On the Unknown Soldier Symbol in Israeli Culture

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Abstract

The “unknown soldier” symbol in Jewish Israeli commemorative discourse was referred to first by veneration in Avraham Stern’s poem “Unknown Soldiers” (1932) and then by negation, such as in the popular Yehuda Amichai poem “We Do Not Have Unknown Soldiers” (1969). It is often cited and read in commemorative ceremonies. In negating this category, I argue, cultural strategies of remembrance and forgetting were used as recruiting mechanisms for missions of nation building, which demanded various forms of sacrifice that favor the collective over the individual. Reading the ways in which the “unknown soldier” symbol had been used in the Yishuv Jewish community and in Israel, I suggest that until the 1970s, losing one’s life in battle was a way to regain one’s name as an individual, while afterwards, the use of the symbol, whether negated or revered, points to the anonymity of an individual within a fragmented collective that does not necessarily venerate national sacrifice.

WE DO NOT HAVE UNKNOWN SOLDIERS

We do not have Unknown Soldiers. We do not have the Unknown Soldier tomb. Whoever likes to rest his wreath Should break apart his wreath To many flowers and divide them To leaves and disperse them. And all the dead return home And they all have names. [Yehuda Amichai]²

“WE”: THE ISRAELI COLLECTIVE AND THE FALLEN SOLDIER

The “unknown soldier” is a prominent symbol in the Jewish Israeli commemoration discourse, mainly seen in commemorative texts, such as the much quoted Yehuda Amichai poem, which corresponds with an earlier poem by Avraham Stern, in 1932: “Unknown Soldiers.”²⁴ Stern’s poem cites Uri Zvi Greenberg’s poem that centers on unknown soldiers, both in reaction to the 1929 riots.⁶ Stern set his poem to music; it was the anthem of the Irgun and subsequently became the anthem of the LEHI, a revisionist paramilitary group that violently resisted the British Mandate of Palestine. Since that time, it has been the anthem of the Israeli right wing and radical youth groups. The symbol of the unknown soldier has been central to right as well as to center and left ideas of national defense and militarism. Comparing Amichai’s poem to that of Stern’s, in Amichai, the speaker can be heard representing a collective voice—“We Do Not Have Unknown Soldiers” versus “We Are Unknown Soldiers” in Stern’s poem.

Commemorative ceremonies for fallen soldiers often use Amichai’s poem, in which the unknown soldier is negated: “we” do not have it. This negation differentiates the Israeli remembrance practices from those of Europe, described by Mosse in reaction to World War I and World War II.⁷ Sivan points out the centrality of cited poetry and texts in commemorative rituals and their prevalence in other references to sacrifice.⁸ Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg describe how the use of music in memorial events creates a
sonic memory, whereby certain songs—popular in commercial radio broadcasts—become identifiable with a commemorative and mourning ritual. Stern’s poem was part of such a canon. It was performed by self-described revisionists but also by mainstream popular singers, such as Shlomo Artzi and Yaffa Yarkoni in Israel in the 1960s and 1970s, who were often identified as supporting soldiers and the military. However, we should also remember that performances can simultaneously criticize militarism while often affirming it by separately supporting the army’s missions and their consequences.

Nave considers poems as giving as well as reflecting shared meaning to historical events when a society includes them in its commemorative spaces. Reciting poems and singing songs in whose center the unknown soldier was addressed, often critically, the glorification of anonymous sacrifice. Amichai’s poem remains salient in commemoration discourse and high school literature instructions. It is currently, in 2017, intermixed with the growing salience of Stern’s poem within the current social and political climate of Israel. Thus, the symbol that developed in Europe to commemorate (and glorify) anonymous mass death, far from home fronts in World War I, became emblematic of an ongoing discourse on “war at home,” in Israel. This phenomenon is in dialogue in Israeli commemoration by the Jewish imperative to remember every dead person, also salient in Holocaust remembrance ceremonies.

This article is a critical examination of the symbol of the unknown soldier in Israeli Jewish commemorative discourse. It contributes to a number of studies on militarism and its meaning in Israeli identity and to understanding what is seen as a growing gap within the Israeli Jewish homogeneous “we”—whether along lines of class, ethnicity, religiosity, or age group. This discussion will extend the range of these conversations, bringing the literature about the “unknown soldier” as a modernist nationalist invention into the debate about Israeli’s case, so as to uncover a particular mechanism of collectivization (the “we do not have” of the “unknown soldiers”) fraught with inner contradiction and unified by the willingness to sacrifice lives.

HISTORICAL USES OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER SYMBOL

As stated, an early reference to the unknown soldier as symbol in the Yishuv period was Avraham Stern’s poem “Unknown Soldiers” from 1932. Stern’s poem opens with the words “We are unknown soldiers, uniforms we have none / In death’s shadow we march, in its terror / Volunteering to serve to the end of our days, / Only death from our duty can us sever.” According to Genossar, the lyrical protagonist is not challenging the pioneer ideal, also based on sacrifice as one of its major pillars. To the contrary, it tries to enlarge it to include the unknown soldier as a “covenant pair” to the pioneer, described in the poem in a futuristic fashion as a person who, enveloped by his own dark fate, is moved by an eternal willingness to fight and occupy. Stern’s poem cites revisionist poet Uri Zvi Greenberg’s own poem, with which he reacted to the 1929 Arab attacks on Jews and describes the pioneers as “kind of unknown soldiers.” Indeed, Zvi Greenberg and Stern connect the European model of total sacrifice to the Jewish experience of resisting threat by using violence and tie the pioneer model to it.

The patriotic ideology was coupled with the idea that the national birth will be entangled with blood and, thereby, inevitably, the death of individuals will contribute to the existential victory of the nation. In this respect, Stern’s poem “Unknown Soldiers,” in which self-sacrifice is not only an unfortunate fate but a heroic aspiration of self-fulfillment, should be understood as an extreme case of Zionist martyrdom. In the past ten years, there are many new performances of Stern’s song. His lyrics “With the tears of mothers bereaved of their young / Sacred infant’s blood want only spilt, / We’ll cement the bricks of our bodies for walls / And our homeland will surely be built” should,
therefore, be interpreted as part of the revisionist Zionists’ insistence of turning the dead, the scarified, into heroic icons. Thus, early Jewish nationalism transcended religious symbols. Patriotic sacrifice became the secular version of death in the name of God.18

However, also in the 1930s, another popular poet, Moshe Lifshitz, used the symbol to raise a possible critique of violence in “The Ballad of the Unknown Soldiers.” Lifshitz was a communist-identified poet, playwright, and cultural critic. His poem was translated from Yiddish and published by acclaimed poet Nathan Alterman in 1940.19 In this ballad, there is no collective voice; it begins with “This is the ballad of the Unknown Soldiers / in it there will be told on one big, helpless world / . . . not one, not a hundred, unknown soldiers / Come! Here millions are required, many and many / A wall of millions will be erected / worlds of human arms / Stop, guard this time, Save the World.” The ballad’s call to stop resonates with the communist notion of the general strike, which recruits members to not march or not join state-organized violence but, instead, help the world save itself. Thus, in this example of the Lifshitz Ballad translated into Hebrew by acclaimed and popular poet Nathan Alterman, who passionately supported the Zionist cause, the “unknown soldier” symbol is powerfully purposed as both nationalist and anti-nationalist when set in relation to organized violence. In Lifshitz’s poem, the ballad is used as a metaphor to call to resist—by ceasing, or stopping a world that subjects millions to violence. This is the one use of the symbol that probably refers to the Jewish experience in Europe in the 1930s and was not canonized in Israeli commemorative culture.

Amichai’s poem from 1969 surely corresponds with those prominent and well-known poems that were also popular songs from pre-state Jewish experiences in Palestine. Amichai challenges revisionist convictions. This correspondence, however, keeps the assembly of youth, sacrifice, and anonymity firm, which, to an extant Lifshitz, was the only one to challenge it in not using a plural collectivistic voice and in calling to cease violence while still using messianic futuristic language that Stern uses.

For sure, there are Jewish, Israeli, and European alternatives to the unknown soldier symbol as recruiting for national sacrifice, and they were explored and developed in women’s writing. Siegel claims that in the case of France the unknown soldier symbol was used at the end of World War I in this way:20 Madeleine Vernet, a pacifist educator, published criticism of such patriotic ritual under the title “To the Unknown Mother of the Unknown Soldier” in a women’s journal she had started at the end of World War I, called La Mere Educatrice, marking the naturalized relations between militarism, sacrifice, nationalism, and masculinity. These naturalized relations remain salient within discourses that criticize war, sacrifice, and militarism in Israel. In the case of women’s literature, according to Szobel,22 women poets used the binding of Isaac’s myth to subvert the taken-for-granted narrative, in which sacrifice of the son is an unavoidable fate of Jewish existence in Israel—suggesting, indeed, that retelling this myth could serve in repeating violence. Women poets in the 1930s and 1940s and later in the 1970s and 1980s, especially Leah Goldberg, wrote on poets’ responsibility in showing humanity through aesthetic beauty and reflected on the cycles of historical violence without falling for its centripetal nationalist powers. Esther Raab24 even offered an alternative critical reading of the anonymity of the sacrificed soldier, which could inform resistance to the narrative that justifies death and killing. These poems were written between the time when Stern wrote his poem on the unknown soldiers, in 1933, and Amichai’s poem in 1969. Interestingly, they each signaled different possible narrative sequences; yet, neither entered the commemorative canon. We now turn to a short review of the ways the symbol of the unknown soldier is employed in popular culture in order to advance our understanding of its salience as
a category that informs and, at times, helps justify death and killing in war.

Following are two examples of more recent application of the symbol. The first is when Israel withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000, and the newspaper *Yediot Achronot* ran a two-page black-bordered spread on a Friday, listing the names of every fallen soldier, titled by Amichai’s poem “We Do Not Have Unknown Soldiers.” The second is when singer/songwriter Rona Keinan used Stern’s poem from “When the Thorns Were Thorns” (recorded on her 2009 album *Songs for Yoel*) in a farewell to her father, Amos Keinan, who was a LEHI fighter, sculptor, and writer, and who later turned critical of revisionist ideas. These examples help understand an evolving character of commemorating discourse in Israel and how sacrifice for the sake of the country is viewed and acted upon by different groups. The first case is an apologetic account, which reacts to fierce discussion of the unnecessary deaths of soldiers in Lebanon. The second weaves the lamentation of times in which thorns were thorns, or the myth of sacrifice could putatively hold groups together—in both cases referring to Jewish dead men who were ready to sacrifice their lives in battle. We now turn to other uses of the symbol in Israeli culture.

**THE ANONYMOUS GENTILE, AND DEAD RIGHT-WING POLITICIANS**

In searching Parliament’s (Knesset) recorded proceedings, the unknown soldier symbol was mentioned for the first time on February 19, 1985, having to do with a proposed law for the Holocaust Memorial Day. Non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust were called then “unknown soldiers” by Yitzhak Artzi, who discussed the need of the State of Israel to support them forty years after the Holocaust.25 In the same context of a Gentile who is given recognition or support from the Israeli nation, fallen soldiers who were not Jews were named unknown soldiers. This patriotic designation was mentioned in the proceedings in two other contexts: first, the memory of Avraham Stern, the author of the poem “Unknown Soldiers,” on March 2000, sixty years after he was executed by the British. Second, and the most prevalent context for the usage of the unknown soldiers’ symbol was about the Israeli General Security Service agents, whose actions and names are kept secret. In all cases, the soldiers are either forgotten or their identity concealed, are not necessarily Jews, and are always mentioned in a heroic context.

On October 24, 2001, in a Knesset meet-ing a week after the assassination of Knesset member and minister of tourism, Rechavam Zeevi,26 Ariel Sharon, who was then Prime Minister, said, “He was a soldier of the State of Israel and the Zionist idea. Not about ‘the unknown’ but about people like him, Avraham Stern wrote in his poem the words ‘only death will us sever.’” In 2012, when Yitzhak Shamir died, who was the leader of the LEHI para-military underground and Prime Minister of Israel between 1983–84 and 1986–92, Reuven Rivlin, the president, gave an obituary in the Knesset, “My sir: Prime Minister of Israel . . . and an eternal unknown soldier, in my name . . . and in the name of unknown soldiers in the service of the state and the paramilitary groups, we bow our head for you.” In these last two instances, the reference to the deceased leader as an unknown soldier points to Stern’s poem and is used to mourn the death of Stern’s followers in the LEHI, within a political atmosphere that glorifies such sacrifice and adheres to the social and political convictions that came with it.

**STRATEGIES OF REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING**

The commemoration of fallen soldiers is performed in ceremonies for new monuments and in pop culture, from calendars and memorabilia to songs and poetry. Commemoration is also used in the construction of national consciousness through the creation of a national
landscape of identification. In this section, I examine the unknown soldier symbol as a prism through which cultural strategies of remembrance and forgetting have been used as a recruiting mechanism for missions of nation building that demanded various forms of sacrifice. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger offer a helpful model through which to understand silence as a “complex and rich social space that can operate as a vehicle of either memory or of forgetting and can thus get used by various groups for different ends.” Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger discuss overt and covert silence. Overt silences are a literal absence of speech and narrative, while covert silences are silences that are covered and veiled by much mnemonic talk and representation. The Israeli unknown soldier is an example of both kinds: first, overt—the soldiers are unknown/forgotten, and this is lamented in the European model and in the case of citing Stern’s poem. Then, by declaring that “we are those soldiers” (Stern) or “we do not have them” (Amichai), covert silence is added and used in the commemoration both of the forgotten fallen soldiers (named or not) and for the forgetting of unnamed ones. Thus, our case, in both its popular versions, is an example to a symbolic category that encapsulates both overt and covert silence for commemoration purposes that are also sources of identification.

Reciting Amichai, commemoration agents chose to negate a symbolic mechanism of modern nationalism because the “nationalization” of the fallen soldier, which in Europe reached its peak around World War I, was strongly associated with the 1948 war in Israel by the sheer amount of lost lives among the Jewish population and by the very fact that many of them were, indeed, unknown and died almost immediately after arriving to Palestine, then to Israel from Europe. In this way, Israeli Jewish culture, which recites Amichai’s poem, has also separated itself from a distinct form of European remembrance and forgetting. The negation of the unknown soldier symbol is also a part of a larger discourse of personified Jewish remembrance of national catastrophes, which demands that each of the dead be remembered as a named individual.

I suggest, then, that in this case, the Israeli Jews negate the negation of the name in modern European forms of national remembrance, claiming that its soldiers do not lose their names in dying. Indeed, they lose them before they die and regain them in dying.

Why has the Israeli Jewish commemoration culture had an ambivalent relationship with the European symbol of the unknown soldier? The right wing adopted it for the purposes of nation building. The center and center left, however, rejected it as a destruction of the memory of those who sacrifice their lives for the nation, underlining the same sacrificial mechanism. This mechanism is at work, for instance, in the Ministry of Defense department of soldiers’ commemoration, titled “we will remember them all,” a citation from a popular poem by Hayim Gouri from “The Friendship” (Hā’reut), which was the anthem of Palmach and is associated with socialist democratic values and Labor Party culture.

According to Sivan, the bulk of the remembrance effort is carried out in Israel through spontaneous activity of the civil society rather than by the state. Ad hoc and later on, institutionalized commemoration by family, friends, relatives, and army comrades—separately or together with sports clubs, youth movements, kibbutzim, and schools—historically produced booklets dedicated to one or more fallen soldiers. They later also produced online platforms for these commemorative texts. According to Bilu and Witztum, material and textual commemoration has been produced and reproduced by state-authorized agencies such as the Department for the Commemoration of the Fallen Soldier within the Ministry of Defense. Sivan suggests that the form of textual commemoration through folk literature is more popular than monuments in Israel and that it tries to capture and preserve the individuality of the fallen.
However, the negation of the category “unknown” enabled a unique multidimensional commemoration that was not instructed by the state but has been nevertheless patrolled by cultural mechanisms shared by the Zionist society, to this day. Accordingly, Nave argues, the bereaved family was historically seen as the “silver platter”—they were the “ultimate,” intensified Israelis, whose private disaster is transformed in the Israeli public discourse into a contribution, not a loss, and, ultimately, a presence and not a meaningless absence. Thus, the national community perceives itself as an extended grieving family, which loses sons who then are commemorated through inscription into the national memory by individualized means owned by the collective. As we will shortly see, this conviction changed since the 1970s.

Israel has separate cemeteries for soldiers and separate areas in civilian cemeteries for fallen soldiers. There is a standard structure and writing on soldiers’ tombstones, which are built of Jerusalem stone in austere rectangular lines. The total standardization of remembrance historically left no room for individual commemoration. Bilu and Witztum imply that the tension between collective and personal commemoration was most strongly manifested in the early 1990s in conflicts over epitaphs and the standardized writing that the state asked to keep formal in fallen soldiers’ tombstones, and later agreed to allow variations in the tombstones’ writing. This conflict was intensified around the long process of erecting a memorial to 73 soldiers who died in 1997 from the collision of two Air Force helicopters on their way to separate posts in Lebanon, in what Feige termed the privatization of commemoration.

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING INDIVIDUALS

In order to see how the symbol of the unknown soldier not only made sense to many publics in many periods but also how it was attached to other powerful symbolism, we return to a closer reading of Amichai’s poem. There is a relation and a gap between the individual—the one who wants to remember—and the wreath, which is singular but composed of many flowers and the collective: soldiers, flowers, the dead, and names. This gap between the individual and the collective exposes Amichai’s protest against the cyclic willingness to sacrifice life in war. However, it uses collective language as an allegorical reproach that also reads like a command of the proper singular way to remember. It is not clear who Amichai means by “we” (the nation? the state? those who remember? the dead?); the poem also does not imply if the unknown soldiers are already dead when “we” lack them. Both categories are unassailable—one does not challenge the reality of the “we” just as one does not question the ever presence of death.

I suggest that Amichai’s poem offers two narratives. The first is the unknown soldiers as the frame story, told in the plural: “We do not have them.” Later in the poem, “All the dead return home” and “They all have names.” The second story, the inner one, is the fable of commemoration: it represents the fight between the individual and the collective through the prosaic national symbol of remembrance—flowers. The individual who remembers through a wreath of flowers is separated or “decomposed” from his or her collectivized identity and remains dismantled. Then the wreath itself becomes an object of commemoration activity: it is dispersed as if the flowers, the representatives of fallen soldiers, can be sowed and returned to life.

Following such a double reading of this text, the individual’s total conscription to the nation does not question the latter’s total power and is close in message to Stern’s “Only death from our duty can us sever.”

We can now ask whether by rejecting the symbol of the unknown soldier seen in the popularity of this poem, Israeli culture has actually denied a modern national statist European
recruiting mechanism or if, instead, and perhaps counterintuitively, originated a more extreme recruiting vigor for the living, who would be willing to sacrifice their lives on the national altar knowing that by doing so they will “win” collective immortality—and that they, too, will be part of the wreath that is remembered and not forgotten. In other words, the ultimate recruiting power of the collective denies the individual’s name while he or she is still alive. Therefore, in order to regain one’s name, one should die (or “give one’s life” as it is often put) for one’s country and the safety of its citizens who are considered in the commemorative culture one’s extended family. This conviction was widely criticized in light of deaths due to terrorist attacks and families’ conflicted relations with the state that led armed conflicts that are not easily justified. Still, in looking at its remaining popularity in the Jewish commemorative cannon, Amichai’s poem has offered the possibility for individual expression of the preferable way to commemorate by an individual, yet uses a collectivized voice that speaks for the collective and turns the message into a recruiting, paternalistic, and patriotic power.

According to Halbwachs, collective memory is a form of individual memory, socially constructed and maintained by groups. The duration of collective memory is the duration of the group(s) producing it and their present social imaginary. Following Halbwachs, Winter and Sivan claim that collective memory has a distinct “shelf-life”; after its “expiration,” individuals and groups cease to share and express it unless it speaks to their experiences in the present. The negated symbol of the unknown soldier has had and continues to have a long “shelf-life” in Israel—precisely because of its firm obscurity. We now turn to discussing the resilience of this symbolic category in Israeli commemorative culture.

“DO NOT HAVE”: REMEMBRANCE, SACRIFICE, AND MILITARISM

The rejection of the unknown soldier symbol became part of a future-oriented project of remembrance and forgetting, in which the individual—and especially the individual’s willingness to kill and die—was created for ventures of nation building within a “nation-in-arms” narrative and then enlarged in a discourse on Jewish victimhood. In its construction of memorials on battle sites inside the country’s borders, the Israeli symbolic typology often negated other places of memory, other sites, which were not related to battle fields. In this sense, Israeli Jewish society negated continuity with the Jewish past, in which millions perished namelessly. Later on, in enlarging the narrative of sacrifice to include the Holocaust within a victimhood narrative, it included Holocaust victims in the memorial landscape and readings of known victims’ names. In a 1991 project initiated by Yad Vashem, called “Unto Every Person There Is a Name,” names of Holocaust victims are read aloud on the Holocaust Memorial Day in the Knesset, in cities and campuses in Europe, and in the United States on their Holocaust memorial day, defeat or liberation days, or on International Holocaust Memorial day, January 27.

Kimmerling examined the place of the military and its meaning in Israeli society in relation to the conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians. According to him, the main platform for militarism in Israel is civilian militarism, in which the military plays a central role in the collective experience, especially through the centrality of mandatory conscription to the army. In this way, the whole of society is constantly preparing for war. Additionally, the public discourse prefers the terms “security” and “defense” to that of “military” and, thus, enlarges the legitimate scope of militaristic thinking and operation. Almog traces militarism in Israeli society to the Sabra model,
whose tough character on the outside is said to limit his expression of feelings (a reference to the attributes of a cactus, whose insides are softer and sweet). Sasson-Levi\textsuperscript{46} shows how the Israeli civil outlook is dominated by the military service. According to her, military service, preferably in combat units, is the main expression of civil obligation. Until the mid-1990s, it excluded women, who, at that time, were not allowed to join combat units and Palestinians, who are not required under the obligatory conscription to serve. In recent years, Muslim and Christian Palestinians have been able to join combat units, and women have joined combat units in a manner that has enlarged the militaristic aspect of civic life.

In Amichai’s poem, the commandment to remember individuals’ names is accompanied by an example of a fallen soldier named Jonathan, which provides the poem an added sense of the personal and the individual. It proceeds with the following lines:

\begin{quote}
And also to you, Jonathan, 
My pupil, whose name in the class list
Is the same as your name in the dead list.
My pupil as you were
The name you had
Your name.
Please, even those who had not known him, 
Love him also after his death
Love him: now a void,\textsuperscript{47}
A void that is its form—his form
And its name—his name.
\end{quote}

The lines that describe Jonathan’s name “that is now a void” point to an additional duality to that life and death—the dead soldier’s presence among a group of people who “knew him”: his teacher and classmates and those to whom he is but another soldier—life and death, which exist in lists of school classes and fallen soldiers. According to Zerubavel,\textsuperscript{48} patriotic sacrifice was a fundamental value in the Israeli culture before the State of Israel was established and in the first years of Israeli existence; however, it was challenged after the 1973 Yom Kippur war.\textsuperscript{49} Hazan\textsuperscript{50} claims, “The intergenerational conflict in Israel has been expressed mainly through the idea of ‘abolishing the collective.’” Young Israelis have been involved in a quest for individualism since the early 1970s, especially after the Yom Kippur War, in 1973, which was perceived as a trauma.\textsuperscript{51}

In the late 1960s, death became the subject of macabre humor, all in all from a perspective that sought responsibility from the state.\textsuperscript{52} The gap between the heroic image of the Israeli fighter and the traumatic experience of unjustified wars was discussed through the memories and oral testimonies of soldiers. Political satires and plays expressed frustration about the state’s choices in sending soldiers to wars. War criticism peaked after 1982 and the first Lebanon War.

Even so, public protest against militarism was and still is seen as a phenomenon that endangers the social order and the Israeli national interest.\textsuperscript{53} For example, as Kimmerling noted,\textsuperscript{54} “refuseniks” (soldiers who refused to serve in the occupied territories) never denied the civil importance of the military service; they still perceive it as an “Israeli experience” central to their Israeli identity. But the very act of refusal is viewed as a deviation away from the pure model of moral “military behavior.” Another recent example of the centrality of army service in Israeli Jewish culture, even in pointing to ethical violations, is Breaking the Silence, veteran soldiers’ movement who since 2004 (the second Intifada) collected anonymous testimonies of soldiers’ actions during service in the occupied territories. They also do not resist universal conscription but do try to raise awareness of the moral corruption of the army service in the Israeli society that is inevitable in the tasks of the army as an occupying force.\textsuperscript{55} We now turn from militarism back to sacrifice.

According to Rozental,\textsuperscript{56} the Israeli bereavement ethos was based on three assumptions: grief is a “price” that should be paid for the continued existence of the Israeli people and
the Israeli nation, public and individual griefs are tied, and bereavement is beyond political disputes. As this ethos was progressively challenged, competing acts of remembrance together with challenges to “remembrance authorities” emerged. The hegemonic model, which can be viewed as reinforcing the importance of army service in Israeli society, has been challenged by different ethnic groups, for example, by some working class and Mizrahi Jews, and Ethiopian Jews who feel that they are not equal citizens and, therefore, that their military service is unfair and unjust. These shifts in perceptions and representations of national sacrifice do not necessarily mean that sacrifice has ceased to be an important organizing principle in Israeli culture. Rather, the unknown soldier category seems to have survived these shifts, because it did not question Israeli mythological values and, at the same time, it negated or made obsolete unwanted values, therefore, preserving the readiness to be part of military conflict and war together with a collective promise of national commemoration.

UNKNOWN SOLDIERS

By definition, a soldier is an unknown person who bears an institutional status and whose main capacity is to serve in the army. However, in the case of soldiers dying in terror attacks and morally questioned wars since the 1970s, both Rozental and Feige claim that commemoration undergoes a process of privatization in which bereavement becomes personal and the national ethos of sacrifice for the nation is managed by national authorities that are detached from the bereaved and the bereavement process. It is, thus, worthwhile to examine the symbol of the unknown soldier at a time when we would not expect to encounter it, when collectivism and a one state/one ethnic group ethos are being challenged. The persistent popularity of the symbol can be explained by Ann Swidler’s concept of “cultural repertoires” that remained central as recruiting mechanisms, not only around the need to justify sacrifice in war. For instance, the discourse on the migration of Israelis to other countries moralizes those who have left Israel: (1) they are called “yordim,” or descending, and (2) prior to leaving, they are asked to reconsider their choices by mention of the Holocaust and those who sacrificed their lives in war, a consideration that justifies and calls for further sacrifice. The unknown soldier symbol is, thus, also part of a powerful national ideology.

Ideology is constructed for and by individuals as subjects. The subject that is constitutive of ideology, according to Althusser, only exists by creating concrete subjects as subjects and “concrete enough to be recognized, but abstract enough to be thinkable and [be] thought, giving rise to knowledge.” The unknown soldier is an ideological mechanism that functions in such a way that it “recruits” (to use Althusser’s language) subjects among the individuals and transforms the individuals into subjects. In order to see how the unknown soldier was utilized as a recruiting device, we have to ask whether we can think of a single unknown soldier, dead or alive, a question that Anderson proposes. The answer is, “No.” We can then ask: Is there a possibility of an unknown individual, dead or alive? The answer must be, “Yes.” But their anonymity is not necessarily shaped by or for the collective. In most cases, the collective does not need their anonymity to recruit other civilians to perish for its persistence.

According to Anderson, the Unknown Soldier Tomb symbolized not only the nation’s tendency to erase individual names but also symbolized the deep relation with death, a characteristic that national projects share with religions. The relational connections between the Zionist project and the Jewish religion are deep and complicated, further ground for the necessity of a discourse on names, death, and the birth of the nation. The original World War I model of the unknown soldier was not flexible enough to endure different forms of sacrifice other than the fallen soldier who fought
on remote fronts. This symbolism then was reworked in the Israeli case to connect to war at home, the pioneering ethos, and the high value of the name. By referring to unknown soldiers in memorial ceremonies, the mnemonic setting that considers their possibility becomes everlasting in national remembrance and, as such, has remained salient in both center-left and right-wing symbols of commemoration.

**UNKNOWN AS FORGETTABLE**

Sivan asks who have been forgotten and left un-commemorated. The answer is the immigrants who arrived in 1948. They had a double disadvantage. First, they were less socially integrated when they joined the army upon arrival, migrating singly or as small families after the Holocaust. Second, they had a significant lower level of education as result of the interruption of schooling during the war years. According to Sivan, the “1948 generation” is remembered as one made of native Israelis: the Sabra. Amichai’s poem “We do not have Unknown Soldiers” also means avoiding the acknowledgment of this group that was erased from the heroic, victorious Israeli ethos, which has later also failed to include Mizrahi and Ethiopian soldiers as equal contributors. Interestingly, it was essential to stress that this group remains forgotten: “we” have forgotten that “we” do have soldiers who died unknown and that nobody literally remembers their names.

In the last three decades, this attitude toward Holocaust survivors has changed, and they have gained a place of honor in Israeli memory discourse. Feldman shows in his analysis of the connecting path between Yad Vashem National Holocaust Memorial and the Mount Herzl National and Military Cemetery how the link constructed by Zionist commemorative culture between the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel has developed to include Holocaust survivors who died in the War of 1948 and, thus, reflects the changing attitudes toward national sacrifice. As Holocaust memory became more central to the ethos of sacrifice in Israeli Jewish society, it focused more on heroic aspects of everyday life as well as resistance. A proposal to grant Israeli citizenship to all those who died in the Holocaust was raised in the early days of the Israeli state. Zertal claims that this proposal produced a narrative of heroism that commenced not “over there,” but “right here.” The obligation to remember “here” in Israel is subordinate to a political community that included in its ethos the dead of other countries who were murdered before the state of Israel was established.

**THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER TOMB**

According to Laqueur, in Europe, the mass killing of nameless soldiers led to a development of symbolism of absence through building cenotaphs and the Unknown Soldier Tomb. Both sites attracted and created strong, spontaneous responses of the people “to the infinite meaning of emptiness.” The unknown soldier was a distinctly modern way to create meaning: the concept becomes, in its universality, the cipher that can mean anything; itself, the sign of itself, and the sign of a half-million other selves. While in the case of Israel I do not subscribe to Laqueur’s interpretation of the democratization of death through the equal erasing of names (it is an act of dehumanization that democracies could not afford after World War I), I do agree that there was indeed a mighty power of creating meaning through collective symbols of individual absence.

Laqueur also points out that the unknown soldier was a precursor and signaled the opposite end of the commemorative strategy that is evident in the enumeration of names, as with the empty tomb, and represents the absence of a generic body. The tension between the physical body and its name is embodied in the topological zone of the unknown soldier memorial. In other words, prior to World War I, European society saw the importance of the name for the state and invented the category of the unknown soldier, a mechanism that enabled the return of the name after World War I and the later political
activity around individual identities in democratic regimes.

The salience of the negated symbol in public representation of Israeli commemoration is part of the tradition of strong forgetful remembrance, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin’s concept of insightful remembrance. This notion records not only the missed potential for change in the past but identifies the forces that continue to repress this potential in the present. According to Remmler, insightful remembrance instills historical memory with the function of bearing witness to oppressive forms of collective remembering. The oppressive forms of collective remembrance encapsulated in the symbol of the unknown soldiers were voiced by women poets and activists, and in Lifshitz’s ballad, with calls to cease violence—but have not been canonized. The “original” unknown soldier dissolved with respect to the living (though we remember the oppositional addressing by the unknown mother of the unknown soldier): he does not leave individual traces and often has no known burial site. As an unknown soldier who is part of an unknown collective, he cannot be really dead—he has no name and no singular existence, let alone death; he embodies and signifies the justified war.

“WREATH OF FLOWERS”: COMMEMORATION CEREMONIES AND THE LEGACY OF THE LIVING

As I suggested earlier, soldiers’ anonymity is embedded in their conscription. Their relations to their fellow soldiers and officers are vertical until the moment of death, which erases hierarchies and realigns those relationships as horizontal. In the Zionist culture, the horizontal relationship exceeded the realm of myth, and the symbolic category of the friend (comrade, pal) was widely used. The “friend” is a Hebrew idiom and, as in socialist cultures, is a prefix connected to the person’s first name. We encountered its centrality in the canonized poem by Haim Gouri “Ha’reut” (friendship, or camaraderie) in Israeli commemoration culture. In this section, I suggest that the same mechanism of anonymity was operative outside the battlefield in the sphere of friendship. The idiom “friend” is the most prominent symbol of Israeli Jewish collectivity and within this context, the use of friend as an idiom shifts the spotlight from the individual to the group. The category of “the friend” is divided into three interrelated subcategories: friendship, brotherhood, and camaraderie, which are briefly detailed here in their nuanced differences.

1. **Friendship** symbolizes an intimate relationship.
2. **Brotherhood** illustrates tribal-like connections between Israel’s Jews. Calling a friend or a colleague “my brother”/ “my sister” also has a military lingo connotation that migrated into everyday Hebrew.
3. **Camaraderie** represents collective memory of war heroes and is best illustrated in the term re’ut, or friendship, between warriors.

“Friend” is a mechanism that permits the formation of fluid boundaries because it has no immanent content. The concept is hierarchical and, therefore, denotes membership in various frameworks. At the bottom of the “friendship hierarchy” lies the Gentile who was referred to as yadid (pal or buddy) in Zionist discourse. Nonhierarchical relations were based on the emergence of the “native” Jewish Israeli Sabra. Hazan suggests that “the image of the Israeli Jew who supposedly emerged from nowhere, drawing his strength from the elements of his old-new naturalized homeland, was epitomized in the construction of the fine figure of young warrior-cum-pioneer, whose collective memory did not extend beyond the horizons of his land.” Such a figure of dual attribute recruited its symbolic apparatus from other nations’ mythologies while adding to them local elements embedded in the specific context in which Zionism became and was sustained as a national movement in Israel.
CONCLUSION: “DISPERSING LEAVES,” YOUTH, INDIVIDUALISM, AND NEW REMEMBERING GROUPS

The fallen soldier is usually a young person who, in the potential height of his or her life, happened to die in armed conflict. Youthfulness was the engine of the Zionist nation-building project (as well as of other nation-building projects). The relations between (1) being young, (2) having an eternal future, and (3) being unknown were, together, an unbounded recruiting force. The Zionist ethos was historically carried by youth pioneers. Youth socialization was extended through compulsory military conscription at age eighteen. In popularizing Amichai’s poem, the negation of the unknown soldier symbol from the Israeli pantheon became a didactic attempt to offer a righteous voice to remember the fallen soldiers by their peers, while rejecting both the European nationalist and the Jewish revisionist models.

The recruiting power of the unknown soldier symbol has been expanded to include civilians over the years of the second Intifada (2000–2004), in which Jewish as well as Palestinian civilians have often been attacked, in a so-called Jewish majority “war” at home. Jewish civilians who were killed have been commemorated in the same manner as soldiers, on memorial plaques in public squares and remembered on the same day of remembrance for fallen soldiers. Since 1998, it is called “Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers of Israel and Victims of Terrorism.” This designation of inclusion weakens the distinction between death in war and death in a terror attack, although the groups are still named as separated and are not simply “victims.” This designation includes, in the narrative of national sacrifice of dead civilians, a move that is more often than not welcome in the Israeli Jewish society. Civilians and families whose members were injured or killed during terror attacks, like soldiers, are entitled to benefits.

I would like to conclude this exploration of anonymity in Israeli commemorative culture with two examples of refusal of the national sacrifice narrative. Mr. Hussein Abu Khdeir refused such inclusion. He is the father of the teenage Muhamad Abu Khdeir, who was kidnapped and murdered in July 2014 by three Israeli Jewish citizens as revenge for the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli Jewish teenagers in the West Bank (which started a 50-day war in Gaza). Abu Khdeir asked that his son’s name not be inscribed on a Victims of Terrorism memorial in the Israeli memorial Pantheon on Mount Herzl, together with names of other, mostly Jewish, victims of terror attacks in Israel. This refused inscription illuminates the ways that anonymity is constructed unevenly by the state’s commemorative acts to sectors of the Israeli and Palestinian society who can voice their resistance to it.

The second example is a group of former Jewish and Palestinian combatants named “Combatants for Peace.” Since 2006, they and the Forum of Bereaved Families have organized an alternative Memorial Day for fallen soldiers. Mutual recognition and empathy for the other side in the conflict becomes a vehicle that the organizers and attendants of this ceremony hope to mobilize toward directly addressing the bereavement and loss on both sides, together with their past willingness to kill and die. This group also refuses the nationalist inscription that justifies sacrifice with disregard to national sentiment.

This essay has discussed the career and prominence of the unknown soldiers’ symbol in Israeli Jewish commemoration culture. The symbol’s eminence can be explained on both theoretical and historical levels. I claimed that it encapsulates overt as well as covert silence as tools to commemorate and elevate national sacrifice by different groups in Israel. I examined three versions of its use: the first, and most popular, by negation, in Amichai’s poem “We Do Not Have Unknown Soldiers.” The second celebrates and elevates sacrifice and occupation.
in Stern’s “Unknown Soldiers.” The last is in a poem that did not become popular in commemorative culture in Lifshitz’s Ballad, which used the symbol so as to recruit many who will act to resist violence and destruction.

The historical explanation for the symbol’s long “shelf life” considered the metamorphosis of criticism toward war and sacrifice in Israel, which still holds the army and military action as legitimate and central to the self-understanding of Jewish life in Israel. The recent return to performing Stern’s song that glorifies sacrifice is an example of this explanation. For the hegemonic Israeli Jewish sector, collective as well as individual sacrifice was highlighted. For the national religious sector, which increasingly represents a significant proportion of Israeli soldiers and commanders (ever since the 1967 War), and a correspondingly significant proportion of the folk commemoration found in popular literature and the social imaginary, the Jewish command to remember—to make a written homage to the dead—was fulfilled as well. We are left with a small and currently marginalized number of groups that refuse this inscription into “national fame,” which justifies war as sacrifice, and with the roads less taken, ones that may lead to civic action and commemoration that will be inclusive and center around life.

REFERENCES

1. In Hebrew, these words also mean to deconstruct, decompose, and dismantle—a triple, “secondary” connotation that points to the weaponry and memory of war.
2. First stanza from Yehuda Amichai’s “We Do Not Have Unknown Soldiers,” in Akhshav Ba-ra’ash: Poems 1963-1968 (Jerusalem: Shoken, 1969), author trans. Amichai (1924–2000) migrated to Palestine from Germany and fought in the war of 1948; he was a teacher and one of Israel’s most acclaimed and translated poets and lived in Jerusalem. He received Israeli and international prizes for his work over his lifetime.
3. The translation of the Hebrew for “unknown soldier” is “nameless/anonymous soldier.”
4. Avraham Stern (1907–1942) was a poet and an active member of the armed resistance movement, the “Irgun,” a National Military Organization. His pen name and underground name in the Irgun was “Yair.” In 1940, he formed a radical opposition group, known as LEHI (Lohamei Herut Yisrael), a Hebrew acronym for the Fighters for the Freedom of Israel, who fought the British Mandate. Stern’s name is today commemorated in towns and street names in Israel.
5. Uri Zvi Greenberg (1898–1981) was a Hebrew and Yiddish poet, guerrilla “Irgun” fighter, revisionist party member, and member of the first Knesset.


19. Published in the literary pages of “Hashomer Hatzair,” the socialist-Zionist secular Jewish youth movement, in 1940, and set to music by composer Stefan Wolpe.


21. Ibid., 422.


25. Yad Vashem, Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, Jerusalem, has an “unknown righteous among the nations” memorial for Gentiles who saved Jews in the Holocaust.

26. Zeevi was a Major General in the IDF and later a politician. He founded the right-wing nationalist party “Moledet,” which advocated forced expulsion of Palestinians from Israel.


31. A salient example is a famous poem by the Orthodox poet Zelda, “Unto Every Person There is a Name,” which is recited and sung on various memorial days.


34. Sivan, “Private Pain and Public Remembrance,” 177–204.
35. For example, the Ministry of Defense commemoration website lists the poem “Unto Every Person There Is a Name,” by poet Zelda (a.k.a., Zelda Schneersohn Mishkovsky), among other poems that deal with personal loss and individual fallen soldiers, under the title of “We Will Remember Everyone,” on an official government page of remembrance, accessed Jan 11, 2017, http://www.izkor.gov.il/.
39. The term “the family of bereavement” refers to relatives of fallen soldiers and blurs the boundaries between individual and collective mourning of those who lost their relatives and the rest of the Israeli society that support and identify with them.
40. Feige, “The Monument to the Helicopter Disaster.”
42. Winter and Sivan, War and Remembrance, 177–204.
43. Zerubavel, “Battle, Sacrifice, and Martyrdom.”
47. In Hebrew, hallal means a fallen soldier and a void.
49. Ibid.
50. Haim Hazan, Simulated Dreams, 72.