

## HOLOCAUST TRAUMA IN ISRAEL

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When conductor Daniel Barenboim led the Berlin Staatskapelle Orchestra in a performance of Richard Wagner's "*Overture to Tristan und Isolde*" in Israel, it provoked outrage from the audience, and denunciations across the Israeli political spectrum. Because Wagner is still *Persona non grata* in Israel. Apart from his notorious anti-Semitic opinions, his music was played on ceremonial state occasions of the Nazi regime, during book-burning ceremonies and when concentration camp prisoners were marching to their deaths.

The tones of "*Tristan und Isolde*" are still a powerful trigger for the reactivation of past Holocaust trauma in Israel.

Like the characteristic pattern of Wagner's musical ornamentations, repressed Holocaust themes seem to be a Leitmotif (leading motive) in the collective unconscious of the Jewish People. As overt manifestations of such hidden scenarios, the roles of victim, perpetrator, bystander and savior are continually played out within the texture of the Israeli society. As Israel marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War in 2004, Israelis acknowledged that it is impossible to understand their national psyche without viewing it through the prism of the Holocaust. Naturally, this Leitmotif has been heard (and sometimes expressed) *loud and clear* for over 60 years by the estimated 200,000 Holocaust survivors who are still alive in Israel today and they recognize each note of it. For them, this is a continual companion melody that defines every mood of their daily existence. For others, however, it is felt only as an almost inaudible background noise that causes stress only in certain moments, such as when there is a national crisis. And while there may be a small minority of people who have grown up with a different narrative and cannot understand what the whole Holocaust fuss is all about, most informed Israelis today recognize the repeated and almost mythical characteristics of this historical echo.

Thus we observe that the trauma of the Holocaust has not only left its indelible mark on the survivors who themselves experienced the persecution, or on their descendants who were vicariously affected, but on the entire Jewish people. According to the President of the State of Israel, Moshe Katsav (2002): "The Holocaust is a bleeding wound on the body of the Jewish people, which has never recovered from this tragedy - neither emotionally nor demographically." And the former speaker of the Israeli Parliament, Shevach Weiss, who is himself a survivor said: "Auschwitz is a part of our daily life, not our past. In our society, our souls, our national spirit, everything is connected with the memory of the dark period of Auschwitz." Similarly, the director of the Yad Vashem, Avner Shalev (2002), described the Holocaust as a living catastrophe for the entire nation. "It's in the air, you can feel it," he said. "The wound is there still. We are still mourning, we are still processing and trying to cope. The trauma is so deep and so painful, it is still going on". Possibly, Yehuda Amichai (2000) found the best way to express this sense of identification with the victims and survivors of the Shoah: "I wasn't one of the six million who died in the Shoah, I

wasn't even among the survivors. And I wasn't one of the six hundred thousand who went out of Egypt. I came to the Promised Land by sea. No, I was not in that number, though I still have the fire and the smoke within me, pillars of fire and pillars of smoke that guide me by night and by day. I still have inside me the mad search for emergency exit, for soft places, for the nakedness of the land, for the escape into weakness and hope ... Afterwards, silence. No questions, no answers. Jewish history and world history grind me between them like two grindstones, sometimes to a powder ... Sometimes I fall into the gap between to hide, or sink the way down.” A recent article by Nessman (2005) gives plenty of examples of how the wounds of the Holocaust remain fresh for Israel, a tragedy that darkens the Israeli society and forms an integral part of the national identity. Psychiatrists, such as Dasberg (1979), Gampel (2000) and many others have described the individual and collective psychological effects of Holocaust trauma upon the Israeli society. They assume that there will always remain a trace of the tragedy, imprinted upon the collective unconscious in the Jewish people even if it cannot be easily detected.

Such a viewpoint is based on a classical psychoanalytic interpretation of the enduring impact of major traumatic historical events upon a society. Unable to free itself from the constraints of its past, the society will continue to feel the emotional pain for a long time and, if the trauma is not ‘worked through,’ the society will be compelled to repeat it in a compulsive manner. A traumatized society is thus thrown into a largely unconscious hypnotic spell in which the trauma keeps re-igniting in new cycles of trauma re-enactments, which may lead to new violence, self-destructiveness and re-victimization. As for the psychological effects of the Holocaust upon Israel, it is thus assumed that Israel keeps exposing itself to situations reminiscent of its original Holocaust trauma in order to gain mastery.

Contrary to these points of view, others feel that the Holocaust today has little impact upon the Israeli society. They hold that the present society has effectively put its past behind it and that it has created a ‘new’ Jewish identity, which is detached from its tragic European past and now resilient to such old traumatic influences. Or, if at all important, that such Holocaust effects are similar to other events in the history of the Jewish People, and that they therefore have a negligible impact of our lives today. Wishful thinking? Perhaps.

Because as years go by, it becomes more and more apparent how vulnerable Israelis all still are to the dangers of anti-Semitism and the indirect influence of the Holocaust. Like a traumatized person, who jumps at every loud noise, the Israeli society seems to constantly ‘live on the edge,’ as if it was sitting on a sack of dynamite waiting to explode at any time. It is often said that there is never a dull moment in Israel’s politics, as there is always a new major crisis that is evolving that threatens the fragile existence of the Jewish state. For example, when Israelis made some progress in their peace-talks with the Palestinians, Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated and when Ariel Sharon showed some willingness for compromise, he got a stroke and is lying in coma as of this writing. Most urgently however; while the former threat climaxed in the Nazi Holocaust’s attempt at total annihilation of the Jewish people, the recent threat may lead to ‘wiping Israel off the map’ as recently declared by Iran’s president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

### **Terror in the Past and Terror in the Present**

Past Holocaust trauma is triggered, not only by the sound of Wagner's music, but also at every new military emergency, including terrorist bombings. At these times, the new trauma re-actualizes the old one.

Collective trauma is of course felt especially on memorial days, when the country mourns its losses. During the Memorial Day on May 2, 2006, the state of Israel commemorated its 22,123 soldiers who fell in support of the state, and its 1358 victims of terrorist attacks. In addition, it also commemorated the approximately 200 Jews that were killed in terrorist or anti-Semitic attacks abroad since 1968. Terrorist attacks, suicide bombings or shooting rampages target innocent civilians at home, on buses, on city streets, at weddings, in discos or pizzerias in a busy marketplace or a quiet neighborhood. They may strike at any place and at any time. For Israelis, the fear and pain of terrorism have become part of daily life. Though people still move about their daily lives, the impact of the attacks is slowly taking its toll. People are worried and jumpy and there is a high level of interpersonal violence everywhere.

In a country that has bombproof wastebaskets, it is always difficult to separate remnants of past Holocaust trauma from the present consequences of terrorism. The Intifada has caused Israelis to become agoraphobic, to be afraid of public spaces and of crowds. And to build a security wall which make it feel like it is hiding in a large ghetto. The high percentage of recently bereaved; war widows, orphans, and invalids further aggravate this situation.

But there are chilling similarities between the scenes of the terrorist bombings of today and the Holocaust events from the past. A mother sits with her daughter on her lap in a pizza restaurant in Jerusalem at the time of the explosion. She is found burned to death in this same position, which is a reminiscence of how her grandmother was found with her daughter in the gas chambers of Auschwitz some 60 years earlier. Children are killed in front of their mothers in kibbutz bedrooms, guests at a Passover celebration are suddenly blown to pieces, dancers at a wedding are murdered like in a pogrom, youth who travel by bus are suddenly mutilated, and so on. How can Israelis be exposed to such events and not think of the Holocaust?

On a collective level, Israelis respond to its multiple tragedies in two contrasting ways. On the one hand, the prior Holocaust trauma renders them more vulnerable to extreme stress and on the other hand, the successful coping of the initial Holocaust trauma has strengthened their resistance and made them more resilient to the effects of future trauma. On the background of the Holocaust, there are a wide variety of emotional and cognitive responses to the present Intifada that range from catastrophic expectancy and fear to calculating defiance, outright paranoia and an urge to strike back. With an urgent and fearful undertone, some Israelis would say that 'we should have learned by now not to trust our Gentile neighbor,' while others would rather take a dovish political stance, refusing to strike out at innocent victims, so as 'not to do to them, what the Nazis did to us...'

### **Political Influence**

Any of these responses naturally mold the Israeli public into one or the other political bias and it is a main reason for the fact that the Holocaust has been and still is utilized for political purposes in every quarter of the political spectrum. It has been used both by hard-liners and doves to score political points and is often a reference point for

cultural debates (Nessman, 2005). In addition, the actual and imagined Holocaust narratives have influenced policy-making and policy-reasoning in the past and in the present (Naor, 2003). According to Segev (1986), during its entire history, the Holocaust became a political football game in the hands of the various factions that fought for power in Israeli politics.

For example, right-wing hard-liners who wanted to evoke negative sentiments against prime ministers Rabin and Sharon, depicted them in Nazi SS uniform and left-wing peace-activists equated Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and its treatment of the Palestinians to Nazi behavior. Most recently, the settlers' opposition to the withdrawal from Gaza utilized a multitude of Holocaust symbols, including wearing a yellow/orange star with the word "Jude", calling Israeli soldiers "Nazis" and accusing them for carrying out a "pogrom" and in signs posted around Israel, they accused the government for wanting to make this geographic area *Judenrein*. Holocaust survivors find such political abuse of the memory of the Holocaust as detestable and unacceptable as performing the music of Wagner in public.

### **Periods of post-Holocaust Adaptation to the Israeli Society**

Ne'eman Arad (1997) observed that while the Holocaust is not necessarily becoming more peripheral to Israel's collective consciousness, its effects have changed over time. Its meaning for the early settlers and founders of the state was certainly different than it is for the citizens of Israel today.

In the early days of the Jewish state, the image of the helpless and persecuted Jewish victim from Europe was a shameful contrast to the emerging national mythology of the strong and heroic new Israeli Jews who would have fought back. As described by Almog (2000), the Zionist myth of the zealous pioneering *Sabra* (צבר) represented the alternative to the ghetto mentality of Diaspora Jews and everything that they represented. The Holocaust narrative had no place in this 'Zionist Revolution' and survivors quickly understood that they should not reveal too much about their tragic memories in this environment. In addition, survivors who immigrated to Israel were immediately confronted with the hard reality of a state that fought for its existence and there was no room for any reminiscences. Unable to cope with their own suffering, and told to 'forget the past and to suppress their traumatic memories,' many survivors kept their scars hidden for half a century or more.

But at the same time as the individual Holocaust narrative was put 'on hold', the collective lessons of persecution underscored the urgency and vital necessity of a Jewish state. Thus, it provided a justification for creating a Jewish state in the first place. Holocaust survivors created new families and joined the *Yishuv* in building the country and safeguarding it from its enemies (Sheleg, 2001). In addition, they indirectly brought with them large sums of collective compensation payments that certainly helped to strengthen the general economy of Israel.

The lack of empathy for the tragic experiences of Holocaust survivors began to change in 1961 when the trial of Adolf Eichmann was broadcast on national radio, and the testimonies were brought out into the open. During the 1973 *Yom Kippur* War, when there was an actual threat of the destruction of the country, many Israelis further started to grasp the deeper significance of the Holocaust. In the 1980s, the Holocaust became a part of the high school matriculation exams and an annual

Holocaust Memorial Day (*Yom HaShoah* in Hebrew) was instituted to commemorate the martyrs and heroes who died under the Nazis. There is a special ceremony at Yad VaShem, the Jerusalem Holocaust Museum. A siren is sounded in Israel and everyone stands for one minute of silence in memory of those murdered and all Jewish places of entertainment are closed in Israel. From the attendance and public exposure of these ceremonies over the years, it seems that the Holocaust has become more and more relevant to the Israeli society as time has passed.

Today, the Holocaust is no longer a 'hidden trauma' that is kept away from the public. It is talked about everywhere as never before. Thousands of Israeli high school pupils make journeys to Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps, as well as to abandoned synagogues and old Jewish cemeteries in Eastern Europe, to see for themselves where the atrocities occurred. Finally, the army brings many of its officers to Yad Vashem and to Auschwitz to motivate them to protect the nation from any future horrors. It is believed that such learning will strengthen their Jewish and Israeli identity.

### **Holocaust Lessons for the Future**

The Israeli society today is able to deal with its Holocaust past in a more differentiated manner than before. It is not only a story of either genocide and persecution, or heroism and martyrdom. Nor is it only a confrontation with the forceful presence of the ultimate evil and the cruelty of human beings to each other, or the great manifestations of compassion and courage under the worst of conditions. The Israeli Holocaust narrative of today includes both of these two opposing and paradoxical learning experiences, which are perhaps the main lessons to be learned from the Holocaust. As a result of Holocaust and present trauma, Israelis respond with both 'post-traumatic stress,' and with 'post-traumatic growth'. The first response, make Israelis more vulnerable to stress, while the second make them more resilient. While the Israelis have learned from the Holocaust that the world can be evil and meaningless, that life is terminal and that people are cruel, they have also learned that there may be hope even in the worst of conditions. As Israelis start to carefully listen to the stories of the Holocaust survivors, they have slowly come to appreciate this profound lesson and it has provided them with strength and hope for the future. As Israelis become more accustomed to this dual reality, they come to realize that this duality does not only include the assumptive world of the victims, but also of the perpetrators (who may not be only cruel), the rescuers (who may not be only saints) and the bystanders (who may not be only indifferent). While they have a tendency to look at these main actors of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War in 'black-and-white' terms, and try to understand them beyond the realm of normal human existence, they may come to understand and appreciate that they were all ordinary people of flesh and blood, like themselves and everybody else.

Being confronted with the history of the Holocaust in depth means therefore that Israelis are also facing themselves today. This might be the main thing to digest.

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