Reviving the Memory of Palestine in Tel Aviv: Zochrot's "I Almost Forgot" Campaign

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"I Almost Forgot that Tel Aviv didn't really arise from the sand," says a speech bubble dictating the thoughts of a shirtless, toned male model (Image 1). "I Almost Forgot that today was the Palestinian Nakba Day," reads another speech bubble, affixed to a picture of two women in swimsuits—one in a bikini and the other in a cleavage-baring one-piece (Image 2). These 'speech bubble' statements are two of many similarly flippant, yet sobering, quotes that were pasted onto preexisting advertisements in Tel Aviv the night before Israeli Independence Day in 2006. The group responsible for creating and strategically placing the provocative speech bubbles is Zochrot, a non-governmental organization devoted to bringing awareness of the Palestinian Nakba to the Israeli Jewish residents of Tel Aviv and encouraging them to take responsibility for the events that unfolded ("Zochrot," 2012).

By tacking statements onto eye-catching photographs located throughout the city, Zochrot intentionally manipulated the physical environment of Tel Aviv. In doing so, the group sought to make Tel Aviv's citizenry acknowledge the Palestinian exodus and erasure that occurred surrounding the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, reassert the Palestinian heritage of the city, and create an inclusive collective memory of Tel Aviv ("Zochrot: I Almost Forgot," 2006). By choosing to post the speech bubbles on ads with scantily-clad models that represent the prototypical, hyper-sexualized Israeli, Zochrot highlights the contrasting lifestyles of the victorious, liberated Israeli Jews and the repressed, displaced Palestinians. Through showing these images in conjunction with the "Almost Forgot" phrases, the organization offers a subtle but potent critique of Israeli Jewish society, characterizing it as self-centered and apathetic for its unwillingness to ascribe adequate significance to the tragic Nakba when telling the narrative of the state.

In designing the two aforementioned images, Zochrot—which means, "remembering" in Hebrew—clearly sought to convey a political and sociocultural message. Through the ironic tone and placement of the speech bubbles, the group pushes forward its agenda of forcing Tel Aviv's population to think about the Nakba—in translation, the "catastrophe"—which refers to the "destruction, expulsion, looting, massacres and incidents of rape of the Palestinian inhabitants" of Israel surrounding the 1948 War (Saloul, 2012, p. 1; "Zochrot," 2012). Since the images are intended to send a politicized message about a controversial topic (Israeli-Palestinian relations), they must be examined with scrutiny. However, the political nature of the images does not interfere with their usefulness as sources. The images provide insight into Tel Aviv's history and culture, particularly vis-à-vis the region's Arab population, by uncovering a collective memory of the land that has long been silenced ("Zochrot: Who We Are," 2012).

The images shed light on two significant aspects of Tel Aviv: its Arab history and its desire to erase and cover up that history. Tel Aviv's long and complicated relationship with its Arab neighbors—particularly, Jaffa—has played a critical role in the evolution of the city, a point that Zochrot wishes to bring to the fore through its campaign. Since the first influx of Zionists to the region and the conception of Tel Aviv by Ahuzat Bayit, the city has had tense relations with surrounding Arab communities. In fact, the Zionists' very vision of Tel Aviv was predicated on the idea of the community as a *tabula rasa* absent of any preexisting history or culture, let alone an Arab one. Zionist discourse emphasized the creation of a "'new Israel' [that] could only be erected on a *vacant* site" (LeVine, 2005, p. 23; p. 46-48). The desire for a geographic site for the Hebrew people that was "vacant" led the founding Zionists to build a historical narrative around the idea

of Tel Aviv as a Hebrew city built "from the sands," although in reality Jews, Palestinian-Arabs, and mixed peoples already lived in the surrounding neighborhoods of Manshiyyeh, Neve Tzedek, Neve Shalom, and Jaffa (p. 76-7). Zochrot's statement on Image 1 makes an explicit reference to the myth of Tel Aviv as a city "arising from the sand" (Azaryahu, 2007, p. 54-5). By alluding to this well-established myth, but framing it in a facetious way, Zochrot undermines Tel Aviv's hegemonic Jewish narrative, which has neglected and erased the Arab presence in the region since the city's founding.

Though Zochrot's primary goal is to raise awareness of the Nakba, its statement about "almost forgetting" that Tel Aviv did not really arise from the sand shows an intent to increase awareness of the influence that Palestinian-Arabs had on Tel Aviv's construction. Zochrot's efforts toward Palestinian recognition go beyond remembrance of just the Nakba, as it aims to uncover the history of Palestinian involvement in physically building and culturally forming the city as well. As historian Mark LeVine (2005) argues, Tel Aviv from its birth was inextricably tied to the larger predominantly Arab area of Jaffa "in innumerable ways," though it made every effort to distance and distinguish itself from Arab Jaffa (p. 6; p. 81). To the chagrin of the Zionists, Arabs are entrenched in Tel Aviv's history through their role in the city's construction. Though Tel Aviv was envisioned as a 'Hebrew city' to be built using 'Hebrew labor,' some Zionist settlers relied on Arab workers to construct homes in the early years of development—"Palestinian Arab workers had a small but significant and visible presence" (p. 71; p. 95).

As Tel Aviv matured, however, its Jewish inhabitants began to transition away from reliance on or recognition of the Palestinian-Arab contribution to the city. During the first two decades of Tel Aviv's growth, the community's architecture "still used the

local 'Arab' idioms and construction techniques," but in the 1930s, when the International Style was introduced, the city made "a clear and radical visual break" from its Arab context (p. 154). In this way, Tel Aviv began to erase evidence of an Arab influence on the city and supplant it with a 'modern,' European influence conveyed by the International Style. In its campaign, Zochrot responded to the erasure of culturally Arab elements of the city (such as its architecture) by physically altering the urban environment of Tel Aviv—namely, its ads. By posting powerful messages on top of advertisements, the group sought to reassert the existence of a Palestinian memory in the Tel Aviv by reminding its citizens of the Palestinian history rooted there.

Zochrot uses the statement on Image 2 and the slogan "I Almost Forgot" to extend its argument about the Israeli Jewish effort to obscure the history of Palestinians living in Israel. The organization's conscious phrasing "I *Almost* Forgot" [emphasis added] implies that there is some awareness of the events of the Nakba, but that the story has either been silenced or is not well understood. In this case, both of these explanations are true; the Palestinian narrative was silenced by the state for many years and today is still not well understood by Israeli citizens (Lentin, 2010, p. 31). Though Zochrot uses the wording "I Almost Forgot," as opposed to "I Forgot," it is important to note that the partial awareness that it suggests is a relatively new phenomenon. Scholars did not begin to discuss the Nakba until the 1980s and civil society did not follow suit until much later (Lentin, 2010, p. 69). Zochrot administrator Umar al-Ghubari remarked,

> In the past, the word Nakba was barely in the Israeli Jewish vocabulary. After ten to fifteen years, now Israeli society is talking about the "Nakba"—even if many still don't completely understand what it is. ("New way to reveal Nakba remnants," 2012)

The phrasing "I Almost Forgot" indicates that consciousness of the Nakba has begun to seep into Israeli Jewish culture, but still condemns Tel Aviv for the many years that the Palestinian narrative was actively erased by the state and forgotten by civilians all together. It communicates this criticism through its tone, which is markedly ironic, for it conveys in the most casual manner that which is of grave importance—the decimation and displacement of the history, culture, and people of 'Palestine'. Zochrot also emphasizes its resistance to the state policy of 'forgetting' that accompanied Israel's nation building: "'Ben Gurion knew exactly what he wanted to be remembered, and what he wanted to be forgotten'" (Lentin, 2010, p. 31). By claiming that the Nakba has now been "almost"—as opposed to completely—forgotten, Zochrot seems to stand up to the government's power to entirely erase Palestinian history from Israel.

Until the 1980s however, when Israel's 'new historians' began to uncover the events of the Nakba, the Israeli state had great success wiping the narrative of the Nakba from public consciousness (Lentin, 2010, p. 69). The success of the erasure was due to the "state-organised memoricide of the Nakba," which was implemented after 1948 in an effort to construct "a hegemonic collective Israeli-Zionist-Jewish identity in the State of Israel" (Masalha, 2012, p. 5-6; p. 89). 'Memoricide,' a term for the systematic destruction of a collective memory and the excision of history from the land, was in part accomplished through the silencing of Palestinian voices (p. 10; p. 137). As argued by philosopher Ernest Renan, "organized memory always entails the forgetting or repression of others' memories, because it is embedded in a context of power and politics" (Shenhav, 2006, p. 138). Following the War, the Israeli government took action to muffle the Arab narrative and memory by appropriating Palestinian records, documentation, and

cultural heritage. In doing so, it aimed to solidify Israel's own 'organized memory' and assert its political supremacy. The removal of critical archives from the public arena allowed 'new historian' Benny Morris to "assert that Palestinians produced no "state" papers and that there is 'no Arab *documentation* [on 1948] of the sort historians must rely on'" (Masalha, 2012, p. 137). In and since 1948, the Israeli government repeatedly looted Palestinian archives, preventing the Palestinian collective identity from strengthening and allowing a hegemonic Jewish Israeli identity to prevail (p. 137). Zochrot's campaign marks a concerted effort to fight against the dominant Israeli Jewish narrative that has emerged at the expense of the Palestinian narrative and persists in Tel Aviv today.

The Nakba's long-lived absence from Tel Aviv's narrative can also be largely attributed to the physical erasure of Palestinian structures from the Arab villages surrounding Tel Aviv that occurred during and after the 1948 War (Golan, 2009, p. 1022). In the sub-district of Jaffa, 23 of the 24 pre-1948 Arab localities were depopulated and destroyed by the war to varying degrees (Falah, 1996, p. 264). During the conflict, the Israelis pursued a strategy of "de-signification," whereby they "removed the past cultural traces of other peoples from the landscape" in order to undercut and weaken Palestinian claims to the land. Not only did the Israeli strategy consist of the expulsion of Palestinians from the territory, but also the destruction of remaining Palestinian structures once the land had been vacated, i.e. "landscape erasure" (p. 257-8). With the destruction and depopulation of the Palestinian towns came "the obliteration of a cultural heritage," for nothing of their culture remained and the inhabitants themselves were unable to return due to either the high level of destruction or repopulation by Jews (p. 271; Golan, 2009, p. 1022-3). In the formulation of a collective memory, physical space is a critically

contested territory, explaining why Israel fought so hard to claim Palestinian land as its own (Lentin, 2010, p. 29).

From 1948 onward, the Israeli government practiced Palestinian "landscape erasure" across its acquired territories through a state program that created national parks on top of destroyed Palestinian villages, purposefully refusing former residents the opportunity to return (Pappé, 2007, p. 227; Masalha, 2012, p. 5). Israeli historian Ilan Pappé (2007) describes this as a "metaphorical palimpsest at work…the erasure of the history of one people in order to write that of another people over it" (p. 231). The project, which was spearheaded by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), is considered a prime example of Nakba denial.[1] The JNP aimed "to conceal [any] visible remnants of Palestine not only by the trees it has planted over them, but also by the narratives it has created to deny their existence" (Pappé, 2007, p. 227-8). It 'de-Palestinized' the land by planting non-indigenous trees, creating a European landscape where an Arab one formerly existed, and denying the Palestinian heritage of the spaces (p. 227; Masalha, 2012, p. 121). One of the largest parks, the Birya Forest, was established on the lands of at least six Palestinian neighborhoods, none of which are mentioned on the park's website. Any relics of Palestinian life are referred to as creations of the JNF, features of nature, or "mysteries" (Pappé, 2007, p. 230). In this way, the state of Israel superimposed a new narrative and landscape on the previously existing Palestinian history and landscape, enabling Israeli Jews to remain ignorant of the Nakba. In this sense, Israeli

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[1] According to Ahmad Sa'di (2007), Israelis utilize three strategies to deny the Nakba. The first is the Zionist slogan 'a land without people for a people without a land,' which regards Palestine as an empty land intended for Zionist occupation. The second is the acknowledgment that the Nakba took place, but the denial that it carried any moral or practical implications. The third is "addressing the moral weight of the Palestinian Nakba unapologetically" (*A land without a people,* 2013; Lentin, 2010, p. 10).

Jews for many years did not "almost forget" the events of the Nakba, but simply did not learn of them, as they were strategically denied access to the Palestinian memory.

Like the JNP's 'parks', Tel Aviv-Yafo is a significant locale of Nakba denial and a resonant 'site of [Palestinian] memory' (Lentin, 2010, p. 34). The close ties between Palestinians and Tel Aviv-Yafo perhaps explain Zochrot's decision to target the city for its campaign. The transformation of Jaffa from a major Palestinian Arab urban center to a subset of Tel Aviv, the historically 'Hebrew city', signifies one of the greatest losses to Palestinian culture of the 1948 War (Golan, 2009, p. 1023). Throughout the war, thousands of Jaffa's Arab residents were forced into exile and by the end of the conflict, only 5,000 of the 73,000 prewar Arab residents remained. As per Israeli military policy, the Arab population was blocked from returning to Jaffa and soon Tel Aviv's municipal government took control of the city. In April of 1950, the Israeli government announced the unification of Tel Aviv and Jaffa into the single entity of 'Tel Aviv-Yafo' (p. 1027-30). The transition of the name of the city from Jaffa to its Hebrew translation, Yafo, is one example of how Palestinian history was erased and an Israeli narrative was superimposed on top of it.

As social anthropologist Daniel Monterescu (2011) writes, "in line with the Zionist myopia of the Palestinian presence and the Arab history of Jaffa, [Jews] saw the city as an 'empty shell' to be filled with communal content" (p. 276). The renaming of streets that occurred after Tel Aviv's incorporation of Jaffa evidences the Israeli-Jewish attitude toward Arab Jaffa as an 'empty shell' and the overwriting of the Palestinian narrative. In the renaming process, the municipality granted Arabic names to only four streets while it granted "names from Zionist and Jewish history" to an entire group of

streets. Street names are particularly significant indicators of cultural presence because they "constitute 'spatial texts' that imprint historical events and public figures in the local collective memory" (p. 271). Using a similar logic, Zochrot created its own type of 'spatial text' to imprint the Nakba in the local collective memory of Tel Aviv by pasting provocative speech bubbles on Israeli ads throughout the city.

Zochrot chose to utilize and transform preexisting advertisements into 'spatial texts' because of the formative influence that advertising has on society. Advertisements have the capacity to "influence awareness, perceptions, attitudes, feelings, preferences, and behaviors" and reinfuse words and images with meaning; therefore, ads were ideal targets for Zochrot's Nakba remembrance campaign (Avraham & First, 2003, p. 283-4). Ads are able to exert such power over people because they create myths that reflect enviable lifestyles and entice consumers to adopt those lifestyles (p. 283). As influential sociologist Erving Goffman argues, "advertising is an expression of a collective dream of a better reality" (p. 284). By using advertisements to convey its political message, Zochrot infiltrates Israel's mythical realm of advertising and perverts it through the introduction of a harsh reality—the Nakba. It shatters the Israeli Jewish "collective dream," so to speak, by forcing the acknowledgment of the Palestinian narrative. Though literature on the Israeli "collective dream" is sparse, based on the ads utilized by Zochrot, it seems that freedom and openness are considered utopian values in Israel. Zochrot takes the idealized images of attractive, sexually liberated models and sullies them by adding the "I Almost Forgot" speech bubbles. After the alteration, the models come across as shallow and callous, "almost forgetting" the "most traumatic event in the history of the

Palestinian people" (Masalha, 2012, p. 1). Zochrot harnesses the power of advertising to reshape Tel Aviv's local collective memory through the perversion of its existing ads.

The organization's choice to tack its speech bubbles onto images of scantily-clad models served three purposes: (1) it made its messages all the more eye-catching to passersby, (2) it undermined the Tel Avivian "collective dream" represented by the models' lifestyles, and (3) it illustrated a contrast between the lax Tel Aviv lifestyle and the repressed Palestinian refugee lifestyle. It is this final point that is most interesting in light of Zochrot's proclaimed goal of creating an inclusive collective memory of Tel Aviv as a first step toward the reconciliation of Palestinians and Israelis ("Zochrot: Who We Are," 2012). Though undoubtedly reconciliation is Zochrot's true objective—as evidenced by its consistent work bringing Israelis and Palestinians together in open conversation (Shehadeh, 2012)—the "I Almost Forgot" campaign seems to be a particularly feisty project with the potential to be divisive. The campaign's tongue-in-cheek language seemingly intends to stir up controversy, or at least conversation, in Tel Aviv's Jewish population. The campaign is especially provocative in its use of particularly sexualized Israeli images, implicitly juxtaposing the Tel Avivian experience against the Palestinian experience.

The campaign subtly criticizes Israel, Israeli advertising culture, and the Tel Avivian lifestyle by placing them in the context of the traumatic Palestinian Nakba. By alluding to the Palestinian experience in the plastered messages, Zochrot forces the three entities to enter into a space with the memory of the Nakba and interact—granted this is only a 'mythical' space. Zochrot frames the interaction by selecting images and wording intended to evoke a contrived sentiment: disappointment in the Israeli people's failure to

ascribe the appropriate value to the Palestinian narrative. Ultimately, what emerges in the ads is the image of unapologetically free Israelis—in both political and sexual terms— contrasted against the 'image' of oppressed and dispossessed Palestinians, who are neither given a face nor a voice in the advertisements. Palestinians are alluded to in the speech bubbles but hidden from view.

The images of a shirtless male and two barely clothed women bring to the fore the depiction of Israel, and particularly Tel Aviv, as liberated societies and evidence the proclivity of the Israeli media to utilize themes of freedom and sexual liberation in its campaigns. The state itself is complicit in the projection of these images; as Israeli media scholar Yoel Cohen (2012) remarked, "Even the Israeli government is not innocent in playing the sexual motif" (p. 159). Though there has been periodic backlash against the use of sexualized images in the media by Israel's Haredim, the Knesset has for the most part resisted the pressure to restrict the use of promiscuous imagery in advertising and the media (p. 157-9). In fact, the Israeli Foreign Ministry went as far as to allow American male magazine *Maxim* to shoot pictures of nearly nude Israeli models on Tel Aviv's beaches (p. 159). The state is largely motivated to put forth such images by the desire to project a European, or Westernized, self-image to the rest of the world. It wishes to stray from the model of the Middle East, which still has advertising restrictions for certain 'controversial' products like condoms and underwear (p. 164). Thus, by actively asserting its societal freedom and ability to use sexual images in the press, Israel distinguishes itself from the rest of the Middle East, which maintains a more conservative culture, and 'Palestine,' which furthermore lacks sociopolitical freedom (p. 160).

By launching the "I Almost Forgot" campaign in Tel Aviv, Zochrot was able to capitalize on the city's independent stereotype as a hypersexualized, licentious society. In the 1930s, Tel Avivians were accused of "'shameless' behavior" and the mayor himself lamented that "young people and vacationers…appeared on the city's main streets in immodest bathing suits[, violating] the sense of propriety held by many of the city's residents" (Helman, 2007, p. 36-7). During this time period, visitors and city officials often contrasted the "informal and relaxed" setting of Tel Aviv with the more disciplined environment of traditional Middle Eastern societies (p. 36). After 1948, Israeli culture was further "sexualized" by the Zionist movement's creation of "a new, virile Jewish man," i.e. the "Muscle Jew." Zionists came to envision the ideal Israeli man as a muscular, "sex-crazed" Ashkenazi who could assert a credible claim to Palestine (N. Cohen, 2012, p. 8; p. 13). Zochrot references these stereotypes by utilizing images of women in revealing swimsuits and an unclothed, muscular, Ashkenazi man in its campaign.

The scandalous dress and supposed statements made by the prototypical Tel Avivans —"I Almost Forgot [insert part of Palestinian narrative]"— not only convey that they are a liberated people, but also that they are unconcerned by how their victory negatively affected their foe. Despite the emergence of accounts of the Palestinian Nakba over the past three decades, these memories remain underemphasized in Jewish Israeli and Tel Avivan conscious thought and discourse, according to Zochrot (Lentin, 2010, p. 69). Zochrot criticizes the Israeli Jewish state and citizenry for their lack of regard for the Palestinian narrative and seemingly scorns Israeli ad agencies for rubbing Israeli liberty in the faces of the Palestinians who remain politically disempowered. According to

Zochrot, Israeli Jewish culture is egocentric, only recognizing its own voice and story. Though Zochrot does not provide images of Palestinians to visually compare with the Israeli ads, the implication that Israelis are free—and ad agencies openly flaunt and appeal to this freedom—while the Palestinians and their memory are repressed is enough to convey its message.

Zochrot's campaign turned the Israeli ads in Tel Aviv against themselves by marring their depictions of the culture's "collective dream" with the brutal reality of the Nakba. By attaching ironic speech bubbles to advertisements, the group morphed idealized models of Israeli men and women into foolish and apathetic figures who 'just barely' remember a watershed moment in Palestinian history. By altering these images, Zochrot inserted the Palestinian narrative into areas where it had previously been systematically denied and attempted to undercut the hegemonic Israeli Jewish collective memory that had been constructed at the expense of the Palestinian memory. However, Zochrot did, and does, not seek to overwrite the Israeli Jewish memory with a Palestinian one; it seeks memory integration. For this reason, the campaign relied on preexisting images of Israelis to 'speak' about their own memories rather than superimposing images of Palestinians recounting their memories. In order for the Nakba to be properly memorialized in Israel today, Israeli Jews must engage in 'co-memoration,' the telling and retelling of the Palestinian narrative by Israeli Jews alongside the recollection of Nakba memory by the Palestinians themselves. In keeping with this theory, it appears that Zochrot's goal is not merely to liberate the Palestinian narrative, but also to spur collaboration with the current Israeli Jewish narrative in order to form an honest collective memory (Lentin, 2010, p. 18).

There is still much work to be done to achieve this goal, however. Though Zochrot claims to be working toward an integrated Israeli-Palestinian collective memory, its campaign was still riddled with judgment and resentment of Israeli culture that inevitably complicates the collaboration process. Similarly, the state of Israel and Tel Aviv must work toward greater cooperation with Zochrot and other organizations seeking similar objectives. Only hours after Zochrot applied the speech bubbles to the advertisements in Tel Aviv, the stickers were removed by workers of the municipality (E. Bronstein Aparicio, personal communication, January 10, 2013). Whether due to city ordinances against vandalism, lack of approval of Zochrot's messages, or some combination, the campaign was unable to reach its full potential. Despite resistance, Israeli Jews are slowly beginning to revive the memory of the Nakba that was squelched by state-organized 'memoricide' for many years; however, commemoration remains a point of contention due to the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so surely the struggle to recount the narrative of the Palestinian Nakba will continue for some time (Lentin, 2010, p. 21).

Appendix

Image 1

Image 2

Bibliography

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