



Trauma and Testimony in an Oversharing Society

Dr. Edna Friedberg

Edna Friedberg is a JTS Fellow and a historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. A graduate of the University of Illinois, she received her PhD in Modern Jewish Studies from The Jewish Theological Seminary, where she wrote her dissertation on the origins of American Jewish services for the elderly. Dr. Friedberg joined the staff of the Holocaust Museum in 1999 and has served as the historian for the museum's highly visited online Holocaust Encyclopedia and as director of its Wexner Learning Center. She also curated a special exhibit on the legacy of the Nuremberg trials and postwar justice. Dr. Friedberg regularly speaks to audiences across the country and her essays connecting Holocaust history with social, cultural, and political issues today have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, *Newsday*, and *The Forward*. An alumna of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, she serves as president of the Board of Trustees of the Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital and is a member of Adas Israel Congregation.

Proverbs 11:13

הוֹלֵךְ רֵכִיל מְגַלֵּה-סֵד וְנֶאֱמַן-רִיחַ מְכַסֶּה דְבָר

A base fellow gives away secrets, But a trustworthy soul keeps a confidence.

Leviticus 5:1

וְנִפְשׁ כִּי-תִחַטָּא וְשָׁמְעָה קוֹל אֱלֹהִים וְהוּא עַד אִוֹ רָאָה אִוֹ יָדַע אִם-לֹא יִגִּיד וְנִשְׂא עֹוֹנוֹ:

If a person incurs guilt— When he has heard a public imprecation and—although able to testify as one who has either seen or learned of the matter—he does not give information, so that he is subject to punishment.

Rashi (11th Century) to Numbers 24:5

מה טבו אהליך. על שראה פתחיהם שאינן מקונין זה מול זה:

What did he see that was so good? He saw that the entrances of their tents were not exactly facing each other.

Mishnah Bava Batra, Chapter 3, Mishnah 7

“hezek r’iyah,” the damage caused by looking.

- 1) (לא יפתח אדם חלונותיו לחצר השתפין.)
- 2) (לקח בית בחצר אחרת, לא יפתחנה לחצר השתפין.)
- 3) (בנה עליה על גבי ביתו, לא יפתחנה לחצר השתפין.)
- 4) (אלא אם רצה, בונה את החדר לפניו מביתו, ובונה עליה על גבי ביתו ופותחה לתוך ביתו.)
- 5) (לא יפתח אדם לחצר השתפין פתח כנגד פתח וחלון כנגד חלון.)
- 6) (היה קטן, לא יעשנו גדול. אחד, לא יעשנו שנים.)
- 7) (אבל פותח הוא לרשות הרבים פתח כנגד פתח וחלון כנגד חלון.)
- 8) (היה קטן, עושה אותו גדול. אחד, עושה אותו שנים.)

1) One may not make a window to open into a jointly held courtyard.

- 2) If she bought a house in another [and adjoining] courtyard she may not open it into a jointly held courtyard.
- 3) If he built an upper room over his house he may not make it open into the jointly held courtyard;
- 4) But, if she wishes, she may build another room within her house or build an upper room over her house and make it open into her own house.
- 5) In a jointly held courtyard a person may not build a door directly opposite another's door, or a window directly opposite another's window.
- 6) If the window was small he may not make it larger; if it was a single window he may not make it into two.
- 7) But in the public domain she may open a door opposite another's door, or a window opposite another's window.
- 8) If the window was small he may make it larger; if it was a single window he may make it into two.

“The Right to Privacy in Judaism,” Rabbi David Golinkin

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-right-to-privacy-in-judaism/>

We read in the Talmud (*Yoma*4b): “How do we know that when a person tells something to his friend, the latter may not repeat it until the person says to him ‘go and say’? As it is written ([Leviticus 1:1](#)): ‘And God spoke to [Moses] from the Tent of Meeting to say?’”

This source—codified by Rabbi Moses of Coucy (France, ca. 1236, *Semag*, Negative Commandments, No. 9) and by Rabbi Abraham Gumbiner (Poland, 1637-1683, *Magen Avraham to Orah Hayyim*¹⁵⁶, middle of subparagraph 2)—indicates that one may not reveal a confidence without the express permission of the confider.

“Judaism and Privacy,” Jonathan Stein

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/judaism-and-privacy/>

[B]ecause the concept of privacy is a relatively modern one, it is not explicitly discussed in traditional Jewish sources. Indeed, Classical Hebrew does not even have a word for “privacy” (the modern Hebrew word is *prateiyut*).

Prof. Spyros Kokolakis, Dean of the School of Engineering at the University of the Aegean, Greece <https://blog.mozilla.org/internetcitizen/2018/08/24/the-privacy-paradox-is-a-privacy-dilemma/>

The traditional understanding of privacy was very much connected to a physical space, like a house. If someone looked through your window people would have considered that a violation of privacy. What people did in their homes was private. If they did the same thing outside, in public, that was a different thing. Cyberspace is completely different from that understanding. With the internet we lost a concept of space that defined a playing field for activities that we wanted to keep for ourselves. As soon as you connect to the internet, you are public. Maybe one of the reasons the US did not follow the EU laws on information privacy, is that privacy in the US is strongly connected to the concept of “private space.” There are many cases where US courts did not accept that a person may have privacy expectations in public spaces, such as the internet, or even at the workplace.

Remarks by Holocaust survivor Zvi Gill (in Hebrew) in his Closing Message to the Conference on the Legacy of Holocaust Survivors (April, 2002 at Yad Vashem).

Translated into English in *Our Living Legacy*, Yad Vashem, 2003, p. 7.

In Jewish tradition, the command to remember is absolute. But its obligation does not end with the cognitive act of memory- it must be connected to both meaning and action. Today, we for whom the memory is burned in our hearts and on our flesh gather

to pass the torch of memory to the next generation. We pass to you, as well, the fundamental lesson of Judaism: that memory must be accompanied by action of ethical and moral intent. This must be the foundation and the focus of your energies toward the creation of a better world.

Excerpts from “Hope, Despair, and Memory,” Elie Wiesel

Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1986

Of course we could try to forget the past. Why not? Is it not natural for a human being to repress what causes him pain, what causes him shame? Like the body, memory protects its wounds. When day breaks after a sleepless night, one’s ghosts must withdraw; the dead are ordered back to their graves. But for the first time in history, we could not bury our dead. We bear their graves within ourselves.

For us, forgetting was never an option.

Remembering is a noble and necessary act. The call of memory, the call *to* memory, reaches us from the very dawn of history. No commandment figures so frequently, so insistently, in the Bible. It is incumbent upon us to remember the good we have received, and the evil we have suffered. New Year’s Day, *Rosh Hashana*, is also called *Yom Hazikaron*, the day of memory. On that day, the day of universal judgment, man appeals to God to remember: our salvation depends on it. If God wishes to remember our suffering, all will be well; if He refuses, all will be lost. Thus, the rejection of memory becomes a divine curse, one that would doom us to repeat past disasters, past wars....

And yet it is surely human to forget, even to want to forget. The Ancients saw it as a divine gift. Indeed if memory helps us to survive, forgetting allows us to go on living. How could we go on with our daily lives, if we remained constantly aware of the dangers

and ghosts surrounding us? The Talmud tells us that without the ability to forget, man would soon cease to learn. Without the ability to forget, man would live in a permanent, paralyzing fear of death. Only God and God alone can and must remember everything. How are we to reconcile our supreme duty towards memory with the need to forget that is essential to life? No generation has had to confront this paradox with such urgency. The survivors wanted to communicate everything to the living: the victim's solitude and sorrow, the tears of mothers driven to madness, the prayers of the doomed beneath a fiery sky....

The great historian Shimon Dubnov served as our guide and inspiration. Until the moment of his death he said over and over again to his companions in the Riga ghetto: "*Yidden, shreibt un fershreibt*" (Jews, write it all down). His words were heeded. Overnight, countless victims become chroniclers and historians in the ghettos, even in the death camps. ...

We tried. It was not easy. At first, because of the language; language failed us. We would have to invent a new vocabulary, for our own words were inadequate, anemic.

And then too, the people around us refused to listen; and even those who listened refused to believe; and even those who believed could not comprehend. Of course they could not. Nobody could. The experience of the camps defies comprehension.

Video clip of This is Your Life episode (1953), featuring Holocaust survivor Hanna Bloch Kohner: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4ckFEnn5Bo>

Audio clips of interviews taken by David P. Boder:

1. Raisel Meltzak, September 8, 1946, Bellevue, France

[https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17649/transcript?u=t&keywords\[\]=orphan&](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17649/transcript?u=t&keywords[]=orphan&)

2. Jurek Kestenber, July 31, 1946, Fontenay-aux-Roses, France

[https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17635?u=t&keywords\[\]=kestenber](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17635?u=t&keywords[]=kestenber)

3. Marcelle Kahn, August 21, 1946, Paris, France

[https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17631?u=t&keywords\[\]=marcelle](https://iit.aviaryplatform.com/collections/231/collection_resources/17631?u=t&keywords[]=marcelle)