grown apathetic or disinterested. Instead, it is about groups who, for a variety of reasons, actively do not wish to remember or commemorate a specific event or person.

In the case of Yitzhak Rabin, overt silences in the domain of forgetting are exemplified by Israeli state-religious schools located in highly ideological settlements in the occupied territories where much of the opposition to Rabin's policy regarding the solution of the conflict with the Palestinians was centered. Ten years after the assassination no ceremonies took place in these schools on Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day—in spite of the legislation. Children were not asked to come to school in special dress (as they are on every other official memorial day) and no special decorations, posters or activities marked the day. Several weeks prior to the memorial day, in a telephone conversation with one of the authors, a principal in one such school initially declined to participate in the study by suggesting that the researcher who visited the school would not like what she saw. "She may see pupils spitting on and thus putting out Rabin's candle," she warned in a telephone conversation in October 2005. Without analyzing the assumptions made by the principal about what the researcher would or would not like to see, it is worth noting that, after permission was given to visit that school, the researcher did not see anyone spitting on any candles because there were no candles on which to spit. While data were not collected at Jewish ultra-Orthodox schools, it is probably safe to assume that no commemorations took place there on Rabin's Memorial Day either because the same kind of total silence characterizes ultra-Orthodox schools during every official memorial day instituted by the State of Israel—even the most consensual of them, such as the Memorial Day for the Holocaust (Ebenstein 2003).<sup>8</sup>

Another kind of complete and overt silence that eventually enhances forgetting is the one exemplified by Palestinian citizens of Israel. Following Rabin's assassination, Palestinian citizens of Israel—comprising 18 percent of the Israeli population—mourned him, expressed anger and pain, and, shared, perhaps for the first time in national history, an emotional response with the Jewish majority (see Al-Haj 2000). In effect, Rabin's Memorial Day could have constituted the first and only official holiday observed by both Jewish and Arab citizens.<sup>9</sup> Following Rabin's assassination, Jewish Israelis did not pay much attention to the grief of their fel-



low citizens (Al-Haj 2000) and certainly did not see it as an opportunity for any sort of shared mourning. Instead, they generally perceived Rabin's assassination as an internal Jewish-Israeli affair (El-Or 1998). Indeed, the first and only time that a Palestinian citizen of the state was invited to speak at the annual memorial ceremony in Rabin Square (an event organized by left- and liberal-leaning Israeli parties and associations) was in 2000—a full five years after the first ceremony.

Palestinian citizens of Israel can be said to have withdrawn from participation in remembering of Rabin. Ten years after the assassination, no mention of Rabin was made on his memorial day in Palestinian schools in Israel. Five years after the assassination, Israeli publications in Arabic stopped publishing anything—critical or not—about the assassination.<sup>10</sup> There may be many factors that contributed to this public mnemonic withdrawal. It may be part of a more general response to the continual exclusion of Palestinians from formal and informal spheres in Israel, or it may be embedded within a more specific protest against the events of October 2000 (when 13 Israeli Palestinians were killed by Israeli police during demonstrations following Ariel Sharon's visit to Jerusalem's Temple Mount), or it may reflect a broad disappointment at the pace and status of the peace process. Nonetheless, the emergence of this silence seems also to be informed by thwarted attempts by many Palestinians to share in this specific moment. Riad Ali, a Palestinian journalist, bitterly and painfully expressed this sentiment to his Jewish countrymen in *Ma'ariv*, a Hebrew-language newspaper, on Nov. 5, 1998:

“Detached, that is how I feel these days, the days in which the Jewish-Israeli public remembers its Prime Minister... You [Jews] excluded [us]... from mourning [Rabin]. We wanted to be part of the family. We cried and mourned... We thought that he became a friend of all of us. Apparently he didn't. He was a great man... I feel sorry for you....”

This literal silence reflects a reaction to mnemonic talk that was offered by this constituency but rejected by the majority. The silence is thunderous, and although it may be rooted in a past desire to remember, it ultimately comes to be located in the domain of forgetting.

### *Covert Silence in the Domain of Memory*

Schudson (1997:354-55) has argued that in an “effort not only to report the past but to make it interesting, narratives simplify.” Part of this simplification is the result of commercial considerations which seek to “make an account of the past palatable to all tastes—hence, bland and uncontroversial.” Commercial considerations, however, are not the only motivation for inducing audiences. Agents of memory are often motivated by a variety of reasons to set aside certain troubling aspects of the past recounted to enable broader collectives to participate

in a memory that otherwise may be hard to share. Thus, within commemorative activities and narratives, certain issues come to be ignored and silenced in the aim of memory. Sometimes this silencing involves complete sidelining of aspects of the narrative. Other times, the silencing is more subtle and is manifest, for example, through issues that are hinted at but not explored. Such covert silences can facilitate more peaceful transitions between regimes and curtail the eruption of conflict over representations of shameful and contested pasts.

Covert silence in the domain of memory is often about widening the audience that can share the moment at the expense of a certain depth to the narrative offered. This kind of silence, which is manifested in what we term a bland commemoration, involves a compromise on behalf of those who wish to remember. It allows broader collectives to participate in commemorative activities and thus to remember, rather than forget, the past.

Aside from the Israeli government and its agents and municipalities, all of Rabin's agents of memory belonged to or were associated with the Israeli left and were more or less unified around a certain narrative of the assassination. In general terms, this narrative includes an emphasis on the organized political campaign against Rabin and his government that preceded the assassination, a campaign that led to the three shots fired by Yigal Amir at the Kings of Israel Square (now called Rabin Square). In this narrative, the assassin is placed within a broader social, political and ideological context; and the leaders of right-wing groups, through their action or inaction, are understood to bear at least some of the responsibility for the outcome. "The assassination did not start on November 4<sup>th</sup> [the date of the assassination]" states one of the agents of memory, "the physical assassination took place then, but the character assassination started before." (Vinitzky-Seroussi, Jan. 13, 1998 interview) Rabin's widow, Leah, elaborates the view shared by all of Rabin's agents of memory: "On the night of [the signing of the second agreement with the Palestinians] in Oslo [October 1995, a month before the assassination] you stood there [in Zion Square, Jerusalem], Mr. Netanyahu, and you incited the crowd against Yitzhak Rabin. I blame primarily the leadership of the Likud [Party].... For God's sake, why did you [plural] assassinate him? The circumstances of the assassination were horrible: It is the combination of political manipulation and the religious establishment." (Vinitzky-Seroussi, Dec. 30, 1998 interview) In all the interviews conducted with Rabin's agents of memory, this narrative was recounted. Some were more direct and harsh in their accounts. Others were gentler, implying rather than declaring the narrative. All, however, explained the assassination within a political context that goes beyond the action of an individual and permeates deep into the social fabric of Israeli society.

And yet, when these same agents of memory prepared a special educational kit that was distributed to state schools before Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day in 1997, no mention was made of this political context. Thus, what was mentioned in the context of an interview was silenced in the context of the educational kit where the

prime focus was instead on a selective biography of Rabin that elevated him to the status of national hero and savior. The act of the assassination was recounted and dramatized but its significance was de-politicized and de-contextualized. The assassin was characterized as evil, devoid of any social, political or ideological context. The context of the assassination was, in many ways, silenced (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2001).

One of the agents of memory who was heavily involved in setting the mnemonic agenda for the state schools admits: "I would like to turn Rabin's memory into something that is shared by as many walks of society as possible. If we take off 10% from either side of the two extremes, we are left with most of the society. A merely sectoral memory is eventually lost. So if I want to work to uphold his memory, I would like it to be shared memory of a wide cross-section... The radical right is lost for us but the non-radical right has a real problem [with the assassination]. It cannot say 'leave us alone with Rabin.' It has to swallow it without vomiting. This is where we stand in this seesaw." When asked specifically about the content of the material prepared for the educational system, she said: "In order to penetrate the educational system, we cannot present [Rabin's assassination] on the background of the incitement. [Why?] Because it is interpreted at least partially as a bill of indictment against one side [i.e., the right]... We have to make some effort and look for the widest common denominator *short of lying, without cutting the corners, but sometimes without discussing the corners, you understand?*" (Vinitzky-Seroussi, Feb. 28, 1999 interview, emphasis ours) A compromise was thus made: Certain interpretations of the past would be silenced so as to enable the acceptance of the narrative by a broader public.

The desire to make Rabin commemorations shared by a large audience and thus to keep silent on parts of the narrative is evident in arguments among the agents of memory over the content of the annual memorial ceremonies at Rabin Square. According to one of Rabin's personal assistants,

"The [second] memorial ceremony [in Rabin Square], was indeed an amazing demonstration. There was nothing like that in the history of the state, but we failed. [There were] no religious people, no one from the development towns in the South, and the buses from those places did not arrive... If we want to make Rabin a shared national [icon] we need to look for wide common grounds. We need to make sure that Rabin belongs to the entire people. If we want to see people from the right [at the ceremonies], we cannot make it into a political event." (Vinitzky-Seroussi, April 1, 1998 interview)

Making the ceremony into a political event means first and foremost introducing, rather than sidestepping, the context of the assassination. One of Rabin's most active

agents of memory criticizes the impulse to purge the memory of the assassination of its political context in order to make it more palatable to broader collectives (and thus to allow more people to remember and commemorate). She states:

“You cry and cry and cry and one day you have to say something... You can mourn for a year but then you have to remember... There were people... who did not want the ceremony to be political because Yitzhak belonged to the entire people. But I said ‘what does being political mean?’ Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated as Prime Minister, as the leader of the Labor Party. He was assassinated because of politics... If we cannot talk about it there, what can we talk about?” (Vinitzky-Seroussi, Jan. 9, 1999 interview)

The annual memorial ceremony in Rabin Square is probably the most important public mnemonic activity for Rabin in that it draws a large crowd and is broadcast live on state television channels. In contemplating the event, Rabin’s agents of memory have debated whether to offer the entire interpretation of the event as they understand it, or to condense the narrative so as to allow a larger public to remember together. On certain years the former perspective has won out, on others, the latter. Regardless, many of Rabin’s agents of memory seem to agree with one of the most active of Rabin’s agents of memory who states that “If they [the agents of memory who organize the memorial ceremony] won’t make adjustments, only half of the people will remember [Rabin’s assassination] and the other half will burn every place where Rabin’s statue will be erected.” (Vinitzky-Seroussi, April 1, 1998 interview) Such a perspective has meant that in the educational system and in some of the memorial ceremonies, a certain contextualization and interpretation of the event is not elaborated upon. The aim of this silencing—hidden as it is within the ample mnemonic talk that is offered—is not forgetting. Rather it is about the consolidation of a shared and wide memory of the event and of the man.

### *Covert Silence in the Domain of Forgetting*

Complete silence about the past is one way through which collectives may try to forget the past. Others, however, develop sophisticated mechanisms through which to attempt to effect forgetting, some of which carry the appearance of commemoration. This is often a result of the fact that while certain groups find commemorating certain people or events to be unacceptable or uncomfortable for a variety of reasons, keeping totally silent on these issues is increasingly being perceived as illegitimate within the broader society. Moreover, agents of memory are often aware of potential criticism that may be raised against them if they fail to mention certain elements of the past and thus preemptively respond to these potential criticisms by incorporating difficult aspects of the past in ways that

minimize their impact (Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi 2007). Such covert silences are not easily identifiable and thus not easily critiqued as they are covered and hidden by much mnemonic talk.

The legislation enacting Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day did not specify that schools had to conduct an official memorial ceremony. And yet, following a long tradition of marking official state memorial days with a school ceremony, most Israeli state schools interpreted the new memorial law as one that required a public performance in front of the school community consisting of pupils, teachers and parents (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2001). The requirement to commemorate Rabin's assassination, however, did not turn it into an event that all sectors wished to remember and mark. While 10 years after the assassination ceremonies were still conducted in all state schools (except for the ideological state-religious schools located in the occupied territories), the ceremonies in state-religious schools had undergone a significant change. This change indicates that commemorating Rabin had moved from operating as a "mythic duty" to a "rational requirement" (Olick and Levy 1997) and quite clearly exemplifies the notion of covert silence.

By 2005, Rabin and the assassination were no longer the pivotal, central and sole foci of the ceremonies conducted in these schools but shared the time and space (decorations at the entrances to schools and in their corridors for example) with at least one, and sometimes two, other topics. The first topic to be integrated into the ceremony held in these schools on Rabin Memorial Day was one commemorating the Biblical matriarch, Rachel (*Rachel Imenu*). The commemoration of Rachel in a school ceremony constitutes a new and "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). As narrated in the Old Testament, Rachel—Jacob's beloved wife—died during the birth of her second son, Benjamin. Many Orthodox Jews traditionally visit the place where she is believed to be buried (Rachel's Tomb) on the supposed date of her death, *Yud Alef of Cheshvan* (the eleventh day of the Hebrew month Cheshvan). However, until recently, her death was never marked in state-religious school ceremonies. The fact that Rabin was assassinated one day after Rachel is believed to have died may explain the ease with which this new tradition was incorporated into the schools.

The second topic added to the ceremony commemorating Rabin was rain or, more accurately, a prayer for rain that is traditionally recited by observant Jews around that time of the year (i.e., from autumn through winter). Needless to say, the link made between the three topics (Rabin, Rachel and Rain) was far from trivial, and indeed the organizers of the ceremonies in these schools took great pains to construct a connection between the three. The important point for the purposes of this article, however, is that mnemonic activities that combine various topics in time and space, serve to diminish the potency of any one event commemorated as the commemorated issues blur into each other. Such processes are not about distracting one's attention from the proverbial "elephant in the room" and thus denying its existence (Zerubavel 2006) because, as noted above, com-

plete denial is socially proscribed (Olick and Levy 1997). Instead, these processes are about diminishing the size, importance and magnitude of “the elephant” by recognizing it but only as one part of a much larger, busier picture.

While replacing a specific memorial day for a specific individual (or event) with a generalized day focused on many individuals or events may have many financial, commercial and logistical advantages (as is the case in the United States with Presidents Day), it may threaten the ability to concentrate on a specific individual or event. The uniqueness of the event or person may be diminished such that all the events and people who share the commemorative time and space may become interchangeable or forgotten altogether. Moreover, in such cases, the amount of time dedicated to remembering a specific topic within all the issues contained by the commemorative space and time may range and thus hierarchies of importance may come to be constructed.

Not surprisingly, after Rabin’s commemorative time was shared with Rachel and Rain, the amount of songs and texts dedicated to his memory declined significantly. Even if Rabin remains the center of the ceremony, after the ability to share exists, uncomfortable content can more easily be pushed into the margins as the silences become veiled by an abundance of commemorative activity and speech. The incorporation of many topics into one mnemonic time—what we term a cacophonous commemoration—suggests that much talk can sometimes be related more to forgetting than to memory. As such, a multitude of commemorative activities in a single space or time can serve to create so much mnemonic stimulation that the uniqueness and content of any one commemoration can get lost. As the case of Rabin’s commemoration illustrates, it becomes quite difficult to accuse teachers and principals that they are silent about the event because the event is in fact commemorated. And yet, forgetting is enhanced by the mere fact that Rabin is remembered within a cacophonous commemoration. Covert silence—silence that is hidden in much commemorative talk—can be an extremely sophisticated mechanism through which to effect collective amnesia about certain issues, people or events. Amplification, in short, is not always about hearing better, and silence itself may be facilitated and escorted by much noise.

### Concluding Remarks

The notion of silencing the past and thus burying specific events is not new. But, in a world that demands talk and memory even about pasts that contain embarrassing moments, human right violations, shameful events and little to be proud about, silence may conquer a new position and social space. Most immediately silence is connected in our mind with forgetting, while talk is tied to remembrance. In this article, however, we saw that silence is also part of the language of remembrance, and talk can be found in the language of forgetting.

At the extremes of memory and forgetting, we find two types of overt silence.

The first, in the domain of memory, is heavily ritualized, bounded, short and escorted either by a siren or by much mnemonic talk that comes before or after the moment of silence. This kind of silence is perhaps the highest official honor that can be granted to the past. The second is silence in the domain of forgetting. Here, the silence is not framed by memory. It does not exist in a clearly demarcated time or space and it is often generated by those who object to the commemoration. This kind of total silence can also be found among groups that withdraw from participating in the mnemonic activity and who have perhaps despaired at the possibility of being equally and fully integrated as part of a democratic community. The end product—forgetting—may thus look similar, but the basis for the silence may be very different. In effect, while silence that is generated by opposition may leave some hope for a shared future and understanding, silence that is generated by social and political despair leaves little or any such hope.

In between these extremes of literal silence, we find covert silences: silences that are contained within and disguised by much mnemonic talk. First, there are covert silences in the domain of memory. These are used by agents of memory who choose to give up on part of their preferred interpretation of the past (often the context of the event) so as to enable various collectives to participate in mnemonic activities, to enlarge the potential mnemonic audience, and thus to enhance memory. The second kind of covert silence is embedded in an expectation that the past be commemorated coupled with little desire to do so. This type of covert silence thus falls within the domain of forgetting and is achieved through cacophonous commemorations where a mnemonic time and space are shared with many other issues. Thus, what looks like remembrance, may in fact, be aimed at forgetting.

Given that our analysis is located within the contemporary social challenge of coping with difficult pasts, it should come as no surprise that different collectives have different interests in how events are remembered or not. In such a context, the potential for social conflict is never far away. Our analysis suggests that overt silences may be more susceptible to enhancing social conflict than covert ones. In the domain of forgetting, overt silence can raise much criticism and fuel social conflicts and protests as various collectives object to attempts to erase the past. In the domain of memory, overt silences can create a context for social conflict as those who do not adhere to the social norms demanded by moments of silence generate social antagonism. Covert silences, on the other hand, may help mitigate social conflicts. In the domain of forgetting, covert silences that are hidden by much mnemonic talk are often difficult to identify, critique and therefore protest against. In the domain of memory, covert silences are about widening the audience that can share a less divisive version of the past. The power of veiled silences as a mechanism for coping with a difficult past lies precisely in their ability to minimize the potential for social conflicts. However, the price may be too high for those who wish to remember as the process may ultimately result in forgetting and denial.

Each of the types of silence discussed in this article can have unintended conse-

quences. Moments of silence can lose their uniqueness as they become increasingly popularized and used in a multitude of commemorative events. Overt silence in the domain of forgetting may result in objection, criticism and public outcry and may thus, ironically, become the locus of commemorative activity. Covert silence in the domain of memory may lead to social amnesia as more and more of the narrative gets lost in the attempt to appease too many audiences. Finally, covert silence in the domain of forgetting may end up stimulating memory as the symbolic offering of memory gets taken up by audiences who somehow paid attention. Silence, like memory, is unstable and unpredictable.

In this article, we identified a typology of silences by drawing on the case of Israel in general and the commemoration of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in particular. We view this exercise as an opportunity to open doors for future research on how overt and covert silences in the domains of memory and forgetting are used in different social contexts where groups are being called upon to deal with their difficult and shameful pasts. A good starting point would be to examine these issues in the contexts of European colonialism, American slavery, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and apartheid in South Africa. To be more concrete, scholars may want to start by unpacking the meanings behind the renaming of Soweto Day as Youth Day in post-apartheid South Africa. They may also want to examine the representations of particular aspects of the past, such as violent resistance in the struggle against apartheid. To take just one other case, while the Holocaust is probably the most researched event in studies of collective memory, we believe that a systematic cross-national comparison of the different forms of silence may synthesize and highlight crucial aspects of the mnemonic reality of this period. *Yad Vashem*:<sup>11</sup> Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Authority in Jerusalem, the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. all represent and silence different aspects of the same event (evidenced even by their names). Moving from representations of the Holocaust to more general representations of World War II may be further illuminating. Examining continuities and changes in the representations of Pearl Harbor in the USS Arizona Memorial in Hawaii one may find a variety of silences around the history of the military base,<sup>12</sup> the decision to join the Allied Forces, and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On a different level of analysis, one can examine issues of change and continuity in how individuals speak and keep silent about "cultural traumas" (Alexander 2004) as social conditions transformed (Stein 2009). In these and other cases, attending to the configuration of overt and covert silences may help us to understand better not only the particular cases but also issues around the challenges inherent in dealing with difficult pasts.

Forgetting and denial, as we have illustrated, can be achieved by silence, but they can also be achieved by much talk. Inversely, memory may be achieved by much talk, but it may also be enhanced through silence. In this article we have shown how silence should be understood as a socially embedded construct used



for different ends by different collectives. Furthermore, we have suggested that silence is a broad concept, one that includes a variety of mechanisms enabling both forgetting and remembering. In a world that still believes that some past events and people should be remembered, addressing the role of silence may, in fact, be the key for understanding not only collective amnesia but also collective memory.

## Notes

1. The formula "land for peace" is not only championed by Rabin's supporters and the Palestinians but is also based on United Nation resolutions 242 and 338.
2. By "agents of memory" we refer to individuals who work (sometimes as their full-time profession) to construct, build and maintain the memory of a specific person or event. In Fine's terminology (1996), these individuals may be thought of as "reputational entrepreneurs."
3. The newspaper data were collected in the said years over a period of four weeks in each year (beginning two weeks prior to Rabin Memorial Day and ending two weeks after).
4. Interestingly, Freud (1967[1939]) himself seemed to prefer the term denial over repression when talking about more collective processes.
5. These are sounded using the same state infrastructure used during times of war to warn citizens of immanent danger.
6. According to Jewish tradition, and adopted by the Israeli State, every holiday, including memorial days, lasts from sunset to sunset.
7. It is worth noting that the relationship between time and this type of silence is not always linear as interested parties may rediscover buried and forgotten histories. See for example the recovery of the story Masada after 2,000 years of silence (Ben Yehuda 1995; Y. Zerubavel 1995)
8. Generally speaking, ultra-Orthodox Jews do not support the State of Israel since they believe not only that the Jewish state should be a religious one but also that it should not have come into existence before the arrival of the Messiah and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. As such, members of this community refrain from participating in state ceremonies and rituals.
9. Other official holidays instituted by the Israeli state in no way create a platform for any sense of shared experience. Except for the Memorial Day for the Holocaust, all of the official holidays in Israel are either Jewish religious holidays or national holidays that mark military victories over Arab countries and thus constitute days of mourning for the Palestinians. The most notable of these days is of course Israel's Independence Day which is the Palestinians' Nakba (Catastrophe).
10. One of the newspapers studied stopped publishing anything about Rabin two years following the assassination.
11. Literally translated as "a memorial and a name."
12. For the detailed analysis of the films presented in this memorial site, see White (2001).

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