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# Why Jews Speak of Memory, Not History

Jewish Commentary

by Meir Y. Soloveichik

**O**N A RECENT VISIT TO ISRAEL, I TOURED THE MUSEUM OF THE Underground Prisoners, in Acre. It is housed in the Ottoman fortress that the British utilized as their most important prison during their colonial administration of Palestine between 1920 and 1948. It was the most emotional museum visit I have ever experienced. It was at this site that the pioneering revisionist Zionist leader and thinker Vladimir Jabotinsky had been held in 1920 by the British for the “crime” of organizing a Jewish defensive response to Arab riots in Jerusalem. And it was there that Menachem Begin’s Irgun staged the prisoner breakout later immortalized in Leon Uris’s novel *Exodus* and Otto Preminger’s eponymous 1960 film. But we had not come to Acre to remember Jabotinsky, or Begin, but a young soldier who had been imprisoned there, a young soldier who had died there, a young soldier by the name of Dov Gruner.

Gruner was a Jew who fled Hungary ahead of the Holocaust, illegally made his way to the Holy Land, and served with distinction in the British Army. He had grown convinced that the government that had betrayed the promise of the Balfour Declaration by closing the gates of Palestine to the Jews of Europe and thereby condemning them to death had lost the right to rule. Upon his discharge, he joined the Irgun, the militia that grew out of Jabotinsky’s visionary belief in Jewish self-determination and self-defense, to fight under and alongside Menachem Begin.

Captured during an Irgun raid on a Ramat Gan police station, Gruner was sentenced to death. Given his wartime service, an international campaign sought the commutation of Gruner’s sentence. But the British, in an act that horrified even Menachem Begin’s opponents in the Zionist movement, hanged Dov Gruner in the middle of the night in the Acre prison, denying him the right to see a rabbi before his execution. His sister, who had come from America to see him before she lost him forever, learned about her brother’s death from the radio.

Prior to his hanging, Dov Gruner wrote a letter to Begin, which was somehow

smuggled out of prison on several scraps of paper. He thanked his commander “from the bottom of my heart for the great encouragement you have given me in these fateful days.” He added:



Of course I want to live. Who does not? But if I am sorry that I am about to “finish,” it is mainly because I did not manage to do enough. I too could have “let the future fend for itself,” taken the job I was promised, or left the country altogether and lived securely in America. But that would not have given me satisfaction as a Jew and certainly not as a Zionist.

Begin never forgot this young man, and he mentioned him often, including at the moment when the independence of the Jewish state was declared. Having gone on the radio to announce that the Irgun was being folded into the Israel Defense Forces, Begin went out of his way to recall the young man he clearly loved:



We shall go on our way into battle, soldiers of the Lord of Hosts, inspired by the spirit of our ancient heroes, from the conquerors of Canaan to the Rebels of Judah. We shall be accompanied by the spirit of those who revived our nation, Ze’ev Benjamin Herzl, Max Nordau, Joseph Trumpeldor and the father of resurrected Hebrew Heroism, Zeev Jabotinsky. We shall be accompanied by the spirit of David Raziell, greatest of the Hebrew commanders of our day; and by Dov Gruner, one of the greatest of Hebrew soldiers. We shall be accompanied into battle by the spirit of the heroes of the gallows, the conquerors of death.

It may seem strange that along with political figures such as Herzl and Jabotinsky, as well as David Raziell, the original commander of the Irgun, Begin would name Gruner, a man who had neither commanded an army nor led any political movement. But in so doing, Begin reflected a principle central to Jewish life.

It has been noted by scholars such as the historian Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, that while others speak of their connection to the past as “history,” Jews instead tend to speak of “memory.” The difference between the two terms is profound. History rightly records the great figures who oversaw the events that changed the world. Jewish memory insists on the debt we owe to all those who sacrificed in the past, and our obligation to remember them. Begin himself, in his memoir *The Revolt*, reflected on the difference between history and memory:



It is right that every act performed for the liberation of our people should be recorded and remembered. It is right that everybody who worked in one way or another for the creation of reborn Hebrew strength and for its application in the struggle for liberation should be singled out and remembered. In what we call history there is considerable injustice. History, especially the chronicles of war and revolt, records the names of a few who stood at the head. But the truth is that often the main work is done by the “craftsmen,” the rank and file, the unknown soldiers. Let us not reconcile ourselves to this historic injustice. The chronicles of the Jewish struggle for liberation should be written in their entirety.

The prison at Acre is now a museum that reifies Begin’s worldview. The pictures of the soldiers imprisoned there can be seen in the cells, and many rooms within the former prison are immensely moving, including the room where they were allowed to pray. But nothing compares to the experience of entering the chamber of the gallows, which still stands today. Inscribed on the walls are the names of soldiers, including Gruner’s, who went to their death, as well as the words of the Israeli national anthem, “Hatikvah,” which they sang prior to losing their lives. Visiting the former prison with a group, I entered the gallows chamber, read Dov Gruner’s letter aloud, and recited the Kaddish. There, where Dov Gruner had died, we allowed his memory to live.

Dov Gruner lost his life in 1947. Two decades later, Israeli troops entered the

Old City of Jerusalem and conquered the Temple Mount. They then sought to send soldiers down to the Western Wall, where so many Jews had poured out their hearts in prayer. Steven Pressfield, in his book *The Lion's Gate: On the Front Lines of the Six Day War*, records an interview with one of the IDF commanders present on the Mount, who had been asked to select a single soldier to be first at the Wall.



I picked a young sergeant named Dov Gruner. This Dov Gruner was not the first to bear this name....Dov Gruner was hanged at the Acre prison on April 16, 1947. As it happened, his brother's wife had recently given birth to a son, whom they had named Dov. This boy grew to be our Dov.

This month, after celebrating Israel's 75th anniversary, the Jewish world will mark Jerusalem Day, remembering one of the most miraculous moments in Jewish history. Jews will remember, and rightly so, the commanders who helped bring about this remarkable achievement. But it is right to remember the men who captured a mount and touched the stones of the ancient wall, men who remembered Dov Gruner, expressing thereby what it means to be part of a people who refuse to forget.

*Photo: AP Photo/Pringle*

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