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## **A Fight for Countermemory and Counteridentity: The Alternative Ceremony of Independence Day in Israel**

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Ceremonies and identity in Israel have been an extensively researched issue (e.g. Azaryahu 1999; Elias and Kemp 2010; Feige 2002; Feldman 2008; Handelman 2004; Kook 2005; Lomsky-Feder 2004; Nocke 2006; Weiss 1997; Yacobi 2008; Zerubavel 1995, 2002), but the alternative ceremony of Independence Day in Israel, which is the topic of this paper, has not been a subject of academic interest yet. As a reaction to the official ceremony on Mount Herzl, which is organized each year by a public committee under the auspices of the office of the Prime Minister for the occasion of Israel's Independence Day and broadcasted nationwide on TV (Kook 2005:163; Azaryahu 1995:55; Handelman 2004:93), the alternative ceremony of Independence Day emerged as a political counterstatement thirteen years ago. According to the organizer of the ceremony, Dr. Ishai Menuchin (interview with author, April 22, 2010), the group *Yesh Gvul* has organized it in Jerusalem since 1998.

Both ceremonies celebrate Israeli Independence Day, and with the celebration they transfer a message about their vision of independence and what is central to Israeli independence, which values and virtues are connected to it, and how it should be lived and cherished. They show visions concerning the general collective Israeli memory as well as an image of the ideal good citizen by honoring specific individuals for their way of living. The two ceremonies show different approaches in their celebrations. While the state ceremony tends to conceal socio-political problems, is patriotic, uncritical of the regime, emotional, militarist, and presents an idealized picture of Israeli society, the alternative ceremony is explicitly antimilitaristic: it criticizes government policies, points to problems in society, advocates human rights, and is in support of the peace process.

However, the core part of both ceremony performances is the same: twelve individuals who represent different social groups and contributed something special to society are invited to light twelve torches. The individuals give short speeches about their personal background and their social or political activities, and then light a torch. This highly symbolical composition was invented for the state ceremony and alternative ceremony purposefully replicates this composition.

This paper seeks to understand the role of the alternative ceremony as a reaction to the official ceremony in the context of social memory and identity in Israel.<sup>1</sup> I will describe the alternative ceremony in terms of the concept of *collective memory* and identity and analyze its contentious relationship to the official ceremony

by using theoretical approaches to social memory, especially that of Yael Zerubavel (1995). The article is structured as follows: after a summary of the official and the alternative ceremonies, I will introduce the work of Yesh Gvul. This is worthwhile, as it will clarify the political context of the alternative ceremony. The next section will present the basic theoretical framework concerning social memory, commemorative narratives, and ceremonies, and present an associated approach to collective identity, which I will use in the last section of this article for an analysis and interpretation of the two ceremonies. Since the official ceremony has already been investigated and interpreted by other scholars, I concentrate on the alternative ceremony.

### **The Official Ceremony of Independence Day on Mount Herzl, Jerusalem**

Israeli independence, which was achieved on May 14, 1948, is commemorated each year on Independence Day, in accordance with the Jewish calendar. For this occasion a big ceremony is organized by the Independence Day Committee, a public committee under the auspices of the Prime Minister's office (Avineri 1983:60; Kook 2005:152f, 163). The ceremony takes place on Mount Herzl, the place where Theodor Herzl, one of the central founders of Zionism, is buried. Mount Herzl itself is a huge memorial and a graveyard for influential pre-state Zionist leaders, a military cemetery, and a graveyard for important Israeli public figures, the "Greats of the Nation" (Azaryahu 1995:47f; Handelman 2004:126, 128). The ceremony consists of three parts: the closing of Remembrance Day, a transitional part, and eventually the beginning of Independence Day (Handelman 2004:126).

The official Independence Day ceremony deploys a symbolic strategy that draws a utopian picture of Israeli society. People meet as supposed equals and honor the state of Israel and its moral qualities. The symbolism of the twelve tribes, of twelve equal torches enforces the idea of twelve egalitarian representatives. It provides a vision of an egalitarian society (Handelman 2004:130). Individuals appear as harmonically integrated and are brought together in this ceremony with those they would never meet in everyday life. While in reality stark social cleavages can be found, in the ceremony they are disguised for the sake of the representation of harmonic unity between the Jewish people (2004:132f.).

A committee selects the torch-lighters—they are chosen not only to represent Israeli social diversity but also to demonstrate an exemplary military background. Moreover, being in line with the national core values of sacrifice, heroism, and settlement of the land is crucial for being selected (2004:131; Kook 2005:163f). According to a state official interviewed by Rebecca Kook, the election as a torch-lighter is an award for being committed to living in accordance with those core values and thus representing the best of Israeli society (2005:163).

Cross-temporal references are used in the ceremony to connect the past to the present. A connection is made between biblical times and the twelve tribes of Israel, the Zionist visionary Herzl, democracy, the modern State and the speaker of the Knesset, the Jewish citizenry and the twelve torch-lighters. Thus, an image of historical continuity

between ancient mythical roots and the modern Israeli nation is promoted (Handelman 2004:132; Kook 2005:152f).

Not only do the Independence Day celebrations mediate a “myth of origin” and strengthen national identity, they also represent values and national interests, which transcend local or individual concerns. Heroism, sacrifice, and in-gathering of the exiled Jews and settlement of the country of Israel are presented as uncontested values. Showing the image of social harmony and shared ideology and values, the ceremony helps mask internal social conflicts and tensions associated to those values (2005:154–166). The national unity that is communicated with the ceremony is an important means for producing legitimacy of the current political and social order and supporting the government and the elites (2005:153f).

### **The Alternative Ceremony of Independence Day**

As a reaction to the official ceremony of Independence Day, and as a part of the fierce fight between the right and the left-wing that divides Israeli society, a small counter-ceremony with a protest character—amateurish compared to the official ceremony—appeared in 1998: an alternative ceremony of Independence Day. Compared to the official ceremony that every Israeli knows and has seen on TV, the alternative ceremony is barely known. It is a local event, mainly observed and frequented by people who are already interested in its political message. Organized by the left-wing group Yesh Gvul, it brings forward a viewpoint about Israeli society that is different from the one advertised in the official ceremony. It demonstrates tensions, conflicts, and social problems. It presents different ideals and a different vision of Israeli society and Israeli identity. The invitation to the 2010 ceremony reads as follows:

The ceremony presents an alternative to an official, nationalist ceremony taking place at the same time on Mt. Herzl. Your presence will encourage the beacon lighters to continue their activism for human rights, and will signal to Israeli decision makers that there are many who will not buy their empty slogans (Yesh Gvul 2010a).

### **The Organizers of the Alternative Ceremony: Yesh Gvul**

*Yesh Gvul* (There is a Limit) is a peace organization founded by Israeli soldiers and officers in 1982 after the Lebanon War. Many soldiers considered the Lebanon War an aggressive and unnecessary action in which they did not want to participate. 168 servicemen who refused to take part in the operation in Lebanon were sent to jail. It is said that even more soldiers refused but were not prosecuted. Also during the First Intifada in 1987 many soldiers refused to serve, and almost 200 were jailed. A high number of the refusing soldiers were combat-officers of high rank (Yesh Gvul 2010b).

Yesh Gvul opposes the occupation of the Palestinian territories and promotes a two-state solution. It considers the military operations in the Occupied Territories to be

brutal actions that serve to subjugate and repress the Palestinian population. As such the military actions are neither morally nor, in most cases, legally justifiable. Further, they argue that these actions do not serve Israeli interests—that rather the opposite is true and that they are harmful to the security of Israel (Yesh Gvul 2010b).

Yesh Gvul supports conscientious objectors. The organization counsels soldiers who need to decide whether to serve policies that they disapprove or consider actively unhelpful, or to disobey military orders. Yesh Gvul supports so-called *refuseniks*<sup>2</sup> both morally and financially. When *refuseniks* are jailed, their families receive financial support from Yesh Gvul, and the refusal is made public so as to foster a larger peace movement and to give an example for other soldiers (Yesh Gvul 2010b). The concept promoted by Yesh Gvul is “selective refusal.” This means that the need for military force in certain circumstances, such as defence, is acknowledged and cannot be argued for refusal, but its abuse in wars of aggression or in repressive occupation is rejected. It is not a pacifist approach, but it emphasizes the right of each soldier not to obey orders that he considers illegal and immoral (Yesh Gvul 2010c).

The general goal of Yesh Gvul is to fight against the abuse and misapplication of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and the occupation of the Palestinian territories. Apart from its support for the two-state solution, the group does not have a specific program (Yesh Gvul 2010b). Yesh Gvul is active in various ways and in different areas, both inside and outside Israel. Its members organize a multitude of events. Their activities include solidarity demonstrations, vigils for imprisoned *refuseniks*, petitions to politicians and the Supreme Court, education work, the publication of articles, and the alternative Independence Day ceremony (Yesh Gvul 2010d).

### **Description of the Alternative Ceremony**

I attended and videotaped the alternative ceremony of Independence Day 2010 on the evening of April 19. The following description is based on my memories, the notes I took during the ceremony, the videotape of the ceremony, and a personal interview with Dr. Ishai Menuchin. If not designated differently, the summaries of the torch-lighters’ speeches are paraphrases of their original words.<sup>3</sup>

The ceremony takes place at the same location each year: on Emil Grunzweig Square in the Government Quarter in Jerusalem, opposite the Prime Minister’s Office, on the front yard and the front stairs of the Bank of Israel. While the stairs and the front yard serve as a stage for the torch-lighters and the performances, the square at the bottom of the stairs provides space for the audience. At the bottom of the stairs books, t-shirts, and sweaters were sold, and information was provided about different groups, such as the group Breaking the Silence. Books, mostly in Hebrew, were sold, with titles like “Occupation and Refuse,” “A Rainbow of Opinions,” “On Democracy and Obedience,” hats with the Hebrew slogan “No to War Crimes—There Is a Limit,” and sweaters with the slogan “We Refuse the Occupation.” The only flags in the area belonged to Bank of Israel; no flags were installed particularly for the ceremony.

The beginning of the ceremony was delayed for around half an hour, as the

police and representatives of the Bank of Israel refused to agree to the lighting of the torches. Apparently they were afraid that the burning torches could damage the flowerbeds. When the ceremony started, the whole square was filled with an estimated 500 to 1,000 spectators. The audience was made up of people from all age groups, and it seemed as though there was an equal number of men and women. There were a lot of middle-aged people between the age of 30 and 40, fewer young people, and very few families. The bulk of the audience consisted of Israelis, but we also heard some English-speaking visitors. Among all the spectators I only saw three men wearing a *kippa* (yarmulke). A lot of people had dreadlocks, were colorfully dressed, and were carrying Indian-style bags with them. Some people wore shirts with the Hebrew-Arab slogan "Free Sheikh Jarrah."<sup>4</sup> Someone in the audience held up a big pirate flag. Altogether the atmosphere was relaxed and cheerful.

Ishai Menuchin opened the event with a short speech, a dedication to a more just, worthy and equal Israel, demanding a stop to the violence and the occupation of the Palestinian Territories. A slow and melodious Hebrew rock song followed played by the girl-band Tarantina. After this, Menuchin invited the first torch-lighter on the stage with a short, poetic announcement, giving several metaphors and examples of people who ask for help and do not receive it, or who point out problems but are not heard and how it frustrates, deceives, and depresses them.

Ron Gutman, the first torch-lighter, is a member of the labor organization *Koach Leovdim* (Power to the Workers). He assists people who have lost their jobs. He started by introducing himself in a way that made fun of the formula of the torch-lighters in the official ceremony. Albeit sarcastically put, he harshly criticized Israeli society as unjust and competitive. As such his critique reached the broader problem of free market economy and capitalism, against which his organization *Koach Leovdim* fights. *Koach Leovdim* speaks up for the rights of people who get impaired by the mechanisms of competition and the market. After lighting the first torch, he played a song on the guitar.

The second torch-lighter Shiri Meir, a young woman in her twenties, dedicated her torch to the Jewish-Arab cooperative fight in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem. They fight against the violent Jewish settlers who have more and more been trying to take over Palestinian houses with force. She criticized the racist foundations and the discriminating practices of the State of Israel, the fact that it calls itself democracy. More so, she also criticized that the majority of Israelis do not protest but silently accept this reality. She called for the fight against racism, against the regime of separation and discrimination that is upheld under the auspices of the security forces, and for the creation of a real and stable peace coming from below. In the end she invited everyone to join their non-violent fight in Sheikh Jarrah and lit the second torch accompanied by the shouts from the audience "Sheikh Jarrah, don't despair! The occupation will end soon!"

Elisheva Ragan, an activist from Greenpeace lit the third torch. She is active in a group against nuclear weapons in the Middle East that seeks to save the future generations of the world. They fight in a non-violent way for a nuclear-free world in

general, and for a nuclear-free Israel in particular.

The fourth torch was lit by Tova Ganani and Shai Ben-Tov from the Committee of Cleaning Workers of the Ben-Gurion University Beer Sheva who are involved in fighting for better working conditions for the cleaning workers. In their speech they complained about the employment conditions for cleaning workers at Ben-Gurion University, which violate human rights and are especially disastrous for parents.

Julia Abramowicz from the organization Psychoactive was chosen to light the fifth torch. Psychoactive is an organization involved in the fight for human rights in the area of mental illnesses. In her speech Julia Abramowicz talked about the psychological problems which are suffered among the Palestinians because of the Israeli government's ban on the commemoration or marking of the Nakba.<sup>5</sup> This interdiction of public expression of grief leads to the impossibility of dealing successfully with a collective trauma. The silencing of this trauma causes severe problems and conflict potentials in Israeli and Palestinian societies. She demanded that the Jewish Israeli citizens know about the Nakba and accept it, because this is the only way to repair damages of the past and to reach a just and equal solution for the future of all the inhabitants of the area.

Mohammed Suliman from the organization *Bnei Darfur* (Sons of Darfur) and Vered Moreh from ASAF, an organization working with refugees from Sudan, lit the sixth torch. In their address they complained about the hard and unjust living conditions for refugees in Israel for whom basic human rights often cannot be assured. After having experienced poverty, violence, wars, and genocide in their home countries, refugees have to stay and wait in Israeli prisons, sometimes for months. They dedicated their torch to their claim and to the hope for a life in honor and respect for the refugees in Israel.

A break followed their presentation, during which Ilan Aloni and Dan Shalom performed a satiric play on stage about someone whose sister was murdered by two Palestinians. The play dealt critically with Israel's militarism, settlements, and the occupation. The seventh torch-lighter was Dror Kilinsky of Breaking the Silence. Breaking the Silence is an organization of soldiers who served in Hebron and want to tell the public about the situation in Hebron and the violence and the wrongs committed there by the IDF. Dror Kilinsky talked about incidents during his time of service in Hebron, how he obeyed his orders and participated in unjust military actions, how he observed and did not help, and how he realized that which was printed in the Israeli media about what happens in Hebron is not true. He dedicated his torch to the freedom of opinion and the freedom of the media, which should be used to tell the public and the world what really happens in the occupied territories.

Nir Katzmann, a teenager who refuses to serve in the army, lit the eighth torch. He stated that he does not want to serve a state that is responsible for discrimination and violent occupation and that regularly lies to the Israeli public about what happens in reality. According to him, the state suppresses the Palestinians and constantly violates their rights, their freedom of movement, and their security, but calls itself democratic and supports the settlements, which are built on Palestinian ground and are

a continuous obstacle for peace. He does not want to serve in an army that supports this “whole system” and whose interests are mostly hidden from him, as they are from everyone else.

The ninth torch was lit by Yonatan Goldstein, a peace activist from the first generation of immigrants to Israel after the Second World War, who was active in different peace organizations since the first days of the state. He dedicated his torch to all those who keep fighting for peace and a better world.

Tal Yardeni and Yaron Banai from *Guerrilla Tarbut* lit the tenth torch. *Guerrilla Tarbut* (Cultural Guerrilla) is an open group of free artists who create events in all kinds of places and in demonstrations. They want to foster solidarity, freedom, and love in a way that connects politics, music, arts, literature, and poetry. Tal Yardeni and Yaron Banai recited a poem. The last two torches were lit by children from the audience.

After the ceremony, Tarantina played another song, and Menuchin said a few final words: he hoped that Bank Israel and the government would understand that it is impossible to destroy traditions and ceremonies like this. “HaTiqva,” the Israeli national anthem, was not played, which is unusual for ceremonies in Israel.

Outside the area a counter-demonstration took place by a small group of young people holding up signs with slogans of the extreme right-wing organization *Im Tirtzu* (If You Will It). The soldiers standing in front of them insisted that all the pedestrians immediately turn the other way. Eventually, I found out that someone in the audience of the alternative ceremony let down his pants and exposed his bottom in front of those demonstrators. This led to his arrest due to indecent behavior and was even mentioned in the media (Mandel 2010).

In comparison to the official ceremony of Independence Day on Mt. Herzl, I could observe that the atmosphere of the alternative ceremony was much more “matter-of-fact.” The torch-lighters and their speeches had a lasting effect because of their activism and their personal commitment, although there were no special effects, no light shows, and the performances were small and simple. The strong symbolism of the official ceremony, which employs flags, soldiers, and historical and biblical connotations, was missing completely.

In a personal interview with the organizer and inventor of the ceremony, Ishai Menuchin, a day after the ceremony, I sought to find out more about the strategy of the alternative ceremony. Why has Yesh Gvul decided to conduct the ceremony as a replication of the official ceremony? And what do they want to achieve by doing this? Ishai Menuchin told me that the ceremony was organized for the first time in 1998 as a general protest activity, directed against the official ceremony. According to him, the ceremony is clearly political, because it incorporates four central messages: (1) The alternative ceremony gives an opportunity to people who cannot identify with the official ceremony of Independence Day and who want to celebrate independence in a different way. (2) The ceremony states that Israeli society does not behave as it should. The message of the ceremony is in favor of social change, in order for Israeli society to be more worthy, more just, and more equal. People who are involved in activities trying to realize these goals are honored and encouraged in the alternative ceremony.

(3) The alternative ceremony challenges the official interpretation of national symbols. It challenges the attitude of the right-wing that lays claim on the “love for society” (Menuchin 2010). It challenges campaigns like the one of the radical right-wing group Im Tirtzu that states that everyone who is involved in international law or in claims against the “thrusts a knife in the back of the nation” (Menuchin 2010). It challenges the idea that anyone who thinks differently or criticizes society is a traitor. The alternative ceremony is not only a fight for meaning and interpretation but also for identity. The alternative ceremony states that the “other side” does not own Israeli identity, that the official ceremony does not have the right to define Israeli identity and that it cannot determine what it means to be a good or bad Israeli. (4) Visitors, torch-lighters, and organizations with different agendas and political standpoints are interconnected in the alternative ceremony to one big camp whose main goal is social change.

Menuchin explained the ways in which the ceremony has an impact on Israeli society. On a personal level the invitation to the ceremony and the public appreciation of their actions means a lot to the individual torch-lighters, especially when they are active in fields that usually do not get a lot of positive attention. Furthermore, it can be an important opportunity for organizations that do not have any other possibilities to express themselves in public, because they never enter the media. The alternative ceremony offers them a special opportunity to be heard, to communicate their message and to receive public attention.

On a social level, their influence is more subtle. Due to the emergence of more “alternative ceremonies” for other occasions, Menuchin recognizes effects of social education. He says that ideas spread in Israeli society due to the distribution of the invitation and the summary of the ceremony via email, and because many people attend the ceremony and bring their children and friends (Menuchin 2010).

We can see that it is not only two different versions of a similar ceremony that we can witness each year on Israeli Independence Day. Those two ceremonies are symbolic for a deep internal cleavage in Israel that divides the society. Setting up the alternative ceremony is much more than a political move—it is the expression of a deep personal frustration with the status quo and an outcry for the public acceptance of a different vision of Israeli society and identity.

### **Social Memory, Commemorative Narratives, Commemorative Ceremonies, and Identity**

Here, I will clarify my approach to *social memory*, *commemorative narratives*, and *master/counteridentity* in order to analyze the alternative ceremony and understand its role in the socio-political and historical context of Israel more accurately.

The notion of social memory has become increasingly popular in the social sciences. The concept reaches back to Maurice Halbwachs and Emile Durkheim, and during the last twenty years social scientists have taken up and developed the idea. Currently, there are many studies of social memory (Berliner 2005:197; Crumley 2002; Klein 2000; Zerubavel 1995), most of them referring back to the writings of the

French sociologist Halbwachs. He is considered the first to publish about the idea of a collective memory that is distinguishably something different than the memory of the individual, and thereby shed light onto the cultural aspects of memory (Assmann 1988:9; Halbwachs 1967:34, 40f, 50). Since then, several social scientists have worked with this concept and developed it (Assmann 1988; Connerton 2004; Nora 1984), and also criticism on the overly used concept has certainly not been lacking (Berliner 2005).

In general, social memory describes the process of transferring images and important values of the past from generation to generation (Connerton 2004:4, 40; Zerubavel 1995:4). I will use this concept of social memory to describe what Assmann called *cultural memory*: the long-term memory of society that reaches back to the far-away past and is conveyed in commemorative ceremonies (Assmann 1988:12). A central point of transmission of social memory can be found in political rituals and commemorative ceremonies.

Ceremonies used by social groups to commemorate their most important events can reach from communal festivals, memorial services, and holiday celebrations to national holidays and political rituals. In these ceremonies groups present, create, communicate, and negotiate their memories and visions of the past and the present. Thus, narratives—stories—are being produced. Commemorative events play an important role in shaping collective memory. Choosing which events should be remembered in ceremonies is central for organizing a national past. The annual repetition of the commemoration reinforces the belief in the coherence of the past and the nation's continuity. Commemorative events tell the community the story of its identity and explain to the people who they are. The management of social memory is highly political. The selection of certain events, memories, and values to be transmitted is a question of power. Whoever can influence social memory can influence the identity and the core values of a group as well as its strivings for the future (see Connerton 2004:48, 70; Kook 2005:152f; Zerubavel 1995:5f).

The approach of Yael Zerubavel distinguishes between different forms of commemorative narratives. A commemorative narrative is a certain story, an interpretation of the past and the present of a society that consists of a network of commemorative acts. Independence days are, among others, an example for typical events which constitute commemorative narratives. The interpretation of society's elite and its dominant groups, which supports their political goals and comes to be the widely accepted version, is called the *master commemorative narrative*. The master commemorative narrative is the most dominant story in a society regarding interpretations of past, present, and future in the light of certain values, representing the visions and interests of the elites. It is expressed and created in commemorative ceremonies, memorials, monuments, history, and stories, and has not only a unifying and integrating function in society, it also legitimates the present social order and is constitutive for the establishment of a group identity (Zerubavel 1995:6–11).

I claim that apart from representing a certain interpretation of past, present, and future, the master commemorative narrative is often associated with a distinct concept of identity. This concept connects, in the light of its interpretation of history,

certain values, morals, a certain behavior, and lifestyle to a concept of the appropriate, appreciated, and esteemed identity of the good citizen: the *master identity*. The master identity defines which behaviors, actions, opinions, and choices are considered morally right or wrong for the individual as part of a certain collective.

Yet interpretations of historical events will never be clear-cut and not without tensions. There might be times when the interpretation given by the master commemorative narrative will be discussed controversially, questioned, or even openly contested. Alternative narratives can be presented, which operate against the hegemony as *countermemories*. Countermemory is opposed to collective memory and claims to present the more accurate historical interpretation. Countermemory can lead to public debates, and it can eventually either be suppressed, or lead to a change in the master commemorative narrative and be converted into collective memory (Zerubavel 1995:10–12).

However, it is not only disagreement about history that can lead to conflict. Due to disagreement about the morals, values, and behavior demanded of the individual by the master identity, tensions and resistance can be provoked among groups that do not embrace the master identity. These tensions can lead to the emergence of counteridentities containing different ideals, morals, and values and thus define a different identity and a different set of behavior as legitimate, desirable, and morally right. Thus, commemoration and identity can be contested territories between different social groups and political camps (1995:11f).

### **The Official Ceremony as Master Commemorative Narrative and Master Identity**

In the context of this research it can be concluded that the official ceremony of Independence Day in Jerusalem on Mount Herzl is part of the master commemorative narrative of Israeli society. It is structured by the elites and serves their political goals: it supports government policies and conceals intra-social problems. It presents the dominant version of the images of past and present and it communicates and seeks to create national unity.

Apart from this, the official ceremony honors individuals for their acts and values. But the torch-lighters are not only invited due to their specific contributions to society regarding the annual topic of the ceremony—they are honored publicly as good Israelis due to their whole being and lifestyle (Kook 2005:163). They represent the best of Israeli society: their whole identity corresponds to the core values of the master commemorative narrative (2005:154–166). The identity they embody can thus be described as the master identity.

### **The Alternative Ceremony as Countermemory and Counteridentity**

The alternative ceremony of Independence Day honors activities that do not conform to the core values of the master commemorative narrative as displayed in the official

ceremony. Whereas the official ceremony presents its historical interpretation of the Jewish history as continuous with ancient, biblical times and thus erasing 2,000 years of Jewish life in exile, the in-gathering of the exiled Jews as successfully happening on the basis of equality, and the Israeli nation as harmonically integrated and unified (Handelman 2004:132; Kook 2005:152f), the alternative ceremony gives quite a different picture and obviously disagrees with the master commemorative narrative. It represents countermemory. The alternative ceremony presents people and organizations as torch-lighters who criticize society and point to its problems. It focuses on conflicts in society, such as the lack of integration of refugees and immigrants, the violation of human rights of refugees and employees, the crimes committed in the Palestinian Territories, and the discrimination to which Palestinians are exposed on a daily basis under occupation. As countermemory, it presents a different interpretation of history, one that claims to be more accurate, clearly opposed to the official ceremony, which is described by Menuchin as “[t]he governmental, recruited, washed one, the one where they don’t really let the person say what he thinks, but what the state asks him to say” (Menuchin 2010). In 2010, for example, Julia Abramowicz from Psychoactive offered a part of the Palestinian perspective on Israeli Independence Day, the Nakba. The Nakba, the day when Israel declared its independence as a state, is the Palestinian national catastrophe. It did not only lead to the expulsion of several hundred thousand Palestinians, followed by material problems and conflicts, it also caused enormous psychological problems. The commemoration of this collective memory is banned by the Israeli government, which perpetuates the collective, unresolved trauma.

The alternative ceremony opposes the core values represented in the official ceremony: it shows that the in-gathering of the exiles did not happen without problems, as mass immigration is prone to be accompanied by difficulties. It shows that the Israeli nation is not as harmonious, integrated, and unified as declared in the official ceremony. The alternative ceremony criticizes the IDF, it shows the lack of respect for social groups and minorities and the violations of their human rights, and it presents social and political controversies regarding a big variety of topics.

Not only does it oppose the official ceremony in relation to historical interpretations and political opinions, but also concerning the issue of identity. In the interview with Menuchin it became clear that the issue of identity is central for Yesh Gvul. The torch-lighters of the alternative ceremony challenge the values represented by the torch-lighters in the official ceremony (presented above). In criticizing Israeli society and thereby other Jews, each torch-lighter challenges and attacks the core value of the unity and harmony of the Jewish people in Israel. The second torch-lighter, Shiri Meir from the Sheikh Jarrah activists, fights against radical Jewish settlers and thereby also challenges the core value of settlement, and, because of her fight against other Jews, in a very strong way also the unity of the Jewish-Israeli nation. Dror Kilinsky from *Breaking the Silence* harshly criticizes the situation in Hebron, which is severely exacerbated by the Jewish settlers there and the actions of the IDF. Thus, he challenges the value of settlement and, by criticizing the IDF, also the core value of heroism. Nir Katzmann, the refusenik who does not want to serve in the army and criticizes the

government, the IDF and Israeli society, challenges many values, namely heroism, and settlement, and because he is not willing to sacrifice for society and serve in the IDF, he also challenges the values of sacrifice and the unity of the Jewish nation. By appearing on the stage of this ceremony basically every Jewish participant and spectator challenges the core value of Jewish-Israeli unity.

According to Menuchin, one of the central goals of the ceremony is to claim a right in defining Israeli identity because it is too exclusive a category. This exclusive category neither allows for the appreciation, the praise, and the support, nor even for the inclusion of the individuals who are part of the “social change camp” and whom we can see as torch-lighters, audience and organizers at the alternative ceremony. The alternative ceremony, thus, fosters a counteridentity. However, this counteridentity does not only challenge or negate traditional values and morals, but also contains positive values. These positive values are, according to Menuchin, “a democratic, pluralist, maybe humanist way of thinking” (Menuchin 2010). Looking at the alternative torch-lighters, it is possible to assume that this includes also a democratic, pluralist, and humanist way of acting. The characteristics and values of the counteridentity are expressed, appreciated and honored in the alternative ceremony of Independence Day.

Due to an increasing awareness of the deliberate construction of myths, symbols, and traditions by the government, the Israeli public became more attentive regarding the political implications of the topic of national memory, ceremonies, and symbols (Zerubavel 1995:234). Since the 1970s, various countermemories have emerged in Israeli society, and due to their growing visibility, they were named a distinct phenomenon: “*niputs mitosim*” (1995:232), which can be translated as “shattering of myths.” Whether this demythologization is a logical reaction to the extensive national glorification of the past, or if it is a treacherous undermining of sacred national values is subject to controversy (1995:232). In any case, today there are multiple narratives in society that offer interpretations of the past—sometimes they exist side by side without obvious conflicts, but sometimes the associated tension and disagreement becomes visible, including different factors from inside and outside Israel, like the Jewish-Palestinian conflict, the conflicts with the bordering Arab states, and the tensions between secular and religious Jews. Further, problems caused by mass immigration during the last years, especially from Russia and Ethiopia have led to a growing diversity in society, which in turn led to a growing diversity of collective memory and to the emergence of countermemories (1995:235). Even though the hegemony of Zionism is increasingly challenged, its influence on Israeli society and culture persists. But the emergence of countermemories is an indication for a certain awakening and a readiness to re-examine the sacred foundations of national memory and collective identity in Israel—maybe exactly because of the strong impact and influence they still have on present society—concerning moral claims emanating from them as well as political implications, concerning the evaluation of individual behavior and choices, as well as the interaction with other states in the area of international politics (1995:236f).

## Conclusion

After inquiring about the alternative ceremony of Independence Day, I conclude that the issue of Israeli identity is still contested. Y. Zerubavel's approach of master commemorative narratives and countermemory opens up an interesting perspective on the alternative ceremony and is a useful tool for its analysis and interpretation. I developed it in suggesting as associated with this approach a concept of an ideal identity: the master identity. The master identity includes values for the ideal individual as part of a certain collective and is fostered by the master commemorative narrative. The counteridentity, as opposed to this, is fostered by a countermemory. In the same fashion countermemory arises due to tensions with the interpretations put forward by the master commemorative narrative. Counteridentities can emerge due to a lack of identification with the ideals supported and enforced by the master identity.

I claim that the official ceremony of Independence Day can be considered part of the master commemorative narrative of Israeli society because it is organized by the government and supports the interests and policies of the elites. The associated concept of an ideal identity and the image of the good citizen drawn in the official ceremony represent the master identity. The alternative ceremony, in turn, can be regarded as countermemory as it points to social problems which are concealed in the official ceremony and it interprets past and present in a different way. It fosters different values in society and individuals and presents a different ideal of the good citizen as critical, active, in favor of democracy, human rights, and pluralism: the counteridentity.

The territory of memory and identity is contested and dynamically created anew, especially in a society as pluralist, multicultural, and heterogeneous as Israel's, where new interpretations about past and present are likely to emerge. Those who decide about what is remembered in society and which values are passed on to the next generation also decide about the legitimacy of the present social order and about the direction the society will take in the future (Kook 2005:152). Thus, the fight over memory and identity is also a fight about political power. The alternative ceremony of Independence Day is an example of how conflicts over the territory of memory and identity can be carried out.

In the end, counteridentities can encounter the same fate as countermemories—just like countermemories can be included into the master commemorative narrative, also counteridentities can be accepted by the dominant social groups and become incorporated into the master identity. On the other side, they can be refuted and remain in a marginal position, until they eventually disappear.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the alternative ceremony regarding its symbolic and ritual strategies, see Lisa Krieg, *Holding Up a Mirror to the 'Other Side'—The Alternative Ceremony of Independence Day in Israel* (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup>Refuseniks are soldiers who refuse service.

<sup>3</sup>All the names of the torch-lighters have been changed due to reasons of privacy and security.

<sup>4</sup>Sheikh Jarrah is a neighborhood in East Jerusalem that is currently in a conflict with radical Jewish settlers occupying Palestinian homes.

<sup>5</sup>Nakba means catastrophe in Arabic and refers to the forced exile of the Palestinian population in the territory in which Israel as a state was established in 1948. As such it does not just correspond with Israeli Independence, it is caused and constituted by it. It is a historical event and a collective trauma for the Palestinians marking Israel's take-over of the country in 1948. For further reading see Nur Mashala (2005) *Catastrophe Remembered. Palestine, Israel and the Internal Refugees* (London, New York: Zed Books) or Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal (2003) *The Palestinian People: A History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

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