

Psychodrama As Dialogue Between Enemies

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First I want to thank ANZPA for inviting me from Israel to give this keynote address. This invitation by you is a sign of recognition of the professional work I am doing for many years. It is my honor and pleasure to be here with you and share with you my thoughts and feelings regarding my experience leading psychodrama for dialogue between enemies. I am going to tell you something of myself and also talk to you about two of the main bodies of work: the encounters between Jews and Germans and the dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.

Many times while watching again and again how Israelis and Palestinians fall into the trap of revenge instead of finally seriously sitting down for a real dialogue, I feel so helpless, disillusioned, and alone and getting no reward for my efforts, yet I never lose hope. I think this incurable optimism tendency in me comes from my childhood when I found myself taking the role of a mediator, bridge maker, between my parents who were fighting all the time. I was then introduced for the first time into this endlessly difficult on- the- edge job of trying to create dialogues between enemies.

Both of my parents were Holocaust survivors. I was born in 1948 in a Displaced People camp in south Germany. When I was one year old my family moved to Israel. My traumatized parents had lost everything. They each lost their total families, had been uprooted from their homes; and had spent a few years being tortured and starved while working as slaves, for 16 hours a day. Growing up in such a family was very painful for me. It was a survival experience. My parents were alive but in a lot of ways they were dead. They never talked about their suffering and loss but the silence was loud and clear. It was a silence born of feeling overwhelmed, and of being destroyed inside. When they were singing they also cried. Every sign of life carried in it the memory of the void, the longing for family members who would never come back.

My experience was that my parents could not pay attention to me: they were themselves lost children, full of unexpressed sadness, rage and despair. Out of this lonely place grew the need to become the mediator so they, my quarrelling parents would pay attention to each other through me.

Most of the time I felt as if I am a memorial candle. On the anniversary of a person's death we light a candle to remember them with. My existence reminded my parents of those who died. This is one of the major reasons why later I chose to become a psychodramatist. Psychodrama allows you to be noticed, to come to the stage and present yourself and say: "here I am, look at me, I am important, I am me, I am alive. So now I can look back and say that being a psychodrama therapist and trainer is my way of staying alive, my way of not dying in this violent, aggressive, full of wars world.

My parents were shattered, deformed souls, trying to keep their head above water. They even did not have power to hate. But it was obvious that I would never go to Germany. Germany, Germans were out of the question. It was a taboo. It was the enemy.

When I first met and talked with a young German man when I was a soldier I felt that I am betraying my parents. I am doing something which is forbidden. I remember that I was interested in his life story. He told me that he was a Nazi soldier and came to Israel to find a way to clean his guilt feelings.

In 1984, 26 years ago, I was invited to come to Germany to lead a psychodrama workshop for young Jewish and German people dealing with the Holocaust. In order to overcome my fear and resistance to go to Germany I made a special trip driving from Amsterdam through Dusseldorf, the Black Forest and the place where I was born -Furenwald refugee camp, south of Munich. The trip into Germany was like a trip into me. I was flooded with emotions. While driving I remember many times the urge to turn around and drive back. I forced myself to continue and to encounter what I was so afraid of. Many of my childhood dreams and nightmares came back to me. I fantasized that I am going to be tortured and burnt alive. I cried but continued this trip knowing already that the enemy is not around me but inside. People were very kind to me, but I did not trust them. I felt that this is only a mask they are putting on in order to seduce me to come with them into a concentration death camp. Everything was so green and beautiful and at times I thought to myself that maybe the whole story of the Second World War was just a legend story my parents were telling me. I asked myself how these German people here can be so cruel.

I remembered my father words before going to this journey:" when you go there ask the Germans not why they did what they did, but why they had so much pleasure and joy killing me and my family and my people? How could they burn children when they are still alive and enjoy it so much? I saw it with my own eyes many times. They were not drunk. They were young men possessed and committed to evil"

I tried to talk with the Germans about the Holocaust but they spoke about the war. They said:" you have to understand, it was a war and in a war people get killed". But I only wanted to scream, to shout, to resist, fighting back. I wanted to argue with them and tell them that it is not true, that there was a plan to kill all the Jews, to kill all of us, that there was this final solution plan. I knew already then about the systematic killing of mentally ill, handicapped, retarded people that the Nazis organized as part of cleansing the Aryan "race". No one wanted to talk about it. I hated them. I hated the denial, hated the way they were pushing these painful feeling under the carpet. In some strange way they, the Germans, reminded me of my own parents who were doing the same thing: investing in silence.

One day on my way out of Bonn I stopped my car in front of the rail trucks. It was quiet. All engines were shut off, to keep the air from being polluted and suddenly I saw this cattle train filled up with Jews, old people, babies, women. I could only hear their screaming, begging for help. No one moved. I left my car, which was standing in the line of cars in front of the rail trucks and ran to the train. I remember that I said to myself that this is my chance to save them. People around me formed a circle and gave me the feeling that something is wrong with me. Believe me, nothing was wrong with me. I really heard their screaming and I was so surprised to find out that no one came to help. It was like a bad dream, like a nightmare. I said to myself loudly and clearly I have to do something to wake them up, to do something to bring to their awareness their own history. I have to come to Germany to teach Germans what had happened in their past.

Since then I go few times a year to Germany. I am involved in ongoing educational teaching project in German high schools where I share my family experience as survivors and my experience as second generation. I have them encounter the Holocaust through the

arts: by drawing, writing stories, psychodrama activities, sociodramas and exchange of dialogue letters with young Israelis. I come there to share and to listen. I do not blame them, or put guilt feelings on them, or criticize them. I am always surprised how little they know and how easy is to distort historical truth. Many of their questions have to do with what is happening today with the Palestinians and the way the Israeli army treats them. I try to give them the full information about the situation and I share with them my difficulties and inner conflicts regarding this subject.

I am also involved in a project called: " Traces of the Holocaust in the Present". I do this together with Hilde Goett who is a psychodrama therapist and trainer coming from the enemy side.

The participants are offspring of Holocaust survivors and of Nazis. This work is offered especially to second and third generation descendants of victims and perpetrators.

The Second World War and the Holocaust are a story of cruelty and infliction of pain and suffering which left scars on both the victims and the persecutors sides. It is a long lasting process and it has traces in the present. In our work we aim to give the participants a chance to confront the Holocaust without judgment, criticism or blaming.

The purpose of our joint work is to gain better understanding and to recognize the moral, social and personal implications that the Holocaust left us with. In these workshops we explore spontaneous, expressive and creative ways of dealing with the relationship of the persecutor-victim roles within each of us and in the society. As a result the participants can learn to face their own history more authentically.

The active work through the body allows an immediate safe opening of the inner emotional world and an encounter with the truth which lies within. The theatrical and psychodramatic stage allows the group members to present and share their real history in a true and genuine manner. They can share their memories, experiences, fantasies and feelings by giving voice to the suffering. And be heard. It gives them an opportunity to win in the struggle against anonymity by telling and acting their stories and by breaking the family and social process of silencing.

The fact that we come from the opposite sides of the Holocaust is unique and special. We bring with us the story and the legacy of our families. Both my parents were Holocaust survivors. Hilde Goett was born in Romania 1953 and is from a family which was a member of the German minority in Romania. She was discriminated against by the Romanians as a "fascist child" since both her grandparents served in the Nazi army. And as well her grandmother was deported to Siberia by the communist regime, so it was a double whammy for her.

In the psychodrama groups that we started to lead together we shared the same goals. We had the same drive to teach people how to respect the other, how to listen to the story, the narrative of the other - the "different" one. Our purpose is not to reach reconciliation but rather teach the Germans and the Jews and others who attended the workshops to be witnesses to the unique personal way the participants express their feelings and share their thoughts with the group.

One of the things the two conflict groups frequently have in common is the silence, even if the motives for this are different on the respective sides. In the perpetrator families it is mainly the fear of persecution and condemnation which leads to silence about what occurred. In the victim families it is the sadness over murdered family members, the

victims' shame of such extreme humiliation and the desire in all family members to protect each other from further pain.

Another thing in common is the terrible effect of family secrets, which in the institutionalised family systems work against a thematic consideration of the past. This is mirrored again in the fantasies of the descendants, which can be expressed in many different forms. In this way descendants of the victims pose questions about the guilt of survival, such as: What did the survivors do in order to survive? Whereas the descendants of the perpetrators ask questions of their own potential guilt, such as: what would I have done in the same situation?

For us the aim is establishing a dialogue through the encounters between both conflicted and conflicting groups. We let the subjective truth of the respective sides be represented on stage with all the sorrow, mourning, shame, despair, horror, rage and feelings of guilt this entails. Thus a bridge is built connecting the fate of the participants with the family histories of the opposing sides.

We use sociodrama as a dialogue for dealing with the burden of trauma stemming from incidents of the previous generations. As a rule, the trauma of the Nazi period has not been personally or directly experienced by participants in our workshops. They are not survivors of the Shoa or the Holocaust and are not Nazi perpetrators, but the children, grandchildren and family members. In short, we deal with Trans-generational trauma.

Trans-generational trauma is simply the inheritance or passing on of trauma from generation to generation. This topic has been increasingly discussed in the last 20 years. Researchers have increased their focus on the second generation of Holocaust survivors, due to the sufferings and emotional problems which they have. In the first scientific work on the subject there was an astonishingly high agreement concerning the unusual nature and high degree of emotional problems, which were very similar to descriptions from the survivors themselves. Case portrayals and psychotherapy reports on the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors or of those suffering from trauma clearly verify that the passing on of trauma from generation to generation is a serious problem. The diagnostic criteria of a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting from war trauma are frequently fulfilled, although the person has no personal experience of war.

If we want to stop the passing on of trauma from generation to generation we must find an accessible and adequate way of dealing with the individual and group consequences.

We start out with the premise that the experience of violence sits tightly in the body where it has found its place and it is physically felt. As advocates of an action-oriented method, we know that a lasting effectiveness occurs when the active analysis and discussion of a subject is deeply felt and penetrates the thought process, illuminating the problems and opening up new horizons. Thus our concern is to initiate deeply meaningful personal discussions on the stage and to find a language for this and to be aware of the different truths, in order to overcome the consequences of collective trauma during the Nazi period. The body- and the encounter- exercises which we offer help make this possible and also help establish real contact between the participants in the group.

The silence in the families weighs so heavily on them that they feel the need to find a new voice. Others want to comprehend the sorrow, despair and mourning of the family which seems to have no apparent end. In all these areas the feelings of the participants are deeply engaged and attendees relate to themselves as individuals and in terms of their own complete family and not at all with the "opposite side".

Jewish participants take part by mourning over murdered members of their family, enraged about the perpetrators who have burdened them with this sorrow. The participants who come from families of perpetrators have different wishes. They would often like to choke the family history, are fighting the shame and feelings of guilt and often cannot distinguish between the personal and the collective guilt. They would like to have a better understanding of themselves and their families and break loose from their identification as perpetrator. Some also hope for forgiveness or reconciliation.

The participants who are baptised Christians and have a partly Jewish background, or who come from a family which has experienced persecution for political or religious reasons, or because of their sexual orientation, are also torn with the question of their identity and affiliation. We regard them as coming from "mixed families" because they share the experiences of both sides.

One thing they all have in common is that they are seen as "traitors" to their families. They betray the taboo of silence and confront the family with its troubled past.

Generally the individual persons or groups who are made "scapegoats" because they want to talk about what happened and how they feel are regarded as the cause of disaster and accidents. The so-called scapegoats are burdened with the fear, the shame and the guilt and they wear the blame for all the sins and offences of the family, the community and the world. Generally speaking our groups are made up of scapegoats from all sides of the conflict: victims, perpetrators and mixed families.

We also take week-long groups to Auschwitz-Birkenau. While we are in Auschwitz we work psychodramatically but we also include a process of creating individual rituals. These rituals are carried out in Birkenau Death Camp with the help of the group. These sociodramatic rituals have a therapeutic effect, a kind of psycho-social healing. One of the most difficult experiences of Holocaust survivors and their descendants is not having a real concrete grave to mourn their dead. The rituals create a new opportunity of re-burying my dead. The rituals offer meaning and a sort of closure to the events of the past. Some of these rituals became theater performances including movement and singing. The rituals give voice, form to emotions which do not have clear words and they acknowledge the suffering of the "other side". In this way they give hope, a sense of belonging and a relief from being alone, anonymous and overwhelmed with the enormity of the Holocaust.

The encounter between Holocaust survivors and their perpetrators is most of the times painful or even impossible. The generation after and even the grandchildren are taking the risk to meet and confront one another in a safe way, working deeply on this theme in front of others in the group, especially from the other side.

Although the descendants of the victims and the perpetrators have an equal right to represent the sufferings they carry on the stage and to reflect them in the context of real history, this does not mean that the sufferings of the two sides are looked at analogously. For us it is much more important to find a way of expression that can be formulated and manifested in a common language that works diametrically against the traditionalised realities of that time.

This is painful and purifying experience for both sides and frequently results in the decision to live an honourable and dignified future. We are now responsible for ensuring that history does not repeat itself. We accept the group from the opposite side and look for a new way, through encounters and dialogue, where the wounds can be suffered, mourned and then be

healed. Seeing this pain as an essential part of a person's life can lead to a clear decision never to cause anybody else such hurt and to realise a different, respectful and meaningful relationship with other people.

As leaders we are aware in our work of the danger of creating false closeness which can lead to premature reconciliation or forgiveness. We do not aim to reach reconciliation, but at times it happens spontaneously and naturally, in a step by step, long and slow process.

We can now look back into our history as psychodrama directors coming from opposite side of the Holocaust that we succeeded to create a safe place of expression, to create trust, a sense of belonging and exchange fear, hatred and prejudice with a real encounter and dialogue. In the 15 years we have worked together we have developed a system of encounters and dialogue filled with mutual acceptance, respect, recognition and love. We sincerely hope to carry on this work in the future.

In my Psychodrama work between Israelis and Palestinians I use the same concepts coming from my experience with the Holocaust. In this project which is called: "Dancing with the Enemy" we meet together in East Jerusalem to have joint psychodrama training. This includes some introduction warm up evenings of sharing food and dancing together to both Israeli and Palestinian music which usually breaks the resistance. During the psychodrama sessions they are not allowed to get into political arguments but to share their subjective stories and express their feelings without judging or criticizing the story of the other side. We do not bring peace through this work, but we create a chance to listen to the story of the other and having a dialogue which is so rare and needed in the Middle East.

Peace is not the lack of conflicts. It is the ability to live with the conflicts.

In my dialogue work with Israelis and Palestinians I find myself in the same difficult position being in between on the edge as a psychodrama therapist and trainer. I am coming from one side of the conflict and yet I have to take the impossible role of being neutral and not leaning to one side or another.

So for the past 15 years or so I am disguised as a woman and smuggled into the West Bank Palestinian Territory where Israelis are not allowed to visit. I give myself to the hands of members of a FATAH terrorist group so I can go around the Israeli Army Check Points into the land of the enemy, the opposite side. What is amazing and heart breaking for me again and again is the trust which exists between me and them. At times I feel I am doing the impossible and taking big risks doing this job. On top of that not many people around me accept and support me for doing it. Many times I endanger myself. But I am not afraid. Being a witness to the personal painful stories being portrait on the psychodrama stage and the tears, screams and joy are my reward.

Wars and conflicts affect us much longer than their actual time. The emotional results are present in our inner lives and affect our behaviour. The wounds of war go from generation to generation. While being here now in Australia I became aware of the growing need to deal with the history of colonisation, the past and ongoing violence against the indigenous people and its legacy for all of us. There is a lot of potential for psychodrama to help in this.

I want to end this keynote residing to you a haiku which helps me a lot:

"SINCE MY HOUSE BURNT DOWN
I NOW OWN
A BETTER VIEW
OF THE RISING MOON"

Thank you!

About Yaacov

Yaacov Naor, MA, CAGS, TEP is founder and director of ISIS ISRAEL: a Psychodrama and Intermodal Expressive Arts Therapy center in Tel-Aviv. He is certified therapist and trainer in these fields. Since 1986 he has been leading special psychodramatic dialogue groups for second and third generation Holocaust survivors together with young Germans and between Palestinians and Israelis.