

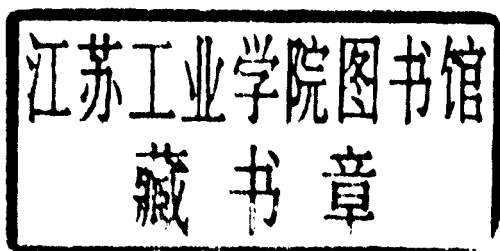
Don Handelman

# NATIONALISM AND THE ISRAELI STATE

Bureaucratic Logic in Public Events

**Nationalism and the Israeli State**  
**Bureaucratic Logic in Public Events**

**Don Handelman**



 **BERG**

*Oxford • New York*

First published in 2004 by

**Berg**

Editorial offices:

1st Floor, Angel Court, 81 St Clements Street, Oxford OX4 1AW, UK  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

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Berg is an imprint of Oxford International Publishers Ltd.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 85973 780 3 (Cloth)

1 85973 785 4 (Paper)

Typeset by JS Typesetting Ltd, Wellingborough, Northants.

Printed in the United Kingdom by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn.

**[www.bergpublishers.com](http://www.bergpublishers.com)**

## Acknowledgements

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Even so, my thinking on the subjects discussed in this book has been influenced for the better through discussions over the years with the following friends and colleagues: Myron Aronoff, Amnon Aronson, Daniella Aronson, Hanna Barag, Hugh Beach, Eyal Ben-Ari, Yoram Bilu, Jean Briggs, Yoram Carmeli, Selim Deringil, Shlomo Deshen, Terry Evens, Sidra Ezrahi, Yaron Ezrahi, Michael Feige, Jackie Feldman, Harvey Goldberg, Deborah Golden, Ithamar Gruenwald, Haim Hazan, Bruce Kapferer, Tamar Katriel, Elihu Katz, Carol Kidron, Baruch Kimmerling, Gideon Kressel, Smadar Lavie, Galina Lindquist, Emanuel Marx, Piroska Nagy, Ronit Nikolsky, Robert Paine, Riv-Ellen Prell, Su Schachter, Don Seeman, Moshe Shokeid, David Shulman, Pieter Vanhuysse, Connie Webber, Jonathan Webber, Pnina Werbner, Richard Werbner, Eviatar Zerubavel, Yael Zerubavel. My deepest debt, of intellect, of feeling, is to the late Lea Shamgar-Handelman. Yaron Ezrahi and Hanna Barag helped especially, with thoughtful, valuable comments and discussions on a number of chapters.

The research discussed in Chapters Eight and Nine was supported by the Shaine Foundation of the Hebrew University. Yona Weitz, a research assistant on that project, has helped in manifold ways in collecting and discussing field materials.

Parts of this book were written during a Senior Fellowship at Collegium Budapest, 2001–2002. My warm thanks to the staff of the Collegium, especially the librarians, for providing such comfortable conditions for scholarly endeavor.

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**Part I**  
**Preamble: Designs and Depositions**



## **The Collapse of Versailles and the Nation-in-Arms**

And I do now what every memory dog does:  
I howl quietly  
And piss a turf of remembrance around me,  
No one may enter it.

Yehuda Amichai (1995: 410)

By permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

One warm evening in the late spring of the year 2001, a private Jewish wedding reception in West Jerusalem turned into an ellipsis that collapsed brutally when the floor of the reception hall, named Versailles, fell away from beneath the feet of the celebrants, plummeting them precipitously into the level below. Twenty-three people were killed; hundreds injured. The disaster was videotaped by the wedding photographer, and the dramatic footage – in which people abruptly vanish into a huge, yawning hole that swallows their screams – was telecast round the world.<sup>1</sup> Rescue personnel – police, firefighters, volunteers – arrived quickly, and thousands gathered outside police cordons to gawk, comment, gossip, pass the time, calling relatives and friends on mobile phones to fill them in. The mood was more one of sadness than anger: was there no surcease from catastrophe? Once more, Israeli Jews were called on to suffer, to bear their already weighty burdens. Much of the rescue work was telecast. The disaster occurred well into the second Intifada, the uprising of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, against Israeli occupation. Rumors spread rapidly that Palestinians had bombed Versailles. Denied officially, these stories continued to circulate. Army units of the Home Front Command, itself responsible for civil defense, were ordered in to do the bulk of the search-and-rescue. These units have had extensive experience in many parts of the world. The task itself was carried out by young soldiers, most hardly out of their teens, doing their national service. The conditions were hazardous. The threat loomed that the entire building could collapse atop them at any moment. The jagged remains of the building looked bombed out, blown up – a war zone, a site of suffering, a startling and numbing vacancy in the built landscape within which soldiers labored to separate the human and the once-human from the debris. They worked for over forty straight hours almost without respite, in the glare of spotlights, in the heat and dust, until their commanders agreed there were

no corpses left to be recovered. The commanding officer of the Home Front Command called off the search.<sup>2</sup> Television announced that this was the worst civilian disaster in Israeli history; and government proclaimed that a 'ceremony' would be held to mark the close of the rescue effort.

This 'ceremony' is in my terms a 'public event,' and the discussion of the Versailles occasion in this chapter will introduce and foreground theoretical issues that engage with my ongoing attempt to develop a theory of 'ritual form,' begun in a previous work (Handelman 1998a). I argued there that as a roof concept the term 'ritual' includes a multitude of occasions that have little or nothing in common with one another, apart from being glossed as belonging together. The term 'ritual' obscures more than it clarifies and should be abandoned. Instead I use the term 'public event' to refer to sites of performance whose designs are intended in relatively coherent ways to convey participants into versions of social order. As the flow of living so often is not, public events are put together to communicate comparatively well-honed messages. The currents of mundane living may be quite uncertain in terms of direction and outcome, yet the converse is true of public events. Public events are indigenous phenomena that exist in the life-worlds of their participants, and are graspable as such by external observers. The mandate of public events is to engage in the ordering of feelings, ideas, and people through certain kinds of practice. The *logics* of design of public events, of how these events are put together, are crucial to how these events work and to what they can accomplish. To enter within such forms is to be captured by and caught up in the logic of their design – and so to be operated on by the event, regardless of why it came into being, or for whatever motives it is enacted. In this book I give center stage to that which I call the 'event of presentation.' I associate this kind of event especially with modern state and state-influenced social orders. The logic of design of the event of presentation I call 'bureaucratic logic.' I stress immediately that bureaucratic logic does not refer to institutions of bureaucracy as such, and I will clarify this shortly.

This chapter addresses the Versailles commemoration as a public event of presentation organized through bureaucratic logic by the State to shape the nation-in-arms, the embodiment of the national. Chapter Two discusses bureaucratic logic in depth, and traces this logic from Eastern Europe to socialist Zionism in Palestine. Chapter Three takes up one example of the State's use of bureaucratic logic in the shaping of Jews as national in their citizenship, and certain of the consequences of this for ethnicity and inequality in Israel. Apart from these three introductory chapters, this book is divided into three further sections. The first of these contains two chapters that take up public events – holiday celebrations and birthday parties – in Israeli Jewish kindergartens. This section addresses the socialization of little children into the encompassing horizons of the Jewish state and into the linearities of bureaucratic logic. Nationalism and bureaucratic logic induce and induct children into living within and through the classifications of the modern state, in the name of greater values of peoplehood, history, heritage, and destiny. The three chapters of the third section

address the ways in which the State presents itself to its publics through the opening public events of its three national days – Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Day, Remembrance Day for the war dead, and Independence Day. These events are presentations of social classification emphasizing social categories made to represent fruition and maturity; and so that participate together in the great cosmic drama of national destruction and rebirth. The fourth section, of two chapters, addresses the eternalizing of history, national and personal, through opening and filling holes of absence: one chapter addresses the significance for Israeli Jewish nationalism and memorialism of turning the ‘absence’ opened by violent death into the ‘presence’ of sacrifice; while the other discusses the evocation of presence from absence through personal narratives of Holocaust survivors. The Epilogue addresses Israel as a cyborg state, one in which the unlike qualities of the emotional and the machinic are torqued into one another. Each chapter adds to the idea of ‘public event,’ but each can be read separately as a contribution in its own right to ‘ritual’ studies and to a perspective on Israeli social order informed by anthropology.

The collapse of Versailles and its commemoration expose two dynamics that intertwine and knot together in events of presentation of the modern state. One dynamic, nationalism, is so prominent and dominant, and is openly contested by numerous constituencies. Nationalism has been likened to a religion, in part because of the intensity of its totalizing impact.<sup>3</sup> Endless reams are written on nationalism, pro and con, popular and scholarly. Nationalism often is showcased in statist events of presentation. In contrast to the other dynamic, I will say relatively little on nationalism. That other dynamic, ‘bureaucratic logic,’ is pervasive and deeply embedded in the routine grounds of daily life in modernity. If nationalism is thought of as a religion, then this religion is informed by bureaucratic logic, its ‘rituals’ shaped through this logic. As noted, I distinguish between bureaucratic logic and bureaucratic institutions. In my usage, bureaucratic logic is a way of invoking, shaping, and organizing existence. The logic constitutes the grounds through which bureaucratic institutions are shaped into social existence.<sup>4</sup> As such, the logic is much more pervasive than are bureaucratic institutions; moreover the logic also constitutes the grounds for numerous other social configurations. In this usage, bureaucratic logic has not been named as such. This logic is ignored by scholars of the state and modernity, yet it is practiced incessantly in the everyday living of so many of the societies these scholars study. Ingrained and implicated in daily lives, bureaucratic logic shapes much of the ordering of social life in the modern state, because this logic is central to the shaping and making of order through the invention and application of classifications. The ubiquity of schemes of classification saturates our lives. The practice of inventing and applying classification is so ordinary that it occludes the pervasive power of bureaucratic logic in shaping forms of living, including those of state institutions, nationalism, and remembrance.

Numerous public events in modern states – occasions large and tiny, national and other – are deeply informed by the formative capacities of bureaucratic logic. This perception is overlooked in numerous studies of statist ‘rituals’ which understand

these events first and foremost as straightforward symbolic reflections of social and cultural order.<sup>5</sup> Ignored are the ways in which the logics of *form* in these events shape the messages and feelings that the form of event configures and conveys. The practice of form is the performance of significance. This has not been lost on regimes of the modern era.

Bureaucratic logic is a way of generating lineal forms of classification – a dynamic for the creation and organization of linear form, that in its multitude of applications makes, shapes, and counts social life into existence in so many ways. Bureaucratic logic is a logic of form, yet more so it is *a logic of the forming of form*. Consider that form is omnipresent, in that nothing exists without shaping; and that the dynamics of this shaping, ongoing, never finished, is what I intend by form. All phenomenal worlds are forming, formed, forming. Without social forms, can there be social ordering and its fragmenting? Form is essential to the existence of any and all phenomenal worlds, since without form there is no embodied perception. Yet social form exists only through practice, through the practice of the logic of form that is making form through this practice. The forming of form is that of continuous practice, without which particular social forms would cease to exist. Therefore every act of the forming of form brings form into existence. Form in this regard is more than visual. All the senses are forming.

All peoples must classify their worlds in order to exist together socially. This was the contention of Durkheim and Mauss (1963), elaborated on by Douglas (1966, 1999) and Schwartz (1981) among others (Allen 2000), one never successfully challenged. Bureaucratic logic exists as one possibility of the forming of classification that peoples have imagined in forming their worlds and themselves. Yet the lineal rudiments of bureaucratic logic are part of the stock of possibilities that describe being human. The possibility of bureaucratic logic is always present as an imaginary, though one that itself is not a sufficient cause to bring form into being. The logic offers possibilities for the configuring of moral and social orders, always related to social and historical formations that enable it to be shaped into, and so to shape, existence. This is why bureaucratic logic is related intimately to the routine making of change – through the changing of classification – in the lived world. And this is why this logic of the forming of form has cosmic implications – forming and shaping as originary, implicating over and again some sort of genesis.

Bureaucratic logic has a much wider cachet than the institutional. Bureaucratic institutions are prime loci of this kind of forming, but so too are numerous other sites of perception and organization in our lived worlds. Bureaucratic logic has become a hegemonic dynamic of the forming of consciousness in worlds of modernity. Most modern states and other kinds of complex organizations simply could not exist as they do without the ways in which bureaucratic logic contributes to their ongoing shaping and operating – tautological, yet so. Therefore this pervasive logic must not be treated as an adjunct of other phenomena – for example, of ideology – that ‘really’ make the world work. Bureaucratic logic is active in all projects of lineal organization in

modernity (if not at their outset, then as an emergent property of their development). Bureaucratic logic makes many of the worlds we live in, and enables many of them to work as they do. As such, bureaucratic logic pervades the symbolic representations of modernity in the most commonsensical and unnoticeable of ways.

The state creates, reproduces, legitimates, changes, and sanctifies itself through everyday practice. Nowhere is this done more powerfully than through the lineal classifications generated by bureaucratic logic in institutions that acutely compact and concentrate such classification – the legal and judicial, the bureaucratic, the military, the police, athletics and other contests, and most educational setups.

### **Versailles Collapses, the State Ascends**

The State made order at Versailles. The course of the search-and-rescue mission was to remove the living and the dead from the ruins of the celebration of life, family, kin. The ratification of a new marital bond had turned into the public wreckage of disembowled lives that spilled out into the public domain. The hundreds of celebrants had thousands of ties with others within Israel. Their networks spread, far, wide, deep. The reverberations of ruination traveled with speed and penetrated with force. Versailles smeared the border between private and public with its entrails. There were rumors of a terrorist attack, and the building indeed had fallen in upon itself. The metaphor of Versailles was too close to the greatest of ongoing, pervasive fears among Israeli Jews – the terror that the State could cave in upon itself, either because of threat from without or because of weakness from within, or one leading to the other.<sup>6</sup> A spectacle of flawed construction (social no less than physical), deep within civic society, the ruined remnants of Versailles had to be mended, domesticated, controlled. And this had to be seen to be done, and could be done only by official organs of the State. Versailles was an offence, not to democracy, but to the regnant society of law and order (as Israel is often described by its officials). The State mounted its own spectacle to co-opt and to dominate that of the wreckage. A public event of the making of order – of doing violence to violence to undo violence – was superimposed upon the uncertainty of the unexpected, on behalf of the people.<sup>7</sup> How order was seen to be done is crucial to understanding the public events discussed in this book. From the perspective of television the public event began with the televising of the rescue effort, while the closing ‘ceremony’ summarized this performance, presenting it as a national effort, directed by and on behalf of the State.

### **The Versailles Public Event**

A rough and ready stage – a makeshift platform of wooden planks – is put together in front of the ruined building; and behind the platform, a large, irregular, gaping hole into the dark ruins. In front of this opening are two parallel rows of symbols. Closest

to the backdrop of ruins are the following: rubble, piled into a crude pyramid, to one side of which is the emblem of the Home Front Command, and to the other, national and army flags. In the next row are chairs for the dignitaries, and, to the other side, a podium and an unlit memorial flame, balanced on a makeshift tripod. Above the row of chairs is a sign, reading, 'Home Front Command.' Standing, talking, joking, milling about in front of the stage are the young soldiers (some hundred of them) still in their work fatigues (see Figure 1).

The participation of these anonymous grunts is crucial, looking towards the stage and the dignitaries who will show there. Their presence together is the embodiment of the nation-in-arms, as I will discuss shortly. Their exhaustion and dirty uniforms are living evidence of their cooperative efforts; but no less of the intelligence, acumen, and effort of the higher echelons, the commanders of bureaucratic infrastructure who have ordered and organized the rescue effort. The condition of the soldiers is the 'presentational evidence' that the officials responsible are doing their job; while the task of the people is to gaze together towards the elevated dignitaries, to hear their words, and together to demonstrate fortitude and solidarity. Filling space between viewer and stage, the soldiers foreground everything on stage seen by the viewer. The viewers become the nation-in-arms – seeing themselves in the present in the young soldiers, and in the past in themselves, to be led and emotionally fed by the dignitaries. The dignitaries in turn foreground the ruins within which the soldiers have labored. The architectonics of this event are intended to give the officials control over both the ruins and the rank and file, and through the latter, control over the television viewers.<sup>8</sup>

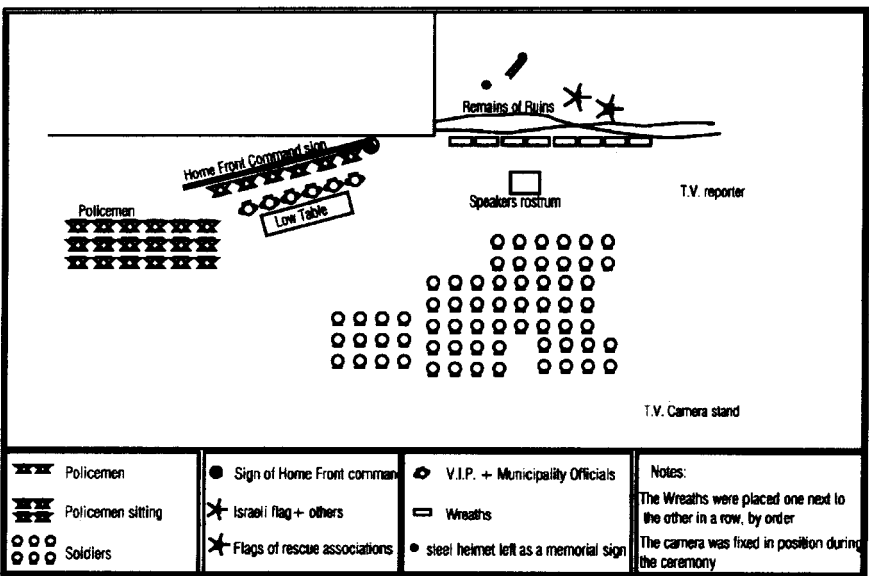


Figure 1 Versailles memorial event, spatial layout.



From the platform a television commentator announces that this is a 'ceremony of remembrance' (Heb. *hazkara*), of 'unification' (*hityakhadut*). Both terms are used during commemorations, the latter term especially to denote the coming together, the joining together of people, of people and memory, of the living and the dead, so that all are closed off together, enwrapped (and at times enrapt) in communion among themselves, to the exclusion of everyone and all else. Together, the performance of remembrance and unification is a powerful practice of the closing of boundaries around a collection of people who, secluded together, then belong together, attending to a common focus shared by all. The 'ceremony,' says the correspondent, is expected to be 'impressive'. She tells us that many members of the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), including a woman minister, are present, as well as numerous volunteers. We see none of them. The nation-in-arms is primarily a military family, the family-in-arms, given birth by crisis, cradling the state with its arms, the bereaved family (*mishpakhat hashkhol*) mourning its dead, uncovering and discovering its unity beneath the shroud.

As the dignitaries file onto the stage, a sergeant-major announces them by name and position, at a staccato tempo. The next four acts – the last three from Jewish ritual – are found in all state or statist occasions of commemoration.<sup>9</sup> The opening act, the lighting of the memorial flame, iconic of remembrance and re-membling, often comes first on these occasions. The assistant commander of the Home Front Command lights the memorial flame without ado. In rapid succession, rabbis associated with the Command read Psalms (*Tehilim*) and recite the Mourner's Prayer (*Kaddish*).<sup>10</sup> A cantor then sings, God Full of Mercy (*El Malei Rakhamim*). The next, lengthier segment consists of four speeches from the podium, the speakers representing the government, the municipality, the police, and the military.

Each speech is delivered by a representative of an official category of state. Together, these categories constitute a lineal taxonomy that delineates the state's organization of responsibility for the welfare of the citizenry, according to categories of national policy (the minister), local government (the mayor), public order (the police commander), and national security (the Home Command general). These speeches are all declarations of official responsibility and achievement. The first act – lighting the flame – is done by an officer of the military, in its role as the physical protector of the citizenry; here the prime intervener in remaking order out of chaos. The next acts are done by functionaries representing the category of religion – Judaism, the official religion of the State, is always present on such occasions. Whatever else it is, the State is Jewish.

The opening speech is given by a retired general and Minister of Tourism. He is the leader of an extremist political party that advocates the 'transfer' of the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>11</sup> He praises the coordination of all the organizations involved in the search, with special plaudits for the Home Front Command and its rescue work around the world: 'Our little Home Front Command extended its arms [outwards] and carried out rescues at site after site.' He underlines that, 'What