

Pedagogy

Israeli Art, Jewish Art, and Jewish Studies

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I am sitting with a group of American students, some, but not all, Jewish, in the military cemetery at Kiryat Anavim in the Jerusalem corridor. It is Yom Ha-Zikaron, Israel's Memorial Day for its fallen soldiers. An obelisk-like memorial chamber designed by the artist Menachem Shemi (1897–1951) stands at the far end of the area. The inscription on the structure, in block Hebrew letters, reads: "To the Harel Palmach fighters who sacrificed their lives to die for Jerusalem, Judea and the Negev in the War of the Liberation of Israel." Shemi's son Aharon, known as Jimmy (1926–1948) was a beloved Palmach commander who fell in the 1948 war. The book published after his death, *Friends Talk about Jimmy*, became an Israeli classic. What started out as a temporary burial ground became a small military cemetery. Parents of soldiers who died then were given the option of being buried near their sons, and so Shemi and his wife are buried there as well. Today, the small cemetery is full of visitors, even though most of the graves are from the battles of 1948. People of all ages—children, soldiers, young couples, senior citizens—are crowded under the makeshift tent erected over the graves. The two-minute siren during which everybody stands still, in silence, is about to sound.

The choice of day and place is not coincidental—we are on a tour of the art of memory and memorial in the Jerusalem area, for my course titled History of Art in Israel from the Yishuv to the Present. Questions to be discussed: How have these events been commemorated in art? What does the artistic language of these works say about the period in which they were made, about those who made them, and about those commemorated? By attending this ceremony, the importance and power of memory and



*Kiryat Anavim Military Cemetery on Yom Ha-Zikaron.
Photo by Susan Nashman Fraiman*

The study of Jewish and Israeli art teaches us about Jewish values, influences from the outside world, and the way Jews have contended with their historical circumstances.

commemoration in Israeli society are directly experienced by the students, who most likely have never witnessed a comparable event.

I have been teaching Israeli and Jewish art to students at the Rothberg International School of the Hebrew University since 2007. In recent years, prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, besides students from the United States and Canada, I have had students from places as diverse as Australia, China, England, France, Italy, Hong Kong, and Germany. In order to teach Israeli art, one must start with the basics: How did Jews express themselves through art, either by making art or commissioning art, before the Emancipation? The next questions, of course, are: After the Emancipation and the entry of Jews into art academies, what changed and what didn't? What were the ideological forces that led to the founding of an art school, the Bezalel Academy in 1906, before the founding of the first kibbutz?