

A portable homeland: How crisis-induced insight had rescued Jewish cultural memory from oblivion

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Abstract: Human cultures are biocultural 'supraorganisms', that can store memory as distributed experience-dependent representations over hundreds and thousands of years (Dudai 2020). Similar to other natural memory systems, cultures encode, store and express memory in the concerted activity of multiple types of sub-components of the system. But whereas in the individual brain the sub-components are brain circuits that store information up to the individual's life-time, in culture the memory traces are encoded in large distributed assemblies composed of individual brains, intra- and inter-generational interacting brains, traditions, and artifacts that interact with brains. It is this combination of brains, traditions and artifacts that permits cultural memory to overcome the life-span of an individual or a generation. Particularly effective, for example, are traditions that recurrently evoke information about remote fictional or factual collective events, e.g. in festive times, aiming to convert semantic collective memory into personal episodic memory. This personal experience serves as a booster that reinvigorates cultural memory each generation anew. When such traditions dwindle, e.g. by secularization or globalization, cultural memory may fade away as well. This is usually a slowly-developing crisis for the culture and is difficult to overcome since it inherently limits the population interested in practicing that culture. Another major role in cementing viable cultural memory, particularly in cultures that had originated in a national entity or acquired national identity, is served by the homeland. When the territorial cradle is demolished and its inhabitants expelled and dispersed, the associated culture faces the risk of dilution and decline. Such abrupt crisis, however, may trigger insightful solutions to evade cultural oblivion. A notable example is the replacement the geographical homeland of the Jewish people with a literary corpus, culminating in the Talmud, a "portable homeland" (Boyarin 2015). Jewish culture continued to evolve in this rich hermeneutic space for many generations, independent of the locale of its sparse practitioners. The relevance of this ancient creative response to crisis to contemporary global limit situations will be discussed.

Boyarin D (2015). A traveling homeland. The Babylonian Talmud as a Diaspora. *Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.*

Dudai Y (2020). In search of the cultural engram. *Neuron* 108, 600-603.