

Psycho-Activism in Israel: From Past to Present Challenges

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My presentation will be divided into three parts. In the first I shall relate to the political context within which the change of position – from passivity to activism – of some Israeli psychologists came about in the late 1980's. In the second, I will portray the two Israeli psychoactive groups - *Imut* and *PsychActive* - their development and major activities. Finally, I will briefly refer to the value of political engagement of psychotherapists and to some general principles of politically minded psychotherapy.

First, I would like to address the political climate in Israel from late 1970's through the 1980's. 1977 was a year of political revolution in Israel as Likud party won the elections for the first time. It was considered to be the victory of the marginalized. At the same time, values of nonconformism, alienation and even signs of weakness that were previously renounced, became in certain social circles bon ton. At the same year, the "law of psychologists" passed and set a new legal basis for the psychological practice. Israeli psychology became more influential and psychotherapy gained greater social acceptance. During the 1980's numerous private clinics were opened and in certain elite circles, psychotherapy became quite fashionable. It seems that the greater openness of Israel to the world and vice versa, brought with it American influences, with psychologism included (Almog, 1988).

The Lebanon war in 1982 signified yet another major transition in the Israeli sense of collectiveness. For the first time, the Israeli society found itself torn and in controversy over a war and its necessity. The process of fragmentation of the Israeli monolithic identity reached a new peak (Bar-On, 2005). The disintegration of the Israeli monolithic myth led to a change in the collective self perception. At this stage, negative aspects of the self that in the past were attributed to the "other" (i.e. the Arabs) were now identified as part of the self (Ibid). Needless to say, this was a painful and threatening process. Introspection became more dominant and the confidence in the self righteousness diminished. It was then that the first unripe signs of psychoactivism appeared. The two forces described above fertilized one another – the greater acceptance of the psychological perspective increased self doubt and reinforced an individualistic and anti-war stands that in turn resulted in turning to psychology.

In the following years Israeli psychology was becoming more political than ever. It was the first Intifada that pulled Israeli psychologists out of their protected stance of neutrality and

anonymity. Interestingly, it all started in a seminar on cross-cultural therapy that was held at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and taught by Michael Gorkin, an anti-war veteran and the author of *The Uses of Countertransference* (1987). The group was composed of Israeli Jewish and Arab clinical psychologists, who worked at the campus' counseling services. Obviously, in December of 1987, when the Intifada broke out, the intercultural issues gained new and unbearable meanings and implications. Simply stated, the group members and particularly those who were engaged in bi-national therapies (Jewish and Palestinian dyads), could not go on working. Both Arab and Jewish members of the group felt that they could not ignore the intense developments and images coming from the West Bank and that they had to take an action. They decided to compose a petition denouncing the ongoing occupation. The petition turned out to be an immediate success, successful way beyond the hopes of the initiators. Actually, as early as late January and early February of 1988, less than two months after the eruption of the uprising, two petitions were initiated by mental health professionals. They were published in an Israeli newspaper and were signed by more than 650 Israeli mental health workers. And so, for the first time, Israeli psychologists publically took a clear political stand against the ongoing occupation and supporting negotiation and political settlement. This unprecedented open declaration, identifying those who signed the petition as having a leftist political stand, was not trivial at all.

It was this small group of people that in early 1988 founded '*Imut*' (the Hebrew word for verification), the '*Mental Health Workers for the Promotion of Peace*'. *Imut* was active for approximately a decade. At its peak, the organization counted hundreds of active members involved in various undertakings (Berman, 2003). They organized conferences and seminars, issued a bulletin (*Imut-Katuv*), conducted research studies and published articles. Also, encounters between left and right wing professionals (Moses, 1992), and between Palestinian and Israeli professionals (Gampel, 2002), were initiated. Moreover, *Imut* activities did not limit themselves to addressing professionals. During the time of the first Intifada, not long after its establishment, the voices of organization members were also heard in the media. For example, Attar Ornan, one of the leading figures within *Imut*, was quoted in one article (Benziman, *Ha'aretz*, 3/10/1989) as saying: 'A psychologist who doesn't speak about the situation nowadays is not being neutral, but taking a stand by remaining silent'. After the signing of the Oslo accord in 1993, the volume and intensity of *Imut's* activities and influence declined significantly.

Imut members chose not to become bystanders; rather they took action for peace and for the moral purity of the Israeli society. As a marginal group, *Imut's* impact on the political and military systems was quite limited, perhaps negligible. Furthermore, *Imut* did not set a long-

lasting movement of activist psychologists in motion. Accordingly, the group is vastly unfamiliar today to many psychologists who did not take part in its activities. Nevertheless, and perhaps because of that, I believe that it is important to address this activity, belittled by the dominant stance of socio-political neutrality and passivity. *Imut's* importance lies in its uniqueness; from the foundation of the state of Israel, up until recently, psychologists as a group have not been involved in organized activities of the sort.

Interestingly enough, such an organized protest did not take place in the second 'Al-Akssa' Intifada as the psychologists' voices turned once again into silence. This shift is demonstrated by the extreme paucity of professional written references to this intense state of conflict. One possible explanation for this puzzling change has to do with the difference in the intensity of the conflict (vis á vis the Palestinians, and equally important, internally). The second Intifada marked a whole new level in the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict, introducing previously unheard of and extremely violent means used by both sides (notably assassinations by the Israelis and suicide bombers by the Palestinians). As a result, and due to the excessive intensity of the events and emotions, the second Intifada was much more conflictual for the Israeli public. At times like this, taking a critical stand is not easy. Any expression of empathy or sympathy with the Palestinian suffering was considered by most Israelis to be insensitive toward the people's hardship and virtually tantamount to 'crossing lines' and identifying with the enemy. Any conscientious claim regarding the moral value of the government and its policy, or any criticism concerning its pragmatic value or rationale was quite likely to be referred to as weakening and damaging to the nation. Indeed, at times of political dispute and uncertainty, any nonconformist view or deed may result in severe sanctions, aggressive reactions or isolation, in both social and professional milieus. It is reasonable to believe that this social climate was largely responsible for the 'silence of psychologists' at the time of the second Intifada.

From 2004 and on, the intensity of the Intifada diminished. The number of Israeli casualties or of Palestinian attacks (both successful and attempts) declined significantly. Israelis' actual security and sense of personal safety increased. Additionally, the economy developed rapidly and the government, under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, was as stable as ever. Once again, conditions were more favorable for manifest political action.

In 2004, a group of independent Israeli psychotherapists registered as members in an internet forum designated for Arab speaking psychologists. Soon enough this 'dead' forum became very lively. However, no sign of Arabic could be found and, just as it happens in reality, the very tiny minority of Palestinian psychologists who did visit the forum from time to time was forced to

use the Hebrew language. As in the forming of *Imut*, the immediate issue at hand had to do with Jewish and Palestinian psychologists working together. This time the conflict revealed itself in a very personal and quiet tragedy, that of Majed Kana'aneh.

Majed Kana'aneh was born and raised in the village of Arrabe, in the Galilee. In 1988, at the age of 18, Majed traveled to Italy to study psychology and majored in clinical-community psychology. At 30, he returned to Israel with a masters' degree. In October, 2002, Majed started working part time at the adult clinic in the community center for mental health in Jaffa, as an intern in clinical psychology. On February 7th 2003, in the middle of the night, Majed was arrested by security authorities for suspicion of sabotaging state security. A year later he was found guilty and sentenced to ten and a half years of imprisonment. His supervisor and friends from the Jaffa clinic found themselves horrified and in shock. Together with other colleagues they have sought channels in which they might influence public opinion and raise awareness of what they thought was 'a trial captured by paranoia'. A tri-lingual petition was distributed, a website was created and attempts were made to interest the media. However, from its very beginning the group did not limit itself to supporting Majed. In fact, a few members expressed reservations about this activity and have instead suggested different channels of action for the group.

This small group of therapists started to meet regularly in early 2005, and somewhat later the name *PsychoActive* was chosen. The development of the group was especially enhanced by several weekend workshops and a one year course for 'agents of change' that brought together Jewish and Arab mental health professionals from Israel and Palestine (organized by the School for Peace in Neve-Shalom/Wahat al-Salam and Chiwar - the Arabic word for dialogue - center for peace and development in Kalkilia). The encounters allowed the participants to develop a clearer and more complex understanding of the situation. This was not an easy process, since the intensity of emotions and stereotypes from both sides was extremely high, and signs of hatred and total mistrust could be felt from time to time. At the same time, personal contacts were formed and an opportunity for cooperation opened up.

One of the first joint projects was a direct reaction to the personal story of a Palestinian member of the group and of his village, Qadum, situated at the heart of the West Bank. As it happened, in the beginning of the second Intifada the Israeli army closed the main road connecting the village with the city of Nablus. Without such a road, getting to the villagers' farmlands, to a hospital, a school or university could be virtually impossible. Joined by a former Israeli minister and by media people, Israeli and Palestinian members of the group expressed

solidarity and assisted the people of Qadum in their struggle to build a new road instead of the old one. While visiting the village, they found out that it had no electricity; although infrastructure was built, the Israeli local municipalities (run by settlers) had issued a demolition warrant for it. Also, the water supply was unstable and the villagers suffered from recurrent abuse and damage to their belongings by the settlers. The group maintained the contact with the people of Qadum, and, among other activities, members participated in the olive harvest in order to defend the villagers from the settlers' aggression.

In the course of the encounters, the Israeli participants were exposed to the immense impact that the checkpoints had on the daily life of the Palestinians and on their well being. The checkpoints were virtually everywhere in the dialogue (just as they were in the West Bank), as one story followed another. None of them was extremely shocking in itself, just numerous examples of banal daily hardship and humiliation. As a result, an idea to organize psychological seminars at the checkpoints came up. And indeed, one conference, titled '*Psychological Barriers for Peace: Lifting the Barriers Between and Within Us*', was organized in cooperation with the Palestinian Al-Quds University. It focused on the psychological impact of checkpoints and was extremely well attended by Israeli and Palestinian professionals. Since then, other conferences took place, examining relevant issues including: "The interrelations between the therapeutic and the political in a society experiencing and producing violence", "The therapeutic space in the shadow of the Jewish-Arab conflict", "Whose' place is this? The Jewish-Arab conflict between psychology and politics", and "The Psychological Effects of Military Service in the Occupied Territories on Soldiers and on Israeli Society". Additionally, the next conference is now in preparation and will examine the Nakba (Arab word for disaster signifying the annual day of commemoration of the anniversary of the creation of Israel) and its influences. The idea to organize such conference was raised after Israel Beiteinu Knesset Members (Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Liberman's party) proposed the "Nakba Law". The bill declares that anyone expressing public mourning or bereavement on Israel's Independence Day may be subject to three years imprisonment.

Other ongoing activities include regular meetings and a recently the issuing of a monthly pamphlet; The issuing of public letters and petitions – for instance, with regard to the humiliating security check routine on Palestinian citizens at the Israeli international airport or during the second Lebanon war calling for the immediate end of violence and pointing out possible implications of its resumption for the mental health of Israeli and Lebanese citizens. Moreover, the group organized one-day visits for mental health practitioners to the occupied territories and

IDF checkpoints, with special reference to mental health implications and other relevant issues. Also, joint Palestinian-Israeli projects related to mental health are being undertaken in the West Bank, in cooperation with various Palestinian, Israeli and international NGOs. For example, cooperating with the center for Autism in Sudra, with Israeli human rights organization *B'tzelem* vis a' vis their "Shooting back" or camera distribution project or with Israeli-Palestinian *Combatants for Peace* group. Moreover, *PsychoActive* reaction to operation "cast lead" in Gaza included co-organizing a public event of "Gathering to Mourn and to Protest: Grieve together & reject the massive killing of civilians" followed by the attempt to gather relevant testimonies from Palestinians from Gaza, soldiers who took part in the operation, Israeli civilians and more. Other recent activities include supporting the Palestinian families evacuated from their homes in Sheich Jarach in east Jerusalem, examining the possible participation of psychologists in interrogations and torture (in cooperation with *The Public Committee Against Torture in Israel*) and offering low cost activist friendly psychotherapy for political activists in Israel.

Before I conclude, I would like to address the potential value of psychologists' political engagement and its contribution to dialogue and peace processes. I believe that bystanding and avoiding any social or political involvement constitutes a very dangerous political stance, one that cannot be reconciled with conventional psychological merits: namely, pursuing change and wellbeing wherever we come across misery and despair. Psychologists may serve as a unique voice within a violent and stormy atmosphere, one of empathy and compassion, of respect toward differences and reconciliation with the past and the other. Such an atmosphere may support and ease political dialogue between leaders, and, equally important, it may have positive repercussions on people's state of mind, degrees of anger, anxiety, distress and so forth.

In order for psychologists to take such social role, they have to shift their political stance from denial and passive bystanding to growing awareness and reference to political factors that lead to human suffering. Economics, class, violence (including state-originated), leadership, as well as ethnicity etc. - all affect the well being of society as a whole and of individuals within it. Ignoring such factors in therapy constitutes a form of malpractice. Ignoring them outside the clinic constitutes a very dangerous political position. Remaining silent, ignorant or passive would make us psychologists accomplices to the production of human suffering and would constitute a betrayal of our basic values as therapists.

To be clear, one need not become a political activist in order to resist the status-quo or confront injustice. In fact, one may assume such a position merely by practicing psychotherapy. However, for psychotherapy to become a liberating praxis, therapists need to widen their

awareness to various political forces and deepen their knowledge about their possible impacts. Without such awareness and knowledge, politically related contents may be overlooked or regarded as intrapsychic ones, and the opportunity for action towards change will vanish.

Conversely, the possibility to discuss political issues in therapy not only abolishes the traditional 'zone of avoidance' and widens the therapeutic discourse as to include other facets of human existence; it opens a supplementary (or perhaps complementary) way for the apprehending of the human psyche. That is, apprehending the individual in context, as a political entity. Within this framework, discussing political issues is not extraneous to the therapeutic dialogue, but rather a very relevant and a deeply personal activity that in Andrew Samuels' (2006) words 'may be profoundly unsettling, possibly clarifying and occasionally transformative' (p 20). Israeli psychologists, witnessing a bloody and painful reality, face a challenging ethical imperative: to remain morally engaged while setting an alternative to hatred and violence. As Nick Totton (2000) remarks, 'psychotherapy offers enormous resources for the political project of confronting conflict, through its work on and in groups' (p 44).

Another significant step toward a socially responsible and politically minded therapeutic practice has to do with the understanding of human suffering and its causes. In contrast with dogmatic psychodynamic conceptions, emphasizing intrapsychic origins of the clients' miseries (and therefore put the blame on them), the emphasis here is on social, cultural or political factors. In other words, human suffering is contextualized and hence politicized. Acknowledging contextual causes for the clients' suffering may empower them. It may reduce self blame, a sense of self-deficiency, victimhood or helplessness. Additionally it may strengthen the connections between the clients and their socio-cultural environment. Thus, this kind of perspective is more likely to advance a sense of belonging, fellowship and solidarity. Ultimately, it may result in a more active stand of both therapist and client vis á vis the socio-political reality. Lastly, willingness to take a stand (political or moral), what was termed by Argentinean psychoanalysts as 'Ethical Non-neutrality' (Hollander, 2006) is crucial in a politically minded psychotherapy. That is, a stance of solidarity with the oppressed, marginalized or disempowered.