

Simanim / Signs

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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הצעת מחקר לתזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

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I. Introduction

A year after my grandfather passed away, my whole family went to Har HaMenuhot for the erection of his tombstone. The raw scab of earth had been covered with a traditional Jerusalem tombstone—a flat slab of limestone covering the length of the grave. Yet instead of the usual laconic lines that sum up a life-- name, dates, family appellations—the entire stone was covered in text. In his will, my grandfather had asked that the names of his father, his mother, his sister, her husband, his four brothers, his sister-in-law, and his uncle all be engraved on his tombstone, along with the various dates on which they had been murdered.

The period after my grandfather's death was followed by an explosion of words. It was not only the tombstone. My family was being crushed by the burden of memory even as we were terrified of losing the weight that kept these memories from floating away, that kept us connected to those who were gone. Each member of my family dealt with it differently. My uncle refused to allow my grandparents' house to be touched, effectively turning it into a shrine. My mother, over my uncle's protests, rushed to preserve and disseminate my grandfather's papers. His mysterious diary, which had sat unreadable in his study, was given to scholars for transcription. For my part, I was consumed with the need to investigate the half-heard facts that had haunted my childhood, spending hours on the internet tracing my grandparents' past.

But the focus on memory took a turn and became particularly acute and personal when, less than two years after my grandfather's passing, I was in a traffic accident that left me with a severe concussion, a week of amnesia, and months of disrupted memory. Conversations disappeared. Objects fell out of sight. I was never sure where I was going, or if I had been there before. I felt I was being eaten away from within. If the previous year I had felt burdened by the need to preserve the collective memory of my family, now I was grasping after my own.

My grandfather's diary was finally published a month ago. For the first time, his unspoken past is at my fingertips. He opens by writing about his need to keep record, to preserve, to engrave in words. *Simanim / Sign* is about the process of assimilating and retrieving lost memories, of finding a place for a personal voice within the collective memory of trauma and loss that defined my family. It is about the burden and need for memory.

II. Aims and General Description

Simanin / Signs will be a full-length (48-60 page) collection of poetry which explores the intersection of cultural, familial and personal memory. It will be divided into three interwoven sections of approximately equal length. The first will focus on family memories, especially of my grandparents; the second will explore my grandfather's wartime journal; the third will delve into my experience of memory disruptions following the traffic accident. These three sections will be united by a sustained exploration of how memory is preserved and transmitted, identifying and highlighting common mnemonic devices—from religious rituals of collective memory, to journal entries, documentation, lists, and aspects of poetic form (there is a reason that Mnemosyne-Memory was considered the mother of the Muses).

III. Conceptual Background

Anything that has *simanim* and has claimants must be declared...

--Mishnah, Baba Metziah, 2:2

Simanim—“mnemonics” “markers,” “signs” -- are ubiquitous throughout the Talmud. Anything that differentiates, that marks, is a “*siman*”—whether it is a physical manifestation of puberty or one of the characteristics that separates the kosher animal from the non-kosher. This term gains particular prominence in the Talmudic discussion regarding the laws of returning lost objects. Here, *simanim* become a litmus test: if an object is marked by identifiable *simanim*, it is considered to have a claimant, and must be returned. If the object lacks characteristic markers, it is considered to lack the personalized relation of ownership, and may be appropriated by the finder. *Siman* indicates what can be identified, what can be claimed, what can be remembered—what can be named.

Ultimately, *Simanim* and memory are intimately intertwined. The Talmudic discussion is punctuated by mnemonic devices, introduced by the phrase: “And your *siman* is...” We remember what is marked, and we remember by giving a name. The Talmud does not see this as incidental, but rather as pointing to an essential aspect of language. In the middle of a discussion of the mystical presence of the letters engraved in the Tablets of Law, the Talmud begins to read the Hebrew alphabet as an acrostic, pointing to primal truths. *Samek* [ס] and *'ayyin* [ע] are read as standing for “devise [*aseb*] mnemonics [*Simanim*] in the Torah and [thus] acquire it.” Names, language, memory, and writing are inextricable interconnected.

This linkage between memory, naming and language can be found in Greek as well. “Mnemonics” from Greek *mnemonikos* “of or pertaining to memory,” comes from the root *memne* “memory, a remembrance, record, an epitaph.” This root is also the source of the name “Mnemosyne,” the goddess of memory, who gives birth to the Muses. “She gave a designation to every object about us by means of the names which we use to express whatever we would ... And to this goddess is also attributed the power to call things to memory and to remembrance (*mneme*),” declares Siculus (circa 100 BC),¹ crediting Mnemosyne with the birth of language and culture.

Running beneath this weave of words and memory is their shadowy counterpart: silence and oblivion. *Simanim* allow the lost to be found. *Memne* counters death by preserving a “record,” giving

¹ *Diodorus Siculus, Library of History* 5. 67. 3 (trans. Oldfather) (Greek historian C1st B.C.):

“an epitaph.” Forgetfulness, by contrast, is the absoluteness of death: “For the living know they will die, but the dead know nothing...for their memory has been forgot” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). In *Economy of the Unlost*, Anne Carson points out the Simonides of Kios, who is credited with inventing the Greek system of mnemonics, was also considered the master of the epitaph. Those who construct systems of memory are also those who preserve the names of the dead. Not for nothing is Simonides famous for being able to identify all the guests who had been killed when his employer’s dining hall collapsed.

I see my grandfather as a Simonides of sorts, carefully preserving a vast city of the dead in an internal memory vault. And yet he combined a strange mixture of epitaph and silence. My grandfather opens his journal by marking his need to preserve the stages of the war for posterity. Upon reaching safety in America, he immediately set out to compile a collection of all the teachings he remembered from his rabbis in Telz Yeshiva. Yet this need to preserve and write was accompanied by a deep silence. His family was never mentioned. We knew only a few facts about his wartime experiences. If my grandmother reviewed her losses again and again, in constant mourning, my grandfather embodied Lamentation’s injunction to “Let him sit alone and be silent, for [God] has laid the burden” (3: 25). Strangely, the preservation of the names of the dead is often accompanied by reticence. The combination of epitaph and silence has literary precedents: Carson points out that Simonides was famous for a miserliness of language—for not “wasting” his words. For words to bear the burden of memory, they must be made precious by the stringent “economy.”

Some losses are too deep to be spoken. Sometimes, speech erodes rather than preserves memory. There has been a glut of talk about the Holocaust. Yet the very ubiquity of memorials and museums makes it easy not to feel. After being inundated with statistics and knowledge for so many years, there is a numb sameness. The horror has become a cliché. To counter the banalization, my grandfather chose existential quiet. Rather than speak, he became a memorial incarnate. Only when he could no longer be a living presence did he turn to words, engraving them on his tombstone. I, by contrast, stand at a remove. I do not know his family, or what he lost: I know only him. It is precisely because this distance that I feel the need for words. I cannot embody memory, and so must speak around it, invoking its presence. Yet how to speak within the cacophony of writings about the Holocaust? My challenge in this collection is to use poetry to overcome the difficulty of talking about something that has apparently already been said—said again and again, but not truly understood.

I will use a mix of documentary poetry and poetry of witness to circle the gap of my non-knowledge of my grandfather's past, constructing a narrative by interweaving the fragments I was told as a child with the research I conducted after my grandfather's death, along with excerpts from his just-published journal. Taking the example of Michele Battiste's *Uprising*, I will flesh out the specific events my grandfather records in his journal through the perspectives of different witnesses. I will punctuate these research-based documentary poems with short sections of poetry of witness, in which I trace my own responses to reading the diary. In the documentary sections, the narrative strategy of approaching the historic events through the voice of the lived experience of the time will help break down cliché: an event, as it unfolds, is surprising and new. To those who lived through World War II, each incident was a new development, another step into the unknown. Often, the overwhelming reaction was confusion and uncertainty. By contrast, the poetry of witness sections will place the events within the retrospective perspective available today. This juxtaposition will create a disorienting doubling, further breaking down the feeling of cliché. The poetry of witness sections mostly trace my confused response to the journal, my questions and investigations. In highlighting the gaps of knowledge, and the multiple ways that stories are handed down in families, these sections point to the elements that remain missing in supposedly objective historical accounts. How can an event be clichéd when it remains so darkly mysterious?

Placing my grandfather's journal within the context of my own life will also point to the long-term implications of his experiences, while keeping the focus on the personal and specific aspects of history. I will utilize divergent forms to create this heteroglossia of perspectives and voices: syllabics, Sapphics, ghazals, litanies, list poems, free verse and fragments of prose non-fiction will work together to counter the sense of the expected. Throughout, drawing inspiration from Eleni Sikelianos's *You Animal Machine*, I will also include non-verbal elements of memory such as family pictures, images of cherished objects and other ephemera of daily life.

In the *Angel of History*, Carolyn Forché, alluding to Walter Benjamin, speaks of how the past and future are intertwined, arguing that our perception of coming events is colored by what has already happened to us. This is very relevant when speaking of family history, as children tend to repeat the patterns they were raised with, recreating their home family situation. In interweaving poems of persona, documentary poetry and pieces written in my own voice, I hope to uncover those elements of memory that I do carry within myself, to discover how much the personal and the collective are intertwined I am also looking to Carolyn Forché's anthology of witness poetry, *Against Forgetting*, for

models of for how to speak about historic events in an intimate voice, using the personal to illuminate the public.

For models for the sections of poetry of witness, I am drawn to Rachel Zucker's humorous, painful, and lyrical poems, which often place personal struggles within the context of family and cultural history. For example, in "Hey Allen Ginsberg Where Have You Gone and What Would You Think of My Drugs," Zucker deftly interweaves her poetic pedigree and mental health struggles with Biblical stories, Jewish traditions and history, while setting them all within the context of the long term effects of historic trauma: "Don't think, this refugee thing part / of a syndrome of fear of medication / of being better..." (Zucker, 2009, 23). Here, the personal and the collective are completely intertwined. I also draw inspiration from Zucker's hybrid composition *MOTHERS*, which she defines as "not a poem and not a story. Perhaps, according to the most basic definition of the form, it is an essay in that *j'essai*—from *assayer*—I try. [...] I think of it as a 'rumination' or, perhaps, a 'public notebook.' Part memoir, part lyric—self conscious of its own making" (Zucker, 2014, 68). Like Zucker, I "try" to reconstruct memories, while remaining aware of the gaps and untrustworthiness of memories. I follow her in plaiting together stories and the process of remembering, placing them within the living context of the actual writing situation.

Natalie Diaz is also an inspiration, providing a model for how to speak a personal story within the context of an overwhelming cultural tradition. She opens up possibilities for writing about topics that in less deft hands could have turned into cliché. Using the frame of myth and collective memory; she grants archetypal power to possible banalities. For example, the title poem to Diaz's collection *When My Brother was an Aztec* describes the effects of Diaz's brother's drug addiction through Aztec mythological narratives. The lines between the literal and the metaphorical blur, as Diaz's brother "rips out" her parent's hearts in a recreation of Aztec human sacrifice, making heartbreak violent and viscerally real. Also relevant to me is the way in which Diaz interlinks her poems through repeated imagery and symbols, so that each poem becomes a commentary on the ones that came before. The poems build on each other, and the symbols become progressively more multilayered.

IV. Shape of Project

Simanin / Signs will concentrate on three aspects of memory: family memories, cultural memories, and personal memories. It will feature 48-60 pages of poetry—including hybrid work, graphic poetry, and lyrical prose-poems—and will be organized in three interconnected sections. The

first section will concentrate on my memories of my grandparents; the second on the journal my grandfather kept during World War II; the final section will explore my experience of amnesia, and the gradual recovery from a head trauma.

In order to explore effectively these various aspects of memory, the collection will be written in a mix of voices and viewpoints, and will interweave poetry with hybrid lyrical essays and found objects. The first section, which will explore my memories of my grandparents, will describe the town of Wickliffe, Ohio, where my grandparents lived in a small community of Lithuanian Holocaust survivors. My personal memories will be intertwined with stories I was told. Jewish collective memory will be evoked through descriptions of holidays that I spent with my grandparents, as well as by allusions to various figures from Tanakh and Jewish history. This section will include poems in various forms, with special emphasis given to list poems and litanies, as enumeration and repetition are common *simanim*-mnemonic devices. Making lists is a way of remembering disparate items, while the obsessive repetition of litanies engraves certain words, making them unforgettable. The relationship of litany to prayer will also highlight how religious ritual can function as a cultural mnemonic.

The second section will focus on the publication of my grandfather's wartime journal. It will be in hybrid form, drawing upon historical research to trace my grandfather's experiences during World War II. The personal voice of the lyrical "essay" (in the Zucker sense) will be juxtaposed with various voices reconstructed from history. Some of the poems will be written in first-person, with a changing speaker. The use of a non-metered narrative voice will allow me to transform journal entries and historical events into poems, told mostly in the present tense, examining my grandfather's experiences from multiple viewpoints.

The final section will address my own struggles with memory. In June 2013, I went on trip to the Far East with my sister. During a visit to a nature reserve in Vietnam, I was in an accident that left me with a serious concussion, wounds on my face and hands, whiplash, and over a week of amnesia. Though I was released from the hospital after several days, the recovery process was long and slow. Worse than the chronic headaches were the recurrent memory gaps. Conversations, people, places and numbers would simply disappear. I could no longer trust my memory or my mind. The visceral experience of the fragility of my personal memory became a symbol for the fragility of remembrance as a whole. The literal gaps in my grandfather's journal caused by a lack of paper and the loss of a notebook became, in my mind, the equivalent of my missing days, damaged neurons an echo of damaged paper. When I read my grandfather's diary, I was especially sensitive to the things left

untold, to the “disnarrated”² beneath the narrative. In learning to doubt my own memory of events, I became more aware of how stories are transformed in the telling, of how my mother’s view of her parents was being changed without the constant check of their presence.

The poems in this section will explore the process of building a new sense of self that can incorporate the gaps of lost memories—and by implication, will also search for a way to carry a family history, with all the lacunas of missing knowledge. Here, I interweave cultural and personal memory, interspersing personal ruminations on memory loss with the Talmudic section that highlights *simanim* was the litmus test for the return (and non-return) of the lost.³ Tractate Baba Metzia Chapter 2-- also known as “*Elle metziot*—these are the found”—declares that only objects with “*simanim*,” with distinctive physical markers, need to be returned to their owners. Yet “*elle Metziot*” uses “*simanim*” in multiple ways. The Mishna is structured along a series of mnemonic devices for the transmission of what was essentially an oral culture; the Talmud expands upon these devices, assigning “*simanim*” for remembering complicated legal disputes. The two meanings of *simanim* -- physical marker and mnemonic device--allow me to trace the interaction of memory and the physical ephemera of life. The concrete disputes about the loss of objects will serve as a springboard for exploring the less tangible loss of memory. I will interweave lyric poems in various forms, including sonnets, litanies and list poems, with sections based on material from the Talmud. The structure of the Talmudic debate provides the scaffolding for teasing apart the various elements that come into play when we discuss loss, return, and preservation.

This final section also serves to sum up and close the collection. The mnemonic structures of the Talmud, which includes lists, repetitions, and symbols, will echo the list and litany poems of the first section, creating a frame structure that will unite the collection. Talmud study is also a frequent motif in my grandfather’s journal, and his observations on the war are often punctuated by his notes on learning Talmud. The backdrop of the Talmud will thus interweave the second and third sections, while the use of Talmudic structures to discuss personal memory points to the interconnectedness of personal and collective mnemonic devices.

² To use Gerald Prince’s wonderful term for elements that are spoken in the negative—the gaps in a narrative that are present in their absence.

³ See “Conceptual Background,” page 5.

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