

# The European Days of Jewish Culture 2023 Inspiring Memory Session #1

## *From social storytelling to social sensemaking: digitized memory and collective imagery* By Luca Baraldi

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## From social storytelling to social sensemaking: digitized memory and collective imagery

### 1. Introduction

Today I will try to share with you, through many themes (perhaps many provocations), a reflection on memory, its role and its ability to create meaning.

I will do so starting from some elements of cultural sensitivity of the Jewish tradition, but I will try to maintain an open perspective on a multicultural horizon, in a scenario of cultural pluralism and social interdependence. And I will start precisely by clarifying the terms: when I speak of **cultural pluralism**, I am speaking of the need to integrate, in a condition of real mutual respect, secular cultural systems and religious systems, united by the common choice to respect and value what we consider to be fundamental rights. When I speak of **social interdependence**, I try to make evident the need, today more than ever, to use culture as a system for reactivating awareness of the need for shared existence. In the age of digitization, of the dematerialization of experience, we need to keep alive the conception of our role in the world. I wish I could start from the assumption that human beings have the clarity

and foresight to understand what is really important, but the history of humanity goes in a different direction. Somehow, perhaps deluded by the potential of technology, we lose sight of the individual's responsibility, as well as of the potential for individual freedom. We have to decide, we have the ability to decide who we are and who we want to be, who we want to exist for, with what purpose and with what vision. We need to decide how, in this pluralistic context, in this interdependent society, we want to preserve our memory, we want to animate our present, we want to envision our future. And on this tiny thread of time, on this fragility of existence, we will base our reflection, starting with a verse from a poem by I. Pinkas.

*“One way to understand  
something about us  
is perhaps to say that we pass.”*

I will spell out some steps, trying to sketch a common conceptual path. I know it's a complex reasoning, I know that I will share seemingly contradictory ideas with you, but I ask you for the patience to try to follow me. Each step will complicate things, but somehow I hope it provides some element to interpret them in a more open way.

## **2. Digitization as a codified space**

Today we live in the digital reality. Somebody defines it as a hybrid reality, somebody talks about the dematerialization of reality, somebody else defines our historical time as the "access era". Digital technologies, which had already undergone a very strong acceleration in the nineties, especially with the expansion of the web, have experienced a real phase of radical acceleration in the recent context of the pandemic. The need for connection, fast communication, digital transformation of physical habits and experiences has led to an almost total digitization of life. It applies to reading habits, it applies to the habits of listening to music, it applies to shopping at the supermarket, to buying books, to buying clothes. We have moved our life experience and our market experience into an intangible dimension (this is not the context for thinking about how much life and the market are increasingly overlapping, as a concept and as a conception of existence). Even after covid, it's difficult to get people used to rediscovering, for example, the pleasure of going to the cinema, rather than locking themselves up in the domestic space to watch a film on streaming platforms. Not only has the experience been digitized for a substitute dimension of what was not possible to do for the security measures in the pandemic, but the expectation towards the experience has been digitized. Somehow, our way of feeling has given way to the virtualization of the senses. We agreed to transform all of

reality into a world that can be datified. As we know, today we are increasingly accustomed to hearing about data-driven decision-making processes, data-driven companies, data-driven marketing, data-driven governance. The World Health Organization itself has tried, since the first symptoms of the pandemic, to manage everything starting from the large availability of data, trying, in some way, to bring - perhaps even reduce - the complexity to numerical sequences. After two years of more or less unsuccessful (certainly perfectible) attempts, even the WHO has recognized the need to create a department of behavioral and cultural insights. After trying to bring everything back to a series of numbers, it was recognized that the number is nothing more than the superficial symptom of a changing, elusive complexity. But if we claim to be able to translate everything into numbers, and at the same time we recognize the digital untranslatability of all the experience of existence, what role does our identity play? Are we really attributable to intersections between clusters, to mixtures of categories? Are we really simply a sum of tags? As individuals and as a society we have the possibility, perhaps the moral duty, to ask ourselves if we are really willing to let our complexity, our depth, our uniqueness be flattened on systems of categorization of human beings based, in fact, on Excel tables. Are we really that simple? Are we really that poor? We could try to contextualize the complexity I'm talking about at least two dimensions, the simplest, the most linear ones. Space and time.

With respect to space, it is evident from the first glance that Jewish history, a physiologically immaterial history, without physical roots, without territory, is linked to the idea of dematerialization. There is nothing as stable and as persistent as the intangible world of words beyond Jewish history. The only real point of reference, if we want to force the metaphor a little, is the code. There is nothing but language, in its forms, in its interpretations, in its traditions. The complexity of Jewish cultural and religious history has always been linked to the code.

With respect to time, the great epistemological and interpretative challenge of the coherence and legitimacy of the transmission of information is raised. If the history of a people is an immaterial one, all that matters is the ability to give stability to intangible roots. There is no traditional geopolitics, there is no administrative law to guarantee stability. There is only memory, with its lights and shadows, with its search for a coherent thread, in an attempt not to feel totally at the mercy of the waves of history. This absence of materiality is a key point, to which we will return.

### 3. The use of the word as a flow for generating creative chaos

Traditionally, in the Western world, in the Eurocentric culture, we have gradually become accustomed to the idea of words as a tool of transmission. Sometimes, more rarely, a tool of creativity. Words convey notions, they convey information. The theories of information, the theories of semiotics, the history of language, have accustomed us to considering language as a tool to be managed in a linear way. We have progressively linked the value of language to a conception of its functionality, its effectiveness, its usability. We've made language a brush instead of a color palette. In the world of the datification of reality, and certainly of the datification of information, we have accepted the habit of considering language, every single word, like a tag, like a flat, static, linear label. We have progressively lost the ability to transform semantic imprecision into an unexpected horizon, and to recognize possible interpretation as the claim of an ontological freedom. By reducing language to a code - therefore linked to a linear function - we have denied the creative capacity of 'Adam. In the Garden of Eden, 'Adam does not give names to stabilize the nature of things, but to extract them from the void of the absence of names, of the absence of meaning. What can't be called by name, can't have the chance to evolve its nature. In a world where everything can be codified, care must be taken not to transform language into a procedure. We need to reframe the teaching of Babel, the disorder as a necessity to rediscover order as a form of freedom, rather than as a constraint. Language is not informative, it is not descriptive, but it is so much more. It generates, enlivens, transforms, confuses, redefines. The word allows a reality to change shape, to change destiny, to change horizon. Today I speak of *word* because it is the simplest register to understand, in the transformation of communication layers into digital code. (In fact, language is code, understood as a conventional sequence of symbols, according to a limited and perimeterable matrix in a coherent, precise and defined way. But it could be true for the use of images, or sounds.) In fact, it could be true for everything that can be transformed, through translation interfaces, into a system with rigid, interconnected, limited, graspable, precise categories.

But it is in ambiguity that creation comes to life. It is in the imprecision that meaning expresses its own possibilities of existence, which claims the freedom to be other, and in this otherness it expresses the possibility of getting out of the predefined schemes, of the categories, of the marked destiny. We need a narration that frees the imprecise meaning of words, and that allows our logic to escape from the idea of traced schemes. On the one hand, the social imaginary defines a vocabulary for anthropological or social categories - for example the Italian, the Jew, the Colombian - and attributes characteristics to these categories. On the other hand, liberation - which etymologically we should define as redemption - must allow, precisely starting from language, from the symbolic system, to

subvert an order established a priori, fixed with the grids of language, behind the bars of words. You have to take care of the openness of the language. We need to overcome the traditional conception of language: no longer purely descriptive, no longer purely informative, but the rediscovery of a greater function. New inspiration, new creation, new regeneration.

#### 4. The individual and the need of society

We talked about the end of materiality and the difficulties that this entails. We have spoken of language as a system of organizing order, and in some ways of order as a convention. In the digitized world, in the datified world, immateriality determines a loss of information, coding - through the procedural language - determines a necessary approximation. On the one hand the loss of senses, on the other the loss of expressive capacity. Yet we live in an era of great potential, perhaps the first in history, in which we have everything we need to solve the world's problems. From a certain point of view, we would have all the technical and technological levers to ensure that *tiqqun 'olam* could be accelerated, in the operational integration between what the mind wants and what the hand can do. But once again, as often happens in human history, the ability to recognize true need is lacking, the ability to accept priorities is lacking, the will to pursue the common good is lacking. Once again, the individual prevails over the prospect of sharing the destiny. Not only is the forbidden fruit picked, but it is picked and thrown away, without even being tasted. The individual, in the absence of comparison, in the absence of willingness to compare, finds himself emptied of predictive capacity, deprived of his ability to understand the world. In a world founded - as we have said - on the digitization of information and the automation of knowledge, individualism entails the loss of the fullness of life. The information retrieval systems, as well as those for content production, that we have available today, are based on the information that is on the web and on existing data. In some way, it is as if technology were accelerating an ever more closed, ever more one-dimensional self-referentiality with respect to the unexpressed scenarios of possible worlds. In information theories we speak of eco chamber, of echo effect, which amplifies information bubbles in which we find ourselves cradled, and slowly trapped, in self-subsistent microcosms, in which pluralism does not exist, in which alternative truths do not exist, in which our mind gets used to neglecting everything that, through the filter of the digital world, simply doesn't find space, or doesn't want to find it. Let's think about it: even though we are aware of the limits of technology, if we have to entrust someone with an assignment, even if it were to repair the washing machine, we are suspicious of what doesn't exist on the web, of those who don't even have a page on social media. We are fueling a paradox, whereby the system that was supposed to make available the representation of a reality - naturally for those who wanted to be part

of this represented reality - has replaced reality itself, at least in our perception. We only recognize what becomes recognizable through an interface of logical organization of existence. What does not exist in the immaterial reality of the web simply does not exist. The society we are moving towards will amplify this tendency to the extreme limits of cognitive danger. The new generations have become unaccustomed to the rigor of the reconstruction of the past, of the chain of transmission of the past, simply because society has accustomed them to the instantaneousness of existence. Instagram speaks of the instant, not the flow of the story. We could certainly say that the sequence of instants makes up the story, but what changes, what must be taken into consideration, is the perspective with respect to the choice to publish in the instant, with what purpose, with what will, with what perspective. We are used to knowing that history is written by the victors, with informative selections and conscious removals that compose a voluntary representation of memory. Here, this is the theme: social history, built from the aggregation of information on millions of individual stories, is becoming, today more than ever, the product of millions of stories written by those who want to feel like winners. If traditionally historiography, the writing of history, is the product of an artificial operation, which however had to deal with critical analysis, with dissident thought, but above all with the physical evidence of what was happening today, in the era of the dematerialization of existence, two existential dangers seem to shake hands:

The first danger: on the one hand the artificial construction of history starting from the desire for self-representation, on the other the indemonstrability of history in its physical connotation, which today, in the new categories of what exists, we can no longer define as "real" . Somehow, relativism fueled by the desire for consensus, by the need for public consensus, is prevailing. What happens seems insane, but it should not be underestimated. Today, in the virtual representation of the life I live, I choose to represent myself, and therefore to exist, according to the traffic I will be able to generate. Today, what obtains the most public consensus has more ontological solidity. And I would like to focus attention on this issue, trying to reflect on two points. The first: memory becomes the product of an artificial operation of information aggregation, and no longer experiential. What is represented remains, in the way it is represented, in the condition, for the first time in history, of giving everyone the possibility of manipulating their own representation. Collective memory fails because there is no correlation between individual memory and individual life, between what has been lived and what has been told. Each published selfie is a selection from dozens of selfies, from dozens of filters. We have become the staging of our lives, and the memory that will remain of us will be that seemingly harmless performance that we repeat every day, in the seemingly harmless act of selecting that

fragment of reality that seems most interesting to us, and of telling it in the way that seems more attractive to us.

The second danger: language, flattened to a descriptive dimension, a sequence of procedures and instructions, is getting us used to an unprecedented cognitive and behavioral transformation. In the global audience of content producers, in the visibility of the lives of millions of people, we are not called to listen, but to enjoy. We are not called to understand, but to follow. We are not called to identify ourselves, but to imitate. We live inundated with millions of possible life stories - realistically, each of you can really follow a few dozen at most - but we become passive users of people's existence. On the one hand we can draw inspiration from it, raise questions, discover new interpretations. On the other hand, the dialectical possibility is lost, in a predefined code of rigid reactions. The emotionality of the reaction is traced back to a scale of emoticons, which force us to imagine a precise range of sensations. In losing the ability to interact, we lose the ability to let others interact. There are biochemical mechanisms, in the reaction to one of our posts, and there are algorithmic mechanisms, in the visibility of our contents. As Pascal Chabot says, it is the techniques that form the modes of existence and translate ideas.

In this dimension, what are the new memory production processes? What role do we play in trying to save a way of making history less fragile, a little less manipulable, a little less forgettable? As paradoxical as it may seem, perhaps the only way to combat the uncertainty of the hyper-descriptiveness of social communication is simply to tell slow stories, without too many words, or with the right words. We have to get used to going out of the stage window again to understand that, behind the self-representative need of the capillary history of the existence of all of us, there is a great story, which has defined the perimeter of our rights, our freedoms, our very possibility to manipulate, with a little vanity, the way we want others to perceive us. There is a story behind our stories. And if our stories are largely made up of bits and a desire for attention, in the history behind us, real history, human history, social history, planetary history, there are big questions. great achievements, great pains. The paradox is the tension between the possibility of absolute knowledge, of absolute information, and the inability to understand that, behind the information, there is a reality. By now accustomed to the gap between what exists and what is told, we see war reports and find it hard to understand that it is not a film. Reality always seems to us a representation, until it enters, usually, unfortunately, with an unwanted vehemence, into our lives. We dehumanize human history, convinced that everything is mediated by filters. We don't question the nature of others, because we believe that, after all, each person interposes a series of narrative reworkings between their own life and the way they represent it.

Irene Vallejo, in an article of a few years ago, published in her "*El futuro recordado*", speaks of literature as the opening of existential horizons, and affirms that "In a narcissistic and egomaniacal world, the best that can happen to one is to be able to become potentially everyone else." We need to relearn to notice what is happening around us, outside the representable dimension of our existence. We have to start losing control of our narrative again. If there is only what we choose to keep in the publishability of content, the digitized world will bend the importance of the different phases of our existence to a logic of data traffic.

I add an even more delicate element. Once, in the silence of our personal diaries, there was no mediator between us and the recipients to whom we decided to speak. Whether they were imaginary or real recipients, we wrote for ourselves. Today our diaries are designed to be told publicly, in the square, and are mediated by private platforms. The purpose of the platforms - it is useless to deny the evidence - is to make a profit on the data traffic generated. The algorithms underlying the distribution of information, the way in which one of our posts is viewed, promoted or neglected, are designed to generate traffic, and not to recognize the value of what we say. The value of our words, our stories, our memories, is measured only on the basis of the traffic it generates. And on the basis of this same traffic it is conserved, recovered, put back into circulation. Our immaterial history exists only if it is seen, if it is read, and above all, if it generates a reaction. We exist only as a function of what we arouse. In this mechanism of causality of existence, what value does memory play? Are we sure that we will be able to preserve historical memory if we tell a memory that is too uncomfortable to be "consumed"? If information - even historical information, even important information - becomes entertainment, how will it change, how should our way of remembering change? How will the aesthetics of memory change? Should we ask ourselves how to make memory palatable, to ensure it has a place in the future of preserved information, or should we ensure that it is true memory? Should we deal with the design of memory, to bring the transmission of historical data as close as possible to the logic of a "consumable" content? Should we ask ourselves how to make our memory competitive in order to attract attention in the right way? Will we have to think about lead generation - as is done in market logic - also to convey the history of which we are heirs? For now we will leave the question unanswered, but we will return to this point again at the end of our reflection.



## 5. Storytelling as creation, sensemaking as a critical process

When I started researching Jewish history and culture, I was surprised by many topics, which literally enraptured me. I dealt with manuscripts, linguistic evolution (with research on Judeo-Italian), contamination between Christianity and Judaism in the pre-modern age, qabbalah, cultural heritage. Gradually I realized that the only real common thread that characterized my work, my desire to understand the Jewish world, was linked to semiotics. When I was involved in qabbalah, with years of research on Mordekhay ben Yehudah Dato, a student of Moshe Cordovero, I was interested in his attempt to make cryptic concepts of qabbalah accessible through images and metaphors. When I dealt with Jewish preaching, I tried to understand how preachers created methodologies for the emotional involvement of the assembly, without being able to use the emotional impact of the images. When I dealt with Judaeo-Italian, I tried to discover how the processes of assimilation and interaction had modified - and profoundly enriched - cultural and religious systems that coexisted in the same territory. When I dealt with Jewish social history and the history of anti-Judaism, and then of anti-Semitism, I deepened the construction of narrative processes, the construction of models for defining identities and the dynamics of relationships between memory models. Everything has always led me to analyze the narrative dimension of Judaism. In Judaism everything is memory, everything is word, everything is transmission. For many centuries there was no distraction of the accumulation of power, or the dispersion of energy of the conquest of territory. Even if the work of Esther Benbassa, "Suffering as identity", defines an important threshold of critical analysis of Jewish self-perception - at least in certain contexts - it is important to understand how a particular story has allowed us to concentrate energies and dedication to research of knowledge. A complex knowledge, composed of explorations in external linguistic worlds, with respect to the monolithism of the Eurocentric matrix, but opening up to the Mediterranean, the Middle East, to the influences of the mysteries and mystics of other continents. Like any complex knowledge, it needed new descriptive models, sometimes new words, a new taxonomy, new ontological perspectives, even before conceptual ones. Jewish history is a semantic history.

One of the things that has always surprised me the most is the hybrid nature of Talmudic composition. Halakhah and aggadah. Rule and narrative, rigor and openness, precision and ambiguity. The conception of law in the Jewish tradition provides precise instructions for regulating behavior and at the same time guarantees the interpretability, through examples, emotions, the humanization of the norm. On the one hand there is the codified information, on the other there is the recognition and acceptance of the fluidity of existence. As Bauman rightly said, we live in a liquid society, in which categories have lost their meaning and stability. Yet, in the technological acceleration, without

realizing it, we are delivering the liquid nature of society to the rigidity of codified mathematical models. We need to learn to keep a balance. On the one hand the law (the existential fluidity regulated through a code) and on the other the story (the claim of the existential fluidity as a necessary condition, even going against the rules, even breaking the mold). In some way, the law has always been the image of the ideal society, at least from the point of view of those who govern. When we study, in retrospect, a society through law, we must always remember this: law describes what the society of an era thought was right. Law describes the desired perfection. Somehow, the law arises, obviously in the filtered coding of power, like the description of a society's selfie. Among the many possible, the choice of the best version, with the application of the best filter. It is as if, in codifying a regulatory code, a king, or a government, or a legislator, looked at their work as a projection of the society they want. It's as if they were saying "we did well in this one, let's post it". Law is the projection of memory that we would like posterity to receive.

If the law, somehow, focuses on the narration of the past, art instead becomes an exploratory language in the reality of the present. Try to experiment, to touch with your eyes closed, to probe the ground, to understand what is happening, to look for keys to understanding. Art allows us to go beyond the limits of the code, the limitation of language, to reshuffle the senses and to seek a new meaning. Art allows us to go beyond the linear correspondence between signifier and signified, it allows us to break down the barriers of logic. Art subverts the rules of gravity, aesthetics, realism. It allows us to tell what happened and what could have happened. It allows you to conserve, together, the entire fascination of the many possible presents. Again, as with information, art is undergoing a transformation in social perception. Less and less a cognitive access tool, more and more an occasion for entertainment. Normally we do not choose to go to an exhibition to question our epistemological perspectives, but to spend our free time. We don't go to an exhibition to see how someone else looked at the world, but to see the evolution of a style. Of course, this doesn't apply to everyone, but it's important to be honest when we try to analyze the evolving cultural contexts in which we live. On this I think it is very important, especially in the context of Jewish culture, to take the time and the opportunity to rediscover the voice of Aby Warburg, to discover an inevitably Jewish perspective on the iconographic evolution of world art. And on the other hand, I think it is important to try to access Bruno Zevi's reflection on architecture and urban planning, who in his "Judaism and architecture", states that "Tomorrow is built in the present. This prompts us to question ourselves about the future by hypothesizing its projects. What can this lead to tomorrow? [...] The active, incisive, pounding contribution of Jewish thought is necessary and urgent for humanity today". The contribution of Jewish culture to the interpretation - and counter-interpretation - of the linearity of artistic history is

fundamental precisely because it starts from a perspective external to European epistemological homogeneity. We need to understand - and to make people understand - that the construction of memory feeds on the evolution of symbolic languages, that the history of art is above all a history of dialectical tension and contamination, that the narrative of an era is constructed starting from a visual imaginary. For a very simple reason: we are sensitive beings before being rational beings. We believed, we convinced ourselves that it was more important to defuse the noise produced by the senses, that rationality should be pure, purified by the strong presence of tangible reality. Yet it is the smells that bring back memories, more than anything else. These are the flavors that take us back to our childhood, to what our grandmother cooked, to the precise flavors - only those - connected to moments of festivity. It is the senses that help us make sense of things.

And here we come to the closure of our circle, to the point of arrival of our journey. We talked about the dematerialization of reality, and about the way we have become accustomed to considering virtualization as a space of advantage. We talked about coding, and about language as a system for stiffening the complexity of reality. We talked about the technological systems that automate information flows and that compose, in a mechanical way, based on numbers, what deserves to be remembered. We talked about the way in which languages evolve, the way in which the law can order but also liberate, the way in which art allows us to preserve sensoriality. We talked about the need to keep all these levels together - material, sensory, digital, immaterial - and to question ourselves critically about our nature and what we want our nature to be. About how we want the memory of our nature to be.

And here we collide with reality. Here the problems begin. In this context, on this occasion, we share themes, reflections, conceptual elaborations, but outside the door, outside this screen, there is a reality that is showing all its edges. A reality that is showing its fragility. Out of here, we have to deal with the strategies behind the manipulation of information, with the information warfare dynamics that will make our ability to distinguish what is plausible, what is credible, from what is increasingly fragile. It is true. Out of here we have to figure out how to redefine a security perimeter for a memory that, today more than ever, risks being swept away by a lifestyle focused on a permanent present. On an instalife, as we have seen before. Out of here, we have to understand that we can't help but wonder about the political key to our work.

## 6. Conclusions

Hannah Arendt, in 1959, in her speech on the occasion of the awarding of the Lessing Prize, stated that "history knows many periods in which the public space darkens and the world becomes so uncertain that people no longer ask politics except to lend attention to their vital interests and their private liberty". The European project that has fueled the political imagination from the second half of the twentieth century to today is based on overcoming fear, on the desire to overcome the fear of every person of not seeing their vital interests respected. It is a project that, from the outset, was based on the desire to elaborate joint responses to the threats, different from time to time, that characterize the evolution of history. Geopolitics has had to progressively abandon the scenarios of the forecasting strategy in favor of more fluid, more elusive emergency management scenarios. Over the past few months, political scientists and journalists have fed kilometers of printed pages, questioning which dynamics of the past had generated this present, which mechanisms of international political reflection had created, over the years, this idea of democracy, this idea of a country, this idea of Europe.

However, I believe that we can no longer disregard a serious reflection, based on correct political premises and adequate intellectual tools, on the role of cultures, traditions, the innumerable potential of a Europe which is still struggling to reformulate its imagination, respecting of the value of a complex, sometimes certainly controversial, but undeniably extraordinary past. Anne-Cécile Robert states, rightly in my opinion, that "the function of history is not to heal the wounds of the present". Certainly, however, it will not be possible to trace a direction on the future of a project as ambitious as it is necessary, such as the European one, without an accurate analysis of what has characterized the multi-millennial history of a dynamic and multiform geopolitical ecosystem. The task of all of us, as diplomats, as scholars, as professionals, but above all as citizens, is to give voice to the questions, without fear and shame, so that together we can nurture the courage and foresight to seek new answers.

The task of all of us is to convert memory into a transformation engine. The task of all of us, with every little action in the greatness of everyday life, is to help give the future of a dream a new chance.