

Connecting in the age of accountability

Asaf Rolef
Ben-Shahar



A. Wounded nations and trauma logic

It has been seven and a half years since I left Israel. During this time, I find a split in me growing, cutting through the deepest layers of my identity, and at the same time enriching me with a dual focus, with a broader spectrum of perspectives. I can feel the split in me expanding and tearing in my soul, yet for most parts this pain is a blessing: it is a reminder of my fear of connection, of the wounds connection can open in me and of the blessing that it brings with it.

Let me explain: a lot of you over here cannot fully understand the complexity of the Israeli-Arab conflict, not having grown into a reality where your life, and the lives of your loved ones, is at constant threat; where you have faithfully carried a generational torch of suffering. A lot of you do not know what it feels like to belong to a nation with a post-traumatic-stress-disorder. At the same time, you can understand parts of the conflict that are impossible to understand from within Israel or Palestine: you can see our trauma. Like many sufferers of PTSD, we are frequently blind to the effects of trauma on us; like many sufferers of PTSD, Israelis and Palestinians genuinely believe that their decisions are informed by rational, adult reasoning (it's only the other side that is crazy). They believe that their actions are logically following a realistic path.

In truth, like the PTSD sufferer, our reactions and our decisions are primarily deriving from our trauma-logic: a black and white world, with childish value system of dichotomic right and wrong. This is a result of internalized fear, violence and more significantly, unfathomable suffering.

What is required for the healing of those wounded nations is intervention of a different sort. As Albert Einstein has said: 'The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them' (retrieved from www.quoteworld.org). We do not need a big mom or dad to find the wrong brother and punish him. I can see daddy Bush siding with the older brother, while mommy Europe sides with the younger sibling – and their actions

merely perpetuate the very act of violence. We really need someone who is willing to challenge the assumptions of violence, to point out (forcefully, but not violently) our trauma and trauma-logic; we need someone who will not be seduced into the transferenceal fragmentation, someone who could separate the brothers, attend to their wounds and demand they see their trauma; someone who is willing to take a risk and share our hurt without self-abandonment.

B. Let us hand over our responsibility

There is something very convenient about trauma and the reign it calls for. When our survival is at stake we are much more likely to compromise values, beliefs and ideas in order to stay alive. Even though I've been vegetarian for the last thirty years, I will happily kill a snake who threatens to bite me or harm a dog charging at my loved ones. And holding on to the perceived reality of terror and fear is beneficial for governments; we grant them power to protect us, which is rare in a limiting and regulating democratic society. Under terror, we gratefully hand over our responsibility – our ability to respond – in the hope that we will be kept safe.

Let me say it bluntly: there is a lot of abuse out there; there are a lot of abusers among us. In the therapy world, not unlike any profession that plays with power and authority, you can find financial extortion and sexual molestation, lack of boundaries and unethical conduct, insufficient training and plenty of other dangerous and damaging

actions that have been committed by us, psychotherapists, to our clients. And as a result, with the growing awareness of accountability, threats of lawsuits and malpractice complaints are constant.

It is convenient to believe that strengthening regulations and emphasizing accountability will make a difference. We respond to abuse by tightening our grip and believing this is logical, realistic – perhaps the only way to *fight* abuse. Let us condemn the irresponsible Israeli attack and send some support to Lebanon! Let us be shocked with the actions of Hezbollah and grant Israel permission to act in Lebanon!

It is convenient because, when we are legislated and when regulating psychotherapy is done by an external, governmental agency, then we are controllable; we no longer have to fear our own shadows. Our abuse is now controllable, our misconduct is controllable, and our therapeutic effectiveness is now neatly measured and evaluated.

A great deal of our succumbing to such madness is exactly because of the convenience of trauma. Fear and terror are a very convincing, and dangerously dichotomic, reality. But reality is not monochromatic, and by accepting the premises of extra regulations and hyper-accountability we are becoming more and more afraid to do what we are here to do – to connect and engage with our clients and, even more fundamentally, with our selves.

The Sufi mystic Rabia al Basri (717-801 C.E) is told to have run the streets of Basra, carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When asked what she was doing, she answered: 'I want to put out the fires of hell, so I do not worship from fear of punishment, and to burn down paradise, so I do not worship for the promise of reward; but simply for the love of god' (Retrieved from www.wikipedia.org & www.poetry-chaikhana.com).

Excessive reliance on accountability accepts the terror-axioms and power-language, only tilts it towards the clients. Now, the clients have power over us. We are saying: 'I am so afraid of you that I would avoid taking us to any place that may evoke your discomfort, to any place that would put me at risk.' In essence, we are worshipping from the fear of punishment, gradually avoiding real connection, real I-thou interaction.

We live in a society on a verge of a social paradigm shift, and like all changing societies, we are surrounded by excitement and fear. Corporate consumerism on the one hand and the many shapes of fundamentalism on the other are on the increase along with genuine social, political and environmental awakening. The internet has shrunk the world and brought us together, and at the same time has been used to alienate communities, and create isolation and loneliness. We live in a paradoxical time; the needs to belong and connect are stronger now, and the social structures supporting such connections are somewhat lacking: we have erected

barricades of safety-nets and accountability, which keep us safe yet isolated.

We can see these trends reflecting in psychotherapy – there is so much loneliness and isolation, such lack of support networks. The deepest yearnings for connection and companionship and the depression resulting from the lack of are in the foreground of therapeutic agenda. In my practice I see more and more people whose only human contact is buffered through text-messaging, chat-rooms or e-groups. The immense degree of loneliness and lack of social contact have sometimes brought me to tears – I meet clients for whom I am the only intimate, face-to-face relationship they have in their lives. In such socially-limited contexts, the therapeutic relationship extends beyond the 'curative', transference arena to also serve as role-modelling the possibility of I-thou connection, and this is a great social, as well as personal responsibility.

C. Psychotherapy without engagement?

As people who are committed to create personal and social difference, can we seriously allow ourselves to simply accept this terror-bound axiom and adjust ourselves to fit a trend of cautious fear? To not rock the boat so we could 'change things from within?'

Because abiding to this would directly lead to alienation and non-reality. If I would have to always consider each and every possible interpretation to my

therapeutic interventions I would avoid doing anything, or saying anything. Let me reiterate, this is not a call to brush-off ethical conduct or responsible practice, but a plea to take a responsible risk and be willing to get it wrong for the sake of connection.

Because when we give up connection we are begging to our exiled and externalized super egos: 'please monitor my actions, please limit me and bind me; I am not to be trusted, the therapeutic relationship isn't to be trusted, and the boundaries are not to be trusted; please lead me not into temptation.'

I am reminded of Carl Rogers (1957) writing: 'significant positive personality change does not occur except in a relationship.' Yet in a fear-bound practice, there is no real relationship. In such fear-bound practice, I would secure myself in the battery of my safety zone without daring to connect with my clients. And they would smell my fear, which contaminates the transference arena as well as the I-thou space, and therapy would be compromised, becoming lost in our current political manipulation and terror.

Without a genuine therapeutic relationship free of such fear, where we dare bring ourselves authentically into the relationship, we are lost in the medical model of experts 'doing things' to our clients. Is that what we really want?

The expert-layperson, medical model is not a vicious one, but simply one that does not fit psychotherapy. The medical model, while it may be useful to heal broken arms, is totally inappropriate when endeavoring to

heal broken hearts. Systemic therapist and inspirational scholar Bradford Keeney (1983) illustrates: 'The use of an epistemology of billiard balls to approach human phenomena is an indication of madness.'

And this is where we come in as a community of psychotherapists, as a community committed to connectedness; this is where we are called to step outside of our comfortable secure offices and dare to make a stance for connection, for reality, for humanity – even if it means that we clash with a medical-governmental perception of therapy.

Unless we act to retain our integrity of connection and rise to challenge such political paradigms we would lose the essence of psychotherapy.

D. Accountability as a defense mechanism

So it becomes ever so clear why organisations and governments seek to create fear with such zeal: it is simpler, more structured, more mechanic and much easier to control. We join the medical model (I do things on you / to you) and leave a far too complicated humanistic approach (I am here with you) behind. We find the right side (Israel / Palestine) and define the wrong side, and – luckily for us, it has nothing to do with us. Fear permits control and is being used by governments to exercise control over us.

But how come we are so happy to accept such limitations? Why isn't there a bigger movement challenging the assumptions of growing threats and the need to enforce order rather than educate for responsibility and strengthen peer-support and peer-

accountability? Why is it that we take such delight in these regulations?

I believe that the main reason for our contented embrace of limitations is that regulations and legislations save us from our own wounds and traumas. While fear is being politically used to exercise non-democratic control in democratic societies, it is also pathologically used by us as a community as a defense mechanism against our own pain and our shadows.

I remember returning from Israel a few years ago straight into an NLP weekend-course. The visit to Israel was harsh, there were a few bomb attacks with many killed and the atmosphere in Israel was tense, violent and depressing.

Throughout the weekend course, I found myself so aggressive and violent. I attacked ideas and suggestions with such great conviction and without mercy and even inspired a few others to do the same. And for the trainers, it turned the weekend into a nightmare. To-date I still disagree with a lot of the content of that weekend, but can also clearly see that my responses had little to do with the trainers: I was traumatized, full of violence and fear, and I acted out. It was intolerable for me to open to my trauma and rawness at the time, and I chose instead to channel it violently – to perpetuate my trauma.

I believe that we cannot truly do psychotherapy without our wounds being touched, without our hearts bleeding, our stomachs churning and our processes surfacing time and again. We cannot truly connect and engage with another person unless we are willing for every bit of their humanity to touch ours. But we are still trying to escape!

E. The blessings of connection

And to me, there is indeed nothing scarier than seeing another person and letting them see me. There is nothing more painful than allowing their raw experience to resonate with me and touch me: the suffering, the anger, the shame, the lust and excitement, resentment and jealousy, fear and distortion, confusion and isolation. Because I do have them all, they are all alive in me too. Yet sometimes I find myself hiding, not taking the risk and becoming an expert. And coming back home, coming to connection; can we really afford not to? Because, for me, this connection, which is ever so frightening, risky and taxing, is the most rewarding human experience, the most powerful therapeutic agent, and the most direct spiritual event.

When I dare to relate, to engage with another with my full humanity, than real magic happens: we can share the pain and the joy of being together, human. This engagement, which challenges premises of terror, is a rich substrate on which traumas can heal.

In the workshop that accompanies this paper I hope to introduce some experiential processes which demonstrate the value of connection, and bring to the fore our fears of it. It is through such magical I-thou moments that we can expand our courage to engage and connect as individuals and as communities.

I am hoping to remind us of the magic, the richness and the irreplaceable value of deep human

connection; I know I need these reminders all the time.

As psychotherapists, we have an important social and political role in the healing of individual and collective trauma. Let us no longer see Israel and Palestine as different from each other, or different from us. Their violence is our own; their suffering, anger and shame – is ours too. Unless we can open to feel it too, we are merely paying lip-service for political correctness.

May we come out of our political passivity and compliancy as a community.

May we have the courage to engage and relate.

May we have the courage, alongside fear, to risk connection and proudly carry the torch of reality and connection into our work and our lives.

References

Al-Adawiyya, Rabi'a. Retrieved on 30th June 2006 from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Rabia_al-Adawiya&redirect=no; <http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/A/AlAdawiyyaRa/index.htm>

Einstein, A. Retrieved on July 10th 2006 from <http://www.quoteworld.org/quotes/4222>

House, R. (2001). The Statutory Regulations of Psychotherapy: Still Time to Think Again..., in *The Psychotherapist*. 17, 12-17.

Keeney, B.P. (1983). *Aesthetics of Change*. New-York: The Guilford Press, 95.

Mowbray, R. (1995). *The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration: A Conservation Issue for the Human Potential Movement*. London: Trans Marginal Press.

Rogers, C.R (1957). The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change, in Kirschenbaum, H. & Henderson, V.L. (eds.). (1997), *The Carl Rogers Reader*. London: Constable and Company Ltd., 221.

Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar (UKCP reg.) is a psychotherapist, trainer and writer. Asaf integrates the worlds of Neuro-Linguistic-Psychotherapy, Self-Relations, hypnosis and Body-psychotherapy into his work to create Integrative-Mindbody-Therapy (IMT). Having arrived in the UK from Israel, Asaf is very sensitive to the interplay of political, philosophical, and sociocultural events with the personal and relational. For the last ten years, Asaf has practiced, taught and written about IMT. He practices in London and St Albans, and teaches in the UK and Israel.