

STILL VS. TREMBLE: THE POWER OF SILENCE AS A DEMOCRATIC SECULAR PUBLIC ACT

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AVI FELDMAN on the tradition of the Yom HaShoah in Israel and Yael Bartana's "Two Minutes of Standstill"

The commemoration of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) seems to unite all streams of the Israeli society. The sound of siren spreading around the state of Israel captures almost violently a great majority of the population. People cautiously start preparing themselves in advance to the two minutes of silence taking place traditionally at 10:00 in the morning. They watch attentively the hour and send hesitating glimpses into their surroundings. No one wants to be caught off guard when it comes to paying tribute to the victims of the Holocaust.

However, this is not a miraculous spontaneous act of respect. Rather, it is a sign of the durable acceptance of the rule of law in Israel. As early on as 1951 a Holocaust Remembrance Day was legislated, and signed by Israel's first prime-minister David Ben-Gurion. It is worth mentioning, that a date was agreed upon only following long parliamentary debates, shading light on conflicting positions in regard to possible reciprocal of national and Jewish identity.

The original law has been amended by the Israeli parliaments (The Knesset) several of times. First it had included in its title recognition to ghetto uprisings, yet in its last legislated version in 1959 it was titled in English 'Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Day Law'. The Knesset's web-site describes shortly the different original first intentions "to declare the day of remembrance in accordance to the day of the Warsaw ghetto appraisal". As this coincides with the Passover Jewish holiday it was fast rejected. The legislature finally decided on a date "six days after the Passover and within the 'Counting of the Omer', which are days of mourning for the people of Israel, and a week before the Day of Remembrance for the Fallen Soldiers of Israel and Victims of Terrorism, and national Independence Day".

At last, the chosen date took into account the Jewish tradition; however, in itself is not a day of Jewish fast. A compromise was made, which serves to demonstrate early example of the unique formation of Israeli Republicanism entangled in-between the notions of religion and nation. The legislation of Yom HaShoah, as a secular civil observation day, helped to form the concept of 'Mamlakhtiyut' – a Hebrew new term coined by Ben-Gurion in his effort to conceptualize the idea of Republicanism. A cornerstone of Israeli statehood "Mamlakhtiyut contains the roots of Israeli civil strength, thus it can explain the robustness – against all odds – of democracy, the rule

of law, and social stability in Israel". (Israeli Republicanism Avi Bareli, Nir Kedar 2011, The Israel Democracy Institute).

Yet, a minor section of Israelis can also be found to revel on the very same day. "Haredi barbecue on Holocaust day" was a headline this year in The Jerusalem Post. "Hundreds of Haredi Jews partied at the same time when the Israeli president delivered his speech at Yad Va'shem" was a headline of Channel2 TV news broadcast. Yona Metzger, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, had expressed publicly his contempt during a radio interview in which he denounced such actions. "...There is no reason for a Jew not to stand still during the time of the siren and recite chapters of Psalms..." said the chief Rabbi. His message was clear –in public one must obey the state rule and act sensitively by reading parts of the bible.

The attitude of some sects of Haredi Jews towards Yom HaShoah, traces back to early divisions between ultra orthodox Jews and the Zionist movement. From the beginning of the 19th century leading rabbis opposed to Zionism and a Jewish state, and saw in it a danger to Jewish tradition, and a step into secularization and assimilation. These early conflicting positions remain alive to this very day in Israel, contributing to the on-going debate on the identity of Israel, and of a possible shared existence of a hybrid democratic and Jewish state. Nevertheless, this day of remembrance, kept meticulously by a vast majority of Israeli citizens and interrupted only by a small group of ultra orthodox minority, declares the achievement of a democratic secular regime.

Thus, 'Two Minutes of Standstill', exported from Israel to the city of Cologne and from there perhaps eventually to the rest of Germany by artist Yael Bartana, brings with it a strong message in support of democratic rule of law and secularism. It is a call for the common among all people and for the creation of mutual shared understanding by utilizing the public sphere. As Germany, just as the rest of Europe, struggles in search for a cultural identity in-light of growing immigration from non-Christian countries, the initiation by an artist of a new memorial day against fascism is a proposal for the further establishment of a secular common ground. It is a preliminary step toward creating a civil public act that denounces differences in favor of the formation of an equal, non-discriminatory practice, and non-partisan participatory space.

The Israeli chief rabbi calls for the reading of Psalms during the two minutes of silence as he hides away from the strong effect existing in quietly standing still. For religious people as the Haredi Jews, a Hebrew word that also translates as trembling in fear, silence may bring with it anxiety and uncertainty. In contrast and in an act of trust, Bartana arouses the German public to halt shortly from daily life and its obligatory routines. In a pure democratic act, rooted in early Israeli Republicanism, she enables all people the freedom to think, shape and boldly decide upon their present and future common civil acts while enduring a shared two minutes of fearless stillness.

Bartana's proposal for Cologne is in defiance of Haredi fear, while it is also a measure redefining state regulated commemoration. It follows in the steps of some groups of secular Jews in Israel who are seeking in recent years to assemble new meanings to Yom HaShoah beyond national and religion constrictions. For example, in 1999 the first 'Alternative Yom HaShoah Ceremony' took place almost as a secretly run undergrounded operation hosted by the fringe theater 'Tmuna' in Tel-Aviv. What started as a subversive private initiative grew since then dramatically attracting hundreds of people each and every year. They join together on national Yom HaShoah to listen to discussions and lectures by scholars, and watch performances by local artists.

'Two Minutes of Standstill' might also signal the beginning of a new tradition in Germany. From the creation of a one channel video 'Trembling Time' (2001) Bartana is continuing to challenge national rituals this time around through the form of a performance. Taking her artistic ideas and practice into the public space, Bartana shifts her position from an observer once described as "amateur anthropologist" to a live intervention perhaps opening new directions for civil participation and commemoration in Germany.

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