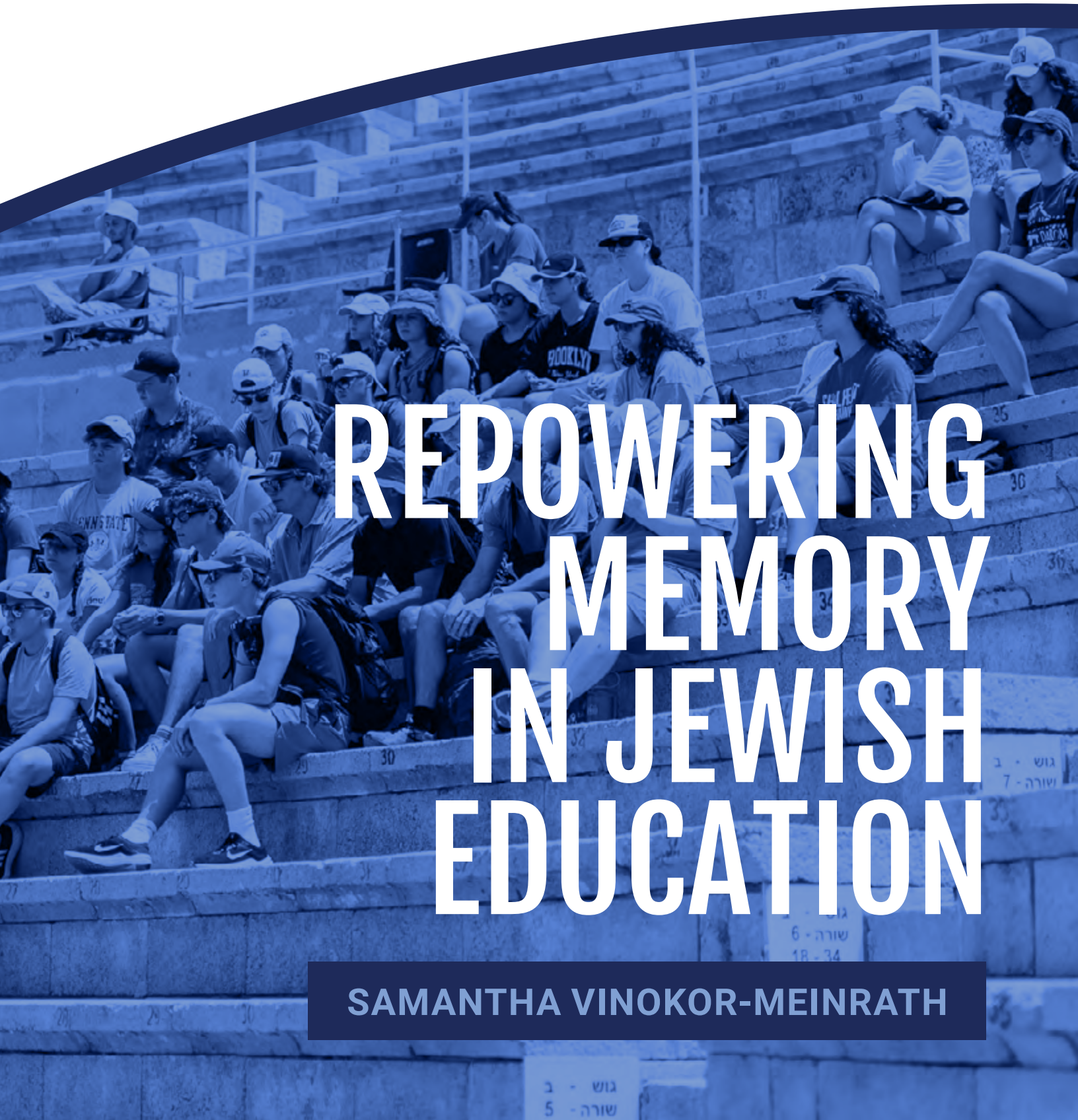
THE JEWISH EDUCATION PROJECT

REIMAGINING ISRAEL EDUCATION



REPOWERING MEMORY IN JEWISH EDUCATION

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Introduction

"Without memory, there is no identity, and without identity we are cast adrift into a sea of chance, without compass, map, or destination."

— Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (2005)

So often, an airport—of all places—exposes me to the power of Jewish peoplehood. In the chaos of the crowd and with people heading in all directions, I will reliably have a moment when a flicker of familiarity emerges. It might be a Hebrew word, or perhaps an external marker of identity, and all of a sudden, I realize: I may not know you, but I connect with you. And regardless of the fact that we're not going to the same place, and the odds are that we'll never meet, and there is no rational reason to seek connection, with the recognition of connection comes a desire to make that connection known. We lock eyes and share a nod of acknowledgment: I see you, and I'm part of you.

This indelible, hard-to-articulate feeling—palpable for some—stems from an innate sense of Jewish peoplehood. Jewish peoplehood reflects an awareness of the underlying unity that connects individuals to the broader Jewish collective. **Community is not incidental to Jewish life; it is foundational.** To live a fully Jewish life, particularly within the framework of Jewish law, requires participation in community and a sense of investment in the shared fate of the Jewish people. Over time, this mutual responsibility has ensured that Jews show up for one another in ritual, in pain, and in joy. In this way, peoplehood shapes Jewish identity by fostering a sense of belonging, connection, and shared responsibility (Ravid & Kedar, n.d.). It serves as the "why" that motivates engagement in the Jewish present and commitment to the Jewish future.

Memory is the foundation of peoplehood. It cements our feelings of belonging. We find comfort in our identity and in a sense of home. And particularly in these times, when conversation across differences is so hard, shared memory gives us a container of safety in which to raise any points of disagreement.

The strength of our participation in collective memory and our relationship with our past dictates the strength of our peoplehood, including our connection to Israel. Conversely, with the dissolution of memory comes also the dissolution of peoplehood. For most American Jews, Jewish memory is not palpable; neither, necessarily, is peoplehood. **Jewish education can help us reestablish our people in memory, thereby strengthening Jewish peoplehood.**

This essay explores these claims, examining the relationship between Jewish memory and Jewish peoplehood, and the weakening of the connective tissue that binds Jews to one another and to a shared past. In response, **the essay offers a typology of memory, meant to help us understand and teach collective memory in Jewish education.** This typology makes memory explicit, embraces its diversity, and lends it dynamism. By using this typology, Jewish educators can help memory move from passive inheritance to active construction.

The Role of Memory in Building Identity

Collective memory is the socially constructed and transmitted relationship to the past that sustains communal identity, values, and a sense of continuity across generations.

Such memory is not dependent on direct experience but shaped through social frameworks that determine how the past is recalled and mobilized in the present (Halbwachs, 1992). Marianne Hirsch describes this inherited memory as "postmemory," the powerful, affective relationship that inheritors form with experiences—most notably persecution, displacement, and collective rupture—that they did not live through but that they nonetheless experience as formative. These inherited memories are transmitted through family narratives, communal rituals, liturgy, education, and cultural symbols (2008).

Collective memory offers historical knowledge and is a lived, emotional orientation. Through postmemory, the past is not simply remembered but felt and integrated into personal and communal identity, thereby shaping moral commitments, communal responsibility, and expectations for present behavior. In this frame, history is not inert; it carries ethical and relational claims on contemporary life.

A cultural tradition actively preserves memory to preserve its people. Shared narratives provide content for meaning-making, which allows collective memory to be personalized. Rituals bring memory to the fore through embodiment and reenactment. Calendars provide structured cyclical reinforcement. Texts provide the material or literal stories for preservation and authoritative transmission. **Together, these inputs create structures for the ongoing explicit and implicit experience of collective memory.**

Memory in Jewish Tradition

Memory saturates Jewish tradition.

Commenting on the revelation at Sinai and the Israelites at the base of the mountain, Midrash Tanhuma (Nitzavim 3:1) claimed, "The generations that have yet to come were also there at that time . . . Because all the souls were there, [even] when [their] bodies had still not been created." Thus, the Passover seder is not a repetition of a folk legend. Rather, it is ancestors recalling something that happened (metaphorically) to them, working collaboratively with those for whom this is also metaphorically real. **The exodus—and, specifically, receiving the Ten Commandments—is not meant to be of a distant past, something that happened to someone else. We are socialized, even commanded, to understand that *we were there*.**

Jewish tradition carries memory further, into covenant. Narratives, rituals, holidays, and texts bind past events to present obligations. The broken glass at weddings, the liturgical repetition of phrases like *l'dor v'dor* (from generation to generation) and *zachor* (remember), and holidays such as Passover, *Tisha B'Av*, and *Yom HaShoah* remind participants to experience the past as present. **Past events are not sealed off as completed history but are continually reentered through ritual.** Daily, weekly, and yearly rhythms transform history into a living framework for ethical and communal life. Jewish memory is executed through communal performance.

> Collective cultural memory in Jewish life resists linear historicism. It embraces cyclical and dialogical time, binding generations into a single moral community. We are all present—together.

In this way, memory grounds peoplehood. It connects us. It provides a context for our collective worldview. It informs shared destiny and anchors a shared future, particularly when the present is divided and uncertain.

Peoplehood, as a result, does not need territory, political sovereignty, or uniform belief as a primary organizing principle. Jewish peoplehood emerges from a collective commitment to remember a common past and transmit it to future generations. Foundational narratives, such as exodus, exile, revelation, destruction, and renewal, create a sense of shared destiny that transcends geography and time. **Through collective memory, Jews understand themselves as participants in an unfolding story, responsible both to their ancestors and to future generations.** Peoplehood is not simply an inherited status but an ongoing act of remembrance: To belong to the Jewish people is to locate oneself within a shared past and to carry that memory forward as a source of identity, responsibility, and continuity.

The Dissolution of Jewish Memory

> ***"You've all forgotten . . . that you're a link. And a link cannot pick itself up and walk off."***
>
> ***"Shackles," Suzanne muttered to herself.***
>
> ***"Yes, shackles. But also a golden chain, a lifeline. . . ."***
>
> **— Naomi Ragen,**
> ***The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* (1998)**

Indeed, as Naomi Ragen illustrated, memory can be a "golden chain," a gift, even a "lifeline." But it can also be a burden, and the inheritor becomes a broken link in the chain.

The strength of collective Jewish memory is dissipating.

My own, personal, most powerful example of this comes from an anecdote that begins in the early 2000s. I was on a bus traveling through northern Israel when "The Exodus Song" (released by Williams in 1960) was on the radio. Based on Leon Uris's transformative novel about the creation of the modern state of Israel, the song suggested, "This land is mine. God gave this land to me. This brave, this ancient land to me . . . so take my hand and walk this land with me." We—my peers and I, on a teen trip to Israel—were collectively moved by the searing lyrics and the message behind them: Israel was ours. We were singing along, repeating the sentiments. Even though we hadn't experienced the founding of the state, and many of its epic moments were in the past, we carried an inherited sense of pride and connection to our legacy. We felt like we were part of the narrative of the State's founding, carriers of a legacy of giants. Israel's mythic heroes were sources of inspiration. How could we feel anything other than connected to the place we were traveling through?

In the 2020s, I shared the same lyrics—specifically, "This land is mine, God gave this land to me," with a group of teens. But, in this new moment, the reactions were different. They responded simply, to summarize, "That's uncomfortable."

To be more specific, some of what they shared included the following:

"I find God imagery irrelevant in a conversation about land ownership and politics."

"This land isn't just ours [i.e., the Jewish people's], and presenting it this way is erasing the Palestinian people."

"I love Israel, but I don't feel a claim on this space."

"It's weird and unrealistic to say that our religious claim is more than theirs."

"Even if we say that this is the Promised Land, we have to talk about it being promised to different people. And doesn't being 'Promised' mean that we don't have to be moral in the land?"

During my own teen Israel experience, memory was sufficient to serve as a point of connection. Memory inspired; it made us proud. The teens I taught, just twenty years later, did not feel that point of connection. **Their good questions pointed out the extent to which our (mine and my trip-mates) own sense of memory may have been nostalgia for a romanticized Israel.** The next generation stood not open but closed to romantic ideals. They viewed Israel with skepticism and kept it at arm's length. Rather than internalizing collective memory, they critiqued it.

These breakages in the Jewish chain of memory stem from a collection of pressures. Today's Jewish child (in North America) is more likely than ever to have non-Jewish family members; they inherit memories from diverse legacies (Pew Research Center, 2013). North American Jewish families are less engaged Jewishly, and as their Jewish affinities and activities have weakened, Jewish collective memory has increasingly faded.

Jews lack a shared language today. Their lack of Hebrew fluency[1] separates them from historic Jewish texts, from history, and from contemporary Jewish culture created outside of the English-speaking diaspora. This lack of access prevents immersion in collective memory. Once memory is studied secondhand, it is no longer personal.

Twenty-first-century trends and events have also weakened collective memory. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, more people are withdrawing more frequently from intensive community. In the United States specifically, and in other places as well, society is more polarized (Pew Research Center, 2022), with many of us seeking to have our opinions reinforced rather than engaging in a marketplace of ideas. **Generally, collectivism is weakened.**

Even more generally, younger generations tend to privilege nostalgia and seek superficial, simple readings of the past (Amatulli et al, 2023). Youthful nostalgia for the past is comforting, but it rarely withstands scrutiny when confronted with a modern understanding of the world.

And more broadly, North American Jews and Israeli Jews seem to differ in their remembering. In Israel, the story of Chanukah, for example, focuses on the military victory of the Judeans over the enemy that sought to destroy us. Donniel Hartman attributes this Israeli society's need to develop myths that push it past "Diasporic defeatism and powerlessness." In his words, this version of the Chanukah story "saw the foundation for the new Jew in Maccabees of old: A Jew who was brave. A Jew who was willing to bear arms, and most significantly, a Jew who was victorious" (2015). **This Israeli Jewish understanding of the past aligns with themes of victory, heroism, and overcoming an external threat to thrive, all of which are deeply relevant in Israeli society today.**

But the contrast means that the two largest Jewish communities in the world read the past through different, potentially opposing worldviews: one of particularism (Israel) and one of universalism (the US).

Conversely, as Hartman pointed out, the American Jewish community remembers the legacy of Chanukah differently, as more oriented toward American culture and emphasizing "fostering religious tolerance." In America, he wrote, "Maccabees were liberal warriors against the darkness of religious oppression and fundamentalism." **With this American frame, Chanukah is a core touchpoint of a liberal, pluralistic communal agenda.**

Both readings of the Chanukah story carry legitimacy. But the contrast means that the two largest Jewish communities in the world read the past through different, potentially opposing worldviews: one of particularism (Israel) and one of universalism (the United States). When the Jewish people lack a shared memory of the past, our sense of purpose linking us in the present is weakened.

[1] In 2013, Pew Research Center found that only 12% of American Jews can carry on a conversation in Hebrew (2013, p. 172).

Jewish Education and Memory

The tools discussed so far that comprise collective memory—texts and text study, ethnic traditions, liturgy, and more—explicitly inculcate both the responsibility for interpretation and for reception. It is not just that we hold and locate ourselves in memory. We inherit memory, and we activate it.

In North America and, more broadly, in modernity, Jewish education is responsible for bringing many of these tools to children. (For some, the home is replete with Jewish memory; for others, the home is a meager Jewish environment.) **It is Jewish education that anchors learners in memory.**

Herein lies a central tension of making memory manifest in Jewish education and of teaching peoplehood. Memory, and participating in Jewish memory as a young learner, is inherently personal and relational. It involves our becoming part of something larger than ourselves; we take on an obligation to that which we are remembering. There are countless examples of this in Jewish tradition: We remember the Temple and its destruction, we care for the sick, we count in a *minyan*, we guard the dead up to the moment of burial.

But Jewish education is also, by nature, an *educational* project. It assumes learners' agency, as does all education (Korczak, 2017). And paradoxically, Judaism itself, despite its sense of obligation, also understands that its adherents have agency. We are to act of our own accord, within a universal tradition, as part of an interconnected reality of commitments and mutual responsibility: To remember the exodus is to care for the vulnerable; to remember exile is to wrestle with power and belonging; to remember catastrophe is to affirm resilience and continuity. By offering us the opportunity to observe them, these rituals confer agency. We have a choice, and we can embrace it. And then, **participation in the ritual aspects of Jewish life that center around memory leads to an embodied connection through deliberate action.** In this way, the practice of collective memory shapes how Jews understand who we are, what we owe one another and our world, and how we locate ourselves within an unfolding historical narrative of the Jewish people and the broader world that both shapes us and calls for responsibility.

> ***Confidence in the inheritance of the past comes when the existence of one memory doesn't overpower others, but instead serves as a source of inspiration, moral good, and motivation.***

These multiple tasks inherent to Jewish education are not transparent. That is, **educators need to actively teach memory.** But in doing so, many educators move naturally between offering personal stories that learners are meant to hear fondly and creating opportunities for learner exploration that are interlinked with history, texts, and current events. It can be hard for learners to determine where memory ends and content begins. When educators craft personal narratives, they can incorporate history, texts, personal stories, memories, and data. But when they do this, narratives can intentionally or unintentionally conflate these various inputs, leaving learners absorbing story and fact as one. In this conflation, memory can be received as having happened, and truth can be hard to identify. In this way, **collective memory can become a replacement for reality.**

For example, on the one hand, our celebration of Israel's founding, shaped by memory and even sentimentality, is beautiful and important. We are and should be proud of what Jews accomplished, just three years after almost being eradicated. But educationally, we must hold our people's memory of the state's founding in conversation with corresponding memories of the same time that other peoples—most notably, the Palestinian people—hold. **Our memory is one telling, and to make that memory a source of strength rather than vulnerability, we must recognize the other tellings—other intimately held and felt memories—within other peoplehoods.** Confidence in the inheritance of the past comes when the existence of one memory doesn't overpower others, but instead serves as a source of inspiration, moral good, and motivation.

When memory is not transparent—when it is taught as history—it creates a distorted sense of reality. In the case of Israel education, this manifests in learners who can hear Israel as a utopian society and the Jews as perfect moral actors. **When learners eventually understand that the stories they learned do not reflect the only truth, their meaning structures collapse.** This is the root of students' critiques that they were "never told" or that their education was whitewashed; this is the root of the broad critique of their Jewish education.

Carrying the Broken Pieces Forward: A Typology of Memory

If we recognize that memory is distinct from history and therefore is not transmitted purely by teaching the past, how can we teach memory clearly and explicitly as memory, clearly and without confusion? How can memory be sure to allow agency?

We can reimagine the work of Jewish education in building collective Jewish memory. We can support educators in building new paradigms and frameworks that enable learners to make meaning of the inheritance of the Jewish past in ways that align with who they are and how they see the world.

Jewish memory is neither singular nor static. It is layered, dynamic, and enacted across time, space, and context. **Different forms of memory do distinct kinds of educational work: They shape identity, belonging, values, and moral responsibility in different registers.** A framework for memory can distinguish among these different types of educational work, allowing all types of memory to flourish.

In daily practice, a framework can help educators notice when memory surfaces organically—through student questions, current events, holidays, or personal experience—and respond without collapsing all memories into a single mode of teaching.

Naming multiple types of memory enables educators to act with greater intentionality. It makes memory more transparent to learners and educators alike, enabling them to respond thoughtfully in moments of rupture and change. Educators can be intentional in teaching memory alongside history, inheritance, pain or joy, or ethical obligation. **Understanding the dynamism of collective memory is not an academic exercise; it is foundational to responsible and adaptive Jewish education.**

When internalized, this typology can shift educators' work from transmitting memory to stewarding it. With heightened ethical awareness, educators can align curricular choices, pedagogical strategies, and classroom culture with the specific form of memory at hand. Contested memories may call for dialogue rather than memorization. Inherited memories may require ritual and embodied practice. Traumatic memories may solicit care and boundaries. Historical memories can invite inquiry and critique.

In daily practice, a framework can help educators notice when memory surfaces organically—through student questions, current events, holidays, or personal experience—and respond without collapsing all memories into a single mode of teaching. A framework that itself holds diversity can encourage the inclusion of diverse Jewish memories, signaling that collective memory is expansive and plural, and allowing learners to locate themselves within it without being conscripted into a single narrative. Ultimately, internalizing a memory typology informs the countless small but consequential decisions educators make—what to emphasize, when to pause, how to frame, and when to sustain complexity—so that memory is engaged with depth, care, and purpose rather than habit or assumption.

Six types of memory are identified below, with examples of their exploration in educational environments. Using such a typology generally asks that educators:

- Are transparent about the type of memory they are exploring with learners
- Help even very young students connect with different types of Jewish memory
- Engage learners continuously in all of the types of memory

Memory comprises the following.

Narrative Memory:

The stories a community tells about its past to explain its origin stories, its values, and its continued existence. Narrative memory emphasizes interpretive storytelling for ownership and relationship rather than fixed historical scripts. It teaches multiple narratives as contributing to authentic meaning-making and community building and invites learners to see themselves as emerging narrators of the Jewish story.

Educators working with narrative memory:

- Dedicate more time to story
- Teach more diverse stories
- Help learners intertwine their stories of self with those of the Jewish people and of their particular Jewish families

Textual Memory:

That which is carried through canonical and evolving texts. Traditional and modern texts are taught as records of communal memory and debate, emphasizing interpretive traditions as memory in conversation. Learners are encouraged to see interpretation as an act of participation in collective memory.

Educators working with textual memory:

- Work with learners to help them see themselves as embedded in the textual process
- Help learners see themselves as inheritors of the tradition by studying texts like Avot 1:1
- Teach learners to add to texts, as the Talmud grew with additional commentators

Ritual Memory:

The memories transmitted through repeated physical, sensory, and communal practices. Ritual memory, which is both embodied and lived, prioritizes experiential learning that activates the body, emotions, and senses. It frames rituals as technologies of memory that collapse the gap otherwise experienced between past and present. Ritual memory education calls for the teaching of ritual literacy alongside personal meaning-making.

Educators working with ritual memory:

- Articulate to learners how ritual reflects and communicates memory
- Work with learners to explore how their own family rituals and ritual objects are rooted in memory
- Help learners attach their memories to ritual, such as through sensory memories

Place-Based Memory:

How memory is embedded in physical locations, landscapes, and movement across place. This typology integrates Israel, diaspora Jewish communities, and local Jewish spaces into memory education.

Educators working with place-based memory:

- Integrate place-based memorabilia into learners' experiences (such as bringing Jerusalem stone into diaspora buildings)
- Engage with place-based texts and particularly texts and traditions that explore the role of place (such as the commandment of *zecher l'churban* to leave part of one's house unfinished to remember the Second Temple)
- Help learners explore their own origins: their towns and their ancestors' journeys

Temporal Memory:

The ways that memory is structured through cyclical time, holidays, fasts, and commemorations. The Jewish calendar becomes pedagogy—not a schedule—and helps learners recognize how recurring moments build layered meaning over time.

Educators working with temporal memory:

- Emphasize and celebrate Jewish time, including the date, minor holidays, and major ones, while recognizing them even without observance
- Engage with holidays in the context of where they come from (Israel or moments in Jewish history)

Future Memory:

The recognition that memory is not a passive process of reception, nor is it transmitted linearly. Rather, there is a back-and-forth nature to memory transmission and meaning making in which the past is remembered and the future envisioned through that lens. Memory is a present version of the past.

Educators working with future memory:

- Help learners explore their visions of the world that they aspire to build and live in, to which their learning contributes
- Engage learners in connecting their lessons to their futures

Without memory, there is no identity. And without identity, there can be no enduring peoplehood. The question facing Jewish education today is not whether memory matters but how to carry it with integrity in a moment marked by fragmentation, moral complexity, and distrust of inherited narratives. Collective Jewish memory can no longer be sustained through nostalgia or simplification; it must invite learners into an honest encounter with the past—its tensions, ruptures, and unresolved questions.

To remember Jewishly in this era is to hold continuity alongside critique, belonging alongside responsibility. When educators intentionally engage narrative, ritual, temporal, textual, place-based, and future-oriented forms of memory, they enable young people not simply to receive the Jewish story but to enter it as active participants. In doing so, memory becomes not a brittle relic but a living covenant, binding generations together through the sacred work of carrying the story forward.

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