

The European Days of Jewish Culture 2023: Memory

Addressing the theme of Memory

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*Memory is the faculty of preservation par excellence.
The act that best defines memory is remembrance.*
Henri Bergson (Lesson I)ⁱ

INTRODUCTION: Values and functions of the annual theme

Every year, the theme chosen by the AEPJ, in consultation with its members, creates a link between the various European participants and provides a beneficial coherence to the actions carried out, with a view to sharing Jewish culture, or rather, Jewish cultures.

The choice of a single theme, which is different each time – and which each individual can freely adapt according to their own requirements or priorities –, has at least four advantages. It consolidates joint efforts to improve knowledge of Jewish heritage and cultures, and thus greatly contributes to the fight against antisemitism. It creates links between national and European associations. And lastly, it allows for increased visibility. As for renewing the themes, this attracts the interest of the general public and encourages their continued participation.

Each theme is therefore an invitation to embark on a journey into a heritage still to be discovered. Each of the topics proposed to date has opened up and offered exciting perspectives. Better than a perspective, the 2023 theme, centred around Memory, or Memories, addresses a fundamental aspect of Judaism.

MEMORY or FOUNDING JEWISH MEMORIES

What is memory in Judaism?

Bible: A few seeds of biblical semantics of Memory

To put it briefly, one could – not joking - almost affirm that Memory is to Judaism what theology is to Christianity. Collective or individual, through history or through narrative, it is the crucible in which Jewishness is forged.

Before making some more concrete suggestions, which will deal with the ways in which spiritual, historical and existential experiences can be transformed into a cultural and artistic programme, let us first briefly recall the relationship between Judaism and memory.

The root *ZHR* means “remembrance” and “memory” in Hebrew. Without dwelling too much on what would now be considered the controversial aspects, how can we not mention a famous comment by the late Rabbi Josy Eisenberg, who reminded us that this same root, *ZHR*, also means the “masculine”, that is, the fertilising principle of life?

But let us return to memory, or remembrance. *ZHR* appears frequently in the Bible (some 286 mentions in the sense of “memory” or “remembrance”, as opposed to 81 mentions in the sense of

“masculine”). Along with the Book of Job, it is the Psalms and the Prophets that speak of it most often. This is not surprising. The first is certainly the most questioning, the most philosophically Jewish book in the Bible. In the second, the celebration of the link between man and the Eternal permanently imprints a dialogical and existential model. As for the contemptuous Prophets, how would they envisage the links to amendment and future without recourse to memory and remembrance?

It should also be noted that the injunctive verbal form dominates the biblical text, *Z'HoR* (28 occurrences), which gives the term the value of an existential and moral commandment. This is how it is expressed in the Fourth Commandment: “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy...” (Ex. 20:8 -11). This is not a proposition, but an existential and moral law, which, like “memory” and “remembrance”, – even from the perspective of neuroscience or philosophyⁱⁱ – orders the organisation of time and existential values. Philosophers and psychologists confirm this approach when they teach that memory is not an open drawer, but a construction operated by the intelligence according to “social frameworks”ⁱⁱⁱ and values.

Without using the word “memory” or “remembrance”, it is indeed in time – understood as history, memory, attestation and recital – that the First Commandment (Ex. 20:2) is affirmed, referring to the Exodus from Egypt, and therefore to deliverance. Psychoanalytical work is based on this same notion of a liberating memory. Freed from the prison of the past, the subject becomes the master of remembrance through memory. Here too, memory enables access to life and responsibility.

In this dialogue of man with himself, which gives access to the dialogue with that which is beyond him, and which is called prayer (literally: “to expect” or “to hope”, in Hebrew), every Sabbath, the Jewish home brings together these two Commandments: that of the Revelation of God in History^{iv} and that of the Sabbath, which are associated with the remembrance of Creation^v.

This is just an outline of the semantic configuration of the theme of biblical memory and some of its extensions in the human sciences. It remains for us to add the “Sinaitic Covenant”, in other words, the real and symbolic presence^{vi} of each consciousness at the time of the “giving of the law”, which implies collective responsibility before the law, as well as the capacity to give meaning to existence, but not without learning to question it. Jewish rituals and festivals consolidate, through the transmission inscribed in affectivity, these links between memory, Law, both individual and collective responsibilities as well as the questioning of meaning.

To end this biblical journey, a final word on the expression “Yad Vashem” (Isaiah 56:5)^{vii}, literally: a “hand” and a “name”, which, by extension, means a lasting memory, a memorial monument.

History

There is no need to return here to the constituent episodes of Jewish history and the way in which they have been inscribed in memories. Whether it is a question of general history or local history, memories and “places of memory”^{viii} tell countless structuring narratives. Bibliographies, filmographies, comic strips, exhibitions, new approaches... there is no shortage of material to make memories speak. This is true for ancient history, and it is even truer for modern and contemporary history. The work carried out by the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah admirably illustrates one of the most terrible chapters of Jewish history and also presents numerous educational resources, accessible to event organisers.

Uprooted people are another living source of Jewish memory. Musical and literary treasures allow us to enrich our programmes and the emotions of the audience.

Suggestions and avenues to explore

It is imperative that national associations should have directories that list the artists and speakers to contact. Especially when the cultural policies of certain European countries co-finance travel in order to promote their culture^{ix}. Groups such as the Polyphonies Hébraïques from Strasbourg, certain Yiddish choirs, Klezmer musicians and Sephardic music such as that by the group Transmosaïk can cross borders. For example, JECJ-Lorraine invited an Italian band^x to Metz, as well as a fabulous baroque ensemble^{xi} from Switzerland and twice artists from Austria^{xii}.

In our European context, in the age of feminism, the *Memoirs* of Glückel of Hameln, written in the 18th century, are of major interest. (Reading of extracts? Exhibition?^{xiii}). Closer to home, the most European of authors, Stefan Zweig, who lived through the history of the 20th century and died as a result of it, could be the focus of a memorial programme, especially since 2021 saw the publication of a previously unpublished work by this author, *Vienne, ville de rêves*^{xiv}, which mentions a large number of Jewish artists.

At a time when autobiographies and biopics are on the rise, we can favour quality by choosing to highlight Georges Perec^{xv}, Nathalie Sarraute^{xvi}, Bob Dylan, the (deserved) Nobel laureate Elias Canetti, or the writer who could have had it, Amos Oz – who is of course not European but remains a victim of European family neuroses. Albert Cohen, Primo Levy, Romain Gary, offer other excellent avenues. Beyond the “soaked madeleine”, Marcel Proust is a genius of sense memory, whereas André Schwartz-Bart is a genius of Jewish secular memory.

Finally, we can honour forgotten intellectuals, such as Maurice Halbwachs, a student of Bergson and Durkheim, sociologist of memory and inventor of the notion of “social frameworks” that shape memory. Catholic, but married to a Jewish woman and father of two Jewish sons, he died in deportation, in Buchenwald. And since it is through memory that human beings acquire a history, we can just as easily pay tribute to a great historian, assassinated by the nazis, Marc Bloch.

Let us remember that *memory is the spirit* – and also the heart – *as long as it lives and lasts*. Let's make it live and last!

Some suggestions for programming

Bible:

- Theatrical readings, dramatizations (with or without musical accompaniment) of the founding biblical episodes.
- Exhibitions and/or lectures - Presentation of the rituals that structure memory, by means of ancient illustrations, modern images, or didactic panels: *Sabbath, Exodus from Egypt, Giving of the Law*, etc.
- Exhibitions and/or lectures centred around time: calendars, festivals, the Messianic idea, the earth cycle, etc.
- Activities: Memory games based on biblical quotations.
- Liturgical or thematic concerts.

History and culture:

- Collection of testimonies and life stories.
- Organisation of a mini literary exhibition of recent Jewish biographies.^{xvii}
- Work on family photographs together with artists or animators.
- Artistic and/or cultural use of family trees.
- Artistic and/or cultural use of family names.
- Cultural itineraries around a Jewish personality.
- Organisation of memorial trips.

As a general rule:

- Develop partnerships with artists to transform the memorial material into performances.
- Develop partnerships with institutions (media libraries, libraries, schools, etc.) and/or bookshops for the presentation of works, readings of simple or dramatised extracts.
- Develop wide-ranging partnerships, with a view to diversifying the audience.

ⁱ Bergson – Cours I Leçons de psychologie et de métaphysique -coll. Épiméthée – PUF Paris 1990.

ⁱⁱ Bergson, Matière et mémoire, coll Quadrigue PUF, Paris 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. the work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs “Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire”, PUF, republished by Albin Michel in 1994, or “La mémoire collective”, by the same author.

^{iv} מצרים ליציאת זכר

^v בראשית למעשה זכרון

^{vi} On the seminal poetic force of these “Real Presences”, refer to the excellent book by George Steiner.

^{vii} Isaiah 56:5: וְנָשָׂא טוֹב בְּיָמֵי וְנִחַמְתִּי וְנִחַמְתִּי לָהֶם בְּבֵיתִי וּבְחוֹמֹתַי, אֲשָׁר לֹא יִכָּרֵת, וְנָתַתִּי לָהֶם בְּבֵיתִי וּבְחוֹמֹתַי, אֲשָׁר לֹא יִכָּרֵת. I will give them, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons or daughters. I will give them an everlasting name which shall not perish.”

^{viii} The “place of memory” is a historical concept put forward by the book *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, compiled by Pierre Nora between 1984 and 1992. “Places of memory” are material or conceptual elements that play a role in the constitution of collective identity.

^{ix} This is the case in Austria, for example.

^x The group from Turin, *Di Goldene Pave*.

^{xi} Profeti della Quinta, for the admirable *Joseph and his Brethren*, sung in Hebrew.

^{xii} The Brauer - Meiri Ensemble from Vienna, led by the remarkable Yemeni-Austrian-Israeli Timna Brauer.

^{xiii} In Lorraine, we commissioned a puppet company to produce a play based on the Memoirs of Glückel. It was sublime!

^{xiv} “Vienne, ville de rêves” (unpublished), edited and presented by Bertrand Dermoncourt, translated by Guillaume Ollendorff and David Sanson, Paris, Bouquins, 432 p., 2021.

^{xv} W, or the Memory of Childhood

^{xvi} Childhood

^{xvii} For French speakers, a book like the one by Dr Sibeoni, President of a Jewish community in the Vosges, which recounts his childhood as an immigrant from Egypt, presents an authentic and unusual approach.