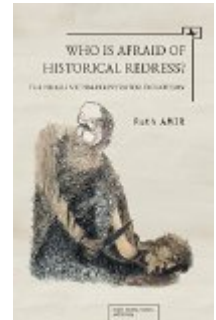


**Ruth Amir.** *Who Is Afraid of Historical Redress? The Israeli Victim-Perpetrator Dichotomy.* Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2011. 325 pp. \$59.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-934843-85-7.



**Reviewed by** Jeffrey Barnes

**Published on** H-Genocide (January, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Elisa G. von Joeden-Forgey (University of Pennsylvania)

Ruth Amir's *Who Is Afraid of Historical Redress? The Israeli Victim-Perpetrator Dichotomy* offers a fresh reading of the role of memory in the construction of the Israeli state. While most work addressing this topic focuses on the elision of injustices perpetrated by the government against Palestinians, Amir considers how the Israeli state negotiated redress claims for wrongs committed by Israel against both its Jewish citizens (especially the Michrazim) and Palestinian-Arabs. Specifically, Amir examines in depth the redress claims surrounding Holocaust reparations from Germany in the years immediately following the establishment of the State of Israel, the Yemeni Babies affair, the Tinea Capitis affair, the destruction of the Palestinian villages of Iqrit and Bir'im, the status of Ethiopian Jews in Israel in the past two decades, and the ongoing claims of redress by Holocaust survivors. What emerges from these case studies, according to Amir, is evidence of the Israeli state carefully constructing itself as a perpetual victim, not only vis-à-vis the Holocaust and the historic persecution of Jews, but also against

the contemporary perpetual "threat" of destruction at the hands of Israel's Arab neighbors, while simultaneously employing state-sponsored neutralization techniques (through court rulings and official commissions) to elide the memory of injustices perpetrated by the state itself. In doing so, Amir adds to a growing literature seeking to explain the paradox of Israel's victim and oppressor status.

Amir begins her monograph with a chapter outlining various legal and scholarly debates surrounding redress claims and historical injustices. In it, she stresses the "uniqueness of reparations claims" as opposed to other forms of redress, making the point that reparations allow for monetary compensation on the part of the state to attain moral atonement, a tactic the Israeli state employed (or attempted to employ) in a number of the cases discussed in the book (p. 20). Amir includes a lengthy discussion of various theories of redress that not only serves to strengthen her analysis of the specific case studies in the rest of the book, but is also of great value to any scholar

writing about redress claims in any context, as the author exhausts every possible interpretation of redress campaigns and historical injustice. From this review of the extant literature, Amir concludes that when defining redress, it is crucial to address the fact that an injustice was committed (and by whom it was committed), rather than seeking to establish the extent to which the victim suffered as a result of the injustice, as the latter can lay the foundation for dismissing claims of redress and neutralizing state responsibility in cases of historical injustice.

From this introduction, Amir proceeds to a discussion of specific campaigns of redress against historical injustices perpetrated by the Israeli state. The first case she includes, namely, the handling of reparations from Germany by the Israeli state in its early years, situates the Holocaust as the background of all redress campaigns in Israel. Ultimately, the historical injustice committed by the state was that it “acted as fiduciary for the survivors without seeking their consent” (p. 72). Amir addresses the victim/perpetrator paradox in this case by describing how the acceptance of reparations from Germany by the Israeli state allowed for an ablation of Germany’s immoral actions in the past while placing the Israeli state in the position of accepting a less-than-adequate apology in exchange for much-needed cash to absorb the large number of Holocaust victims flooding into the newly established state.

Following her discussion of Holocaust reparations and the relationship between the Israeli state and Holocaust survivors that forms the background of all further redress campaigns in Israel, Amir proceeds to discuss three significant historical injustices committed by the Israeli state in the years immediately following the declaration of independence in 1948. Firstly, Amir addresses the immigration of Yemeni Jews to the early state, focusing on the Yemeni Babies affair in which the children of a number of Yemeni Jewish immigrants to Israel “vanished” from the hos-

pitals in camps designed to “integrate” Michrazim Jewish populations into the Ashkenazi-dominated state. Amir notes how attempts at redress quickly became impractical, especially once officials responsible for the “loss” of the children began to pass away. However, her examination of the various state-appointed commissions into the affair demonstrates the power of constructing memory in Israeli statecraft. All official commissions sought to transfer blame from the state to either the circumstances surrounding Yemeni Jewish immigration to Israel (i.e., the chaos and confusion of the Israeli state absorbing so many immigrants at one time) or to the parents themselves. The appearance of objectivity in the commissions allowed for the matter to quickly be removed from the Israeli public eye each time survivors sought redress.

The Yemeni Babies affair closely parallels the third case study that Amir includes, namely, the Tinea Capitis affair. The Tinea Capitis affair refers to the treatment of (mostly) Yemeni Jewish immigrant children suffering from or suspected to be suffering from tinea capitis by applying localized radiation to the scalp. While a widely accepted medical practice at the time, treatment by radiation proved to lead to a number of health issues later in life. As it was accepted medical practice at the time it was administered, Amir maintains that the treatment itself did not constitute an act of historical injustice. The singling out of Michrazim immigrants for the treatment, the deceitful and cruel methods employed by the state in order to be able to subject the children to the treatment, and the refusal by the state over the years to inform those who were treated of the potential side effects did constitute injustice. As was the case with the Yemeni Babies affair, redress attempts by those who had been subjected to the radiation treatment were met with ambivalence on the part of the state as concerned reparations coupled with official commissions that absolved the state of any guilt.

Amir concludes her discussion of redress campaigns against historical injustices committed in the early years of the Israeli state by analyzing the redress campaign of the displaced inhabitants of the Palestinian villages of Iqrit and Bir'im that had been forcefully evacuated and destroyed by Israeli forces in 1948. Amir notes two interesting aspects of the redress campaign by the survivors from the two villages. Firstly, inhabitants of Iqrit and Bir'im have consistently refused reparations, insisting that the right to rebuild their villages is the only way to recompense for their loss. Secondly, the Israeli state (and in particular the supreme court) consistently agrees that the destruction of the villages constitutes a historical injustice; however, the meaning and memory of the villagers suffering is rewritten. Rather than being a wrong committed by the state, court rulings and official investigations paint the events of 1948 as unfortunate side effects necessary for the creation of the State of Israel. Official discourse maintains that the inhabitants of Iqrit and Bir'im had to suffer for the creation of the State of Israel and that that was unfortunate; however, the Jews had to suffer much greater injustices toward the same cause. According to Amir, much of this elision also boils down to the fact that the state fears that rewarding the right of return to the inhabitants of Iqrit and Bir'im would set a precedent for other displaced Palestinians.

Amir concludes her discussion of the connection between redress campaigns, historical memory, and the Israeli state by discussing two contemporary injustices committed in Israel. Firstly, she discusses the ongoing debate about the relationship between Holocaust survivors and the state, demonstrating how the issues discussed in chapter 2 remain alive and active. Secondly, she discusses the status of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, paying special attention to the secret disposing of blood donated by Israeli citizens of Ethiopian origins in the 1980s and 1990s. Amir reports that attempts at redress continue to be met with half-hearted apologies that consider Ethiopian Israelis

to be second-class Jews and distinct from Ashkenazim. This demonstrates that the process of historical elision described in the previous three chapters remains alive and active as part of constructing the identity of the Israeli state vis-à-vis the victim/perpetrator dichotomy.

As a whole, *Who Is Afraid of Historical Redress?* is a worthy contribution to the literature on memory studies in Israel. The author's choice of case studies coupled with her analysis of state responses to redress campaigns more than demonstrates the role that memory plays in the construction of state identity concerning episodes of historical injustice. Further, the focus on injustices committed by the Israeli state against Jewish citizens and immigrants to Israel coupled with a discussion of injustices committed against Palestinians in the formation of the state is brilliant and makes the point stronger. Amir's work does suffer from including too much secondary material at the outset of each chapter (for instance, including an extremely lengthy discussion of the immigration experience in America at the onset of the Tinea Capitis affair chapter), but this distraction does not take away from the overall contribution of the book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-genocide>

**Citation:** Jeffrey Barnes. Review of Amir, Ruth. *Who Is Afraid of Historical Redress? The Israeli Victim-Perpetrator Dichotomy*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39700>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.