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"Kristallnacht in Tel Aviv": Nazi Associations in the Contemporary Israeli Socio-Political Debate

by Liat Steir-Livny

The Holocaust has always been a central trauma in Israel’s national consciousness. The memory has not faded over the years; on the contrary, it has been the focus of increasing public discourse in recent decades. Together with the heightened awareness has come increased politicization. Both right- and left-wing public figures have used the specter of Nazism and the memory of the Holocaust in varied and sometimes contradictory ways in order to boost their agendas. The theme of Kristallnacht has surfaced within left wing discourse as a means of expressing criticism towards socio-political acts in contemporary Israel.

The chapter focuses on a violent demonstration against illegal African immigrants orchestrated by right-wing politicians and activists, which took place in South Tel Aviv on May 23, 2012. The demonstration was immediately branded “Kristallnacht in Tel Aviv” by members of the left political spectrum. The chapter analyses the appearance of this term on social media in microblogging (tweets, posts), blogs, memes and video-sharing platforms (such as YouTube).¹

Research shows that social media platforms enable private citizens and opposition groups to take active roles in grassroots campaigns.² The chapter uses this research in order to introduce three main claims: 1) In Israel, a society
drenched in Holocaust awareness, Kristallnacht references are used as a socio-political tool; 2) as a result, the historical event has been trivialized and has been turned into a series of symbols, myths, and associations; 3) Kristallnacht-related satire and black humor present similar ideas to those heard in serious debates.

**POLITICIZATION OF THE HOLOCAUST IN ISRAEL**

Israel encompasses a unique sphere of Holocaust awareness. Studies have shown that Holocaust memory has a very powerful presence in Israel, with a multi-generational impact. For Israeli Jews, the Holocaust is a cross-generational defining characteristic. Surveys reveal that, since the 1940s, the Jewish-Israeli population has assimilated the Holocaust as a central event, and young Jewish-Israelis consider the Holocaust to be the historical event that has had the greatest impact on them, even more than the founding of the State.³ Research shows that Israeli media, education, culture, and public discourse all frame the Holocaust as a current, ongoing local trauma, rather than an event that ended decades ago in another place.⁴

In Israel, Nazi and Holocaust associations are a prominent socio-political tool used by politicians, journalists and educators. For many years, the political use of Holocaust rhetoric was particularly associated with the Arab-Jewish dispute. From the late 1940s until the late 1970s, under left-wing governments, a distinct parallel between Arabs and Nazis was discernible in Israeli culture. The necessity of warding off surrounding Arab armies was represented in terms of preventing an imminent “second Holocaust,” and Arab leaders were described as Nazi successors.⁵

In the political upheaval of 1977, the right-wing Likud party came to power for the first time and, with the exception of a few short intervals, has been in power ever since. As right-wing attitudes spread throughout the Israeli public and the left lost its governing clout, it instead found expression through the country’s intellectual, artistic, literary, and academic life.⁶ Culture became the mouthpiece of the disappointed political left, which voiced its unhappiness over Israel’s situation. During those decades, the political right continued to recycle the Nazi-Arab equation in speeches, interviews, etc., and also began comparing their left-wing foes to Nazis, while the left abandoned its former use of the Nazi-Arab equation. Parts of it began to highlight a reverse equation in which both national traumas (the Holocaust and the Nakba [lit.: disaster;
it is the Arabs' definition of their 1948 downfall]) were likened to each other. Parts of the left and especially the radical left represent Israelis in general, IDF soldiers who serve in the occupied territories and members of the right in particular, as Nazis. The term “Israeli Kristallnacht” grew out of this trend.

**REFUGEES FROM AFRICA IN ISRAEL**

Since the year 2000, when Africans began entering Israel through the border with Egypt in growing numbers, particularly from Sudan and Eritrea, the subject of refugees and asylum seekers has created controversy and stormy debates. Most of the immigrants entered between 2007–12, before a wall was built between Israel and Egypt, and currently, in 2019, around 37,000 Africans reside in Israel, whose inhabitants number is almost nine million Israelis. The debate concerning the Africans is foremost manifested in semantics. According to the left-wing narrative, the vast majority are refugees and asylum seekers who should be absorbed, while according to the right, the vast majority are infiltrators, illegal immigrants and seekers of employment who must be deported. These, however, are popular perceptions, which differ from the legal definitions.

Since the Africans' arrival, right-wing governments have engaged in numerous social and judicial struggles that have not yet yielded a clear policy defining “infiltrators” and “asylum seekers,” and have tried to facilitate a policy of mass deportation. This culminated in an announcement on April 2, 2018, in which Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu reported that the state of Israel had reached an agreement with the UN whereby sixteen thousand asylum seekers would be transferred to Canada, Italy, and Germany. Another sixteen thousand were supposed to be absorbed in Israel and sent to various kibbutzim, moshavim (a type of cooperative agricultural communities) and other areas. Several hours later, Netanyahu cancelled the plan because of pressure from right-wing political parties and right-wing public debate.

From the very beginning, the vast majority of Africans were bussed to poverty-stricken neighborhoods in South Tel Aviv, where they joined Jewish residents from the lowest deciles of society who were already dealing with severe societal and economic struggles. NGOs familiar with the neighborhoods noted, over time, a rise in alcoholism, domestic violence, and increasing numbers of women turning to prostitution within these communities of Africans.
Statistics published by the Israel police in 2018 noted four times as many sexual assaults and three times as much violence by Africans than in general Israeli society. Some of the southern neighborhoods’ original residents began trying to evict the newcomers from their neighborhoods. Right-wing politicians (as for example Danny Danon, Miri Regev, and Michael Ben Ari), who backed deportation of the Africans, often supported the protests, using them as a tool to highlight their agenda, while members of the left, who rejected deportation, worked against these attempts by writing articles, publicizing their opinions in social media, and trying to help the newcomers in the southern neighborhoods by establishing various NGOs.

**THE MAY 23, 2012 DEMONSTRATION AND THE “KRISTALLNACHT” REFERENCES**

The term “Israeli Kristallnacht” first appeared in April 2012, after Molotov cocktails were thrown at the homes of Sudanese and Eritreans and at a kindergarten in South Tel Aviv, in order to frighten the Africans and force them to leave. But a month later, after a demonstration organized by Michael Ben Ari, a Knesset member from the National Union party, along with far-right activists Itamar Ben-Gvir and Baruch Marzel, it became an idiom. The approximately one thousand attendees at the protest demonstrated against allowing Africans to live, work, and stay in Israel—especially in South Tel Aviv. Politicians from the right, such as Danon, Regev, and Ben Ari, inflamed the raging crowd from the stage, shouting slogans against the Africans and calling for their deportation. One of the harshest phrases, which was later mentioned repeatedly in the Israeli media was voiced by Regev, who shouted that the Sudanese were “a cancer in our body” and that the left was to blame for the wretched state of the South Tel-Aviv neighborhoods. During the demonstration, African bystanders were attacked by some of the demonstrators; some were injured (blood stains were found on the road), windows of African shops were shattered, and some looting of shops took place. After the violent outbreak, several people were arrested and later released.

Researchers who analyze representations of Holocaust commemoration within the virtual space, especially user-generated online platforms, and user-generated content (UGC) use the term “vernacular memory.” This type of memory, as opposed to official memory, stems from everyday life, “the street,”
the “public space,”\textsuperscript{16} and is compiled from “psychological, social, linguistic, and political processes that keep the past alive without necessarily intending to do so.” It is a non-hierarchical, popular, informal, unplanned and sometimes subversive memory.\textsuperscript{17} Studies have emphasized its role as a “milieu for social action and as loci of oppositional collective memory.”\textsuperscript{18} In the last few decades, user-generated content became an important part of the vernacular memory, which is “manifested more immediately after an event rather than through a retroactive commemorative perspective.” Scholars examine the way “individuals negotiate, reconstruct, and share their versions of a collective memory in a given context” in online vernacular web-based commemoration.\textsuperscript{19} The vernacular memory adds another layer of representations, associations, and meanings to collective memory. In addition, research shows that social media platforms have become powerful sites for documenting, challenging, and protesting against episodes of brutality\textsuperscript{20} and that communicative spaces can create political and social awareness and encourage activism.\textsuperscript{21}

This analysis of UGC shows how in this demonstration, like many other cases in contemporary Israel not related to the Holocaust, the Holocaust and Nazi themes were used as an important interpretive framework.\textsuperscript{22} In a society steeped in Holocaust awareness, this is one of the first associations used to interpret a situation and create a critical response.

In the hours and days following the demonstration, members of the left used social media platforms to post comparisons between this demonstration and Kristallnacht, as a means of protesting against the right wing, and against this event in particular. Their claim was that Jews—led by racism, hate, fear, and a desire to keep their space “clean” and infiltrator-free—had behaved like Nazis, using verbal and physical violence against a helpless minority. Using this loaded term also signaled that this was just the beginning; a preview of much worse attacks in the future.

\textit{YNET} News, the English version of the highly popular Israeli Hebrew news site \textit{YNET}, wrote on May 26 that, “World news sites call Tel Aviv rally against influx of African migrants ‘race riot’ and ‘Israeli Kristallnacht,’”\textsuperscript{23} thus implying that the term was created outside of Israel. But a review of Israeli posts, tweets, blogs, and videos on YouTube in Hebrew shows that the term was first used by left-wing Jewish-Israelis, and only afterwards did it begin to appear on news sites outside of Israel.

Immediately after the demonstration, Jewish-Israeli social media was filled with posts using the terms “Israeli Kristallnacht,” “Kristallnacht in Tel-Aviv,” “Kristallnacht 2012,” and “Kristallnacht 23.5.2012” (all used the Hebrew
term “Leil Habdolah”: the direct translation of “Kristallnacht”). For example, Aviv Maimon tweeted: “Kristallnacht Israel 2012 . . . Hitler must be giggling somewhere.” Hamutal Ronen felt that “The next step is ghettoizing strangers,” and advised Israelis with foreign passports to “use [them] and emigrate from Israel for [sic] a better place.” Others uploaded links to videos from the demonstration, adding the title “Kristallnacht 23.5.2012, South Tel Aviv.” Some posted in English, as well as in Hebrew, in order for the critique to be widened beyond an internal Hebrew discussion in Israel. For example: “Night of attacks against African Refugees, Tel-Aviv, Israel, 23.12.2012,” tweeted Martin Kiel in English, and added the Hebrew hashtag “Leil habdolah 2012.” The Israeli activist Rotem Ilan, who founded the NGO “Israeli Children” and who fights against the deportation of the children of foreign workers, posted a long description of what she experienced during the demonstration, which she referred to as “Israeli Kristallnacht,” blaming not the demonstrators themselves, but the government for incitement, racism, and neglect. The News Room, which is an independent Israeli YouTube news channel, published an item about the demonstration titled “Tel Aviv Kristallnacht.”

The term, however, did not appear in mainstream newspapers reports. The daily Haaretz, which is well known for its leftist stance, was the only newspaper which used the term in three different opinion columns. The first was in the column of Itamar Hendelman Smith, titled “Kristallnacht—2012 Version: look at us and remember them.” The writer claimed that, as much as he dislikes comparisons of Israelis to Nazis, there are incidents which demand it:

Less than 74 years after Kristallnacht—a well-organized pogrom of Nazi party members in the Jews of Germany, the Israelis received their own Kristallnacht. You don’t really have to be a historian in order to make the necessary connection between the violent incidents in South Tel Aviv (and other towns in Israel) and the event which symbolizes the step up in Nazi brutality against the Jewish population.

According to Hendelman Smith, the comparison was inevitable. He claimed that in Nazi Germany, the Nazi establishment wanted to create the illusion that Kristallnacht was a spontaneous outburst of the masses. So, too, in Israel, Hendelman Smith wrote, the government wanted to create the illusion that it was a grassroots outburst, while in fact the right-wing officials were to blame.

The Globes financial section of Haaretz featured a piece by writer Eyal Meged titled “Kristallnacht.” More than a year later, the term appeared for the
third time in an article about the well-known writer Yoram Kaniuk's legacy, where he was quoted as having said “The Israeli Kristallnacht . . . strengthen the feeling that Israel has changed. All those who want a stern-faced and right-wing halachic state will feel revived.”

Israel’s Channel Two website, in its coverage of the stormy debates surrounding the demonstration, also referred to the term. The item, which was aired on television, featured a debate between Danon from the right (who was one of the officials who spoke on stage during the demonstration), and left-wing Meretz party leader Zehava Gal-on. The website also included comments by Israelis who decided, after the demonstration, to press charges against Knesset members Danon, Ben-Ari, and Regev for incitement. Even though Kristallnacht was not mentioned within the report, the headline on Channel Two’s website proclaimed: “Police Pressing Charges against Danon and Regev: Israeli Kristallnacht.”

Members of the right responded to the criticism and use of the expression in various ways. For instance, an anonymous group that was assisting residents of South Tel Aviv in their campaign to deport the Africans (and probably took part in the demonstration) proudly posted YouTube videos from the demonstration showing the violence, under the heading “The Neighborhood’s Rage.” The introduction stated:

The Rage of South Tel Aviv: After a wave of rapes, murders, attacks and harassment from the African infiltrators, the rage of the neighborhood broke out. On May 23, 2012, the residents of the neighborhoods went out to the streets, and this is the outcome.

Knesset member Danon, who, from the stage at the demonstration, called upon the government to deport the infiltrators, posted a picture from the demonstration with the caption “Israel is at war.” Others spoke out against the expression “Kristallnacht,” claiming that there can be no comparison between the two events, and that those who attempt to do so are hypocritical liars. For example, the journalist Saul Rosenfeld wrote that

Ignorance, malice and hypocrisy stand behind the lame, despicable and refuted comparison of the violent demonstration in Tel Aviv to the murder of hundreds of Jews, the deportation of tens of thousands to concentration camps, and the burning of synagogues.

He claimed that he supported deportation, but opposed hate speech, such as the remarks of Regev, and objected to violence and incitement against the Africans. He expressed his repugnance that “some of our ‘chosen and spokesmen’” chose to use this comparison. He added, ironically, that members of the
left objected when the right used Holocaust associations, but they made the same associations when it suited their agenda. Others rejected violence but also opposed the comparison between Kristallnacht and the demonstration, claiming that it was disproportionate, an incitement against the inhabitants of the South Tel Aviv neighborhoods and a part of the “inability of the riotous left” to understand that a real problem existed in South Tel Aviv. On June 23, 2012, a protest for social justice took place in Tel-Aviv, organized mainly by the left. During this demonstration, the windows of a bank were shattered. “When a window in the Shapira neighborhood was broken, the left called it ‘Kristallnacht.’ How will these hypocrites describe the violence of this demonstration?” tweeted a surfer.

As a response to those who opposed the comparison, left-wing journalist Uri Misgav published a post that was shared many times in which he suppos edly tried to explain why the Kristallnacht reference was wrong, but actually, strengthened it:

I do not understand the absurd comparisons. Go learn some history. There [in Germany] it was done to find a scapegoat because of the economic collapse and mass unemployment. Here it was done to find a scapegoat only because of the economic slowdown and the intolerable social gaps. There it was done with the encouragement of the authorities. Here only the Interior Minister and several MKs from the coalition arrived to agitate the crowd. There they were called parasites and germ spreaders, here they only call them cancer and Aids distributors [. . .] There they punished those who employed Jews and prohibited Jews from integrating into the labor market, here they only passed the Prohibition of Employment Law [. . .] There they marked Jewish businesses and shattered shop windows, here, well, mmm, never mind. There it happened in Nuremberg and Munich, here in Tel Aviv and Arad. There it was against Jews, here it is by the Jews and this is all that matters.
FROM “KRISTALLNACHT” TO “POGROM”

In their research on Kristallnacht terminology, Ulrich Baumann and Francois Guesnet claim that there has been a recent shift in terminology from the use of “Kristallnacht” to “pogrom” in Germany to describe the events of November 9–10, 1938. According to them there is a major difference between the two terms: “Kristallnacht” is state-sponsored violence, while “pogrom” is a group-sponsored expression of hate. Baumann and Guesnet claim, that the term “pogrom” emerged in an Eastern European context in order to describe anti-Jewish violence that took place there. In Russia, it appeared to describe incidences of mass anti-Jewish violence in 1881–82. The term broadened beyond Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was used to describe a one-sided and non-governmental form of violence used against a group as a whole. According to research, authorities did not order or authorize pogroms, but the empathy expressed by officers, ministers, and monarchs in the wake of the violence encouraged a significant shift in the perception of anti-Jewish violence around 1900, as Baumann and Guesnet explain.

In the Israeli culture public discourse, “Kristallnacht” is a term commonly used. The term “pogrom” is also known in Israel, but usually in reference to smaller-scale attacks against Jews, not necessarily committed by Nazis and much less commonly used to describe the events of November 9–10, 1938. The Israelis, in their use of the term “pogrom” to describe the demonstration unknowingly echoed what researchers have seen as the key elements in a pogrom: perceived upward shift in the position of a minority or marginal group, perceived weakness and passivity of state authorities in regard to “the problem” the minority poses, and ideological reinforcement of stereotypes and prejudice legitimizing violent confrontation from the majority.

The term “pogrom” appeared in several Israeli posts, tweets, and interviews surrounding the demonstration, either with or without the addition of “Israeli Kristallnacht.” For example, “This is how a pogrom looks like,” tweeted activist Igaal Shtaim, who shared a link to a “demonstration against the pogrom against the refugees,” and added the hashtag “Kristallnacht 2012.” An article by Dr. Tali Kritzman-Amir, a senior lecturer who specializes in international law, immigration, refugees and asylum seekers began, “Last night a pogrom took place on the streets of Tel Aviv.” “This is not Kristallnacht, it is more like a Ukraine pogrom” tweeted the surfer Ouriel Daskal: “Many uneducated people with lots of hatred and violence. In order for it to be Kristallnacht we need more organization.” Writer Eyal Meged used both “Kristallnacht” and “pogrom,” claiming that those responsible “cannot refer to themselves as
Jews.” In an interview on Channel Two, Meretz head Gal-on called it “a pogrom which is a result of harsh incitement of those who created a blood libel and later danced on the blood: Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Danny Danon, Miri Regev, Eli Ishay [. . .]” and added that it reminded her of things “I don’t want to talk about.” Knesset member Yair Lapid, who headed the centrist party Yesh Atid wrote a post that showed that the use of the word “pogrom” in relation to the demonstration was not only part of a leftist narrative. On his Facebook page he wrote:

I support the arrest and deportation of infiltrators, and building the fence (between Israel and Egypt l.s.l) and I think that human rights’ organizations should first and foremost think about the human rights of the Jewish-Israelis in south Tel Aviv. But when I see a pogrom in Israel, cultivated by loud agitators such as Knesset members Danon, Ben Ari and Regev I wonder, where do they get off calling themselves Jews? Regev, Danon and Ben-Ari, together with the group who hit infiltrators on the streets of Tel Aviv do not understand what Jewish morality is, Jewish collective memory, or what Jewish existence means.

Three years later, during a demonstration in front of the Israeli president’s house, neighborhood activists from South Tel Aviv published an open letter to the president claiming that their plight had not been addressed. In the letter, they mentioned that their justified protests were called a “pogrom” and “Kristallnacht” while this demonstration was, in fact, according to them, a legitimate fight for their rights.

**EQUATING ISRAELIS AND NAZIS—BEYOND KRISTALLNACHT**

Some of the writers broadened the comparisons between demonstrators and Nazis, widening the discussion to include aspects of racism in Israeli society and going beyond Kristallnacht in an effort to create associations to Nazism in general. Dr. Kritzman-Amir wrote: “‘They’ were attacked violently. The windows of ‘their’ businesses were smashed. Cars were stopped on the streets to make sure ‘they’ are not driving them. Racist calls were heard to deport ‘them’ [. . .]. ‘them’ is us.” And she added, it resembles racist attacks “suffered by the Jews in the 1930s and 1940.” By claiming it reminded her of the 1930s and 1940s, she created not only an analogy with Kristallnacht, but referred to the Holocaust.
Writer Meged wrote in *Globes* that although there were criminals among the Africans there were also criminals among the Jews who arrived in West Europe from eastern Europe after the pogroms. He drew similarities between them and the Africans, claiming that both groups learned how to survive, sometimes using shady methods, and both had to deal with racism. Acknowledging the problematic aspects of the Africans in South Tel Aviv, he also referred to the demonstration as “Kristallnacht,” and described the demonstrators as “Judeo-Nazis,” a notoriously controversial expression coined by Yeshayahu Leibowitz. The well-known intellectual and philosopher claimed in the 1980s that Israel holding on to the occupied territories would create a Nazi-like mentality within Israel. Meged latched onto this comparison between the Jews in Israel and Nazis as he stated that “one answer to the African problem” would be to let the new immigrants work “in jobs that our supreme race doesn’t see fit to engage with.”

In a very long post, a blogger and African immigrant activist who referred to himself as “Ishiton” (“newspaper man”), decried the principle of the Holocaust’s uniqueness, claiming that precisely because of their past, Jewish-Israelis must compare their attitude towards Africans to the Nazi treatment of the Jews. According to him, this comparison was necessary in order to prevent not only the demonstrators, but all of Jewish-Israeli society, from slipping down a moral slope. He claimed that the speeches of Knesset members and other elements in Israeli discourse against the Africans reproduced the tone, words, and visuals found in Nazi Germany. The blogger provided many examples, via a table comparing what he felt were the similarities between Israeli speeches and visual elements and Nazi speeches and visuals. He also divided the Nazi/Israeli narrative into themes such as epidemics, germs, lack of hygiene, crime, violence and terror; the need for an educational system “clean of Jews/Africans;” phrases such as “purity of the race,” terms such as “deportation” and the idea of Africans/Jews being presented as a “demographic problem.” He drew comparisons between the demonstrations, and claimed that de-humanization and racism was present in the posters and narratives both in the Nazi past and Israeli present. Moreover, he showed how contemporary right wing “hate speeches” were aimed at the left wing and at human rights organizations in the same way that Hitler and the Nazi regime addressed political opponents. The post ended with a table of visuals from Kristallnacht and the Tel Aviv demonstration, highlighting the resemblance in the attacks on businesses, broken glass, and the cleaning the next day.
“ISRAELI KRISTALLNACHT” OUTSIDE ISRAEL
The Israeli term quickly turned global. Surfers posted, tweeted, and wrote about the demonstration in English and other languages (including German), using the heading “Israeli Kristallnacht” (John Nada⁷) and adding photos and harsh critiques of Israel (Norm LittleJohn, “Israeli Kristallnacht”⁸). Some examples include: “The Israeli version of Kristallnacht, last night in Tel Aviv, is obviously disturbing if not entirely surprising” (Yaniv Oren⁹); “In a sick twist of irony, Zionists relive Kristallnacht, only now they are the aggressors. Tel Aviv 23.5.2012, Israel” (Daviv Babaiy); “Israeli Kristallnacht: Africans attacked, immigrant-owned business smashed in Tel Aviv” #shame on you (Jones Zafo¹⁰); “The riots in Tel Aviv spurred on by Israeli politics reminded me of Kristallnacht” (Christhesaboaeuor#FBPE¹¹); Surfers used the hashtags #Kristallnacht and #Tel Aviv Kristallnacht in their tweets (for example: Doorn, Bombadil Brin, Sara, Tsipi¹²). These posts appeared not only in social media but also on popular news sites outside of Israel. The website Russia Today referred to the events as the “Israeli Kristallnacht.” The US-based Christian Science Monitor stressed the fact that Israel once was a nation of refugees. “In an ironic twist, Israel’s most tolerant city erupted in violent riots against African migrants last night, eliciting comparisons with ‘pogrom’ attacks on European Jewish communities in the 19th and 20th centuries.”¹³

Some added the hashtag “Zionism” to their castigating “Kristallnacht” tweets (for example: Michael Lee¹⁴). The hashtags “apartheid” and “racist” appeared in other tweets as well (for example, Ashley Fataar).¹⁵ It is impossible to know if these surfers were anti-Zionist or antisemitic and simply jumped on the terminology in order to spread their ideology. There were other cases in which blogs that openly declared their anti-Zionism and antisemitism used these terms as well. The antisemitic website “The Ugly Truth,” which declares that it is “intelligent antisemitism for thinking Gentiles,” gave a description of the demonstration accompanied by cartoons of scissors cutting the star of David as a takeoff of the well-known “Uncle Sam” poster. Instead of “Uncle Sam wants you,” it said, “I’m Israel’s bitch and so are you.” The expression “Israeli Kristallnacht” appeared in the comments to the blog, which described the demonstration. The blog “Jews sans frontiers: The Anti-Zionist blog—browsing the media,” which supports, among other things, boycotts of Israel, on May 24, 2012 featured the headline: “Kristallnacht 2.0 courtesy of start up nation.” The blog called the demonstrators “pogromists” and explained:
Yesterday, South Tel-Aviv was the scene of a Kristallnacht. A series of marches and protests against Sudanese refugees culminated in a mob storming shops associated with Africans and attacking a car with Africans in the street. Although the perpetrators are from the slums of South Tel-Aviv, as is always the case, the racism came from up high.56

One should add that when the demonstration was discussed on social media in Hebrew (turning it to an internal discussion for Hebrew speakers only), it was clear to the writers and the readers that the expression “Israeli Kristallnacht” did not mean that all Israelis were involved. Within Israel it was totally clear that a certain group orchestrated it and took a part in it. When this term spread internationally, the designation “Israeli” received a completely altered and much more general meaning. For example, in one blog titled “Israeli Kristallnacht” the writer claimed the demonstrators were “thousands of Israelis.”57 Another blog elaborated on the comparisons between Kristallnacht and the demonstration in Israel, and addressed it as if all of Israel took part in the demonstration, claiming “75 years ago, the world turned its face away from Jewish refugees from Germany [. . .] Today Israel thinks that refugees are ‘cancer’ and ‘plague.’”58 In another article, the writer explained that these riots were carried out by some on the right wing and members of the “hard-right.” He immediately added however, “While a small number of people carried out the violence, they represented the views of many Israelis.”59

The vast majority of comparisons to Kristallnacht in Israeli social media and abroad completely ignored the fact that not every hate crime is an act of Nazism and not every violent demonstration is a Kristallnacht. The fact that Kristallnacht was executed in a completely different context; that the number of destroyed private and public properties was far higher (see Wolf Gruner’s chapter in this volume); that people were murdered, and tens of thousands were deported to concentration camps during and immediately following the attacks were absent from the comparisons. Instead, a combination of racism, hatred towards the “other” and the shattered glass took over.

The coining of the term in Israel was part of a much wider struggle of the left against deportation, in which they invoke Holocaust associations. The main claim is: how can the representatives of the Jewish people, who were tossed from country to country, deport other refugees? Within this struggle some Holocaust survivors also voiced their protest, claiming that after what they had gone through, they could not agree to the deportation of other people. For example, on January 23, 2018, an article appeared on the front page of
Yediot Aharonot, one of the most prominent newspapers in Israel. A photo located on the right upper part of the front page featured Holocaust survivors and Africans holding hands. The headline, in large letters, proclaimed: “Holocaust Survivors: we will hide refugees in our homes.” The subtitle described how, upon hearing that several El-Al pilots said that they would refuse to fly asylum seekers back to Africa against their will, Holocaust survivors joined the protest claiming, “this is our human obligation. Have we learned nothing from the Holocaust?”

SATIRICAL RESPONSES TO THE DEMONSTRATION
For many years, Israeli culture recoiled from dealing with the Holocaust from a humoristic perspective. The perception was that a comedic approach to the Holocaust might threaten the sanctity of its memory, evoke feelings of disrespect towards the subject, and insult survivors. Official agents of Holocaust memory (for example: the educational system, canonical ceremonies, museums) continue to follow this approach, but in the 1990s, a new and unsanctioned path of memory began taking shape in tandem. Texts that combine the Holocaust with humor, satire, and parody are a major aspect of this new and controversial commemorative trend. Since the 1990s, members of the left have used various aspects of Holocaust humor as a socio-political strategy meant to criticize the right wing’s policies towards Holocaust commemoration and other socio-political subjects. Research indicates that humor (including black humor) has important social functions: it serves as a type of social cohesion, which helps members of the political opposition feel encouraged as part of a larger group. Laughter causes reciprocal reinforcement between members of the group when the individual laughs along with the group, it signals agreement with the group’s state of mind and manner of thought. Humor promotes group cohesion, relieves stress, and vents frustration within the group. It boosts the group’s morale and strengthens the bonds between its members, helps obtain consensus within the group, and minimizes the distance between its members. In addition, aggressive humor which mocks others emphasizes the superiority of the group using it. The political and social Holocaust satire and parody used by the left-wing gives the marginalized left a sense of power, and is used to critique, vent frustration, and also to create social cohesion.
The use of satire by the left in its battle against the right-wing’s attitudes towards the Africans was evident on TV and in social media even before the demonstration and continued afterwards. For example, In March 2010, the right-wing Knesset member Yaakov Katz circulated a memorandum calling for African asylum seekers who had entered Israel through Egypt to be sent to live in a “distant city” that they would build themselves through “workfare.” Soon after, the satirical Israeli TV show *It’s a Wonderful Country* spoofed Katz’s plan. The actor Tal Friedman, in a homage to the film *Inglorious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, USA, 2009) depicted Katz as the Nazi officer from the film, Col. Hans Landa, who hunted down Jews in occupied France. Katz/Landa is shown going from house to house, pulling out asylum-seekers and foreign workers. Several of Friedman’s lines were taken directly from the film. The skit thus used the Holocaust to make its point that the historically victimized had become the victimizers. In December 2013, following the refusal of African asylum-seekers to be sent to the Holot detention facility, a formal document was published in which the illegal immigrants were not mentioned by name, but rather given numbers. Many respondents compared these numbers to those tattooed by the Nazis on the arms of Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz. A photograph uploaded to *It’s a Wonderful Country’s* Facebook page purported to show former Minister of the Interior Gideon Sa’ar preparing to tattoo an anonymous refugee. The photograph caused an uproar and received mixed responses. Some viewers were utterly appalled, while others expressed support. Due to the commotion, the image was removed a day later from the program’s Facebook page.

Satirical responses also appeared intensively after the May 2012 demonstration. The left-wing produced and circulated memes and caricatures using satire and black humor. These memes, published in Israeli social media, highlighted the resemblance between the demonstration and Kristallnacht and presented the right-wing demonstrators and Knesset members who took part in it as Nazis.

Studies on internet memes suggest that they represent more than just a fun pastime or simple joke, and should be taken seriously, since they shape and reflect general social mindsets and may play a role in politics. Memes offer a new kind of civic participation—one in which citizens are able to express political opinions and participate in important debates. Scholars claim that memes can be used as a persuasive tactic, based on the understanding that information stemming from peers, such as friends or family, can be more persuasive than information generated by political elites. “Kristallnacht in Tel-Aviv” memes were a tactic used by the left to voice their feelings about the violent demonstration alongside the serious critique.
**Political Memetic Photos**

Meme-based political discourse often begins with a single “memetic photo” that relates to political actors and controversies. One of the most famous pictures from the demonstration was that of a woman wearing a tank-top on which was hand-written “Death to the Sudanese.” She is seen standing in the foreground of the frame, talking on the phone, while in the background, other demonstrators smile and clap. This photo spread like wildfire, and was immediately turned into a meme. In one instance, Amir Schiby posted on Facebook the photo, adding a speech bubble that contained the words: “You promised me tons of ‘crystal’ (a play on words referring both to Kristallnacht and to cocaine), but in the end I only got redbull” (an energy drink). Another example was a caption to the photo in the spirit of the “My friends went to . . . and all I got was this lousy T-shirt” catchphrase, which now read “My friends went to a pogrom and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.” Racheli Rottner posted on Facebook the photo of the woman speaking into the phone, and glued Hitler’s picture next to her, as if she was calling him. They both seem happy with the conversation and the caption says “No, you hang up,” to hint at a romantic relationship between them.

**Wider Comparisons to Murderous Individuals and to Racism**

The parallels to Kristallnacht or to Nazism were not the only parallels that appeared. The “death to the Sudanese” meme appeared alongside other captions meant to equate the female demonstrator with other murderous and/or racist figures. In one, the notorious sadistic murderer King Joffrey from the popular TV series *Games of Thrones* appeared alongside the protester with the caption saying “did you get the T shirt I sent you?” as the woman answered “thank you, it fits just fine.” In another photo, posted by Eli Levin, with the caption “I do not compare, I only show that one can compare,” the woman was in the foreground, with a picture of the Ku Klux Klan superimposed on the background, waiting for her to join the group. Another surfer altered the picture with a caption reading “how can you recognize me? I am the one in the picture that every sane person will distribute, in shock, tomorrow morning.” Caricaturist and illustrator Mysh Rozanov published a caricature titled “Kristallnacht,” in which Knesset member Regev was seen approaching a group of Ku Klux Klan members. The group turns to her, saying “Thanks for coming to complete our minyan, Miri’leh.” These examples, which appeared alongside the specific references to Kristallnacht, show how the historical uniqueness of Kristallnacht
was flattened—it became a symbol; a trope of racist hatred, like other symbols of racism, sadism, and hate.

The satiric “Israeli Kristallnacht” memes, like other, more serious responses by the left, were part of a broader struggle against the deportations which found expression in caricatures and memes before the demonstration and continued after it. For example, Roznov used the iconic photo taken by Nazis during the Warsaw ghetto revolt in April–May 1943 of the Jewish child with raised hands, surrounded by other terrified Jews, and doctored their skin color and features so they resembled Africans. The caption read, “I’m (standing) with the refugees.” In another photo he split the frame into two parts, with the left featuring a picture of Anne Frank and her family, and the right showing a family of African refugees, sketched in the same pose and with similar features. Another of his caricatures, titled “A Problem of Self-Image,” featured a large, muscular man covered with tattoos saying such things as “death to the Sudanese,” “a good Arab is a dead Arab,” “Russians, go back to Russia,” “Ethiopians, return to Ethiopia,” etc. The thug is looking in a mirror, but the image he sees is not his own, but the image of the same child from the Warsaw ghetto with raised hands, the yellow star of David displayed on his coat. Roznov felt that, more than seventy years after WWII, Israelis still see themselves as helpless victims who do not understand how strong and violent they have become, and that the trauma that haunts them causes them to act violently against anyone who seems to pose a threat.73

CONCLUSIONS
In conclusion, Israel represents a unique sphere of traumatic awareness in which Nazism and the Holocaust have been politicized since the establishment of the State.

The “Israeli Kristallnacht” responses on social media to the Tel-Aviv demonstration against the Africans reflect the way in which the Israeli left wing politicizes the Holocaust to meet its agenda. However, as noted, it is but one example out of many, in which the right and left in Israel politicize the Holocaust for their causes. The “Israeli Kristallnacht” responses are part of a technological change that has transferred power to the individual, who thus becomes directly involved in the circulation of political content. Internet surfers stop being passive observers of the political game and take an active part in it. The circulation of Nazi associations and critical responses is increasingly driven by audiences who share, comment, critique, reframe, and remix the content. This grassroots revolution (serious and satirical narrative alike) on the one hand, increases Kristallnacht commemoration within Israeli society, but on the other hand, completely deflates it by dissociating it from the background, facts, and characteristics of the November 9–10, 1938 events. It turns Kristallnacht into a simplistic and shallow metaphor of shattered glass and violence towards the other; a symbol and a trope mixed with other signifiers of murderous racism, which ultimately deprives it of its profound historical context and meaning.
Notes

1. All social media references are to be found in the end of the article under “Bibliography/Social Media.”


14. For example, Gabi Nitzan, Facebook, April 27, 2012 [Hebr.], https://www.facebook.com/search/str/%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%91%D7%93%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%97+%D7%91%D7%AA%D7%9C-%D7%90%D7%91%D7%99%D7%91/keywords_search?epa=SEARCH_BOX.


22. Yadlin-Segal, “‘It Happened Before,’” 24–47.


26. Martin Kiel, Twitter, May 24, 2012. On the importance of hashtags which create a filing system from which information can be drawn and spotlight additional meanings that are to be found in the user generated content see Bonilla and Rosa, “#Ferguson,” 4–17; Statche, “Advocacy,” 162–64.


30. “Pressing charges.”


32. Maafiyahu, May 24, 2012 [Hebr.], https://mafyahu.wordpress.com/2012/05/24/%D7%94%D7%90%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A0%D7%92%D7%93-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%A1%D7%A0%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%91%D7%93%D7%A8-%D7%95%D7%9D-%D7%AA%D7%9C-%D7%90%D7%91%D7%99%D7%91-%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%94/.


34. Gil, Twitter, June 24, 2012.


36. See chapter by Ulrich Baumann and François Guesnet in this volume.


38. Tali Kritzman-Amir, “‘Them’ are ‘Us’,” *Haoketz*, May 25, 2012 [Hebr.], http://www.haokets.org/2012/05/24/%D7%94%D7%9D-%D7%96%D7%90%D7%A0%D7%97%D7%99/.


41. “Pressing Charges.”


44. Kritzman-Amir, “‘Them’ are ‘Us.’”


46. Meged, “A Wild and Inflamed Herd.”


63. Arie Sover, The Pathway to Human Laughter (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2009), 23–25, 55–57 [Hebr.].
64. Avner Ziv, Personality and Sense of Humor (Tel Aviv: Papyrus, 1996) [Hebr.].
66. I use Limor Shifman’s definition of meme: Meme: a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which b) were created with awareness of each other, and c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.” See Shifman, Memes, 41.


72. Keires, “Incidents.”

73. “Meet Mish Roznov,” All Lies, no date [Hebr.], https://www.alllies.org/blog/archives/19190#.XM6wWo4zY2w.
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