

# **Attrition of Peace Activists**

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I have been thinking about the burnout of activists since my first days of activism, especially about what I don't want to become.

In today's presentation I will speak of my personal experience as an activist in different times, and of the experiences of several activists, whom I interviewed. I will address only the Jewish-Israeli activists, and Jihan will speak about the Palestinian activists. I believe that there is much in common but there are some specific and different characteristics of attrition in the two groups.

I will present several causes for attrition and processes that individual activists experience, as well as processes of attrition that can be seen in peace movements. There are intrapsychic factors, as well as social factors within activists groups and within the whole Israeli society, factors which effect attrition. I will also try to address the questions of what makes activists keep going, and what helps activists maintain their sanity. I will not be able to address all the issues that can be discussed within this domain of attrition. I hope we can discuss some other aspects of attrition together.

In the mid 90's I was working in a human rights organization. I wasn't an activist by proper definition because I was paid, but there is much in common. Those were the days after Oslo accord, and before Netanyahu's

1<sup>st</sup> government, and there was a sense of hope in Israel, that peace might really be possible soon. I began this job with a lot of enthusiasm and hope. My work included the location of detainees- when the Israeli army would come at night to a Palestinian home and take somebody, and usually not tell the family where to, the detainee's family would call us and I had to find where he is held. And if he was held in one of the GSS - general security services facilities, that meant that he was probably being tortured and then we would send a lawyer to meet him.

Another line of my work was accompanying Palestinians who had been beaten by the army or border police to file complaints, and then follow up the complaint and try to get a response from the Israeli authorities. Most of the time it was really like hitting my head against the wall because the authorities who should investigate, usually did not do any effort to find the offender, be it a soldier who defecated in the sack of rice during the night search in a Palestinian house, or a settler who stopped a Palestinian car, pulled out the driver, made him take off his cloths and dance in the middle of the road (yes, it really happened!) So I would go around the Israeli police stations in the Occupied Territories, with a portable Xerox machine (magically, all the Xerox machines in the police stations stopped working when I arrived...) and photocopy the "fat" file of the enormous efforts the police made to find the offenders- in the best case they wrote down the Palestinian victim's complaint. And the next paper would usually be – "file closed due to lack of interest to the public" or "no offenders found". Then we would go to court, and sue the state of Israel for not investigating and as being responsible for the soldiers' actions. Usually, the court would find the State's efforts reasonable and reject the lawsuit.

No wonder I became cynical and bitter. I still am, when it comes to the actions of the Israeli government and it only gets worse as the years go by.

I do see change in the way the Palestinians learned to document the violence against them, for example in the B'tzelem project in Hebron. B'tzelem gave video cameras to Palestinian families living in the most dangerous and conflicted parts of Hebron, where the settlers attack almost every day. We in Psychoactive accompany this project from the psychological angle, and visit some of those families every month. The head of one of the families we visit told us that now, with the camera, he can go to the police station and show the policemen who it was that attacked him and he has a proof. It helps a little, but the police is still very reluctant to act, and the Palestinian who wants to file a complaint may spend a whole day ringing the bell outside the closed gates of the police station. These are the small horrors of the occupation, that make the lives of the Palestinians impossible and the work of the activist sisyphic and frustrating.

People in my close surrounding did not want to hear anything of my experiences at work. My friends who were not activists said that I should leave them alone and don't bother them with my stories, and my father said that I was one sided and blind, and as dogmatic and "religious" as the settlers. I became angrier, and started trying to force people to hear. I was telling these stories in a cynical way, and people felt attacked, and wouldn't listen. Eventually, I stopped telling.

My personal experience of activism back then included an overwhelming feeling of helplessness in front of the enormous suffering that cannot be put into words. The suffering of sick and wounded people who died in the checkpoints, and their families, of the tortured detainees whose

testimonies I read and prepared to high court appeals, and especially the suffering of the children, who did not know any other reality. The sense of guilt, being part of the occupation simply by being Israeli, and my inability to make a change, and most of all, the visions of wounded and beaten people and their stories made me leave this line of work and shut my eyes and ears for those stories. I was still participating in the protests and demonstrations, getting angrier and angrier with every shot of tear gas that I breathed, but I could not read or hear the personal stories of people – I am not a great consumer of newspapers in general, but I stopped reading Gideon Levy – a columnist in "Haaretz"- who writes about the human stories behind the news. It was just too painful.

At that time, my work in the human rights organization was not of a mental health professional, I was still a graduate student of art therapy. Later on, I began using my professional training in activism, and I believe that the **mental health professional tools might be used in a way that can help me and others sustain the ability to be present and thus be effective**. This is one point I would like to suggest for later discussion.

Thinking about burnout of activists I conducted a little research. This is not a representative research by any scale, and it only describes my impressions. I interviewed several activists who roughly can be divided into 2 groups: people who have been active for many years, mostly middle-aged women who have been part of the Israeli peace movement basically since its beginning, who have "seen it all", and young activists who participate in the non-violent struggle against the apart-hide wall, and who devote their lives to activism. These are two different groups who have different characteristics of burnout. There are other groups of activists in Israel, and I do not presume to describe them all here.

I also rely here on thoughts and ideas that my Psychoactive friends shared with me, and on my own ideas.

I will try to describe several mental processes that the activists seem to experience, in the **intra-psychic** level:

Being exposed to the injustice of the occupation and the discrimination, being out there, meeting people and hearing their stories, makes the activist feel **overwhelmed** with suffering. The exposure to such enormous suffering sometimes creates secondary trauma, like the trauma that therapists who treat trauma survivors might suffer from, and might cause people to develop posttraumatic symptoms.

The exposure to suffering and injustice may make the activist feel **guilty** for being privileged and having the freedom to choose where to live and what to do. This guilt in turn makes activists wear themselves out by running to every demonstration and helping activity and giving most of their time to the activism.

There is a sense of **urgency** and the activist might feel the urge to do more and more. "I must do something, I must not shut up in front of the injustice".

**And a sense of duty** - Being so few, each and every one of the activists may feel that the mission lies on her shoulders alone. Being open to hear, they hear many stories of suffering and pain, and being empathic, they want to do something. Often, activists end up sick and without any strength left to enjoy, on top of the sense of duty and guilt – which will not allow them just to have fun, where so much suffering is going on.

One of the major signs of attrition of activists is the **feeling of helplessness**. Both the older and the younger activists mentioned it. Despite all the efforts, the reality does not really get better. Actually it is getting worse as the years go by. The occupation is still there, as well as the checkpoints, the discrimination and humiliation. The fruits of the struggle are very limited. **Facing reality causes feelings of helplessness that lead to despair**, not to better adjustment and forsaking the narcissistic search for satisfaction, as Fried thought.

The despair makes some activists stop being active. If nothing is getting better, so what's the point? Some leave the country and go live elsewhere. The despair can make some activists **paralyzed and unable to act**. This is the most common sign of attrition that I recognized within the group of the experienced activists who have been active for decades. They see that all their activity hasn't brought peace and end of the occupation. (although it did change a lot- 30 years ago it was illegal to meet with PLO members. Today the government does it). They stop believing that change is possible. So when there is a new initiative for action or activity, initiated by new activists, the experienced burnt-out activist will say "it's useless, we have already tried it and it will not work because of this and that...". That's how they discourage the young generation instead of welcoming new initiatives.

Helplessness might cause activists to become very frustrated and angry. The anger can be a very strong motivation for action, and action can relieve the horrible sense of helplessness, but anger can also be destructive and can burn the activist from within.

**Anger might make the activist bitter and cynical and hateful**, and this kind of bitterness and hate might be extended to include not only the government and the perpetrators of the occupation but also the closest

people: family, friends and co-activists. This is a process that happens in a lot of the peace movements – the aggression which is experienced in the struggle against the occupation, and the aggressive atmosphere around the demonstrations and some of the activities, enter the personal relationship, the families and organizations themselves. The extreme effect of bitterness and aggression can result in a person who just hates everybody- Israelis and Palestinians, soldiers and civilians and everybody else, including herself.

### **On the group level:**

**Parallel processes happen in groups and organizations.** The aggression of the occupation is mirrored in relationship within organizations and between people. Hurt and violence is compulsively repeated in personal relationship. In this atmosphere of anger and hate, there is very little tolerance to the other, and to differences of opinion. The other may be considered somebody who thinks slightly different than me. Avi Bauman, an Israeli Jungian psychoanalyst, uses the Jungian concept of the Hero's Journey as a psychological developmental process, and the archetype of the monster that the hero encounters in his struggle for individuation. Avi describes monsters that can be identified within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One such monster, which is not a person but a psychic quality, is seen "through **fully and totally worshiping a certain illuminating ideology** without seeing anything else. ...this monster's evident traits are: self-righteousness, false saintliness and self-persuasion". When this monster takes over someone in a peace organization, he, or she, will be obsessed with being holier than the Pope and will persecute everyone else for not speaking the right words, or being not devoted enough to the cause, or even for thinking thoughts that do not belong to our group.

**On the wider social level**, attrition of activists has to do with **isolation and alienation from the wider Israeli society**. Peace activists form a very small group within the Israeli society, as Tova mentioned in her lecture. The mainstream of the society perceives us as weird, hallucinating and strange at best, and as traitors at worse. Sometimes people cannot state their opinions around family and at work, and if they do, they are subjected to attacks or their job might be at risk. Such atmosphere makes people feel alone and estranged to their society. Activists who are exposed to very difficult scenes and experiences in their activity cannot share their experiences with family and friends, except other activists. This creates a very strong sense of cohesion within the group but a very strong sense of isolation and alienation from the "outer world".

Sometimes the peace political activity may involve great physical risk – being shot at demonstrations, being arrested and beaten, as happens to many of the young activists. They are dragged into police stations, harassed and interrogated. The police investigators try to intimidate them and threaten to murder them and all their activist friends (this is Israel of 2009, not Argentina of 1973). They have only each other to rely on.

One of the older and experienced activists was talking about the sense of isolation even within a group of friends who basically support the activity and her political views, but are so full of despair that it makes no sense to talk to them. So she just clams up while the helplessness and despair grow inside.

A different aspect of attrition on the social level has to do with the **relationship between Israeli and Palestinian activists**. Some Israelis feel a constant need to apologize for the actions of the Israeli government,

and the constant need to prove the "right" views and actions. There is a feeling that whatever we (Israeli activists) do, is not enough. Israeli activists sometimes feel attacked (both by other Israeli activists and by Palestinians) for the actions of Israeli government, which they oppose. Those accusations place the Israeli activist in the same boat with the Israeli public that supports the occupation, a boat that the activist is estranged to. And thus, isolated from the Israeli mainstream society and accused of being part of it by the Palestinian partners, the Israeli activist might feel extremely alone.

In this atmosphere, feelings of alienation and exclusion within the group arise, and activists are denied of one of the most powerful supports- the cohesion of the group, and the help of friends.

One of the causes for the despair that experienced Israeli peace activists talk about has to do with lack of attendance of Palestinians. This issue has 2 sides, as I understand. Palestinians are tired of talking and of bi-national encounter and sharing groups. And the Israeli activists want to have mutual activities with the Palestinians. Many times, the kind of activities that the Israelis have in mind are not the kind that Palestinians would join, so the Israelis are left alone. This is a major source of frustration and feeling of despair for the Israelis, who then might feel that there is no one to work with. Another source for the feelings of despair is the guilt of the Israeli leftists, who take all the blame for the situation and do not demand anything from the Palestinians and thus deny the Palestinians of their responsibility for their destiny - this one-sidedness takes out all the motivation to act, as one burnt-out (by her own definition) activist said.

And on the even wider Israeli level:

One of the young activists described the source of attrition as **despair**

**of the political situation which is not in our hands.** The reality perception is changed when someone is an activist because they know things that people in the Israeli society make big efforts not to know. "You cannot go back to not knowing, once you are exposed to what is happening only 30 minutes away from your home", he said. "It is difficult to see how the whole consciousness of the Israeli society is based on a lie, and you cannot do anything about it. You try to tell people what you know and what you see, and they do not want to listen".

**So what makes people keep on being activists? And what helps the activists maintain their sanity?**

First, it is the sense of **value and purpose** in what activists do. A lot of emotional energy is invested in the activity and its causes and reasons. As one young activist put it: "I believe that there is a great need to state an alternative to the consensus in the Israeli society. I believe that when things will be different, and they will, eventually, we will set an example of another way of being Israeli, for the Palestinians as well as for the Israelis." And one of the very experienced activists said that the reason for staying active is for her to be able to see herself in the mirror and know that she did something and not just stood aside and let "it" happen.

There is also a sense of responsibility that makes people go on. Personal responsibility to do something in order to change the situation that we now know of, and not close our eyes and look away.

One other very important reason to keep going, is the **personal relationship** with Palestinian friends which are formed during mutual actions. Mutual actions and causes make friends, and thus the activity is not only for the abstract just cause, but the cause now has a name and a face.

And the major factor in supporting people's activism is the friends and co-activists. **The sense of community and togetherness, solidarity and cohesion of the group, mutual support and personal friendships,** all these help the activists maintain their enthusiasm and sanity.

One of the very experiences activists I talked to, wished that the older generation, those who "have seen it all and tried everything" would become a sort of support system for the younger generation and be its mentors – accompanying the new ideas or the new ways to carry out the old ideas of the young activists.

As for me, what makes me continue is the hope that on the personal level I can make a difference, and the thought that normal relationship between Palestinians and Israelis are possible, but I must admit, that one major reason to keep going is the possibility of opposing the occupation, and fighting my feelings of helplessness with doing. And as one member of Psychoactive wrote- it also helps to receive a positive reinforcement from time to time.

And how can the professional mental health training help us deal with the difficult feelings that cause burnout?

This is one of the topics for discussion that I want to raise here.