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There is a passage from Yoel Hoffmann's *The Christ of Fish* that has been in my mind for quite a few years:¹

At night, Uncle Herbert came like a slow hunter
of air bunnies and spoke to me. I told
my father, 'isn't uncle Herbert dead, am I
dreaming?' And my dead father said, 'he's alive'.

I find this passage very powerful, as it makes the absence of the dead very much present, tangibly so, their absence and the way in which they are still present in the lives of those who love them and continue to relate to them, miss them, grieve their absence.

While this is, of course, painful, the yearning and the sorrow are a bond that one is often not willing to give up, as it continues to make the dead present. I think that people who cling to and have very intensive relationships with those they lost in the Holocaust do not want to give it up; oftentimes, years after having repressed it, they come back to this connection. This is a relationship perpetuated by pain, by longing, and eliminating it means eliminating a part of one's identity, one's very self.

So although Moshe Shamir wrote of his young brother, who fell in the War of Independence, that "Elik was born from the sea",² Elik wasn't really born from the sea. He came from Europe, and portraying him as being born from the sea means making him forever rootless. And even if one grows roots later, they will still feel what Lea Goldberg called "the pain of the two homelands". Perhaps we should realize that such pain – when it's tolerable and not petrifying – is not always a bad thing.

¹ Hoffmann, Yoel (trans. Eddie Levenston) (2006). *The Christ of Fish*. New York: New Directions. (Hebrew: Keter, 1991).

² Shamir, Moshe (1970). *With His Own Hands*. Israel Universities Press (Hebrew: Am Oved, 1972).

Dana Freibach-Heifetz

Ethics of Documentation: Attentiveness as Responsibility and Grace

In memory of Aliza Auerbach

In this paper I wish to examine the way in which one can *listen to the absence and make it heard*, as an act whose meaning is *ethical*. To draw attention to that which enables, even summons, the transferring of memory, maybe of fiction as well: the interpersonal interaction between the listener and the one who's telling the story. In other words, I wish to present some observations about the relations between silence, listening or attentiveness, and the ability to talk, in particular: about trauma, from a perspective of responsibility and grace.

In order to do so I'll focus on the documentary arena, on the works of two artists – Aliza Auerbach's book *Survivors* (Gefen Publishing House, 2012; Hebrew: Yad Ben Zvi, 2010), and Yonatan Haimovich's film *Fugitive Pieces* (*Resisim*, Israel, 2009).¹ In both cases, I shall examine what characterizations of the photographers, and their relation to the people they photographed, enabled the latter to open up and talk about their lives and experiences, at times: even things that they have never told anyone; when it should be emphasized, that the subject matter is stories that are hard to be told as well as to be heard. These characterizations, I shall argue, can formulate an "ethics of documentation". Against this background, I shall further offer some thoughts regarding the relevance of such ethics to the therapeutic arena as well.

But first I wish to present, in a nutshell, the theoretical perspective from which these interactions shall be examined – the concept of "secular grace".

(A) Secular Grace

"Secular grace" is a philosophical notion or an ethical ideal that was developed in my book.² Being a secularized concept of religious grace (as a relationship between God and humans) which is placed within the framework of a secular-humanistic worldview as a relation between human beings, this notion refers to two planes of the human existence. First, it means a way of life, which is conceived by the one who chose it as self-actualization by love (in a wide sense, that

1 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_jGpuMQY54.

2 Freibach-Heifetz, Dana. (trans. Barbara Harshav). (2017). *Secular Grace*. Leiden & Boston: Brill-Rodopi (Hebrew: *Chesed Chiloni*, Resling, 2009).

shall be explained hereinafter) to others. Such an existential choice implies and requires a manifestation in concrete interpersonal interactions characterized as grace-relations – the second plane or sense of secular grace – in which one invites the other to establish such a relation, and the other accepts this invitation. In other words, by “secular grace” I refer to a relation between two individuals, at least one of whom (denoted “the inviter”) chose it as a way of life which is realized in concrete relationships, while the other (“the respondent”) chose at least to maintain the certain grace-relation with the inviter. There is continuity between these two planes – the concrete grace-relation is the realization of the fundamental choice, while that fundamental choice is the criterion for identifying the concrete relation between two individuals as grace.

Within this framework, the *grace-relation* is a personal encounter with another person as an equal, unique personality. It is a dynamic and open encounter, which is realized in various ways since it is anchored in the individuality of both sides as well as in the dialogue between them. The existence of such a relation is dependent on the mutual will of the parties (the inviter’s will to give and the respondent’s will to accept), due to the fact that this relation is conceived of as a mutual gift by both parties; in particular, the very acceptance is conceived of as a gift since it enables the inviter to actualize his existential choice in the way of grace. It should be emphasized that the grace-relation is given beyond duty and justice – the giver is not obliged to be generous towards the one who receives, and the latter has no right for it.

A grace-relation has two aspects: the subjective aspect of feelings, thoughts and desires, and the objective aspect of speech, deeds and non-verbal conduct. In the subjective aspect, grace is love in the broad sense, characterized by generosity, openness, non-judgmental acceptance, empathy and respect towards the other (which is intertwined with self-love and expresses it). In the objective sense, grace is manifested practically through generous behavior and conduct towards the other while focusing on her needs and point of view.

Secular grace-relations may occur through a wide range of human encounters, from a one-time encounter to a long-lasting and profound friendship. In all cases, it is a special combination of self-love and love of others, in which there is no place for oppression of the other nor for self-sacrifice (even if balancing those two loves might be practically complicated).

It is important to mention that secular grace is a demanding relation that involves difficulty and risk, and requires a constant self-overcoming. Since it involves self-exposure and self-transcendence on behalf of the other, it requires trust, and makes the parties (especially the inviter) vulnerable to getting hurt by the other (as a result of rejection or abuse of the generosity because of belligerence, exploitation or alienation), or because of the other (since it hurts us when

someone who is dear to us suffers). Therefore, founding a grace-relation with another requires *courage* as well as *perseverance* in loyalty and devotion to the other, and, no less importantly: *optimism* regarding the very possibility of the foundation and existence of such a relation.

However, despite the risk and the difficulty, a grace-relation may bring a positive existential change in both parties, in several aspects. First, *liberation*: secular grace may increase the degree of freedom that is afforded to the parties. E.g. – liberation from perceiving the other as impersonal, meaningless, threatening and a stranger, allows to perceive him as a unique individual; this leads to openness, as opposed to imperviousness and withdrawal. In addition, liberation from an exclusive point of view on the world opens the parties to the ability to experience, through empathy and identification, another point of view.

Second, secular grace enables the expression and strengthening of the *self*, both through widening our ability to give as a way of self-expression, and through constant self-knowledge and self-enrichment as a result of an acquaintance and comparison with another's distinctiveness.

Third, *love* – this grace could fill life with love, especially in the sense of loving but also in the sense of being loved; in this I mean love in the wide sense of the word, one that includes, as mentioned above, openness, generosity, affection, etc.

Forth, *meaning* to life – like every act of adopting a guiding principle in one's life, secular grace grants meaning to life (at least to the inviter). Aside from those outcomes there may be more: truth (namely: authenticity), pleasure, richness, vividness, joy and serenity, all of which could be given by loving dialogical relations with other people. One can refer to all these outcomes in terms of "secular salvation".

(B) Attentiveness as Grace

In light of this theoretical model of "secular grace", I shall now examine the listening that allows for the transference of memory in the works of Aliza Auerbach and Yonathan Haimovitch.

Aliza Auerbach photographed, for more than forty years, portraits and landscapes. Her book *Survivors* was published in 2009. It presents portraits of Holocaust survivors, when besides each portrait appears a short autobiography, a photograph of an object from the camps or from his or her childhood home, and a photo of the family each one has raised in Israel.

During an encounter of the research group in The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute,³ in May 2013, Aliza talked about the process of creating the book. Thus, her method of working was revealed, especially some prominent characteristics. The first characteristic is that the encounters with the people whom she photographed were very *personal*, not merely for them but first and foremost for Aliza herself.

This aspect stood out from the very beginning, in the early stage of choosing the photographed people – whenever possible, Aliza chose people whose faces spoke to her. In her words: “I don’t have an explanation. There is a person that you see and feel that you can connect to, and there are people that I feel that [. . .] I can photograph but nothing will happen.”

Likewise, at the stage of preparation, Aliza went to the homes of the person being photographed, alone, several times, and conversed with them before she started photographing. The personal characteristic of the encounters was also evident in the way in which she opened herself to absorb the survivors’ stories, and later described those encounters to the Van-Leer group – she did so in detail, in present tense as if those encounters were happening here and now, while disclosing her own reactions to those stories. She said, e.g., “her story and her whole being left a deep unforgettable impression in me,” “the story that was engraved in me very much,” “her story was particularly difficult for me.”

In addition, when coming to photograph the survivors’ families, the sense of immediate intimacy was important to Aliza, and she insisted that “I don’t want to do a studio photoshoot with a neutral background and clean lighting, but as if I am one of the family that photographs a family photo.” Finally, the personal aspect is manifested in Aliza’s feeling (which she chose to express by the imagery of train tracks in Jerusalem, a repeating motif in the book), that “every one of us, even if they aren’t a survivor or a second or third generation, carries it with them.”

A second characteristic that is evident in Aliza’s approach is the attempt to record and give voice, as accurately as possible, to the stories and feelings of *the photographed people themselves*, while minimizing her own involvement. “I tried to express through the photos what I thought the person in front of me felt,” she said; she also insisted that the survivors write the texts accompanying their photos in their own words. This insistence constitutes a deliberate and explicit artistic stand, in the content-related aspect as well as the poetic-technical one.

³ Being a part of the group, I attended this encounter, as well as the one in which Yonathan Haimovitch presented his movie and how he shot it. Their quotations are based on my writing during these encounters.

Another fundamental characteristic can be seen in what constitutes, in my mind, Aliza's 'credo' as a photographer – *the subjective aspect of love and intimacy* to the people being photographed. In her words:

One may say that I'm sentimental, that I'm emotional, but I am not ashamed of those places. I don't put distance between me and those I photograph. And when I photograph people, one can see that I am moved if that is what I feel. And I do believe that even though my camera is an objective tool, as seemingly clicking a button is a technical thing, at the end of the day it is clear that if each one of us had a camera then each one of us would film differently. The place of detachment is perhaps easier, people are afraid to commit, but my stance is very clear, from love to this place with all its problems [. . .] and love for the human being as such.

Finally, it was important to Aliza to emphasize that "I am an incorrigible *optimist* [. . . and] this is an optimistic book about the Holocaust. [. . .] because the ability to continue functioning in the day-to-day, and I am aware that this is a daily struggle, the day-to-day is to survive every day all over again, but [. . .] I am in awe of people who have this type of mental strength."

Aliza's direct and non-evading gaze into the core of the hardship is ingrained in her photographs, especially her gaze into the heart of the person facing the camera; a warm and empathizing gaze, that does not force itself onto the people photographed precisely because of its remarkable involvement. This gaze enables the photographed, humbly and sensitively, to be who they truly are and to touch the viewer's heart. At times, her gaze enables those people to tell things they have never in their lives told anyone. Because of this, Aliza's photos manage to move its viewer, and invite him to a dialogue with the characters she depicts.

Many characteristics of this documenting process, as well as the quality of its results, can be seen in Yonathan Heimovitch's presentation of the process in which he created his movie *Fugitive Pieces* (Israel, 2009). The movie documents the re-encounter with immigrants from former Soviet Union, who live in the Jerusalemite house in which Yonathan lived in his childhood. More than a decade after leaving the house following his father's death – and after the deaths of his mother and grandfather – he returned to it looking for his childhood, "to collect a few last fugitive pieces, a moment before they disappear." Alongside its creator's losses, the movie presents the hardships of the photographed people – their losses and the trauma of immigration they have experienced, trauma that is exacerbated by their loneliness and the aging they are confronting; their world, just as Yonathan's childhood, is "a vanishing world."



Fig. 1: Two frames from the film *Fugitive Pieces* (Yonathan Heimovitch, 2009).

Like Aliza, Yonathan shot the movie as he came to the house alone. In June 2013, during another encounter at The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Yonathan talked about the movie-making process as a journey full of *difficulties* from beginning to end. In its very beginning, when he arrived and felt “*naked and exposed and a stranger in the landscape*,” and had much difficulty crossing the building’s threshold – for two months he stood and simply looked, “not daring to get closer, only to zoom in with the camera, but actually going, stepping with my feet and my body, crossing the threshold, I didn’t dare, I was *terrified*.”⁴

Later on, another difficulty arose due to the lack of knowledge that is structured in the very process of encountering and documenting the filmed subjects. As Yonathan said: “There is no script. [And . . .] *I am completely open* to what I shall meet, to the people, *I have to be extremely attentive*, and I am constantly aware of my wound and am trying to look at it *with modesty*.” Mainly, a significant difficulty emerged from the *existential meaning* of this journey: “I saw death everywhere, [. . .] everything seemed to me like one big cemetery, and I am going into the graves. [. . .] A feeling of a disassembled man, that there is no world and no reality. [. . .] I was like a little Orpheus, passing through a world of shadows and managing to exit from the world of the dead.”

These things show the process’ difficulties and dangers – including the danger of disintegrating and being trapped forever in the world of the dead – as well as what it demands from the photographer/listener: *courage, patience, modesty, attentiveness and constant openness to the other*. But once those are given, the miracle of encounter occurs. In Yonathan’s words:

Slowly, during my waiting outside the threshold, people I knew began exiting, and to my surprise they reacted very warmly to me [. . .] and I was surprised [to discover] that for them I gave *meaning* and they remembered me and I was a point of reference for them just like they were for me. And *it moved me*. And from that moment I crossed the threshold.

Moreover, he said:

I was required to come closer, and from that moment – to be inside, [. . .] *very very close* [. . .] *they accepted me and I them*. And from the moment I arrived everything was *so intimate and familiar*, as if a world was created, one that I didn’t know how much I longed for and how much it was missing from me and in which I *find my deepest roots* [. . .] *the feeling of intimacy so big and deep and touching and giving me a feeling of a home I couldn’t find anywhere else*.

Thus, a mutually significant and emotional encounter was born, as well as a loving intimacy that produced no less than a profound feeling of having a home. By

4 Here – and later – the emphasis is mine [D. F-H].

means of the unique attentiveness of its creator, the movie succeeds in bringing, with much sensitivity, compassion and gentleness, the portraits of immigrants and “a world of fugitive pieces that touches something in the source, in the unity, in what existed before the fracture” – and thereby draws attention to the absence and invites the viewers to experience this absence and to open up to the film’s heroes.



Fig. 2: From the film *Fugitive Pieces* (Yonathan Heimovitch, 2009).

In my mind, one can talk about all these in terms of *ethics of documenting* as ethics of listening or attentiveness, which is a *private case of secular grace-relation*. A relation in which the artist (for whom this might be a way of life), invites the people being photographed into a dialogical and very personal encounter; an encounter in which the former humbly offers the latter his full and empathic attentiveness, which often deeply identifies with them. They, in turn, *respond*, accept this listening attention, and thereby allow the artist into their world and grant his camera the harsh stories of their lives.

In other words, there is a subjective attitude of the artist, namely: the listener and the documenter, which is expressed objectively in the way in which he looks at the photographed people, talks and is simply silently present with them; and

this, in turn, forms a subjective stance of the photographed people, which enables the intimate and sensitive act of filming.

This creates, sensitively and delicately, an interaction that becomes a *gift* for the photographer and the photographed alike. This gift often *liberates* from loneliness and alienation, lessens the burden of suffering, strengthens *self*-knowledge and its power, grants *meaning* to actions and deeds, gives *love* (in its wide sense) to the photographer as well as to the photographed, enriches their world, and can even give them a sense of home. Furthermore, its fruits can also be a gift to the *viewers*, who choose to respond to the invitation within the artistic piece and enter a dialogue with it. When dealing with a documentation of those who have experienced trauma, loss and absence – things which are naturally difficult and sometimes impossible to talk about – this ethics is needed tenfold; without it, filming and documenting of loss and trauma is impossible.

(C) Therapy as Grace

The abovementioned conceptualization of documentation, as an ethical grace-relation of a witness who is documenting a traumatic person's story, can be implemented in the therapeutic arena as well.

Generally speaking, being a therapist means being a witness – the very attentive presence of the therapist, followed by her listening to the patient, already makes the former a witness of the latter. No therapeutic relationship is possible without this “witnessing function” of the therapist, a function that has many names (e.g. “container”); in this terminology, the patient’s “testimony” may be a verbal or a non-verbal (“enactment”) one. In particular, confrontation with trauma requires a witness who is willing to listen to the traumatic narrative, and more often – to its lacunas (“unconscious”); as Dori Laub puts it: self-knowledge of a trauma can only be created by a process of testifying.⁵ Such a confrontation is possible only within a “healing relationship” with others, in Judith Herman’s words;⁶ when a therapist is this other, she is summoned to be morally committed as a witness to a crime. Herman talks of this commitment in terms of solidarity with the victim/patient and defines the trauma in criminal terms, while emphasizing the emotional involvement of the therapist alongside her intellectual one in order to actualize this commitment. Herman also focuses on the dangers of the therapist’s position, known as “a secondary traumatization”: due to the empathy, even the identification, with the traumatic patient, the therapist may share the

5 Felman, Shoshana and Laub, Dori. (eds.). (1992). *Testimony: Cries of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Routledge.

6 Herman, Judith Lewis. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*. New York: Basic Books.

patient's helplessness, confusion, rage, anxiety and pain as if they were her own, alongside "the guilt of the by-standing witness". Other trauma researchers have also written about the therapist as a witness. Chana Ullman talks of a very *personal* openness to the traumatized patient's world, and goes as far as arguing that as a morally committed witness the therapist has to take a political stand regarding the reality which traumatized the patient, at the risk of blame, shame and even alienation by and from her own community. Furthermore, Ullman adds, being such an involved witness to a traumatic victim is an asymmetric position of being available to the other's needs, which is sometimes bound to threaten the very identity of the witness.⁷

Laub pays special attention to the upheavals of the witness' listening, being the "tabula rasa on which the trauma is being engraved," thus can be reclaimed by the victim as his own story which is a part of his identity. Like Ullman, Laub highlights the required identification of such a witness with the victim, but at the same time he emphasizes that the listener must also be *her own witness* in order to remain a reliable companion of the patient/victim to the unknown land of the trauma – to which one cannot go by oneself. Moreover, in this context Laub explicitly compares the therapeutic process to the documentary one. Given his own personal experience with documenting Holocaust survivors' testimonies as well as with being a therapist of such patients, Laub states that there is an essential similarity between the two: the documentation can be conceived of in terms of a "short term therapy" of the survivor.

Against this background, I argue that one can easily relate to the therapeutic process in general, and of trauma victims in particular, as another particular case of an ethical grace-relation. Within such a conceptual framework, the therapist – for whom this profession can be perceived as a way of life – plays the role of the inviter, who offers her attentive listening as a gift to the patient. This attentiveness needs to be a personal, intimate and sensitive presence of the witnessing therapist, whose subjective aspect may be referred to as a "therapeutic love" which manifests in the objective aspect of the therapist's behavior towards the patient. Such a relation – or therapy – with a traumatic patient is extremely risky for the therapist, since it might involve a brutal attack on her emotions, beliefs, defenses and even her identity, and force her to confront profound existential dilemmas. In this context, the characterizations of what I defined as an "ethics of documentation" can and should be adopted by the therapist in order to enable a therapeutic process worthy of its name.

7 Ullman, Chana. (2006). "Bearing Witness: Across the Barriers in Society and in the Clinic". *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 16, no. 2: 181–198.

(D) The Right Tone

In conclusion, in my mind it is fruitful to think of these issues in light of Natan Zach's "The Right Poem", which was written in another context but is relevant to ours as well.

The Right Poem

When the emotion fades, the right poem speaks.
Until then, the emotion, the other poem, has spoken.
Now, the right poem's turn to speak
Has come.

When a person is weary he thinks of tomorrow.
There is power, a great deal of power, in his thinking.
There is courage. A great deal of courage. Interestingly, courage
Is remembered more than tomorrow's terrors.
He is friendly then, and there is also courage in his friendship.

He is not afraid then. The words he said,
He does not seek to annul. Despite them being air.
The deed he broke off thousands of times, he wishes to break no more.
Due to fragility, he knows. He has measured compassion
But he is accurate: he does not easily transfer imagery
From his sorrow to that which is not his sorrow.

He has an acute eagerness to hear. If in this language listening
Means more than hearing, then listening it is. So as not to
Harm the only thing given to him: the ability
To hear. Now even his own blood shall not dare to harm
The one and only thing given to him – at times, as if from
above – hearing.⁸

For the attentiveness that enables this kind memory transference, emotion is important, even essential; Aliza's 'credo' illustrates this well. However, emotion is only the first step. Reading Zach's poem with Aliza's and Jonathan's words in mind, evokes an intricate picture of this attentiveness.

A true attentiveness to a 'memory of a horror' requires, first and foremost, *courage*. Because its essence, as Jonathan said, is its being a journey to the unknown without a map nor a compass, one that sometimes takes place in territories of death and darkness, places that seem almost impossible to return from alive; while the listener has to expose himself to experiences designed to hurt

⁸ I am grateful to Dana G. Peleg for her translation of the poem from Hebrew, in: Zach, Nathan. (1986). *All the Milk and the Honey*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved. 68.

and scorch, knowing how fragile are the participants who share this journey. Indeed, a great deal of courage is needed here.

True attentiveness also requires “accuracy”, in the sense of the delicacy and sensitivity that Aliza talked about, as well as in the sense of “not easily transferring imagery from our own sorrow to that which is not our sorrow”, since usually we listen mostly to ourselves. All these – courage and accuracy in its various aspects – do not come naturally, they require “acute eagerness”, which can also be conceived of in terms of *personal responsibility*. And, of course – and here the analogy to Zach’s poem ends – they cannot be achieved when one is mentally or physically exhausted, as they require continuous effort.

However, and despite all the difficulties, such an attentiveness is possible. Especially when it is done out of *personal responsibility* to hear and listen, because “the ability to do so was given to us”; a feeling that turns the attentiveness into an ethical act. When a person listens to another in this way, the other can tell the story, including those who feel like they “have nothing to say”, finds within themselves many things to say when they are listened to with true attentiveness. And where there is true attentiveness, it is possible to hear the silence which was described by the poet Israel Eliraz as “the complete, ant-like silence / that can only be heard by those / whose ears are attuned to the thread of suffering.”

Such an attentiveness is evident, as I have shown, in what can be called “the personal ethics of documentation” of Aliza and Jonathan; with all the differences between them, there is a striking resemblance in their approaches to the people whom they photographed. One can also think of such an attentiveness in other contexts, such as the therapeutic one, in which the therapist is a witness to her patient in a manner that is strikingly similar to the documentarist’s; thus, the characterizations of this “ethics of documentation” can easily be implemented into an “ethics of therapy” as well.

In my mind, such an attentiveness is a grace, a grace that people can give each other and thereby find a way to transfer memory and make the absence be present – with compassion, generosity and courage. A way that, sometimes, despite all the difficulties, can offer us what can be conceived of as no less than salvation.