Unconscious Legacies:

Collective Trauma, Identity, and the Psychoanalytic Roots of Power and Occupation

Serene Afifi

July 2026

مدى الكرمل
علم النفس التحرّري
Liberation Psychology

Liberation Psychology

Unconscious Legacies: Collective Trauma, Identity, and the Psychoanalytic Roots of Power and Occupation

Serene Afifi
Clinical psychologist practicing across hospital, community, and private settings

Editors: Einas Odeh Haj; Dr. Siwar Aslih

July 2026

Mada al-Carmel- Arab Center for Applied Social Research
90 Hamiginim st. Haifa
Tel: +972 4 8552035, Fax: +972 4 8525973
www. mada-research.org
mada@mada-research.org

Introduction

This article examines the enduring impact of collective trauma and unconscious defense mechanisms on identity formation, power dynamics, and cycles of re-victimization. Through a psychoanalytic and socio-historical lens, it explores how historical traumas, particularly exile, antisemitism, and the Holocaust, have shaped Jewish national consciousness, reinforcing narratives of existential threat and survival. Drawing on the concept of *anamnesis* (the unconscious transmission and reactivation of historical suffering), the study seeks to demonstrate how unresolved trauma continues to structure political realities, sustain expansionist ideologies, and perpetuate intergenerational cycles of oppression.

By integrating psychoanalytic theory with historical inquiry, this article argues that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not only a geopolitical struggle but also a manifestation of intergenerational trauma, collective defense mechanisms, and historical reenactment. The unresolved trauma of Jewish persecution and Palestinian displacement generates reciprocal projection and mechanisms of moral disengagement, preventing reconciliation and entrenching asymmetrical power dynamics.

Historical Background: Transformations of Jewish Collective Identity

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE marked a profound rupture in Jewish history, above all through the loss of Jerusalem's Temple as the central cultic focus of worship, sacrifice, and pilgrimage.[1] Jewish communities had long existed across the Mediterranean and the Near East prior to 70 CE; rather than a single, empire-wide act of expulsion at that moment, historians emphasize a protracted and uneven process of displacement, conditioned by warfare, enslavement, migration, and shifting Roman administrative and punitive measures.[2] Nevertheless, in Jewish cultural memory and liturgical time, 70 CE became a paradigmatic threshold of exile and loss, accompanied by the heightened prominence of portable sanctity grounded in text, interpretation, and ritual practice.[3]

---

1. Schwartz, Seth. (2009). **Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 BCE to 640 CE**. Princeton University Press; Goodman, Martin. (2007). **Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations**. Penguin UK.

2. Barclay, John. (1996). **Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE 117 CE) (Vol. 33)**. Univ of California Press; Gruen, Erich. (2009). **Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans**. Harvard University Press.

3. Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. (2011). **Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory**. University of Washington Press.

For centuries, Jewish religious life was oriented around the Temple in Jerusalem as the central locus of sacrifice, pilgrimage, and collective worship. After the Temple's destruction, Jewish continuity increasingly depended on portable frameworks of sanctity, including Torah study, legal interpretation, and ritual practice, that could be sustained beyond a single sacred site.[4] Yerushalmi's account clarifies how this rupture was carried forward in Jewish historical consciousness as a problem of memory, preserved through narrative and liturgical time rather than through continuous sovereign control of territory.[5] In this sense, diaspora can be understood not only as loss but also as a generative ground of Jewish identity constituted through interpretive life.[6] Over time, these transformations shaped Jewish existence in diverse and often hostile environments through patterns of adaptation, communal resilience, and cultural continuity.[7]

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the destruction of the Temple constituted more than just historical displacement; it can be understood as a collective trauma that disrupted centuries of religious and cultural continuity. Freud's[8] theory of repression explains how trauma, when too overwhelming to process, is pushed into the unconscious rather than resolved. However, repressed trauma does not vanish; rather, it re-emerges indirectly in cultural narratives, national myths, and intergroup anxieties.[9] LaCapra expands this concept to the collective level, demonstrating how historical traumas become embedded in national identities and political behaviors, such as the rise of nationalist myths.[10]

The destruction of the Temple and subsequent exile were recorded in historical texts and embedded in the Jewish unconscious, where they regulated responses to persecution and reinforced mechanisms of psychological survival. Building on Freud's notion of repression, Volkan extends the psychoanalytic model to large-group identity formation. He explains that large groups often internalize such catastrophic losses as enduring symbols that define collective identity and sustain shared emotional bonds across generations.[11]

---

4. The Previous Reference.

5. Schwartz, Seth. Reference No. 1.

6. Boyarin, Daniel; & Boyarin, Jonathan. (1993). Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity. **Critical Inquiry**, 19 (4). Pp. 693- 725.

7. Barclay, John; Gruen, Erich. Reference No. 2

8. Freud, Sigmund. (1917). Mourning and Melancholia. **The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud**, 14 (1914- 1916). Pp. 237- 258.

9. Caruth, Cathy. (2016). **Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History**. JHU Press.

10. LaCapra, Dominick. (2014). **Writing History, Writing Trauma**. JHU Press.

11. Volkan, Vamik D. (2001). Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity. **Group Analysis**, 34 (1), Pp. 79- 97.

The trauma of diaspora and persecution, embedded in Jewish historical consciousness, has engendered defensive psychological responses that persist today. Vollhardt[12] distinguishes between exclusive victimhood —in which a group views its suffering as unique and develops defensive isolation— and inclusive victimhood, where historical pain fosters intergroup solidarity. In Jewish-European history, cycles of persecution are best understood as reinforcing exclusive victimhood and a defensive identity, which simultaneously strengthened communal cohesion and heightened distrust toward outsiders.[13]

The long-standing perception of existential threat led Jewish communities to emphasize internal solidarity and a form of inclusive victimhood[14] —as later claimed by Zionism— which reinforced a psychological framework in which survival necessitated religious and cultural preservation and a deep awareness of external hostility.[15]

Over generations, these responses to trauma became deeply ingrained. Freud[16] conceptualized defense mechanisms as unconscious processes that protect the psyche from unbearable emotions such as helplessness, fear, and guilt.[17] When applied to collective trauma, these mechanisms manifest as historical patterns that delineate group identity.[18] Splitting,[19] for instance, produces a rigid division between good and evil, allowing persecuted communities to preserve moral integrity and internal cohesion. Projection externalizes internalized fears, reinforcing the perception of an ever-present enemy, while denial suppresses painful realities to maintain psychological stability. In some cases, identification with the aggressor emerges, when a historically oppressed group unconsciously adopts the behaviors of its former oppressors as a means of reclaiming agency and power.[20] While these mechanisms serve a protective function, they also sustain cycles of victimhood and conflict, influencing intergroup relations over generations.

---

12. Vollhardt, Johanna Ray. (2015). Inclusive Victim Consciousness in Advocacy, Social Movements, and Intergroup Relations: Promises and Pitfalls. **Social Issues and Policy Review**, 9 (1). Pp. 89- 120.

13. Alexander, Jeffrey C. (2004). Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma. **Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity**, 76 (4), Pp. 620- 639.

14. Vollhardt, Johanna Ray. Reference No. 12.

15. Baum, Steven K. (2008). **The Psychology of Genocide. Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Rescuers**. Cambridge, UK; Bar-Tal, Daniel. (2003). "Collective Memory of Physical Violence: Its Contribution to the Culture of Violence". In: **The role of Memory in Ethnic Conflict.** London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. Pp. 77- 93.

16. Freud, Sigmund. (2015). Beyond the Pleasure Principle. **Psychoanalysis and History**, 17 (2). Pp. 151- 204.

17. Freud, Sigmund. (1922). Repression. **The Psychoanalytic Review (1913- 1957)**, 9. P. 444.

18. Volkan, Vamik D. (1997). **Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism**. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

19. Klein, Melanie. (2018). "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms 1". In: **Developments in Psychoanalysis.** Routledge. Pp. 292- 320.

20. Freud, Anna. (2018). **The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence**. Routledge; Ferenczi, S. (1949). Confusion of the Tongues between the Adults and the Child (The language of tenderness and of passion). **International Journal of Psychoanalysis**, 30 (4). Pp. 225- 230.

While psychoanalytic theory illuminates the unconscious dimensions of collective trauma, social-psychological models, such as Bandura's theory of moral disengagement,[21] explain how moral reasoning adapts under chronic threat. Bandura's model provides insight into how historical trauma is processed and rationalized. Through the displacement of responsibility, groups may attribute blame to external threats, framing their actions as necessary for survival. In the Jewish historical narrative, suffering was often interpreted through a religious lens, which reinforced the idea that persecution was both a divine test and a moral lesson.[22] This framing, in turn, may have facilitated advantageous comparison, in which Jewish suffering was portrayed as morally superior and fundamentally distinct from the perceived wrongdoing of oppressors.[23] These mechanisms contributed to the preservation of Jewish identity under oppression while also reinforcing a psychological dichotomy between victim and aggressor.

From Enlightenment to Zionism

As Europe entered the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Enlightenment and the rising tide of nationalism created both new opportunities and heightened dangers for Jewish communities. These competing forces —universal ideals of civic equality on one hand, and emerging ethnic exclusivism on the other— defined the modern Jewish struggle for belonging. The *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, sought to bridge the gap between Jewish tradition and modern European society. Advocates of this movement called for integration into civic life while preserving elements of religious and cultural identity.[24] However, the growth of European nationalism, coupled with entrenched antisemitic prejudices, ultimately exposed the limits of assimilation. Despite efforts to integrate, Jews were increasingly excluded from full participation in European nation-states, exposing the stark reality that social and political acceptance remained conditional and precarious.[25]

This defensive posture against exclusion not only consolidated internal Jewish solidarity but also catalyzed the emergence of Zionism as a movement for national self-determination. Initially representing a minority among Jewish communities, Zionism was born from the recognition that Jewish identity could no longer remain contingent upon the precarious acceptance of European societies.

---

21. Bandura, Albert. (2017). "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities". In: **Recent Developments in Criminological Theory**. Routledge. Pp. 135- 152.

22. Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. Reference No. 3.

23. Baum, Steven K. Reference No. 15.

24. Feiner, Shmuel (2004). **The Jewish Enlightenment**. University of Pennsylvania Press.; Litvak, Olga (2012). **Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism (Vol. 3)**. Rutgers University Press.

25. Meyer, Michael A. (1967). **The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749- 1824 (No. 32)**. Wayne State University Press.

The broader European socio-political climate of the time further accelerated this shift. As nationalism increasingly defined belonging in racial and exclusionary terms, Jewish populations were cast as "other", a convenient scapegoat for the anxieties of modern nation-building.[26] Disillusioned by the broken promises of the Enlightenment, a growing number of Jews began to reconsider their place in European society, recognizing that emancipation did not guarantee genuine acceptance.

Freud's concept of the narcissism of small differences[27] suggests that groups with shared cultural or historical experiences often emphasize minor distinctions to maintain their own identity. In this regard, European nationalism, which sought to forge homogenous national identities, ultimately reinforced Jewish distinctiveness by excluding them. Zionism, in turn, emerged as both a reaction to exclusion and a redefinition of Jewish identity, and as a movement whose very assertion of autonomy was forged by the experience of being denied belonging.[28]

Amid the waning viability of assimilation, the appeal of self-determination grew stronger. Rather than seeking security within Europe, Zionist thinkers such as Theodor Herzl argued that the Jewish people could only achieve safety and autonomy through the establishment of a sovereign state.[29] This marked a profound psychological shift from passive endurance of persecution to an active assertion of Jewish nationhood. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this shift can be understood as a psychological defense against past trauma. Anna Freud[30] described reaction formation as a process through which individuals or groups transform painful vulnerabilities into their opposites in order to protect the self. In this case, Jewish communities, long subjected to exclusion and vulnerability, redirected their historical victimhood into a movement centered on strength, autonomy, and territorial sovereignty. This transformation not only served as a means of overcoming historical subjugation but also reinforced Zionism through its assertion of control over Jewish destiny. Yet this emergent assertion was also accompanied by the construction of legitimizing narratives that provided moral justification for territorial claims. Chief among these was the popular yet historically inaccurate slogan, "a land without a people for a people without a land", which framed Zionist aspirations as a humanitarian project while effectively erasing the existing indigenous population.[31]

---

26. Wistrich, Robert S. (1991). **Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred**. Pantheon Books.

27. Freud, Sigmund. (2015). **Civilization and its Discontents**. Broadview Press.

28. Kornberg, Jacques. (1993). **Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism**. Indiana University Press; Shapira, Anita. (2014). **Israel: A History**. Brandeis University Press.

29. The previous reference.

30. Freud, Anna. Reference No. 20.

31. Masalha, Nur. (2012). **The Palestine Nakba: Decolonizing History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory**. Bloomsbury Publishing; Pappé, Ilan. (2007). **The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine**. Simon and Schuster.

Zionism thus functioned not only as a political movement but also as a process of collective individuation, through which fragmented elements of Jewish identity were symbolically integrated into a unified whole.[32] Jung's concept of individuation offers a framework for understanding this transformation. Individuation describes the process by which individuals integrate previously suppressed aspects of the self to achieve a cohesive identity. Applied to the collective level, Zionism can be interpreted as a form of Jewish individuation— an attempt to reconcile historical fragmentation through national self-determination.[33] This shift enabled Jews to reclaim disowned aspects of their identity as they moved from internalized oppression toward active self-assertion.

The psychological transition from victimhood to self-assertion was not a simple reversal of power, but a complex process shaped by both inherited trauma and the conscious ideology that emerged in response to it. In its effort to reclaim Jewish agency, Zionism also risked reproducing defensive postures once directed against Jews themselves, transforming collective fear into political control.[34] Gradually, the collective pursuit of safety revealed its shadow[35]— the internalized fear of annihilation that, when left unexamined, could manifest as the compulsion to control. As Arendt[36] observed, collective insecurity can be consciously organized into political ideologies that convert fear into authority and vulnerability into domination. However, Said[37] reminds us that moral legitimacy rests not on the depth of suffering, but on the capacity to resist its repetition. The intersection of trauma and ideology thus exposes the psychological shadow of self-determination, where the impulse toward survival, if unexamined, risks perpetuating the very conditions it seeks to escape.

The shadow, a notion termed by Jung[38], represents the repressed and unconscious aspects of the collective psyche. Samuels[39] and Fordham[40] have extended Jung's ideas to the social and cultural spheres, suggesting that collectives, like individuals, can undergo cycles of fragmentation and reintegration when confronted with trauma. The assertion of political sovereignty required the integration of this shadow, a process that transformed historical powerlessness into political and military empowerment. This inner process of psychic integration found its political expression in the pursuit of collective self-determination, where the reclamation of identity was intertwined with the construction of sovereignty.

---

32. Jung, Carl Gustav. (2014). **Collected Works of CG Jung: General Index**. Princeton University Press.

33. Samuels, Andrew. (2003). **Jung and the Post-Jungians**. Routledge.

34. Volkan, Vamik D.. Reference No. 18.

35. Jung, Carl Gustav. Reference No. 32.

36. Arendt, Hannah. (1973). **The Origins of Totalitarianism (Vol. 244)**. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

37. Said, Edward. (2025). **The Question of Palestine**. Text Publishing.

38. Jung, Carl Gustav. Reference No. 32.

39. Samuels, Andrew. Reference No. 33.

40. Fordham, Michael. (2013). **New Developments in Analytical Psychology (Psychology Revivals)**. Routledge.

Yet, as Jung cautioned,[41] when the shadow is not consciously integrated, it tends to be projected outward, manifesting as domination, moral blindness, or aggression toward the perceived other. This shift was thus both a response to trauma and an attempt to reorient the Jewish historical trajectory, moving from victimhood to agency while revealing the moral ambiguities inherent in power.

The psychological dynamics of Zionism can also be illuminated through the biblical narrative of the Golden Calf.[42] In seeking immediate security during Moses's absence, the Israelites turned to a tangible symbol of power— an external object intended to restore a sense of control amid uncertainty. This act of misplaced agency reflected a deeper psychic process: the attempt to master anxiety by reenacting familiar patterns inherited from their oppressors. Similarly, in its quest for sovereignty, Zionism sought to construct a stable political identity. Yet, as with the Golden Calf, the pursuit of security through concrete structures risked reproducing the very dynamics it sought to transcend. While Zionism sought to ensure survival, its realization introduced profound moral and political dilemmas, particularly as it navigated pre-existing geopolitical realities and the presence of another people on the land.[43]

The struggle for self-determination ultimately culminated in the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel, the materialization of the Zionist vision. Yet, this movement toward autonomy did not unfold in isolation. The pursuit of sovereignty in a land already inhabited by others entailed profound ethical and political consequences, confronting the newly formed state with the paradox of liberation achieved through displacement.[44]

The Realization of Zionism and the Establishment of the State of Israel

The 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which Britain expressed support for establishing a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, was a decisive turning point for Zionism. It conferred international legitimacy upon Jewish aspirations for self-determination while simultaneously heightening Palestinian anxieties over dispossession and identity. Though framed as a humanitarian and diplomatic gesture, the declaration also aligned Zionist objectives with British imperial interests, embedding the movement within the broader structures of colonial power in the Middle East.[45] Western support for Zionism was thus not solely political but also theological. Within British and

41. Jung, Carl Gustav. Reference No. 32.

42. The Bible, Exodus, 32.

43. Shlaim, Avi. (2015). **The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab world**. Penguin UK.

44. Morris, Benny. (2004). **The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited (Vol. 18)**. Cambridge University Press; Pappé, Ilan. Reference No. 31.

45. Shlaim, Avi. Reference No. 43; Renton, James. (2007). **The Zionist Masquerade: The Birth of the Anglo-Zionist Alliance, 1914- 1918**. Springer.

American Protestant circles, particularly among Evangelicals and the Anglican elite, the Jewish "return" to Palestine was interpreted as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. British leaders such as Arthur Balfour and David Lloyd George saw this vision as divinely ordained, intertwining religious eschatology with imperial strategy.[46] Similarly, Evangelical movements in the United States viewed Jewish statehood as a precursor to divine redemption, which reinforced a moral and religious rationale for Western support of Israel's creation.[47]

As Zionism gained international recognition, the rise of antisemitism across Europe during the 1920s and 1930s lent the movement new urgency. The systematic extermination of six million Jews by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust transformed Zionism from a movement of cultural revival into an imperative for survival. The subsequent influx of Jewish refugees into Palestine exacerbated tensions with the Arab population, contributing to the outbreak of the 1936– 1939 Arab Revolt. The revolt, rooted in Palestinian resistance to British rule, land dispossession, and expanding Zionist settlement, resulted in widespread violence and social upheaval. In response, the British military, seeking to suppress the uprising, launched extensive counterinsurgency operations, including mass arrests, military operations, and the demolition of entire villages, measures that significantly weakened Palestinian political leadership.[48] During this period, the Haganah, the principal Jewish paramilitary group, cooperated with British forces to suppress the revolt, a collaboration that strengthened its military capabilities and laid the groundwork for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) after 1948.[49]

The Holocaust became a defining cultural trauma, reconfiguring Jewish identity and political consciousness. According to Alexander,[50] cultural trauma is not merely a psychological wound but a social process through which suffering becomes a source of collective meaning and political action. Within this framework, the Holocaust can be understood to have reinforced Zionism as an existential necessity, legitimizing the urgent pursuit of a sovereign Jewish state.[51] Yet, from a psychoanalytic perspective, unresolved trauma may persist in the collective unconscious, re-emerging through repetition, projection, and domination.

Freud's concept of identification with the aggressor[52] describes how those subjected to prolonged persecution may unconsciously internalize the traits or logic of their oppressors

46. Ariel, Yaakov. (2006). An Unexpected Alliance: Christian Zionism and its Historical Significance. **Modern Judaism**, 26 (1). Pp. 74- 100.

47. Wistrich, Robert S. Reference No. 26.

48. Khalidi, Rashid. (2010). **Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness**. Columbia University Press; Shlaim, Avi. Reference No. 43.

49. Morris, Benny. Reference No. 44; Shlaim, Avi. Reference No. 43

50. Alexander, Jeffrey C. Reference No. 13.

51. Alexander, Jeffrey C. (2013). **Trauma: A Social Theory**. John Wiley & Sons.

52. Freud, Anna. Reference No. 20.

as a defense against helplessness. At the collective level, this mechanism illuminates the transition from historical Jewish victimhood to state sovereignty, whereby powerlessness was transmuted into doctrines of militarization and territorial control. In seeking to prevent future victimization, Zionist leaders consciously or unconsciously adopted the very logic of security, exclusion, and preemptive aggression once directed against Jews in Europe. What originated as an unconscious psychological defense thus evolved into a conscious political ethos of survival, transforming fear into moral righteousness and rationalizing domination as self-preservation.

As Zionism achieved sovereignty, the unintegrated shadow of historical persecution reappeared. Rather than being assimilated into collective self-awareness, repressed aggression and existential fear were projected outward.[53] This psychological transition, from victim to sovereign, externalized historical trauma and sustained cycles of violence and securitization. Through this projection, Zionism's psychic defense against annihilation became a political reality, reinforcing militarization and territorial expansion as safeguards against an enemy largely constructed from inherited trauma.

Within the collective Jewish consciousness, Palestinians came to be framed not as a people resisting dispossession but as the reincarnation of the historical persecutor—the latest manifestation of the forces that had once sought Jewish annihilation. This framing, cultivated through political rhetoric, education, and media, reinforced moral disengagement[54] and transformed defensive fear into moral justification. Violence against Palestinians could thus be rationalized as self-defense against an "evil" power, maintaining psychological coherence while perpetuating the very cycle of domination born from unprocessed trauma.

The establishment of Israel, celebrated by Zionists as the culmination of Jewish self-determination, simultaneously inaugurated one of the most significant episodes of forced displacement in modern history. For Palestinians, this event, known as the Nakba ("catastrophe"), was marked by the systematic destruction of villages, mass expulsions, and the erasure of social and political life in their homeland. Roughly, 700,000 Palestinians were displaced and more than 400 villages destroyed in a deliberate project of territorial consolidation and demographic engineering.[55] The events of 1948 thus signified the transformation of Zionism's defensive ethos into a settler-colonial enterprise that produced profound collective trauma: for Palestinians, through dispossession and statelessness, and for Israelis, through the psychic burden of denial and moral disengagement that accompanied the founding violence.[56]

---

53. Jung, Carl Gustav. (2014). **Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self**. Routledge; Samuels, Andrew. Reference No. 33.

54. Bandura, Albert. Reference No. 21.

55. Pappé, Ilan. Reference No. 31; Morris, Benny. Reference No. 44.

56. Said, Edward. Reference No. 37.

This historical reversal also marked a symbolic turning point: the re-materialization of what had long been spiritualized. While the historical loss of a cultic center and sovereignty had reconfigured Jewish religious life, intensifying forms of "portable" sanctity anchored in Torah, interpretation, and ritual practice, attachment to the land persisted as memory and horizon.[57] Modern Zionism, by contrast, sought to re-territorialize that horizon, translating diasporic longing and scriptural idioms into projects of settlement, sovereignty, and a national landscape, thereby recoding sacred memory into geopolitical space.[58]

The psychic residue of 1948 surfaced within symbolic and theological narratives. The biblical narrative of Cain and Abel[59] offers a profound metaphor for the projection within the Israeli–Palestinian settler-colonial encounter, later institutionalized through military occupation. Cain, consumed by jealousy and guilt, directs his aggression toward Abel rather than confronting his own inner fragmentation. Similarly, the trauma of Jewish persecution and exile, rather than being consciously integrated, was externalized. Palestinians displaced by the Nakba came to embody the unconscious repository of Jewish existential fear, guilt, and repressed historical rage. As Volkan notes,[60] unprocessed trauma is often projected onto external enemies, transforming internal conflict into recurring collective violence.

Mechanisms of denial and moral disengagement shaped Zionist attitudes toward Palestinian displacement. Euphemistic language, for instance, referring to expelled Palestinians as "refugees" rather than a displaced population, helped normalize the erasure of Palestinian presence. Similarly, the diffusion of responsibility functioned as a collective psychological defense against the moral burden of dispossession and violence.[61]

While projection may explain how trauma was externalized, it does not absolve responsibility. Jewish communities, scarred by centuries of persecution, emerged from the Holocaust with a collective psyche structured by the fear of annihilation. This fear, initially rooted in survival, was later reinforced by conscious mechanisms of political manipulation. As Hopper and Weinberg argue through their concept of the social unconscious,[62] such psychological mechanisms do not operate in isolation but become

57. Cohen, Shaye. (2014). **From the Maccabees to the Mishnah**. Westminster John Knox Press; Schwartz, Seth. Reference No. 1; Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. Reference No. 3.

58. Ravitzky, Aveizer. (1996). **Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism**. University of Chicago Press; Zerubavel, Yael. (1995). **Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition**. University of Chicago Press.

59. The Bible, Genesis, 4, 1– 16.

60. Volkan, Vamik D.. Reference No. 18.

61. Bandura, Albert. Reference No. 21.

62. Hopper, Earl; & Weinberg, Haim. (2011). **The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups, and Societies, Vol 1: Mainly Theory**. Karnac Books.

embedded in national identity and state policy. The Israeli political leadership actively cultivated a "fear industry", reinforcing the premise that Palestinians were not merely a displaced people but a perpetual existential enemy. Biblical notions of the Promised Land and the Chosen People further sacralized this dynamic, legitimizing territorial expansion as both a historical right and a divine mandate. Dehumanization, initially an unconscious projection of historical trauma, became a deliberate state mechanism used to justify militarization, expansion, and occupation. By amplifying existential threats through media, education, and political discourse, the Israeli state upheld a permanent state of emergency in which Palestinians were portrayed not as human adversaries but as embodiments of evil.[63]

The Psychological Architecture of Occupation: From Historical Trauma to Global Complicity

Following the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Palestinian Arab population that remained within its borders was placed under military rule until 1966. Though granted citizenship, Palestinians faced severe restrictions on their movement, political disenfranchisement, and extensive land confiscation within a regime of surveillance and subordination that foreshadowed later forms of occupation and apartheid-based governance.[64] For Jews, Israel symbolized the end of exile and persecution— a return to safety after centuries of stateless vulnerability. Yet, this structure of control reflected an unconscious effort to master historical helplessness by reproducing relations of domination. As Fanon observed,[65] the colonizer's assertion of power often emerges from an unresolved fear of being dominated. The trauma of persecution, particularly the Holocaust, was thus transposed into the institutions of sovereignty, shaping state policies driven by existential anxiety and the moral logic of "self-defense".

As Alexander argues,[66] cultural trauma becomes politically operative when suffering is transformed into a collective mandate. In this sense, the newly formed state sought psychic mastery over historical vulnerability; yet, in doing so, it began to mirror the very structures of domination it had once endured, in a dynamic Anna Freud[67] describes as identification with the aggressor. This process produced an emotional opacity toward the suffering of any outgroup, a psychic defense that safeguarded collective moral innocence by numbing empathy.

63. Pappé, Ilan. Reference No. 31.

64. Khalidi, Rashid. Reference No. 48.

65. Fanon, Frantz. (1963). **The Wretched of the Earth**. Grove Weidenfeld.

66. Alexander, Jeffrey C. Reference No. 51.

67. Freud, Anna. Reference No. 20.

This identification with the aggressor soon crystallized within Israeli national identity. The memory of victimization fused with the pursuit of security, transforming domination into a perceived condition for survival. Power became as much psychological as it was political— a means to ward off the return of collective helplessness. As Fanon[68] argued, the colonizer's compulsion to control is often the afterlife of their own subjugation. Thus, the trauma that had once defined Jewish vulnerability re-emerged as its mirror image: a state identity built on the internalization of domination and the occupation of another people's land.[69]

The Six-Day War of 1967 deepened these dynamics through Israel's rapid expansion into the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sigmund Freud[70] observed that unprocessed trauma tends to repeat itself through a repetition compulsion, a psychological pattern in which past suffering seeks reenactment rather than resolution. In this light, the post-Holocaust narrative of survival became entangled with territorial control, a manifestation of collective anxiety transposed into political reality. As Pappé[71] documents, this expansion entrenched a structure of domination rooted in historical fear.

Drawing on Jung's notion of the collective unconscious,[72] this expansion activated archetypal narratives within Jewish cultural memory, particularly those of the Promised Land and the Exodus, which equated divine fulfillment with security and possession. As Assmann argues,[73] such myths function not merely as theological stories but as enduring cultural codes that translate sacred longing into territorial legitimacy. These archetypal narratives of exile and return thus operated beneath political discourse, transforming ancient yearning into modern justification and providing unconscious reinforcement for policies of expansion and security.

This compulsion may lead to the reproduction of traumatic patterns across different contexts. From this perspective, Israeli policies of security, expansion, and occupation may be interpreted not only as political strategies but also as psychic reenactments of historical persecution, through which victimhood remains central to collective identity. The tragedy of this dynamic lies in the way internalized experiences of persecution may be transformed into defensive practices that reproduce structures of domination against another population, even as such practices are justified as necessary for collective survival.

---

68. Fanon, Frantz. Reference No. 65.

69. Freud, Anna. Reference No. 20; Volkan, Vamik D.. Reference No. 18.

70. Freud, Sigmund. Reference No. 16.

71. Pappé, Ilan. Reference No. 31.

72. Jung, Carl Gustav. (1959). "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious" .In: **Collected Works of CG Jung, volume 9, part 1**. Routledge.

73. Assmann, Jan. (2009). "Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism". In: **Moses the Egyptian**. Harvard University Press.

For Israeli society, the trauma of persecution and the Holocaust left an unprocessed shadow of a deep, enduring fear of annihilation and helplessness,[74] creating a psychological coexistence of both perceived victimhood and the capacity for domination. Within the Zionist imagination, this shadow became embodied in the Palestinian population, who were positioned not as a people with distinct political and ethical claims, but as the symbolic continuation of the hostile forces that had persecuted Jews throughout history. This transference of fear and guilt functioned as a psychological defense, allowing aggression to be experienced as self-protection. Consequently, Palestinians were perceived less as a colonized population and more as the reincarnation of an eternal persecutor,— an embodiment of the belief that the world's enmity toward Jews is perpetual. This corresponds to what Bar-Tal describes as "societal beliefs"[75] formed under conditions of intractable conflict, wherein collective fear and moral righteousness become interdependent psychological anchors that sustain defensive aggression.

This same logic extends into the contemporary discursive field, where the invocation of antisemitism operates as a mechanism of moral foreclosure. By framing almost any criticism of Israeli policy as an expression of antisemitic hostility, the state and its allies transform historical trauma into a rhetorical shield, deflecting external scrutiny while reaffirming a collective identity structured around perpetual victimhood.[76] Such projection and moral closure render the recognition of Palestinian suffering psychically intolerable, reinforcing militarized responses, and legitimizing policies of domination as an existential necessity.

The dynamics of domination that followed the occupation cannot be understood solely in terms of ideology or policy, but also through the lens of Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment.[77] This experiment illustrates how ordinary individuals, once placed within rigid hierarchical power structures, can internalize authority to the point of cruelty, transforming situational control into moral indifference. In the context of prolonged occupation, these same psychological mechanisms become systemic rather than exceptional, reflecting what Arendt termed the "banality of evil"[78]— that is, the normalization of dehumanization through bureaucratic and military obedience.

Israeli military rule over Palestinians mirrors this psychological transformation, as domination becomes routinized and moral agency is diffused. The discourse of "security" functions not merely as political rhetoric but as a psychological alibi, allowing individuals

74. Jung, Carl Gustav. Reference No. 72.

75. Bar-Tal, Daniel. (1998). Societal Beliefs in Times of Intractable Conflict: The Israeli Case. **International Journal of Conflict Management**, 9 (1). Pp. 22- 50.

76. Finkelstein, Norman G.. (2008). **Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History**. Univ of California Press; Butler, Judith. (2012). **Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism**. Columbia University Press.

77. Zimbardo, Philip G. (1972). Pathology of Imprisonment. **Society**, 9 (6). Pp. 4- 8.

78. Arendt, Hannah. (2006). **Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil**. Penguin.

and institutions to perceive coercion, surveillance, and violence as acts of duty rather than aggression. In this sense, the occupation operates as a living laboratory of moral disengagement,[79] demonstrating how fear and conformity can turn moral subjects into agents of systemic oppression.

Fanon offers valuable insight into the psychological dynamics of colonialism[80] by demonstrating that the violence of occupation operates not only through physical control but also through the colonizer's moral justification for domination. For the oppressed, resistance becomes a psychological act of survival, a reclamation of dignity and agency; for the colonizer, repression functions as a defense against confronting guilt and fragility in order to maintain authority. The First and Second Intifadas exemplified this dialectic, where collective uprisings functioned as assertions of self-worth amid systematic erasure, yet simultaneously reactivated Israeli existential fears, thereby reinforcing militarization and control. Fanon's decolonization theory posits that resistance to colonial rule is both a political necessity and a process of psychological liberation. He argues that the colonized must reclaim their identity through acts of defiance, as submission to occupation leads to internalized inferiority.

Fanon[81] further argued that colonialism distorts the psyche of the colonizer just as profoundly as it fractures that of the colonized. In Israel's case, decades of occupation have produced a normalized dehumanization, wherein Palestinians are perceived not as individuals with rights but as perpetual threats. This dynamic mirrors Fanon's warning that colonial violence ultimately corrupts the moral fabric of the colonizer, transforming domination from a purported means of security into an existential necessity for preserving identity and power.

The ongoing conflict thus creates a feedback loop of psychological and physical violence, in which Palestinian resistance and Israeli military responses continually mirror and amplify one another. Weinberg's concept of the social unconscious illuminates why such cycles endure. Societies inherit unresolved collective traumas that shape national myths, dictate political behaviors, and sustain rigid in-group/out-group dynamics. For Palestinians, the Nakba and the ongoing occupation generate an equally potent social unconscious of dispossession and defiance, which reinforces resistance as an act of existential necessity and identity reclamation. Because these unconscious narratives remain unexamined, each side continues to react in ways that confirm and reproduce the trauma of the other, ensuring that genuine reconciliation stays elusive. These unexamined psychic legacies[82] obscure moral clarity and foreclose empathy, binding Israelis and Palestinians together in a shared history of trauma. Each group has become the projected shadow of the other, locked in a pattern of reenactment rather than resolution, thereby instantiating a repetition compulsion played out at the scale of nations.

---

79. Bandura, Albert. Reference No. 21.

80. Fanon, Frantz. Reference No. 65.

81. The previous reference.

82. Weinberg, H.. (2007). So what is this social unconscious anyway?. **Group Analysis**, 40 (3). Pp. 307- 322.

The events of October 7, 2023 and the ensuing devastation of the Gaza war (2023– 2025) constitute the latest manifestation of the unresolved cycle of trauma, fear, and retribution embedded in the Israeli–Palestinian psyche. In Israeli discourse, the Hamas attack was immediately framed as "the greatest tragedy since the Holocaust", a conceptualization that reactivates collective memories of annihilation and collapses the distinction between past and present trauma. From a Freudian perspective, this regression reflects a suspension of the collective superego,[83] wherein moral restraint dissolves as identification with the aggressor re-emerges as a defensive mechanism against helplessness.[84] This psychic collapse was further compounded by processes of projection and moral disengagement,[85] which reframed vengeance as virtue and devastation as self-defense. The ensuing assault on Gaza, waged through mass displacement, heavy bombardment, and deliberate deprivation, demonstrates how unprocessed collective trauma may be transformed into a destructive political action. Rather that resolving historical fear, such violence reproduces it, transferring traumatic vulnerability onto another population and perpetuating the cycle it ostensibly seeks to end.[86] This moral rupture did not remain confined to Israel; it reverberated globally, exposing the silence and complicity of the democratic world.

The "fear industry" has long played a central role in sustaining Israel's psychological and political order.[87] Institutionalized through state rhetoric, security policy, and media discourse, transforms anxiety into political ideology.[88] Following October 7, 2023, this apparatus shifted into a higher gear as grief and horror were rapidly converted into a permanent state of emergency, portrayed as a form of moral self-defense. The reiteration of siege narratives reactivated collective memories of annihilation, thereby legitimizing unprecedented violence against Gaza as an act of survival. Through education, journalism, and political messaging, Palestinians were further dehumanized and cast as embodiments of evil, allowing society to preserve an image of innocence while externalizing unresolved historical fear. This dynamic exemplifies what Fanon[89] identified as the colonial reversal, in which trauma, rather than being healed, is weaponized to perpetuate domination.

This same logic of fear has also been exported beyond Israel's borders, profoundly reshaping international discourse. Western political leaders, particularly in the United States and Europe, frequently reproduce this "fear industry", framing Israeli militarism

83. Freud, Sigmund. (1923). **The Ego and the Id** (Strachey, J.. Trans.). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 19. Pp. 12- 66.

84. Freud, Anna. Reference No. 20.

85. Bandura, Albert. Reference No. 21.

86. Fanon, Frantz. Reference No. 65.

87. Pappé, Ilan. Reference No. 31.

88. Bandura, Albert. Reference No. 21; Hopper, Earl; & Weinberg, Haim. Reference No. 62.

89. Fanon, Frantz. Reference No. 65.

as a moral necessity while suppressing Palestinian narratives through appeals to security.[90] This global diffusion of trauma-driven reasoning has transformed fear into a shared moral currency within the international order, legitimizing complicity through empathy with power rather than with suffering.[91]

The David and Goliath metaphor has long underpinned Israel's national ethos, reinforcing a persistent sense of defensive victimhood.[92] In Zionist discourse, Israel is cast as David—a small, vulnerable nation constantly besieged by hostile forces. Yet, as Israel grew into a dominant regional power, this self-image became increasingly paradoxical; despite its military superiority, the state's identity remains anchored in a sense of vulnerability. Sustained by the projection of an external Goliath, this narrative effectively transforms military aggression into moral necessity, allowing violence to be framed as self-defense. In this way, the myth functions as a collective defense mechanism, preserving psychological coherence through the perpetual reenactment of victimhood.

Fear and trauma, deeply embedded in the collective memory of the Holocaust and historical existential threats, have made Israeli society particularly susceptible to leaders who project strength and certainty.[93] Psychoanalytic theory suggests that in moments of heightened collective anxiety, societies often regress toward paternal authority figures who promise safety and security, thereby translating fear into political capital.[94] This dynamic enables power to be consolidated through narratives of protection and revenge. Furthermore, research indicates that individuals with traumatic histories may develop a perceived sense of moral entitlement to act in aggressive, self-preserving ways, rationalized as compensation for past suffering.[95] This combination of unresolved trauma and defensive entitlement has reinforced a societal inclination toward militarization and the normalization of dominance as a precondition for survival.

Levy[96] argues that Israeli society remains in deep denial about the moral consequences of its occupation, a denial laid bare by the devastation of Gaza during the 2023– 2025 war. Despite the stark visibility of mass civilian suffering, Israeli public discourse remains largely insulated by a defensive moral narrative that frames violence as necessity and empathy for the other as betrayal. This collective blindness can be understood through Klein's concept of splitting,[97] a defense mechanism in which intolerable moral

90. Pappé, Ilan. Reference No. 31.

91. Hopper, Earl; & Weinberg, Haim. Reference No. 62.

92. Bar-Tal, Daniel. Reference No. 75.

93. The previous Reference.

94. Freud, Sigmund. (2004). **Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego**. [n. p].

95. Zitek, Emily; et al.. (2010). Victim Entitlement to Behave Selfishly. **Journal of Personality and Social Psychology**, 98 (2). P. 245.

96. Levy, Gideon. (2024). **The Killing of Gaza: Reports on a Catastrophe**. Verso Books.

97. Klein, Melanie. Reference No. 19. P.160.

contradictions are separated into rigid categories of "good" and "bad" to avoid psychic disintegration. On a collective level, splitting enables a nation to preserve a moral self-image while projecting aggression and guilt onto an external enemy.[98]

Within this theoretical framework, Israeli identity depends on the disavowal of the state's role as aggressor, a process that upholds an image of innocence through the continual externalization of blame. The state's self-perception as moral and perpetually under threat is thus preserved by a complex of psychological and political defenses that repress any acknowledgment of Palestinian suffering.

This defensive mechanism now extends globally. Within international discourse, the invocation of antisemitism often operates as a method of silencing, as criticism of Israeli state violence is recoded as an expression of antisemitic hostility. This conflation transforms legitimate moral inquiry into a perceived existential threat, reinforcing what Bandura[99] terms moral disengagement— the cognitive reframing of harm as a justified necessity. As Butler[100] argues, this dynamic erodes the ethical core of Jewish moral thought by equating justice-oriented critique with disloyalty, creating a demand for solidarity with power rather than with suffering. Together, these interlocking mechanisms of denial, splitting, and moral disengagement constitute the psychological infrastructure that perpetuates domination while repressing empathy and accountability.[101]

Chomsky[102] extends this argument by examining how international power dynamics sustain Israel's moral immunity, emphasizing how political and military support from Western nations allows the occupation to persist, framed as a moral obligation rather than a strategic alliance.

This guilt-driven support, frequently framed as moral atonement, provides Israel with a unique form of international exceptionalism that converts historical responsibility into political prerogative. This alliance further reveals the transference of Western trauma into Middle Eastern geopolitics, manifested as a collective repetition of denial and moral displacement. By seeking to absolve their own histories of antisemitism through unconditional support for Israeli militarism, Western democracies engage in a new form of disavowal that allows them to protect their self-image as liberal defenders of freedom while simultaneously enabling the ongoing dispossession of Palestinians. As

98. Segal, Hanna. (2018). **Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein**. Routledge; McWilliams, Nancy (2011). **Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process**. Guilford Press.

99. Bandura, Albert. Reference No. 21.

100. Butler, Judith. Reference No. 76.

101. Bar-Tal, Daniel. Reference No. 75.

102. Chomsky, Noam. (1999). **Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians**. South End Press.

LaCapra[103] argues, societies caught in "traumatic time" remain trapped in compulsive repetition rather than achieving ethical transformation. Ultimately, the Western world's relationship to Israel functions as both atonement and avoidance, sustaining global complicity through the politics of projected guilt.

From Humanity to Nationality to Bestiality: The Repetition of Catastrophe

The devastation of the 2023– 2025 Gaza war marked the culmination of Israel's unprocessed historical trauma. The events of October 7 reactivated deep-rooted collective fear, collapsing moral judgment into vengeance.[104] The ensuing campaign of mass displacement, systematic destruction, and the genocidal erasure of Gaza's population, revealed how unintegrated trauma can violently invert ethical frameworks into violence, transforming fear into moral license.[105] The paralysis of global democracies in the face of this ethnic cleansing exposed the diffusion of this trauma-based logic in a world order more responsive to the anxieties of power fear than to human suffering.

The Israeli–Palestinian encounter of today should therefore not be understood merely as a political or territorial dispute, but also as a struggle for moral and psychic recognition. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*[106] offers a powerful framework for comprehending this impasse: one side seeks validation through domination, while the other struggles for freedom through resistance. Yet, as Hegel demonstrates, genuine freedom cannot emerge from subjugation; it is contingent on mutual recognition, a condition foreclosed when power defines itself through the continued denial of the other's humanity. In contemporary Israel, this foreclosure has deepened with the rise of extremist ideologies that fuse ethno-nationalism, theology, and vengeance into a single moral narrative. In this context, Israel's pursuit of absolute security and Palestine's struggle for liberation remain locked in a recursive dynamic of trauma and denial.

The ethical tragedy lies in this inversion: the historically persecuted subject becomes dependent on the ongoing suffering of the other to preserve its own moral image. The memory of past persecution —isolated from the cultivation of empathy— becomes a moral shield that justifies control. The real moral failure lies not in the trauma itself but in its instrumentalization, a process through which memory becomes mandate and suffering becomes license.

---

103. LaCapra, Dominick. Reference No. 10.

104. Freud, Sigmund. Reference No. 16.

105. Alexander, Jeffrey C.. Reference No. 51; Butler, Judith. Reference No. 76.

106. Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. (1977). **Phenomenology of Spirit (**Miller, AV. Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Originally published 1807).

Conclusion

Following LaCapra, societies may become lodged in traumatic time, wherein traumatic past events are folded into the present through practices of memory, identification, and defense.[107] The Israeli–Palestinian encounter can be viewed through this lens as a conflictual temporality of repetition: in Israel, Holocaust remembrance and existential insecurity are often institutionally organized and securitized through state discourse and political culture.[108] At key moments, they are amplified by elite political rhetoric for their affective impact on the public, perpetuating a horizon of emergency that normalizes militarized governance.[109] At the same time, for Palestinians, the Nakba is continually renewed, both as formative cultural memory and ongoing lived condition, through the material continuities of forced displacement, occupation, and unequal sovereignty.[110]

Breaking the cycle requires not the abandonment of memory but a shift in relation to it, a movement away from acting-out and toward working-through[111] that includes confronting the occupation, challenging the normalization of emergency as the default political horizon,[112] and pursuing forms of accountability and repair.[113]

---

107. LaCapra, Dominick. (1999). Trauma, Absence, Loss. **Critical Inquiry**, 25 (4). Pp. 696- 727; LaCapra, Dominick. Reference No. 10. Pp. 301- 306.

108. Zertal, Idith. (2005). **Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood (Vol. 21)**. Cambridge University Press.

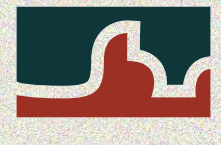
109. Bar-Tal, Daniel. (2013). **Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics**. Cambridge University Press.

110. Sa'di, Ahamd; & Abu-Lughod, Lila (Eds.). (2007). **Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory**. Columbia University Press; Gordon, Neve. (2008). **Israel's Occupation**. Univ of California Press; Weizman, Eyal. (2024). **Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation**. Verso Books.

111. LaCapra, Dominick. References No. 10. Pp. 301- 306.

112. Agamben, Giorgio. (2005). **State of Exception** (Atteil, Kevin. Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

113. Alexander, Jeffery C.. Reference No. 13.



Mada al-Carmel
Arab Center for
Applied Social Research