

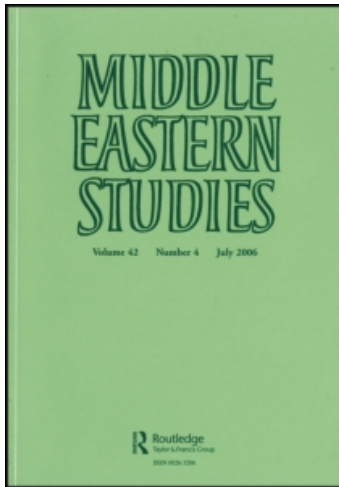
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Shaul R. Shenhav

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Communication of the Israeli Leadership with Families of Fallen Soldiers

SHAUL R. SHENHAV

The bloody history of the Arab–Israeli conflict presents the leaders of the battling nations with the huge challenge of providing explanations and justifications for an enormous loss of life. Political leaders in the Middle East join the long list of leaders throughout history that have faced a similar challenge of justifying losses, especially of troops, in warfare. Some of the greatest speeches in human history, such as the speeches of Pericles the Athenian, or Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, attempt to justify losses in war by arguing the essential makeup of a society. Legitimizing the sacrifice of soldiers became particularly important during the French Revolution and the German wars of liberation against Napoleon – the first wars to be fought by citizen-armies.¹

This article will examine the Israeli establishment’s attempts to explain and justify the harsh outcomes of deployment of force on behalf of the state. It presents a qualitative analysis of the traditional annual letters sent before Remembrance Day to the bereaved families of the fallen in Israel’s wars.² The analysis focuses on the relation between the individual and the collective – a major thread running through all the letters, implicitly or explicitly. The main reason for the centrality of this subject is the establishment’s attempt to justify the loss by conveying an understanding that loss of life in battle is an extreme expression of sacrifice of the individual on behalf of the collective.³ The relation between individualism and collectivism is therefore a core element in any attempt to validate the sacrifice of the fallen soldiers and their families. As a major element of both collective human values,⁴ it has been the subject of various studies of Israeli bereavement and commemoration.⁵

The letters of condolence under examination here expose a continuous conduit of communication between representatives of the State of Israel and a group of citizens who have paid the highest price for the existence of that State.⁶ The letters are in the public domain, visibly present in the Israeli public and intellectual spheres.⁷

In democratic régimes, which give the living precedence in defining the behaviour of the state and its leaders, justifying loss of life is particularly difficult. Therefore, this communication between the political establishment and the bereaved families presents a sensitive and complex challenge to the political leadership. The content of the letters represents a rich source of study of the way the political and military leadership has coped, over the years, with the high price in human life of deploying military power.

I analyze the letters with a view to studying the individualistic and collectivistic perceptions expressed in them. I will focus on major changes in point of view and issues mentioned by the writers. Roman Jakobson’s semiotic model of communication serves

as a theoretical framework within which to evaluate major changes in the letters over the years. The model describes six main functions in any speech event of communication: 'The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to . . . , graspable by the addressees, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized.'⁸ A qualitative analysis discusses the transitions in the role of addressers, addressees and the context (which according to Jakobson refers to the message being sent and not merely the circumstances of utterance).

The War of Independence and the establishment of the State of Israel were interpreted by the Israeli founding fathers as a turning point in the history of the Jewish People.⁹ This understanding is a central factor in the early letters. Bereavement is presented in these letters as part of the great process of realizing the dream, the wonderful story of the return of the Jewish People to its land, and the establishment of the State of Israel. Thus, Yosef Dekel, the head of the Department for the Commemoration of the Fallen (DCF), writes in his letter of 1952 about 'the legend which became reality through the blood of our loved ones, in all its glory'. The 'blood of our loved ones' becomes in the letter a kind of ink in which the national story is written, hinting at an everlasting oath made by the nation to its fallen, and evoking connotations of a ritual oath in blood. The 'legend' is not only wonderful in all its content, which is not detailed in the letter, but also in its ability to become reality. In this way the fallen become part of a legendary story which comes to exist in reality. The participation of the fallen in bringing the legend to life pushes the question of death of individuals and the pain of bereavement out of the text, since it is as if the fallen survive in this living legend.

The 1953 letter of Yitzhak Ben Zvi, President of Israel, who lost his own son during the War of Independence, was the first to be written by a political figure. This letter endows the legend with more content: 'The memory of our sons and daughters, who poured out their souls unto death for the sanctification of God and the homeland, rises before us.' Ben Zvi enlists a verse from Isaiah (Isaiah, 53:12) in the effort to justify the sacrifice. The willingness to die for the sanctification of God, which is evocative of passive resistance throughout Jewish history, is joined with an active pattern of behaviour in going out to battle in defence of the homeland. The closing words of Ben Zvi's letter signal the collective, story-oriented framework of almost all the letters of condolence to this day:

Today all of Israel will remember our loyal sons without whose supreme sacrifice the State of Israel would not have been established, we will remember them; their bereaved parents, their brothers and children, who carry them in their hearts always. Every citizen of Israel will surely remember them, and all of the surviving remnant who were privileged to reach our homeland; the younger generation will be educated about them . . . and their heroic spirit will instruct the youth in its journey toward fortifying the foundations of the homeland, and this will be a comfort to us.

The narrative of a return to the Land of Israel and the establishment of the State dictate the relation to the families of the fallen. Personal memory of the bereaved

families is joined to the collective memory of 'all of Israel' and these in turn join the collective, national narrative of a return to Zion and the establishment of the State of Israel.

The letter of 1955, written by M. Orbach as head of the DCF, includes another expression of the power of a collective address to the bereaved families in his reference to the anthology of the casualties' writings which was given as a gift that year to the families: 'in their words, contained in this pamphlet, are bound up the expressions of all the others, and from them an echo will rise up in praise of their souls which were cut off in the midst'. Praise of the souls of the fallen continues to echo after their deaths, and contributes in turn to blurring the boundaries between the dead and the living. Thus the collectivist perspective allows the fallen to continue to exist in some way, which is the heart's desire of their families.

The collective voice of the national story is manifested by use of the first person plural, with expressions such as 'our loved ones' and 'our sons and our daughters' (see letters 1952–55). The letters of David Ben-Gurion, the first Israeli Prime Minister and Defence Minister, written in 1956 and 1958, express more than others of the period the role of the collectivist, national narrative as a basis for justifying the sacrifice of the dead. The 1956 letter includes quotations from his speech at the planting ceremony of the *Defenders' Forest* at *Sha'ar Hagai*.¹⁰ The ceremonial circumstance of the speech involved the assimilation of the open spaces of nature into the Israeli narrative. The tradition which views nature as a wild space and as a place of refuge from society is replaced by the view that the land is an inseparable element of the national story. Alongside the acquisition of natural open spaces, the creative act which was crystallized in western culture as important for the existence of private spaces is also uprooted from the individual. In its place appears, in Ben-Gurion's letter of 1956, the act of national collectivist writing: 'I am sure, when future generations come, and they will come – to write the genealogy of the wonderful redemption which has begun in our time, they will inscribe it not in gold, but in love and admiration.'

In this sense the national narrative seeks to dominate two central alternatives in western culture to the existence of private spaces: natural open spaces and the creative act of writing.¹¹ Ben-Gurion's 1958 letter, on the tenth anniversary of Israeli independence, provided a festive opportunity to look at the establishment of the State against the background of the epopoeia of the Jewish people:

People in Israel and in the whole Jewish world will celebrate ten years of our renewed independence, and Israel's fabulous achievements.... Since the institution of the festival of Chanukah in the days of the Hasmoneans, our people have not known such a great festival.

The phrase 'renewed independence' expresses the essence of the national narrative of a return to Zion. Further on, the text tells the history of the Jewish people backwards, from the imminent celebrations of the tenth Independence Day, via the 'fabulous achievements' of the first decade of statehood, and back to the days of the Hasmoneans.¹² Thus Ben-Gurion situates the modern struggle for sovereignty as a direct continuation of an ancient tradition of struggle by the Jewish people for the

realization of their ambitions of independence in their homeland. The foundational value of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel is also expressed in the differentiation between the loss suffered by Israeli parents and the bereavement of Jewish parents in the Diaspora, which is made in Ben-Gurion's 1956 letter:

But, dear mothers and fathers, you have been given a privilege denied to thousands of mothers and fathers through the generations, whose children were murdered and slaughtered and killed for no reason and with no purpose during our long exile. Your dear children fell so that the Jewish people might live independently in their redeemed homeland.

While the children of parents in the Diaspora were 'slaughtered and killed for no reason' and with 'no purpose', the sons of children who fell in Israel's wars died for a supreme reason: the 'redeemed homeland'.¹³ Besides Jewish themes, Ben-Gurion's national narrative is based on themes and images closer related to Greek epic:

Their short and wonderful spans of life – in work, study, play and battle – are as if quarried from a wondrous legend, in the vision of ancient prophets and poets, and it is difficult to believe that these were the children of a living and familiar reality, and that they lived, made mischief, were active and took action to the greatest heights of man's heroism on earth, here, beside us, among us, in our days.

Ben-Gurion's words resemble the way in which the ancient Greeks made their dead into heroes,¹⁴ and are indicative of an accelerated process of transformation of the casualties of the War of Independence into key figures in a new Jewish–Israeli mythology.

The construction of a collective, national story appears to be the outcome of a kind of eternal covenant between the fallen and the living, a covenant which at its core involves ongoing cooperation which crosses the boundaries of life. The resurrection of the dead as flowers – an accepted theme of bereavement that follows the Greek myth of Adonis – was another means of blurring the divide between the war dead and the living during the War of Independence and afterwards.¹⁵ For example, Ben Zvi's letter in 1961 makes a connection between a national variation of resurrection of the dead with the theme of sacrifice:

When I look at our country, which our sons have redeemed with their blood and their souls, and I see it rise up and flourish, my heart swells within me... no, not for nothing have we offered our precious sacrifices on the altar of the homeland.

The State is not merely an altar, worthy of sacrifice, but also a concrete expression of the continued presence of the fallen in the realm of the living. The motif of sacrifice recurs in several letters. For example, Zalman Shazar's letter of 1965 regards the 'flourishing and growth of our independent state' as a 'loyal living witness' that the 'sacrifice has been accepted'.

Sacrifice was closely related to the national story. Thus, Eshkol, in his 1967 letter, links the soldiers' sacrifice with the same legendary theme which had appeared in the early letters:

The sons and their parents will be woven in the fabric of the legends of the foundational generation, their heroism and sacrifice will be told of, and generations who dwell safely in their land will raise their eyes to them in admiration and will bless the members of that generation which did not hold back from sacrifice, danger, and weariness in order to ensure the future of the people.

The thriving State is not only a reward for sacrifice, it is a fabulous mechanism in itself which can link the fallen and their families. This is vividly expressed in the letter of Knesset chairman Kadish Luz from 1966: 'A mighty people will tell the stories of their lives and their deaths, and from generation to generation will establish the glory and the wonder of their love and their heroism.' The living and the dead become partners in an eternal ritual which is based on stories passed from generation to generation, and even challenge the divide between the experiences of the living and the dead. In other words, the national perspective offers the bereaved families their hearts' desire, which is the establishment of an eternal connection between the fallen and the living.

The addressers of the letters tended to speak in the name of the nation, and to situate the fallen as an important element in the national story of the return of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel. The national narrative is told from on high, pushing the individual to the margins. Such an approach, nourished principally by Jewish tradition, together with the use of universal themes of heroism, allowed the Israeli leadership to make a national connection between death and the resurrection of those who fell in battle. The story-oriented, collectivist perspective allowed the political leadership to raise politics above the realm of the public's experience and discernment, and even to create a kind of twilight zone between the realms of the dead and the living. This means that their way of dealing with the harsh outcome of the military struggle for the establishment of the State is based on an infusion of a rich and complex system of cultural, traditional, historical and aesthetic elements into reality, rather than on an attempt to justify the decision-making process empirically.

The metaphoric mode, dense with epic imagery which characterized the first period, was replaced by Defence Minister Moshe Dayan's *Sabra* (i.e. native-born Israeli Jewish) style. Dayan laid emphasis on actual events as significant elements in his letters. For example, in his 1971 letter, he refers to the threats 'to renew hostilities' made by the President of Egypt; and in his 1972 letter he refers to the enemy's refusal to contemplate peace even when he knows that 'he has not the power to defeat us in war'. The prominent place given to reference to actual security events signals an obligation to new types of narratives, which are not necessarily directly involved with the national narrative of the return of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel.

Dayan does not however abandon the collectivist aspects of the national narrative which characterized the earlier period, and even adds new elements to them. In his 1968 letter, the first following the Six Day War, he writes:

Our war of redemption is not over... we returned to the city of David. The deepest and most ancient of the hopes of the Jewish People in all its generations

and diasporas was fulfilled. This great salvation carried a heavy and dear price in blood.

The reference made in the earlier period to the wider aspects of the narrative of return using general terms like the Land of Israel and homeland, gives way, in this period, to reference to specific places which were captured in the Six Day War. These shore up the historical and biblical frameworks of the national narrative, and constitute for Dayan the 'great salvation' which justifies the 'heavy and dear price' of those who died in the Six Day War.

Dayan's letters are a kind of parting of the ways, predicated on the tension between preservation of the national narrative of the establishment of Israel, and even an attempt to strengthen it via messianic terminology like 'redemption' and 'salvation', and a challenge to the exclusivity of that narrative. Thus, for example, he uses the expression 'the family of bereavement', which appears first in his letter of 1968 and is destined to gain prominence in the Israeli discourse of bereavement. Addressing the 'family of bereavement' creates an important, new category of direct addressees of the letters which will henceforth be used extensively in the letters.¹⁶ This represents an important communicative change, as it integrates the addressees as a major category in the letters and differentiates the letters of this period from the collective, story-oriented framework which characterized the letters of the first period. The fallen are no longer sons of the entire nation, but also the sons of the 'family of bereavement'.

The change beginning in Dayan's letters is possibly due to the political and military gains of the Six Day War, and especially the sharp switch from a sense of impending doom to the euphoria and messianic belief in the strength of the State of Israel which followed the Israel Defence Forces' (IDF) great victory over its Arab neighbours. It might be impossible to deal with such sharp swings in political reality using a national narrative whose centre of gravity is in telling of the national story which is above the actual events.

Difficulty in evading political and military reality is powerfully revealed in the wake of the shock and pain which gripped Israeli society after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. In Dayan's last letter of 1974 he writes:

Only a few months have passed since the Yom Kippur War, and there has not yet been a ceasefire on the Golan Heights. The casualties of this war, the harshest our country has known, still live before our eyes. They and those going before them form a long line of pure souls.

The casualties 'still live before our eyes' because it has been but 'a few months' since the end of the war. This is not the eternal perspective which derives from sophisticated narratives, with complex metaphors and a reworking of materials taken from Jewish culture, but an actual, current point of view.

Political swings from left to right have a significant effect on the letters that follow this period. The letters written by leaders of the centre-right Likud party usually included a collectivist perspective, while those written by leaders of the Labor party tended towards an individualistic approach. A letter written by the Minister of Defence, Shimon Peres, serves as illustration. This letter, from 1975,

continues Dayan's integration of new contextual elements into the letters: 'As Israel fights – our people, also builds. Our market is outstanding in the speed of its growth, our society in its unique humanity, our régime in its full democracy and our army in its valor which is unmatched.'¹⁷ The letter combines the concept of 'society' as a new major factor in building an identity for the nation. 'Society' does not carry the epic national narrative of Jewish history, but directs its attention to the human fabric of the State of Israel. Along with society, Peres refers to 'democracy' as a fundamental element of Israeli identity. In his 1976 letter he writes: 'Israel continues to stand out as the only democratic country in the Middle East.' Together with these political characteristics, Peres refers to themes from Jewish tradition: 'Our State – which carries the Torah of Moses and the vision of the Prophets, sees in both the only solution and goal for the Jewish People.' His 1977 letter is perhaps the most important of Peres' letters of this period. It includes, for the first time, explicit reference to individualistic democratic values:

Despite its distress our State has known how to preserve the most important of her spiritual assets, and among them the freedom of the collective and liberty of the individual. The right to speak and the right to travel are given daily to all of its citizens... Our State is a wonderful democracy.

The transfer of the point of view from the heights of the eternal nation to that of individual people demanded a new style by the author of the letters. Thus for the first time there is expression of the fact that the political leadership, in whose name the letter is written, is fallible: 'Every day of the year we devote thought and much effort to the correction of mistakes and faults in our lives.' When the letters reflected a national-collectivist narrative, there was no place for mention of mistakes by the leadership, since the writers of the letters were, apparently, interlocutors between the addressees and an eternal, almost superhuman narrative. But the moment the perspective changes, and the leadership no longer claims to represent the epic high ground of the Jewish People but rather the actual people living in Israel, to the best of their judgement and ability, the possibility of making mistakes arises. There may have been awareness of the critical gaze of the electorate on the system of government and defence as a result of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, among other things. At any rate, it is clear that this was a fundamental shift in the image of the addresser of the letters. This shift is based on a view of public politics which dictates the exposure of the processes that guide the decision makers, an exposure which leaves the leadership open to criticism.¹⁸

The letter of Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Menachem Begin, from 1981, represents a materially different approach from that of Peres. This letter written by the leader of the centre-right Likud party clings to the national narrative of a return of the Jewish People to their homeland, and even includes an attempt to expand the collective aspect. Like letters of the first period, there is no mention of actual events which do not serve the dominance of the national narrative:

Thanks to the sacrifice and supreme heroism of our fearless soldiers, we have emerged from slavery to freedom, we have established our independence, we

have shaken off enemy and foe, we have liberated our land, we have redeemed the whole of Jerusalem, the eternal capital of Israel.

The letter reinstates an epic and metaphoric style while using words with connotations from Jewish sources: 'enemies and foes' 'we redeemed' and 'the eternal capital of Israel'.

An important element which is added in Begin's letter is 'national pride', which appears as one of the cornerstones of his version of the national narrative: 'In all of the nation's battles, our soldiers stood few against many and thanks only to their resourcefulness and sacrifice, did they overcome. Thus Israel's pride has been redeemed, which was crushed in our generation.' The letter indeed includes many emotive idioms, such as 'sorrow', 'love', 'pride', 'courage', 'heroism' and 'sacrifice', so that the adhesive uniting the people into one collective is based in large part on emotional elements. These effect a transposition of human emotions into the national-collective sphere. Lending the national-collective human emotions and traits situates unruly emotion as a foundational element in politics. A national narrative which relies on emotive concepts frees itself to a great extent from empirical criticism, because of the amorphous nature of such concepts which are apparently not within one's control.

The letters of Ezer Weizman and Moshe Arens express a similar approach to that of Dayan's – a kind of middle way between that of Begin and Peres. These letters, by two Likud party Defence Ministers, focus on the subject of defence and include reference to actual events. Thus Weizman – a moderate who later joined the Labor party, mentions in his letter of 1979 the peace treaty with Egypt, in the context of expression of a longing for peace. Arens' letter of 1984 mentions 'the wonderful story of rising up and heroism, of immigration and settling of the land'. In his 1983 letter, Arens refers to the 'preservation of the democratic and traditional character' of the State. The use of the attribute of democracy to describe the State is not accompanied in this context with reference to individualistic elements as in Peres' letters, but rather implies that democracy is an important element in forming a national identity.

Defence Minister Ariel Sharon's letter of 1982 differs from others of this period in the special value it lends to the concept of security: 'In order to strengthen the security of Jewish life in Israel and abroad – we must be willing to fight for it.' Security is presented as a value in itself which must be fought for, in a circular principle which sees security as a goal as well as a means for reaching that goal. This approach, which situates security as a basis on which to build Israeli collectivism, is absent from the other letters.

This period signals an essential turning point in the relation between the individual and the collective. The five letters undersigned by Yitzhak Rabin as Defence Minister situate the individual as a defined category in its own right, not one derived from the collective, and in fact portray the individual as a cornerstone of society. While the main changes in the previous period consisted in the incorporation of new contextual elements, the major changes in Rabin's letters have to do with the roles of addressers and addressees. Rabin's letters construct a communication-oriented approach, in which both speakers and recipients become important agencies in the letters.

The process of disengagement from the collective story-oriented approach begins already in Rabin's first letter, in 1985: 'You, parents, wives, daughters, sons, sisters and brothers – carry with you pain and trouble. We, who know this, seek to bring

you some words of comfort.' The separation of 'we', who are not among the bereaved families, and the 'you', the bereaved families themselves, challenges the view which sees the nation as a collective whose might is great enough to blur the differences between the individuals of which it consists. This is a major change from the conflation of the addresser and addressee which characterized most of the letters of the first period. This separation of the families experiencing bereavement and the rest of the nation becomes even more marked in the letter of 1986: 'The public sorrow is not even a little like your personal pain and sorrow. You alone bear on your shoulders and in your hearts the burden of sorrow and pain which will never be healed.' In his 1987 letter, an individualist viewpoint arises which not only differentiates between those who lost family members and the political establishment, but clearly institutes the preservation of the life of the individual as a principle which should guide the decision makers. The letter opens with Rabin's personal address to the families:

This is the third time that I, as Defence Minister, sit at my desk on the eve of the Day of Remembrance for the casualties of Israel's wars, and the pen runs over the paper, and the words have difficulty in coming out to the air of the world. This year once again, I have nothing but a few words of comfort in my mouth which cannot heal your pain. I know that words cannot fill the empty space which has been created in your home.

There is no mistaking the traits of the sender – he is a human being. Comparison of the content of this letter with that of the letter written by Menachem Begin, points to the enormous change in the understanding of the place of the individual in the framework of the collective. Rabin speaks of the difficulty he has, as a human being, in writing to the bereaved families, while Begin, as quoted above, neutralizes the personal aspect and replaces it with a collective address which looks on events from above, from an eternal perspective: 'we have emerged from slavery to freedom, we have established our independence... we have liberated our land'. The defamiliarization which Rabin lends to the concept of space (*'halal'* in Hebrew¹⁹) reveals that he sees the individual as a special category, unique, which cannot be reconstructed and which has no substitute. For the families, according to Rabin, there is nothing which can fill the space left after the soldiers' deaths.

This approach points to a willingness to re-examine the foundations of Israeli society from the point of view of the individual. As a result of this approach, and from the attempt to set down the principles guiding the security establishment, Rabin highlights in his 1987 letter the 'sanctity of life' as a basic consideration guiding the decision makers:

There is nothing more precious to us than human life. In all of our decisions, of the General Staff of the IDF, mine as Defence Minister, those of the ministers of the Israeli government, the cost in blood is weighed. In my opinion, there is nothing more important than the sanctity of life.

The establishment of the 'sanctity of life' as a supreme value in Israeli society encapsulates the essential change which took place in Rabin's letters. This value

stands at the heart of the understanding according to which the living individual is the foundation-stone in the construction of a society. As a result, the collective project is obliged to serve the individual, his needs, and in particular to preserve his life. In Rabin's letters, saving the lives of the soldiers is a goal which has validity in its own right. This explains references to his peace-making policies as well as to new subjects, like training accidents which were not mentioned in earlier letters. Thus in the 1987 letter, he writes:

Every son who is lost, every father who will not return, every brother we have brought to a final resting place, is a terrible loss, an entire world for his family and for us. . . . We owe the fallen and you, the family members, every effort in the long road which leads to the prevention of war and to peace. We are obliged also to make every effort to guard against accidents. I see this as my ultimate obligation to preserve the sanctity of life.

The moment that the sanctity of life becomes a supreme value, it becomes appropriate to refer to the soldiers who fell in training accidents in the same terms as those who fell in battle, and to both in the context of the issue of war and peace. In his 1989 letter, 'road accidents' are specifically mentioned, together with 'training and weapons accidents.' Of course training accidents and road accidents in the military have taken a heavy toll in blood ever since the setting up of the IDF, but only when the value of the sanctity of life became central was there mention of this in the letters.

Another aspect which expresses a change in worldview laying emphasis on the life of the individual emerges from the reading of the hierarchical equality between the writer of the letter and its recipients, as is seen in the close of the 1988 letter: 'I wish to shake the hand of every one of you and to take on your spirit.' Shaking hands, as a gesture of mutual respect, is an expression of relations between partners, and indeed an entire nation cannot shake the family members' hands. The writer here does not situate himself as a negotiator between the families and an eternal collectivist narrative, but rather describes a meeting between persons in a communicative sphere, of addresser and addressees. In his 1988 letter Rabin continues this approach:

As Defence Minister, I surely know that behind the serial number, the name, the ID tag bereft of an owner and the army unit of every casualty, there was a man who dreamed and fought, who had plans and ambitions for the future, who wanted to love and to build a home – to live. And behind him stand the parents whose world has been destroyed, a wife, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends and brothers in arms – all torn and broken. . . . Before me is the sanctity of life, and it is for me, and for us, a supreme obligation.

The State and the army do not stand at the centre of the soldier's ambitions. He is first and foremost an individual person who dreams of building a home and a family, rather than of setting up a State and fulfilling the goals of the nation.

The difference between this approach and those appearing in the first period is profound. While in Rabin's letters the loss of soldiers' lives is the end of the story, in

the letters of the early period the loss is one event in an ongoing narrative. This approach is expressed in Rabin's 1989 letter:

As a human being and as a father of children I know how hard it is to raise them. I know the joy and the worry, the sleepless nights and the smiling mornings: the first tooth and the first step, the tears in kindergarten, first day at school, the *Bar mitzvah* celebrations, graduating primary school, high school, and the day, equally sad and joyful, of enlisting in the army. The overlarge uniform, the first leave, tales from basic training, the friends, operations; and you, bereaved family members – know also the most painful and awful notification of all.

The description of the casualties' road through life ends in 'the most painful and awful notification of all'. Those common experiences constitute a kind of typical summary of milestones in the biography of any Jewish Israeli citizen. Despite a collective aspect of this description, examination of the experience of bereavement is conducted via its opposition to the life cycle of the individual, and not in relation to the eternal system of the nation.

It is not easy to tell what the reason for this breakthrough was, but it is reasonable to assume that the change expresses deep contributions of society in Israel, and with them perhaps too the biography of Rabin himself as a military man, who was party for years to the practice of exercising military power, and who developed a sensibility to its casualties, and even a revulsion to its consequences.

Other letters in this period signal the continued strengthening of the view of the individual as a basic category of society, at the expense of the national, collective, story-oriented perspective. Even in letters written by right-wing leaders, where the return to Zion still plays a significant part, the collective tone does not ultimately dominate. For example, Likud party leader, Prime Minister and Defence Minister Yitzhak Shamir's 1990 letter includes familiar elements of the collectivist perspective, such as dying 'for the sanctification of the State's peace and independence' but without relying on a covenant of blood between the fallen and the living, as appears in the first period. Shamir rather talks about the fallen who 'bequeathed us life'.

In the face of what seems like the weakening of the collectivist perspective, the individualistic perspective gained momentum during this period. In his 1993 letter, the first Rabin wrote as Prime Minister, the theme of 'the sanctity of life' returns as a 'supreme imperative'. The individualistic perspective was increasingly established by new cultural materials:

The government and I, as its Prime Minister and Defence Minister, have set ourselves the goal of trying to put an end to the killing, the bereavement, living by the sword. Therefore in the near future we will devote efforts to putting an end to wars, to bringing peace to the Land [of Israel]. 'seek peace, and pursue it'.

The linking of the foundational value of the sanctity of life with the verse from Psalms (34: 14) represents a new fabric of cultural infrastructure seeking to put an end to the killing. This fabric is woven together with a tendency for the writer to take personal responsibility. In the same letter of 1993, Rabin repeats the image of

shaking hands as an expression of interpersonal communication with the families. The portrayal of the sender as a flesh and blood person, as was seen in Peres' letter is also linked in Rabin's letter of 1994 with admitting the possibility of error:

Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps not, but I am convinced that more than anyone, particularly those who have seen the blaze with their own eyes and felt the awfulness of war in their own bodies... especially they cling to the dream of peace and want it more than others.

Cultural sources, not only from Jewish tradition, are conscripted to the development of an individualistic perspective. The 1995 letter, which was the last undersigned by Rabin, is based almost entirely on a quotation from the poem 'Since Then' by Yehudah Amichai.²⁰ The poem describes in the first person the experience of war from the point of view of a soldier who fell in the battle during the War of Independence.²¹

Reference to the experience of war and to the death of the individual in lyrical language brings the individualistic statement in the letters to one of its heights, and relying on it, especially in the sensitive context of addressing the families, demonstrates an assurance that is embedded firmly enough in Israeli culture. In the lack of a developed Israeli political tradition of individualism, the letters make use of the rhetorical capital of modern Israeli poetry.²² The self is being manifested by a 'poetic function',²³ quoted from a poet and not by the words of the politician. The story of the soldier who fell in the sands of Ashdod takes place in a personal and familial space, and is far from being another inevitable chapter in the national narrative.

It is interesting to note that the fourth verse of the poem, in which the soldier describes how he carried his dead friend on his back, and so makes the experience of death concrete, is the only verse not included in the letter. Perhaps this is because of a sensitivity to the feelings of the recipients of the letter, who might be hurt by the graphic description of the experience of battle in this difficult verse. This connects with a supposition I raised that Rabin's own military past contributed to his recoiling from the harsh outcomes of the exercise of power by the State, and was crucial in the evolution of his individualistic perspective. This supposition is supported by Rabin's words, quoted above from his 1994 letter: 'particularly those who have seen the blaze with their own eyes... cling to the dream of peace'.

The communicative-oriented approach is also evidenced in Peres' 1996 letter. As in Rabin's, there is a prominent attempt to create a sense of personal communication between him and the bereaved families: 'I don't need to tell you how tortured and at the same time hesitant I am together with the members of the cabinet, whenever I authorize a military operation.' Peres returns to the value of the sanctity of life, and refers also to his own and his government's hesitations and suffering in everything to do with security decisions. In this case Peres describes the intimate and difficult experience of the bereaved families:

And the burden, as you know, is very heavy indeed. It begins at that moment, bitter and brief, in which representatives of the IDF stood at your door and brought the dreadful news... The sounds of clods of earth bumping against the wooden coffin being lowered into the open grave keep coming back to you every day.

This graphic description of the families' intimate suffering perhaps explains the difficulties in maintaining an individualistic approach based on communicative-oriented discourse, against the background of the ongoing security tension in the Middle East. Unlike the collective story-oriented approach in which the writers had a grand, national source of legitimacy, outside of day-to-day politics, the focus on the individual addressees and addressers puts the entire weight of bereavement on the bare shoulders of those in power. The intense need for legitimacy in the context of bereavement highlights the tragedy in this approach: in an individualistic atmosphere with a general trend toward personalization in Israel,²⁴ it seems like the most humanistic and perhaps moral approach for a leadership to seek legitimacy and justification for the loss of soldiers' lives first and foremost in themselves – in their own actions as decision makers. Moreover, what could be more decent for a leadership that extols the sanctity of life than to express its own sorrow and pain for the loss, and to identify as much as they may, under the restriction of the need to address many families, with the suffering of the families? Here lies the tragedy of Israeli individualism, and perhaps the tragedy of individualism in the context of ongoing conflict as a whole. This tragedy may be understood against the background of William Connolly's description of the state of legitimacy: 'In a perfectly legitimate order', writes Connolly, 'the imperative becomes the indicative: the "you must" assumes the form of "we will"'.²⁵ The sanctity of life as a main imperative that ultimately leads to the indicative 'we should live' increases the already unbearable burden on the shoulders of leadership. Now they have to explain, justify and legitimize the loss of life relying on their own personas. It seems that neither rational argument nor expressions of sympathy and true sadness are enough to cope with such a challenge set by one individual to legitimate the loss of another.

More recent letters, undersigned by ministers from both sides of the political divide, are characterized by a recycling of various themes and images from previous periods. The letter of 1998, written by Defence Minister Yizhak Mordechai, signals this trend. The letter uses themes typical of letters of earlier periods, together with reference to understandings which are typical of later letters. As in Rabin's letters, he opens with a presentation of the addresser as tortured: 'I write to you with a painful heart and tearing eye.' Further on, the letter develops the understanding which views the death of the individual as the loss of an entire world, using the term 'space' in a similar way to Rabin in his 1987 letter: 'worlds which were and are no more, life which was in full bloom and has left empty spaces.' Together with this, the letter recalls the national narrative of a return to Zion as a basis for addressing the bereaved families:

After two thousand years of exile, after pogroms and troubles, and after the terrible Holocaust, our people won independence. A great miracle and vast sacrifice brought us to this day, the jubilee of Israel's independence – in the Land of Israel.

The letter of Prime Minister and Defence Minister Ehud Barak written in 2000, continues the trend of mentioning current events, especially about peace and security. But this letter and even more so the one from 2008 mentions themes from earlier periods. Thus in his 2008 letter Barak returns to the classic national narrative of the return to Zion: 'For two thousand years the Jewish people did not bear arms, and so its fate was at the mercy of others.'

The letter written by Defence Minister Benjamin Ben Eliezer in 2001 also involves a combination of the collectivist spirit typical of letters from the early years, with reference to the individual as a unique category. Thus, as in Rabin's letters, Ben Eliezer refers to the absence of comfort for the absolute loss of the fallen: 'There is no comfort for the parents who will not see their son return home once more, for the widow who will not feel once more an embracing arm.' Together with these expressions, the major part of the letter recycles images typical of letters from earlier periods. The most prominent of these is a quotation from the letter Ben-Gurion sent to the bereaved families in 1956. This is a passage which more than anything embodies the collectivist discourse of the early periods: 'Their short and wonderful spans of life – in work, study, play and battle – are as if quarried from a wondrous legend.'

The four letters of Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, written between 2003 and 2006, are also based on themes from earlier letters. Thus it emerges that the complex social issues which the discourse of bereavement raises are covered over with a mantle of figures and images which are rooted in large part in a fundamental understanding that guided the political leadership in the early years of the State. Mofaz's letter of 2003, for example, raises the complex issue of how to deal with the foundational heritage which was created in the heat of battle in an age of policies aimed at peace: 'With all of our might we aim to end war in this country and to settle it with security and true peace. But we will always keep the memory of the fallen with love.' Thus expression of the tension between the ambition of ending war and keeping the covenant of memory between the establishment and the fallen and their families is swallowed in the antiphonal word 'but' which is suspended on the one hand between familiar declarations of a policy of peace and on the other variations on the familiar themes of the discourse of bereavement.

The letter of 2007 by Defence Minister Amir Peretz is in line with the other letters of this period. However this letter incorporates some new elements in its description of the 'society' for which the soldiers lost their lives. One is its multicultural character, which perhaps indicates a search for new directions to establish new understanding of the tension between collectivism and individualism in the context of bereavement.

The fundamental differences over the years in the mode of address to the families of the fallen may be indicative of significant changes in the political establishment in Israel with regard to the relation between the individual and the collective. The letters sent between the years 1952 and 1967 reflect a collective story-oriented approach, in which the power of the national-collective narrative of the Jewish People's return to Zion dominates. The expression 'the sacrifice has been accepted' is typical of the letters of the period, in which the fallen were presented as a sacrifice intrinsic to the national narrative for whose realization society must pay the price.

The letters written between 1968 and 1984 indicate the beginning of a process of disengagement from the dominance of the collective story-oriented approach, as expressed in reference to current events not directly connected with the national narrative.

The letters written from 1985 to 1996, mainly those by Rabin, mark a major change in the understanding of the relation between the individual and the collective, which views the living individual as the basic element of society. This approach is

expressed in the presentation of the value of the sanctity of life as a guiding principle in decision making. This change is accompanied by an important shift in the communication approach adopted by the letters. The addresser in these letters is depicted as a fallible human being, very different from the elevated perspective of the story teller who characterized the early letters.

Addressing the bereaved families as a distinct group in Israeli society altered the inclusive reference to the nation or the collective 'we'. Unlike the collective story-oriented approach that offered a consolation for the loss of life in the existence of a national narrative, the burden in the communicative-oriented approach lies on the shoulders of the political personas themselves alone, without the support of grand national narratives. Regardless of the normative question of whether it is a desirable situation or not, given the ongoing loss of Israeli soldiers in military actions, this approach suffers from a severe deficiency in legitimacy. These difficulties perhaps explain the recent letters' return to the national story, and perhaps exemplify immanent difficulties of developing individualistic discourse where there is an ongoing conflict. However, more recent letters seek to maintain at least some of the individualistic traits established since the late 1980s. These letters express an attempt of the Israeli establishment to find a kind of a middle way that incorporates a new climate of individualism but at the same time keeps the collective story-oriented approach as an important source of legitimacy.

Overall examination of the letters tells us something that perhaps goes beyond the Israeli case and the discourse of bereavement. It demonstrates a constant process of definition and redefinition of the relations between the individual and the collective undertaken by the political leadership. The context in which this process takes place may explain the immediate effect of this process on basic communication modes of addressing citizens together with a search for legitimacy.

Notes

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1. G. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.9–10.
2. From 1952 until 1966 the letters were sent by the directors of the Department for the Commemoration of the Fallen in the Defence Ministry, by the Israeli President and by the chairperson of the Knesset. Since 1967 the letters have been sent by the Defence Minister (see Appendix 1).
3. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*.
4. See, for example, W.B. Gudykunst, G. Gao, K.L. Schmidt, M.H. Bond, K. Leung, G. Wang and R.A. Barraclough, 'Influence of Individualism-Collectivism, Self-Monitoring, and Predicted-Outcome Value on Communication in Ingroup and Outgroup Relationships', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Vol.23, No.2 (1992), pp.196–213; G. Hofstede, *Cultural Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001); H.C. Triandis, 'Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the Study of Collectivism and Individualism, in Uichol Kim', in H.C. Triandis, C. K.S.-C. Choi and G. Yoon (eds.), *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method, and Application* (London: Sage, 1994), pp.41–51. For national cultures in particular, see K. Celinska, 'Individualism and Collectivism in America: The Case of Gun Ownership and Attitudes toward Gun Control', *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol.50, No.2 (2007), pp.229–47.

5. See E. Sivan, 'To Remember is to Forget: Israel's 1948 War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.28, No.2 (1993), pp.341–59; E. Witztum and R. Malkinson, 'Bereavement and Commemoration: The Double Face of the Nationalist Myth', in R. Malkinson, S. Rubin and E. Witztum (eds.), *Loss and Bereavement in Israeli Society* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Defence publications, 1993, in Hebrew), pp.231–58; I. Shamir, *Commemoration and Memory* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996, in Hebrew); Y. Bar-Gal and M. Azaryahu, 'Israeli Cemeteries and Jewish Tradition: Two Cases', in H. Brodsky (ed.), *Visions of Land and Community*, (Maryland: University Press of Maryland, 1998), pp.105–28; M. Matisyahu and I. Shamir (eds.), *Patterns of Commemoration* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence Publications, 2000, in Hebrew); R. Rosenthal, *Is Bereavement Dead?* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2001, in Hebrew).
6. The letters are short, for the most part one or two pages written in Hebrew with no formal translation to other languages. All the letters may be found on the website of the families and commemoration division of the Ministry of Defence, http://www.izkor.gov.il/Igrot/izkor95_2006.asp.
7. A special edition of the letters has been published by the Ministry of Defence. See, Ministry of Defence, *Dear Families: Commemoration Day Letters* (Holon: Ministry of Defence, 1999).
References to the letters are made in the Israeli media on Remembrance Day, and in writings on Israeli bereavement. Segev emphasizes the clichéd style of the letters, while Burshten points to the symbolic imagery used and the iconography of their design, in an attempt to see the letters as a unified message, projecting an ideal image of the families in the eyes of the state. D. Burshten, 'And They Shall Live as You Will in the Eternal Memory of the Nation: The Letters of Ministry of Defense to Bereavement Families', *Alpaim*, Vol.32 (2008, in Hebrew), pp.102–118; T. Segev, *The New Zionists* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2001, in Hebrew).
8. R. Jakobson, 'Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in T.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1960), pp.350–77. Jakobson also refers to the CODE, which is a shared language between the speakers and hearers; and the CONTACT, which is the 'physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication' (p.353).
9. David Ben-Gurion, *The Restored State of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1969, in Hebrew); I. Galnoor, *Steering the Polity: Communication and Politics in Israel* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982); D. Horowitz and M. Lissak, *Trouble in Utopia: The Overburdened Polity of Israel*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).
10. During the War of Independence in 1948, *Sha'ar Hagai* saw fierce fighting between Arab and Jewish on the road to a blockaded Jerusalem.
11. S. Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973); Y. Ezrahi, 'Subject and Space in Israeli Democracy', *Studio, Journal of Art*, Vol.37 (1992, in Hebrew), pp.52–3.
12. The Hasmonean Kingdom was an autonomous Jewish state in ancient Israel (140–37 BC).
13. This approach reflects very clearly Zerubavel's insightful observation on the 'Zionist binary model of Jewish history' that 'portrays antiquity as a positive period, contrasted with a highly negative attitude toward the period of Exile'. See Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.17.
14. L.R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).
15. The theme of red flowers as representatives of death is not unique to Israeli commemoration culture. Poppies, as representations of dead soldiers, is an old theme. For example, Remembrance Day in England is marked by wearing a red poppy in the buttonhole, and is known as 'Poppy Day'. For a discussion on the Adonis symbol see also Burshten, 'And They Shall Live as You Will in the Eternal Memory of the Nation'.
16. The relative number of times the word 'family' and its suffixes appears in the letters increased significantly from 0.2% for the first period to 0.6% for the second, and 1.2% and 1.3% in the third and the fourth. For an analysis of 'family identity' as an important component in Jewish Israeli society, see D. Moore and B. Kimmerling, 'Individual Strategies of Adopting Collective Identities: the Israeli Case', *International Sociology*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1995), pp.387–407.
17. The opening of this paragraph quotes D. Ben-Gurion's book *As Israel Fights* (Tel Aviv: Mapai Publications, 1950, in Hebrew).
18. Y. Ezrahi, 'The Cultural Status of the Concept of Power in Modern Democracy', *Times: Historical Quarterly*, Vol.50–51 (1994, in Hebrew), pp.4–15.
19. The idiomatic term for a slain person in Hebrew, '*halal*', also means 'vacuum' or 'space'.
20. Y. Amichai, *Yehuda Amichai, A Life of Poetry, 1948–1994*, selected and translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), pp.310–311. Originally published in: Y. Amichai. *Great Calm: Questions and Answers* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1980, in Hebrew).

21. I fell in the battle of Ashdod
 In the War of Independence.
 My mother said then, He's twenty-four years old,
 And now she says, He's fifty-four, ...
 And since then my home is my grave, and my grave — my home.
 For I fell in the pale sands
 Of Ashdod.
22. Rhetorical capital is 'the aggregate persuasive resources inherent in entities'. See, P.I. Shalom, 'The Rhetorical Capital of Theories: The Democratic Peace and the Road to the Roadmap', *International Political Science Review*, Vol.29, No.3 (2008), pp.281–301.
23. Jakobson, 'Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics'.
24. G. Rahat and T. Sheaffer, 'The Personalization(s) of Politics: Israel 1949–2003', *Political Communication*, Vol.24, No.1 (2007), pp.65–80.
25. W.E. Connolly, 'The Dilemma of Legitimacy', in W.E. Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp.72–98.

Appendix 1

Table 1. Writers of the letters

Year	writer	role	party	Year	writer	role	party
1952	Dekel	head of DFC	Likud	1981	Begin	PM, DM	Likud
1953	Ben Zvi	President	Labor	1982	Sharon	DM	Likud
1954	Dekel	head of DFC	Likud	1983	Arens	DM	Likud
1955	Orbach	head of DFC	Likud	1984	Arens	DM	Likud
1956	Ben Gurion	PM, DM	Labor	1985	Rabin	DM	Labor
1957	no letter		Labor	1986	Rabin	DM	Labor
1958	Ben Gurion	PM, DM	Labor	1987	Rabin	DM	Labor
1959	Orbach	Head of DFC	Labor	1988	Rabin	DM	Labor
1960	Orbach	Head of DFC	Labor	1989	Rabin	DM	Labor
1961	Ben Zvi	President	Labor	1990	Shamir	PM, DM	Likud
1962	no name	DFC	Labor	1991	ARens	DM	Likud
1963	Ben Gurion	PM, DM	Labor	1992	Arens	DM	Likud
1964	Eshkol	PM, DM	Labor	1993	Rabin	DM	Labor
1965	Shazar	President	Labor	1994	Rabin	DM	Labor
1966	Luz	Chairperson Knesset	Labor	1995	Rabin	DM	Labor
1967	Eshkol	PM, DM	Labor	1996	Peres	PM, DM	Labor
1968	Dayan	DM	Labor	1997	Mordechai	DM	Likud
1969	Dayan	DM	Labor	1998	Mordechai	DM	Likud
1970	Dayan	DM	Labor	1999	Arens	DM	Likud
1971	Dayan	DM	Labor	2000	Barak	PM, DM	Labor
1972	Dayan	DM	Labor	2001	Ben eliezer	DM	Labor
1973	Dayan	DM	Labor	2002	Ben eliezer	DM	Labor
1974	Dayan	DM	Labor	2003	Mofaz	DM	Likud
1975	Peres	DM	Labor	2004	Mofaz	DM	Likud
1976	Peres	DM	Labor	2005	Mofaz	DM	Likud
1977	Peres	DM	Labor	2006	Mofaz	DM	Likud
1978	Weitzman	DM	Likud	2007	Peretz	DM	Labor
1979	Weitzman	DM	Likud	2008	Barak	DM	Labor
1980	Weitzman	DM	Likud				

Note: PM = Prime minister; DM = Defence minister.
 Labor includes its earlier forms (Mapai and Maarach).