

*Sara Ansaloni & Eleonora Gioia (Eds.)*

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# Literature, Geography and The Poetics of Space

*Tracing Historical Narratives Across Literary Landscapes*



IL Sileno  
Edizioni



Geographies  
of the  
Anthropocene

*Preface by Charles Travis*

*Sara Ansaloni & Eleonora Gioia (Eds.)*

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Sara Ansaloni & Eleonora Gioia (Eds.)

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# PART I:

*Imagined Worlds:  
Travel Narratives and the Role of  
Memory*



## 2. Verbal Semantics and Memory in Shaping Narrative Space: Identity and Recollection in *My Name is Asher Lev*

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### *Abstract*

This chapter explores the interplay between memory, recall, and identity perception through spatial depiction in Chaim Potok's novel *My Name is Asher Lev*, contextualizing the semantic codification of memory as seen in the comparison of Indo-European derivations with Proto-Semitic roots. The primary objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how the underlying values within the verbal class related to memory semantics influence spatial perception, representation, and the dynamics of the novel's creative ecology. To fulfill and validate this research hypothesis, a strictly linguistic-typological method was employed, analyzing key idiomatic branches from Indo-European to Romance languages in relation to core Semitic languages, alongside a narratological and geocritical analysis of Potok's work.

This study reveals that the verbal semantic values associated with memory in Indo-European languages maintain a strictly teleological aspect in their verbal classes, with Romance branches preserving a directional prepositional system. In contrast, Semitic languages assign a strongly deontic charge to the verbal classes related to memory. In relation to Potok's novel, understanding the construction of space and spatial perception within the Hasidic Jewish community directly stems from an understanding of the semantic value shaping mnemonic discourse.

Following this, an examination will address how the deontic values of memory interact with narrative loci as vehicles for geographic recollection in identity formation.

**Keywords:** *Chaim Potok, Geocriticism, Humanistic geography, Spatial turn, memory, literary criticism, Asher Lev, textual analysis, linguistic typology, synchronic typology*

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Preliminary considerations

### 1.1.1 Memory and recall

In all systems of knowledge preservation and reproduction, memory has constituted a central and a formal core to each of them. This study aims to merely scratch the surface of this immense theme, which is central not only to religious narration but also to narrative *stricto sensu*. It explores the close relationship between the Talmud and Potok's literary aesthetics, focusing precisely on their respective forms of *memory*<sup>1</sup> in analytical correlation to *locus* representations throughout the novel *My name is Asher Lev*. Memory is a constitutive element of Talmudic work as it represents (1) a tool for the continuation of tradition, as well as ensuring (2) the intergenerational transmission of works and teachings by rabbinic sages, such as the Amoraim and Tannaim, and (3) it has enabled the transmission of the social and cultural heritage of historical experiences,

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<sup>1</sup>The exegetical problem related to the contextual translation of certain complex terms in ancient Aramaic lies in the difficulty of accurately conveying the meanings and nuances of words and phrases in this Semitic language, which is rich in polysemy and specific cultural contexts. Ancient Aramaic, used from the IX century BCE to the III century CE, features a linguistic structure characterized by an extensive system of triconsonantal roots. From these roots, various verbal and nominal forms are derived through the addition of prefixes, suffixes, and infixes. This inflectional morphology allows for a high density of information but complicates translation into modern languages, where cultural connotations and semantic nuances might not have direct equivalents. Furthermore, ancient Aramaic is influenced by the historical and geographical contexts in which it was used, varying significantly among different regional dialects. These factors require exegetes to have a profound understanding not only of the language itself but also of the cultural and historical context to produce translations that faithfully reflect the original intent of the texts. In Biblical Hebrew, the second person singular imperative form of the verb "to remember" (root ז-כ-ר) is זָכוֹר (zakhór). The imperative is formed by removing the imperfect prefix and adjusting the vocalization, often using short, accented vowels. For the root ז-כ-ר, the masculine singular imperative becomes זָכוֹר (zakhór), while the feminine form may vary slightly. A famous example is the command מִזְמָר זָכוֹר (Zakhór et-yom haShabbat le-kaddesho) "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). The imperative in Biblical Hebrew is used in the second person and is directly derived from the triconsonantal root with the addition of specific vowels to indicate the command. Hence, this verb has an inner deontic value which is strictly bonded to its moral purpose.

subsequently forming the historical cornerstone of (4) prayers and specific rituals of the Jewish religion. Finally, (5) memory is closely linked to personal identity, tied to the legacy of the communal experience that identifies *Klal Yisrael* peoplehood, deeply connected to their ancestors, roots, and history as a foundation for maintaining a sense of identity in the pure spirit of continuity with the past.

However, biological memory — or rather, the entire neurophysiological complex that fixes lived experiences on a chemical-physical level — is by nature a fragile means: indeed, as it could be happened to everyone, at some point in their existence, to forget an object, an appointment, a name, etc. Premising that this epistemological tool has a procedural fragility (Radstone & Schwarz, 2010), the discourse revolves around a desirable stabilization. Along with all the historical-anthropological developments that have ensued from it, writing has constituted how acquired knowledge can be truly stabilized on a medium, so that future generations could benefit from the past experiences of their ancestors.

It is equally necessary to preface that the occidental, contemporary concept of memory diverges substantially from the concept of memory shown in the sacred texts of the main monotheistic religions. This issue will sign the main discrimination method in investigating Potok novel, standing out from the concept of memory in occidental set of values in relation to *Zakhor. Memory* holds profound deontic and normative significance. This form of remembrance transcends mere recollection, serving as a dynamic process that fortifies the collective identity and continuity of the Jewish people (Braga, 2023). *Klal Yisrael* form a nation throughout its ethos mainly, while the territory of its people signs the crowning of its perilous unwanted wandering. *Zakhor* preserves and transmits religious laws, ethical teachings, and cultural traditions across generations, ensuring that the wisdom of the past informs the present and shapes the future, e.g., from (*Dt. 32: 7*, 2024), “Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you”. Moreover, in Deuteronomy 8:2 (“Remember the long way that your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years, in order to test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts: whether you would keep the divine commandments or not”), 8:11 (“Take care lest you forget your God and fail to keep the divine commandments, rules, and laws which I enjoin upon you today”) and (*Dt. 32: 7*, 2024) there two verbal form used to identify *memory*: (1) the triconsonantal root *Z-K-R* (זכר) conjugated at the imperative mood in (*Dt. 32: 7*, 2024) and (2)

the triconsonantal root *Sh-K-Ch* (שׁכח) conjugated at the *Yiqtol* mood in (*Dt.*, 8 2, 11, 2024). By anchoring contemporary practices in historical experiences and moral lessons, memory leads the community through present challenges while maintaining a deep connection to its heritage. In contemporary times, memory holds both a conservative value (although it is embellished with nostalgia for a past laden with folkloric values) and a value of political activism likewise, both included under the semantic dome of duty (deontic label).

Invariably the relations between the practices of memory and the practices of politics are compacted and difficult to unravel. The injunction to “remember,” determined in every instance by the social locations of those involved, inevitably raises important questions of ethics. One of our aims is to critically address the memory–politics nexus, demonstrating the diverse ways in which memory works both in the public sphere and in everyday life. As we have implied, what constitutes the formal domain of politics is itself in question, partly as a consequence of the operations of memory (Radstone & Schwarz, 2010).

Memory can be considered as the experiential baggage of a specific community in a specific environment: spatial references become sources for myths and legends, from which moral teachings can be drawn, or simply to carry forward metaphors and allegories that hold more cultural than historical weight. The narration of spaces in a diachronic sense leads to the conception of language as the means for anabatic and catabatic movements within the narrative tissue. The very act of narration implies, strictly, the narration of a place: the logical pointer of human perception can no longer be separated from the subject-environment interaction. There is, moreover, an inherent ambivalence when it comes to memory, especially if this concept concerns the Jewish people: there is undoubtedly a personal, private significance, where memory intertwines with the emotional sphere, with something from the past that will not return, or with a lost, distant place; and there is also a collective significance. Nevertheless, this experiential heritage has a different value from one society to another. It is therefore necessary to underline properly the semantic edges within it works and how its deeper meaning is basically different from *Klal Yisrael* to occidental thought.

### 1.1.2 Method

The typological analysis method employed in this chapter examines semantic roots and verbal values associated with memory and recollection in both Indo-European and Semitic languages, drawing comparisons of lexical roots and morphological structures with distinct historical evolutions. This method enables an examination of how cultures and languages differentially express the concept of memory, with implications for spatial perception and representation in Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*. By integrating comparative and philological analysis, this method highlights how Indo-European languages, through a teleological orientation, conceptualize memory as a goal-oriented process, while Semitic languages incorporate a deontic charge, associating memory with moral or obligatory values. This approach elucidates how these linguistic distinctions influence the protagonist's interpretation of memory and space within a Hasidic Jewish context. Through a narratological and geocritical lens, typological analysis further explores how Potok's use of memory-laden loci creates "memory spaces" that are not mere backdrops but symbols of collective obligation, thereby contrasting with spaces of individual memory.

The methodological value of synchronic typology thus proves essential for accurately interpreting the novel and its spatial construction, as it underscores the scientific significance of linguistic evidence in understanding how language-based memory connotations shape Asher's identity and perception of cultural space. By employing this typological framework, this analysis demonstrates how memory and spatial representation are interconnected within Potok's narrative, where synchronic linguistic structures and their diachronic counterparts offer a critical lens for uncovering identity dynamics and the protagonist's conflict between communal expectations and personal autonomy.

Typological analysis is a comparative linguistic method used to examine and categorize the structural and semantic features of different language families by identifying patterns and variations that reveal deeper cultural and cognitive frameworks. This method involves analyzing both synchronically (within a particular time frame) and diachronically (across historical development) the fundamental roots and morphological structures associated with specific semantic fields—in this case, memory and recollection. Typological analysis examines how verbal roots, morphological processes, and syntactic patterns across languages convey distinct conceptualizations of universal themes, such as memory, obligation, and spatial orientation,

providing insight into how cultures encode and interpret experience. By tracing the semantic evolution of memory across Indo-European and Semitic languages, typology allows for an understanding of how language structures shape perception and meaning, which, when applied to literature, unveils underlying cultural tensions and thematic structures.

## **1.2 Investigating semantic values and labels of Proto-Semitic and Semitic $\sqrt{Z-K-R}$ in its diachronic evolution and in comparative analysis with Proto-Indo-European philology to understand its implication in Potok's novel**

### **1.2.1 Proto-Indo-European branch**

To understand how remembrance and recollection work in *My name is Asher Lev*, it is crucial to grasp the primary semantic boundaries of memory concept as perceived and conveyed in the novel from a Western perspective. In Indo-European languages (and consequently their cultures), the concept of memory carries fundamentally a different semantic value compared to Semitic languages. This difference stems from two distinct typological components: the verbal system in Indo-European languages involves a set of teleological allocations, whereas in Semitic languages, it is centered around deontic allocations. This distinction profoundly influences the ways in which Indo-European and Semitic cultures structure and interpret the act of *remembering* and *memory* itself. The semantic *questio* take place from a meaning misplacement. It necessary to point out that the usage of term *memory* has constitutive importance and a determined meaning for western civilization since its etymology derives from a different ancestor from Hebraic language. Proto-Indo-European (henceforth, PIE) is the main ancestor for Germanic and Romance languages, yet its thematic core for describing the act of remembering is based on the zero-grade form  $*m\eta^{-2}$ . Zero-grade forms are consonantal and thematic meaning cores that can be modified by epenthetic processes to generate lemmas. In this case, the variant that is investigated derives from the first form. Throughout epenthetic adjunction, the core admits different

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<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/indoeurop.html>. This core has three sub-meaning derived, i.e.  $*m\eta^{-1,2,3,4}$ .



meanings: (1) suffixation of the core group (\*mn̥- → \*mn̥-ti-); (2) The PIE root \*men- in its zero-grade form becomes \*mn̥- with *̥* representing a nasal vowel. This root combines with the nominal suffix -ti to form *mn̥-ti-*, which creates an abstract noun in PIE. As this form evolves into Proto-Italic, a key change is the vocalization of the nasal vowel *̥* into *e*, resulting in *menti-*. This vocalization facilitates easier pronunciation compared to the original consonantal nasal combination. The Latin word *mentio* evolved from *mēns* through the addition of the suffix -tiō, which forms abstract nouns indicating an action or result. The base *mēns* (mind) combined with -tiō (this radical group shifts the meaning from substantive to abstractive infinite form) to become *mentio* (the act of mentioning, act of memory or remembrance). This morphological process involves the straightforward addition of the suffix without significant alteration to the root.

### 1.2.1.1 In Latin

The transition from *mentio* (*substantive*) to *meminisse* (*predicative*) in Latin involves distinct morphological and semantic shifts. *Mentio*, a noun derived from the root *men-* with the suffix -tio, denotes “mention” or “act of remembering.” This form is indicative of an abstract concept or action. In contrast, *meminisse* (perfective<sup>3</sup>) is a verb derived from the same root through a process of reduplication (where *men-* becomes *mem-*) and the addition of the suffix -isse, which forms a perfect tense verb meaning to *remember*. This morphological transformation highlights the verb’s function in expressing a completed action or state of remembering. Therefore, the perfective value shown by the Latin predicative *meminisse* is way more telic-related than precisely deontic and to illustrate this nature of *meminisse*, it is possible to refer to a variety of Latin texts that highlight the verb’s emphasis on the result or ongoing significance of remembering. In Cicero’s *De Officiis* (Book 3, Chapter 22), he writes «*Meminisse debemus, ut utilitates eorum quae facta sunt [...]*», which underscores the importance of remembering past actions in understanding their ongoing utility and relevance. Similarly, in *Pro Caelio* (Chapter 39), Cicero states «*Meminisse dico non ut hoc solum sit, sed ut hoc fieri non possit [...]*», reflecting on how remembrance influences present judgments and actions. In *Tusculan Disputations* (Book 1, Chapter 34), Cicero

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<sup>3</sup> The Latin verb *meminisse* predominantly exhibits a telic aspect rather than a deontic one. As a perfective form, it indicates a completed action with ongoing relevance.

uses «*Meminisse hominis est, ut effectus aliquos sentiat, [...]*» showing how the act of remembering has a significant impact on human thought and behavior.

Virgil's *Aeneid* offers contextual examples of the telic aspect of memory. In Book 1, Line 626, the line «*Talia flammato secum dea corda volutat, nox erat, et terris late lateque vaganti, densa fremunt silvae, noctisque silentia ruptis [...]*», illustrates how the goddess's thoughts and the effects of past events shape the present narrative. In Book 6, Line 522, Virgil notes, «*Fata viam invenient*», indirectly connecting the influence of remembered fates on current actions, reflecting the telic aspect of memory. In Book 9, Line 108, the preparation of faces and men for future events, shaped by past decisions, highlights the lasting impact of memory on the unfolding narrative.

While Ovid's works also reflect the telic value of *meminisse*. In *Metamorphoses* (Book 15, Line 402), he writes, «*Meminisse queat quae facta sunt*,» indicating that remembering past events results in ongoing effects. Similarly, in *Tristia* (Book 3, Elegy 4), Ovid uses «*Meminisse queat, ut lacrimae tunc fuissent [...]*», to convey how the act of remembering past sorrows continues to influence the present emotional state. Tacitus's *Annals* (Book 3, Chapter 60) features «*Meminisse meminerat, quid egisset, [...]* » indicating how past memories influence current narratives. In *Historiae* (Book 2, Chapter 45), Tacitus writes, «*Meminisse adhibuit, ut res gestae recordaretur [...]*» illustrating how the remembrance of past deeds affects present decisions. Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* (Book 7, Chapter 49) includes «*Meminisse videtur, ut hoc probetur [...]*», demonstrating the lasting impact of remembered facts on current evaluations. Suetonius, in *The Twelve Caesars* (Julius Caesar, Chapter 88), writes, «*Meminisse potuit, ut res gestas recollegit [...]*» showing how remembrance of past deeds shapes historical understanding. Augustine of Hippo discusses memory in *Confessions* (Book 1, Chapter 4) with «*Meminisse autem, ut intellegamus quid sumus [...]*» reflecting on how remembering past experiences influences personal identity. In *De civitate dei* (Book 11, Chapter 1), Augustine uses «*Meminisse dicuntur, ut novae res fiant [...]*» showing the role of memory in understanding divine and historical events.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Manuscripts and codex used for this investigation cf.: Vergil, *Aeneid*: Vat. Lat. 3225, (<https://digi.vatlib.it/>); Plautus: *Ambros. F. 205 inf*, (<https://www.biblioteca-ambrosiana.it/>); Ennius: *Fragmenta Antiqua*, (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>); Catullus: *Veron. V*, (<http://www.bibliotecacapitolare.it/>); Cicero: *Vat. Lat. 5757*, (<https://digi.vatlib.it/>); Suetonius: *Par. Lat. 6115*, (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/>); Boethius: *Bas. F III 15*, (<https://ub.unibas.ch/>).

### 1.2.1.2 In Ancient Greek

The extended form of *\*mṇ-* become *\*mnā-*, and it has a contracted form *\*mnaə-*. The Proto-Indo-European root *\*mṇ-* undergoes significant phonological changes as it evolves into historical Indo-European languages such as Ancient Greek (Adrados *et al.*, 2010). The expansion of the root from *mṇ-* to *mnā-* involves the addition of a vocalic element, represented by *-ā*. This process of epithesis, or insertion, facilitates the formation of more complex morphological and grammatical variants (Adrados *et al.*, 2010). The phonological lengthening with *-ā* helps maintain clarity and stability in the derivation of related words, allowing for a smoother transition to more elaborate forms (Adrados *et al.*, 2010). Conversely, contraction to *mnaə-* involves the reduction of vowel elements, resulting in a more compact and simplified root form. This process, known as syncope or contraction, reduces the presence of intermediate vowels to better fit the phonological patterns of subsequent languages. The presence of *-ə* in *mnaə-* reflects an intermediate stage where the root underwent phonological modifications to adapt to linguistic changes over time. In Ancient Greek, these phonological transformations are evident in the formation of terms such as *μνήμη* (*mnēmē*), meaning *memory*. The expansion to *mnā-* is reflected in the Greek form *μνήμη*, where the root *mnē-* is extended to fit the morphological needs of the Greek language. Although the specific form *mnaə-* is not directly attested, the reduction of vowels and the phonological simplification are visible in the final form *μνήμη*. In Ancient Greek, the verb *μυμνήσκω* (*mimnēskō*), meaning *to remember* or *to recall*, primarily embodies a deontic value rather than a telic one. This shift from the PIE root *mṇ-* to the Greek form illustrates a transition from a telic to a deontic concept. Initially, the root evolved into *μνήμη* (*mnēmē*), which represents *memory* as a telic state — a result of having stored and retained information. This telic notion implies a completed state or final outcome (Napoli, 2019). In contrast, the verb *μνημονεύω* (*mnēmoneuō*), derived from the same root, involves an ongoing process of actively engaging with and recalling past information. This process highlights a deontic value, focusing on the action or duty of remembering rather than a final, completed state. Thus, while *μνήμη* reflects a static, result of memory, *μυμνήσκω* captures the dynamic and active nature of the recollection process. This deontic aspect is evident in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where *μυμνήσκω* is used to describe the act of reflecting as one recalls the truth: «ἐνθυμοῦμαι ὡς μυμνήσκω τὴν ἀλήθειαν» («*I reflect as I recall the truth [...]*»). Similarly, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, the use of *μυμνήσκω* to describe the act of remembering a discourse underscores the continuous action

of recollection: «[...] ὅτι μνησκῶ τὸν λόγον» («[...] *that I remember the discourse* [...]»)⁵. Thus, while μνήμη denotes a final state of memory, μνησκῶ emphasizes the dynamic, active process of remembering, demonstrating the shift from telic to deontic values in the Greek conceptualization of memory.

### 1.2.1.3 Romance branch

The semantic and morphological divergence between *meminisse* in Latin and its equivalents in modern Romance languages (*ricordare* in Italian, *recordar* in Spanish, *souvenir* in French) can be explained through an analysis of linguistic evolution processes. *Meminisse*, a perfective and defective verb in classical Latin, has morphological limitations that led to its replacement by forms derived from other roots. The Latin *recordari*, combining the prefix *re-* (*again, back*) and *cor, cordis* (*heart*), indicates an emotional recall of memory. This deponent reflexive verb evolved in Italian as *ricordare* and in Spanish as *recordar* through phonological and morphological regularizations, maintaining the original syntactic structure and semantic function. In French, *souvenir* derives from *subvenire*, with a connotation of assistance or memory recall. In Old French, *souvenir* underwent a semantic reinterpretation, becoming the reflexive verb *se souvenir de*. The grammaticalization occurred in the case *subvenire* to *sa souvenir de* shows its typical patterns (literary *to come to [help]*, with these attestations in Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 27, «Tanta est necessitas, ut non possit subveniri [...]» and in Seneca, *De Constantia* 3.5, «Quod si omnes velint subvenire [...]»): (1) semantic bleaching is evident in this case and it shows the passage from a precise meaning of necessity to a passage that means *to remember*; there a (2) phonological erosion and an addition of morphological particles such that reflects the point (1) (e.g., *sub-* has a teleological charge and it changes into a reflexive mark *se*, therefore it changes the focus of the predicative that face a mutation from *agent*-related to *patient*-related verb. Afterwards, this teleological shift needs to be defined with a prepositional mark found in *de*. The motion charge from the locative proclitic *sub-* is thus extroflexed into the lemma and transformed into a prepositional form. This change also leads to viewing the verb as an analytical form, in

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<sup>5</sup> Greek quotation used to describe this linguistic process has been obtained with the help of Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (source: [https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Urb.gr.1](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Urb.gr.1)) and the codex used are *Codex urbinas* (Urb. gr. 1) and *Codex Laurentianus* (Laur. gr. 10, source: <http://www.bml.firenze.sbn.it/rinascimentovirtuale/pannello14.shtm>).

contrast to the synthetic version in Latin (Dell’Oro, 2022; Grandi & Mauri, 2022; Napoli, 2019). This change resulted from phonological processes such as metathesis, apocope, and syncope, and grammaticalization, where a deponent reflexive form becomes a transitive or pronominal verb (Grandi & Mauri, 2022). The transformation of *subvenire* into *souvenir* through phonetic mutations typical of the transition from Latin to French (e.g., vowel reduction and loss of intervocalic consonants) exemplifies these changes. The same process is documented for the Italian verb *occorrere* (transl. [1] *to be needed*, or [2] *to need* and [3] *to occur*). In its passage from non-modal verb to modal verb there is a stage of its evolution that testify its involvement into memory and recall (Dell’Oro, 2022). Its etymology derives from Latin *occurrere*, contract form of *ob* (transl. *against*) and *curro* (transl. *to run*) (Dell’Oro, 2022): in this verb, likewise French *se souvenir de* and its Latin origin *subvenire*, there is a prepositional clitic working as a mark of deictic relation between subjects or between subjects-environment followed by a teleologic verb. As it has been stated before, this pre-modal value of recall, remembrance or memory has been attested in Francesco Da Buti, *Commento al Purgatorio*: «[...] *e questo finge, perché nolli occorrea di far menzione più d’alcuna persona* [...]» and in Matteo Villani, *Cronica*, B. 1, chap. 83 «[...] *avendo narrato delle nuove tirannie che ssi cominciavano in Toscana, ci occorre a fare memoria d’un’altra* [...]» (Dell’Oro, 2022). In modern Romance languages, the reduplicative clitic (*ri-,re-* in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese) and the reflexive particles (observable in French and Romanian) subtend a verbal ellipsis of a teleologic verb in relation to speaker or sentence focus. Yet, it is possible to extend a research hypothesis from this premise and it is necessary to confirm it with forthcoming, synchronic and diachronic typology study. Anyway, checking this proposal with the uniformitarian principle analytical lenses (Grandi & Mauri, 2022; Napoli, 2019), it is possible to confirm that this form is exactly coherent with PIE verb phrase *mens dhē-*, transl. *to set mind*, or the suffixed zero-grade form *dhā-mṇ* (attested in Ancient Greek *thema*, transl. *thing placed*<sup>6</sup>) (Adrados *et al.*, 2010).

### 1.2.2 The Proto-Semitic and Semitic branch

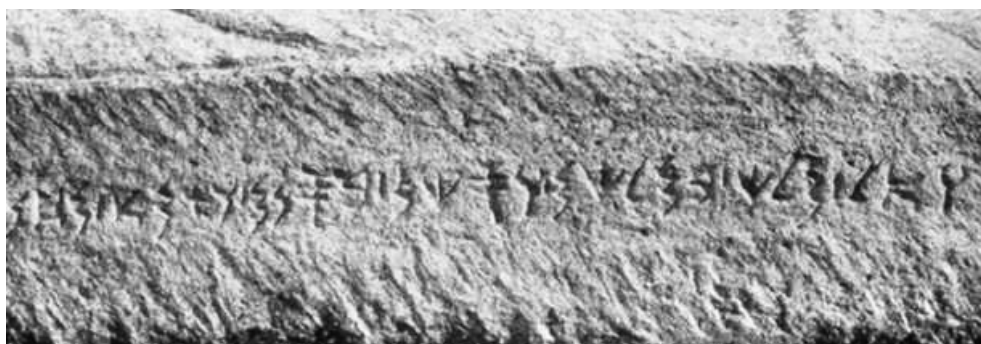
The triconsonantal root  $\sqrt{\text{z-k-r}}$  has a long history in Semitic languages, documented in numerous ancient inscriptions and manuscripts and its semantic

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<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/indoeurop.html#dhē->.



connotation has not barely changed during its evolution. Its attestations show the stability of this root throughout the evolution of Semitic languages and related cultures. It is important to preface this chapter by stating that it does not aim to conduct a typological investigation of Semitic languages. Instead, the goal is to briefly overview the history of this consonantal lemma as it appears in various historical records. By examining its usage across different civilizations that have preserved it, we can better understand the differences between its semantic evolution and that of Proto-Indo-European languages. In Akkadian, the root *zakāru* is attested in the *Code of Hammurabi* (𒀠𒅗𒍪, za-ka-ru, MS Louvre AO 10237) and in the *Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib* (𒀠𒅗𒍪𒍪𒍪𒍪𒍪, za-ka-ru, RINAP 3/1, 3/2). In Ugaritic, it appears in *Tablet RS 24.244* (𐎗𐎎𐎕, z-k-r, KTU 1.23). In Phoenician, it is documented in the *Inscription of Ahiḥam* (𐤌𐤕𐤓, z-k-r, KAI 1) and the *Stele of Kilamuwa* (𐤌𐤕𐤓, z-k-r, KAI 24) (Donner & Röllig, 2002).



**Figure 1.** Example obtained from an archive picture of Stele of Ahiḥam (KAI1, Museum of Beirut) where it is possible to find the attestation of triconsonantal root in phoenician alphabet.

In Moabite, it appears in the *Mesha Stele* (𐤌𐤕𐤓𐤌𐤕𐤓𐤌𐤕𐤓, transl. «w-h- 'z-k-r kṁš», CIS II 189) (Luca, 2008). In Biblical Hebrew, the root רכז (z-k-r) is present in the *Dead Sea Scrolls* (רכז, z-k-r, 4QGen-Exod; 4QDeut) and in the *Leningrad Codex* (וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת-נֹחַ, vayizkor Elohim et-Noach). In Aramaic, the root רכד (d-k-r) is attested in the *Targum Onkelos* (וְיִזְכְּרִינִי, transl. «[...] u-k'dein t'dakkarni, MS British Library, Add. 27031) and in the *Babylonian Talmud* (רכד, d-k-r, Berakhot 32b). In Classical Arabic, the root رَكَدَ, *dha-ka-ra* is found in the *Qur'an* (يُنْزِلُكَ أَزْوَاجًا, transl. “fadhkuruni adhkurum”, Mushaf of Uthman, Topkapi MS) and in the *Hadith Sahih al-Bukhari* (رَكَدَ,

*dh-k-r*, MS Fatih 1015). In modern Semitic languages, in Hebrew the root רכז (z-k-r) is used in defuncts commemoration in Ashkenazi Jew community for *Hazkarat Neshamot* [רוֹכְזֵי, cf. «yi-(z)(k)-o-(r)»] and in modern *siddurim* (זִכְרוֹן, «zikaron»), while in Modern Arabic the  $\sqrt{dh-k-r}$  derivatives frequently appears in media. It should be used to demonstrate the main research hypothesis, which aims to scrutinize the semantic values of movement in PIE memory semantics in contrast to the stative, place-oriented, and deontically labeled verbs and nouns in Semitic languages some excerpts from Arabic language. *Qu 'ran, Surah Al-Baqarah, ayah 148-152* needs of a particular attention. In this short analysis it has not been investigate any form of coherence between texts, theological analysis and religious beliefs, fact that could render this investigation guilty of speciousness and coherently incoherent with mainstream Orientalist mis-lesson (Farrin, 2010). From its very beginning, the spatial references already appreciable in ayah 148) «أَمْ نَدَّبْتُمُوهُمْ وَهُمْ لَا يَكِلُونَ» (And for everyone is a direction toward which he turns. So, race to [all that is] good. Wherever you may be, Allah will bring you forth [for judgment] all together. Indeed, Allah is over all things competent)]; and in (149) «كَلَّا بَلْ يَخْرُجُ مِنْ حَيْثُ نَمُو» (So from wherever you go out [for prayer], turn your face toward al-Masjid al-Haram, and indeed, it is the truth from your Lord. And Allah is not unaware of what you do») and they are converging indeed, and finally, in (152): «مَنْ كَفَرَ كُفْرًا ذَا يَنْوَرُ كُفْرًا» (So remember Me; I will remember you. And be grateful to Me and do not deny Me)]. In ayah 148 and 149 it is appreciable an adverb (see *wherever*) used to generalize ambiguity in spatial allocation. By the way, in Arab this form has been rendered with two different terms: (1) أَمْ نَدَّبْتُمُوهُمْ, 'ayna ma, i.e., literally *where* (abstractive) reinforced by empathic, indefinite particle *am*; and (2) مِنْ حَيْثُ نَمُو, min haythu, which derives from  $\sqrt{h-y-th}$  (ث-ي-ح) which means *where* with a geographic-locative label. Therefore memory, represented by imperative conjugation *كُفْرًا* has a place-oriented deontic value.

As it is appreciable in this abridged investigation, Proto-Semitic and Semitic languages charge with deontic labels and moral values the recollection acts. Thus, memory changes its connotation from PIE memory-related lemmas formation, which is exclusively movement-oriented and teleologically defined, and a Semitic root formation, being even based on two different cognitive stages in verbal and substantival structures and meaning conveyance. Yet, memory has its value wherever the subject is collocated, and its moral,



inner, and fundamental statement is to recall as a fulfillment of its duty. This deontic imperative stands out prominently in a Semitic language. Therefore, its differentiation from the Western conception of remembrance will help (as it is hoped) to study and investigate the Potok novel. Finally, it must be kept firmly in mind that the history of the people of David is indissolubly linked with the experience of exile, with the awareness derived from being uprooted from their own land. The forced removal from their native land, the political and cultural consequences of an imposed policy, can lead a people to lose their cultural, religious roots and the peculiarities that define their constituent traits. During the period known in historiography as the Babylonian Captivity, the Jewish people were led to a cultural flattening induced by the necessity of having to survive under their new masters (Cohen, 2000). Ezra, a skilled Sopher of the Torah – as Abraham Cohen recalls – managed to give new life to the Jewish community in exile and in the land of Judea, and he also realized that the various dispersed branches of the national tree (which resided sparsely in the lands of Canaan, in Egypt, and in Persia) had to be centered around a solid religiosity (Cohen, 2000).

## ***2. The theoretical framework and literary analysis***

### **2.1 Spatiality, perceptive implications and geocriticism: from Halbwachs to My name is Asher Lev**

Thus, for the Jewish religion the homonormativity imposed by the law of the sacred scriptures is that “law of fire” capable of identifying without any doubt a Jew from any other individual belonging to a different religious belief or a particular people. Without focusing on the issues regarding Pharisaic or Sadducean schools (for reasons of time and coherence with the theme), it urges to mention the *Tannaim* Hillel (a Pharisee, founder of the House of Hillel), which considered the orally acquired knowledge from the masters as a strict foundation in his school, knowledge that is still preserved among Eastern peoples today. Therefore, memory becomes the instrument of knowledge *par excellence* (Cohen, 2000). The character Asher (a reference to the patriarch of the eponymous tribe in the Old Testament) in Potok’s novel feels the weight of his own history, the moral and ethical implications dictated by his religion, and similarly feels the burden of a heavy family heritage, composed of almost prophetic and monolithic figures. Right from the first pages, Asher clearly explains his situation:

My mother descended from a family of prominent Hasidim of Sadagora, devout Jews who were followers of the great Hasidic dynasty of Eastern Europe founded by Israel of Ruzhin. On her father’s side, my mother could trace her family back to the Rebbe of Berdichev, one of the most holy Hasidic leaders. [...] The little Asher Lev was a junction point of two important lineages, the pinnacle, so to speak, of a reproductive triangle of Jewish potential and burdened with Jewish responsibility (Potok, 2009, pp. 20–21)

The character of this novel represents a singular premise to a wider consideration about homonormativity religious implications in relation to aesthetical awakening of a *gift*: Asher recognizes a gift within himself, a

personal peculiarity of his character. However, this gift leads him to be considered blasphemous: (1) being immersed in a strictly observant reality like that of the Hasidic community, a fact amplified by his patrilineal and matrilineal heritage; (2) the themes he addresses, e.g., *The Brooklyn Crucifixion*, are not only *inappropriate* subjects for a Jew to portray but are themes that, if addressed by a Jew, can be even more offensive to a Christian observer (Potok, 2009). Hence, that “law of fire”, which was supposed to separate the people of Israel from others, also managed to curb deviations within itself, recognizing them and ensuring they were self-recognized. This awareness arose spontaneously within the individual, and Asher represents the literary device skillfully used by the author. Finally, it can be asserted that the Jewish religion bases part of its normative framework on the experience of the Exodus, which, in general terms, translates as that experience of expropriation of a fundamental existential component for any people: their own land. The very definition of a people (i.e., the act of being defined, their *raison d’être*) derives from the belonging to a land, from being-there-for-the-world as inhabitants-for-a-land (broadening Heidegger’s concept of *being* as *in-der-Welt-sein*). Having lost all geographic reference to their native land, the vivid imagery of the Scriptures compensates for this lack, ensuring solidity within the religious sphere. The focal shift that defines “the people of Israel” as inhabitants of *Eretz Israel* it is changed into “the people of Israel” as the people professing the religion of Israel. It is undeniable that the people of Israel long for *Eretz Israel* as their promised land, but they unite the community around the solidity of their religious beliefs and customs. Therefore, this geographic absence leads to the merging of worship for the divine, which is the moral precept, with the worship of the universalization of the “everywhere”: religious righteousness and adherence to the precepts of the Halakhah are valuable not because they are performed in the land of Israel, but because they are performed by a believer. This religious formalization is the cultural legacy of the dramatic history of these people, deprived of their own nation. Memory, therefore, ensures the maintenance of this millennia-old defense mechanism. According to the research premise of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Halbwachs (mindful of WWI facts due to its physical presence) states that the geographical and cultural uprooting he had personally undergone contributed to his understanding of the complexities involved in the process of memorialization and the dialectical relations existing between individual and collective memory (Apfelbaum, 2010). Uprooting consist as trauma and therefore undermine mnemonic stabilization (Apfelbaum, 2010). Moreover, as people moved away and were cut off from their communities and their territorial, cultural, and

social roots, they began to exist as individuals, as separate autonomous entities (Apfelbaum, 2010). Thus, memory can merge the passage of traumatic events, individuals and their communal experience to set a stricter bound that are converging into *identity*, e.g., one of *Arba Parashot*, the *Parashot Zakhor* in memory of Amalek's atrocities (Bleich, 2022). In *My name is Asher Lev*, the author commences yet from the *incipit* to scheme a modulization of mnemonic brief appearances (Potok, 2009, pp. 17, 18, 19) using a precise verb: to *fix*<sup>7</sup>. Each predicative used is directly related to a particular event that has been thereafter labelled in *collective*, *memorial*, and *individual*: (1) pray at the Synagogue (*collective*); (2) Synagogue and *Shabbat* (*collective*); (3) *Yom Kippur* celebration (*memorial*); (4) *Sukkot* celebration (*memorial*); (5) *Chanukkah* celebration (*memorial*); (6) *Shabbat* and ritual lunches (*individual*); (7) *Shabbat* e *piyyut* chant *Yāh ribbôn 'alam* (*individual*). Building this textual and metaphoric *Menorah*, the author passes from the public/*collective* to private/*individual* spheres of competency, and tries to destitute the teleological, western label for memory *fixing* it, therefore annulling its movement's trajectory to redefine its action boundaries. Moreover, as the author *fix* the memory and its stream in this metaphor, the young Asher *fix* his father memories portraying him during his reading session or during the prayers. Memory defines identity, and even existence submit to *remembrance*. Losing the memory signifies to lose even one's own existence: e.g., [Asher] «But Dad, is the leader of Russia bad to the Jews? [Asher's father] «Stalin?», he said quickly in Hebrew. «May his name and memory be erased» and he continued bitterly in English: «Stalin comes from the Sitra Achra» (Potok, 2009, pp. 40–41). Asher's father condemns Stalin to *damnatio memoriae* using a ritual sentence that has an inner reference to Sacred Texts: the form used is «*Yimakh shemo vezikhro*», which is a powerful reference to Amalek's atrocities cited in (*Dt. 25, 19*, 2024) «Therefore, when your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!» and likewise related to (*Mishnah, Sanhedrin 10:2*, 2024). Potok in these lines trace a parallelism where Russia is accounted as the nation where a *new* Amalek leads its people against Jews, meanwhile USA is accounted as safe place to stay. The verb *יָמַח* (*yimakh*) in the Hebrew phrase «יָמַח שְׁמוֹ וְזִכְרוֹ» (*Yimakh shemo vezikhro*, «May his name and memory be erased [...]») is derived from the root מ-ח-ה (*mem-chet-he*), meaning *to erase* or *to obliterate*. Conjugated in the Niphal binyan, which often denotes the passive voice, *יָמַח*

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/english/fix>. Meaning values used is B2, with structure *to verb* + *obj.* + [*to sth*], or [*at sw.*].

is in the third person masculine singular imperfect (future), expressing a wish or intention for something to be erased (Van Pelt, 2023). Morphologically, the form מִחֵ (michē) includes the prefix י (yod) for the future tense and a dagesh forte in the mem, characteristic of the Niphal<sup>8</sup> (Van Pelt, 2023). Russia is identified as the geographical marker for remembering Amalek's atrocities and facts, developing therefore a narrative *locus* that build a semantic dyad between past to narrative present in correlation to space: this dyad is present elsewhere in the novel. The Amalekian interpretation of Stalin recurs throughout the novel, becoming a true *leitmotif*, and this reading is often woven with a central, elusive thread: the warp of the Sitra Achra (Potok, 2009, pp. 52, 57, 69, 71, 76, 77, 81). Russia therefore becomes the counterpart of elsewhere-ness references complex, literally a *sitra achra* (i.e., transl. *the other side*). Especially, this dyad is dissolved in (Potok, 2009, p. 81) where the author describe Stalin death and Rivkeh (Asher's mother) recited «*Ken yo'vdu kol oyeveikha Adonai*», transl. «*So may all Your enemies perish, O Lord!*» (*Judges 5:31*, 2024). Moreover, Chapter five *incipit* (Potok, 2009, pp. 108 - 109) signs a boundary in character development and as well as in novel. The Vienna passage signs cracking point in the young Asher beliefs, perceiving his first, real uprooting feeling. Hence, premising that a significant portion of contemporary Jewish-American fiction is pervasively Jewish in its moral insistence and its reference to Judaic texts (Kremer, 1993), in Potok's work, space is depicted as a living fabric of references, serving as a means to understand the millennial tragedy of a wandering people and its modern, atrocious reiterations. This moral and textual embedding underscores the pervasive Jewish identity that defines the narratives and themes, illustrating the deep connection between contemporary experiences and ancient Judaic traditions. Finally, chapter five starts with Library of Alexandria burning represented in an Asher drawing and the climax ends with the representation with ladover building blaze. This depiction serves as a metaphorical elaboration of Asher uprooting trauma from his America environment, its social and emotional implications. Geographical space and narrative space, therefore, interpolate and complement each other through the hermetic adhesive of memory and recollection. The metacognitive environment represented by the diegesis and the concrete, volumetric space of the world converges into a complex epistemological mass, imbued with sacred Judaic tradition and its

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<sup>8</sup> Phonologically, מִחֵ is pronounced /ji'maχ/, with the stress on the second syllable and the voiceless uvular fricative /χ/ at the end. This verb denotes a complete and intentional erasure, distinct from gradual processes like erosion, and is often used to curse or express the deontic/volitive obliteration of a malicious person's memory.

contemporary aestheticization in the art of the novel. The verbal value of memory, as deduced from the previously conducted typological analysis (§1.2.2), leads to the conception of space as a tangible assembly of moral values to be upheld. Its comprehension lies not only in the knowledge of the sacred text (*in sich*) but also in its application and in the fulfillment of the moral value inherent in the text's words (*für sich*). In conclusion, Jewish tradition deeply intertwines memory, moral values, and physical space. As highlighted in (Dt. 6: 6-9, 2024), «*These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates*».

### 3. Conclusions

Through the understanding of the semantic charge of the verb class grouped under the broader set of predicates that encode memory, recollection, and remembrance, it became possible to equally comprehend their specific use within certain cultural and religious communities, starting precisely from a deep and specific understanding of its use. The ability to discern between deontic and teleological value allows the reader to understand the specific use in the text, while also giving the reader the possibility to ascribe a specific significance. In an author like Chaim Potok, who, although belonging to a specific religious community, writes in a language of Indo-European origin, the underlying question of this study was: does the value of memory in Potok's novel refer to reminiscences strictly and uniquely Semitic, or does it point to the theological value of Indo-European origin? Through a scientific and typological definition of the value of memory itself, and the corresponding predicative class, integrated with a geocritical and narratological analysis of the text, it was concluded that the value used by the author is deontic. This leads to the conclusion that, from a strictly cognitive perspective, the linguistic structure alters spatial perception and its encoding, leaving in other languages a value that those languages themselves, in their native form, would not have.

This analysis confirms the research hypothesis by demonstrating that the semantic framing of memory significantly influences spatial perception and the formation of identity within the novel's intricate creative and moral landscape. Through the typological approach, we see how memory, structured by linguistic conventions, shapes not only the protagonist's internal experience but also his interactions with a collective heritage. This approach reveals the dual role of language: it serves both as a tool for preserving cultural continuity and as a medium for expressing individuality within and against that tradition. In *My Name is Asher Lev*, this nuanced linguistic framework deepens our understanding of Asher's inner conflict, showing how language molds the narrative's exploration of artistic rebellion, moral obligation, and self-discovery.



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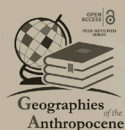
This volume examines the interdisciplinary nexus of literature and geography through a multifaceted lens, blending theories from cultural studies, narratology, and spatial analysis. Beginning with a systemic understanding of literary geography, the chapters explore imaginative, political, and ecological landscapes, emphasizing their relational and dynamic nature. Contributions analyze the production of place and space, highlighting their role in shaping cultural, historical, and environmental narratives.

Key topics include the interplay between memory, identity, and travel in literary geographies, the cultural significance of territorial disputes, and the transformative potential of ecological narratives in the Anthropocene. Methodological frameworks range from geocriticism and literary cartography to ecocritical and geopolitical analyses. Case studies span diverse contexts, such as French 18th-century travel narratives, Etruscan agricultural practices, and Hayao Miyazaki's ethical landscapes. Themes of power, positionality, and environmental responsibility are examined through postcolonial, feminist, and ecological perspectives, illustrating the creative and critical capacities of literature to reshape spatial imaginaries. The volume introduces innovative concepts, including the cultural critique of geopolitics in avant-garde aesthetics, mnemonic geographies in Jewish narratives, and urban-nature dynamics in Romantic fairy tales.

The contributions underscore the ethical and performative dimensions of literary geographies, revealing how storytelling fosters new spatial understandings and responses to global challenges. By reimagining real and fictional spaces this work demonstrates the transformative interplay of literature and geography in shaping our understanding of history, culture, and the environment.

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