

There are no winners in the repetition of trauma

Lyn Bender

Israel is in trouble again. Its extreme response to the ships seeking to bring humanitarian aid to Gaza has aroused wrath and international protest. The pictures of the Israeli soldiers boarding the boats and the accounts of terror, mayhem and fear have awakened a world that seemed to be dozing through the everyday plight of those living in Gaza. Although we await an investigation, Israel appears the aggressor and the incorrigible tyrant, yet again.

For me, Jewish by birth but a non-religious member of the so called Diaspora, it conjures forth my late childhood - incompletely formed and simplistic adolescent paradigms and memories. I grew up in the hothouse environment of Melbourne Holocaust Survivors. Many of those who visited my parents' Elwood home had been in the camps, hidden, or had lost family in the Holocaust. As my therapist would later explain to me. "They were all holocausted." Now I work as a therapist to those who have suffered trauma.

The thunderous stentorian thrilling voice of Charlton Heston, in the epic film, *The Ten Commandments*, would brook no dissent. "Let my people go!" The screen images of the parting of the seas, the plagues, pestilence and the infant Moses set adrift on the River Nile, suffused my images of the Passover story with its promise of salvation and freedom for an enslaved people. Passover, the memorial to this emancipation, was the celebration at which the stranger at your door was welcomed and invited to dine and join the celebration of freedom from oppression. The youngest child was to question the elders regarding the meaning of the Passover meal. Now we are all driven to question yet again the meaning of gaining the so-called promised land.

The two most important "religious" experiences in my Jewish childhood were the Passover celebration and the shadow of the Holocaust. Passover brought expressions of joy and hope surrounded by relatives who had survived the dark shadow of the Holocaust. These two themes were in constant juxtaposition - on the one hand survival and on the other annihilation. Freud postulated that traumatized people are driven to repeat their experiences of victimization (van der Volk, 1989, para. 29). He thought that the aim of repetition was to gain mastery, but clinical experience has shown that this rarely happens: instead, repetition causes further suffering for the victims or for people in their surroundings.

In my practice I encounter this repetition phenomenon time and time again. Abused and neglected children revisit and re-enact abusive and depriving situations in their adult lives. Another response may be that the victim becomes the abuser, thereby exchanging the powerless position of the helpless sufferer for the mastery and potency of the perpetrator. Controversially therapist Bruno Bettelheim, himself a nazi camp inmate, observed the phenomenon he termed "identification with the aggressor" amongst the prisoners (Grotjahn, 1945, para 2). These prisoners adopted the stance and mannerisms of the more powerful prison guards. It was a survival strategy.

The ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine could be seen as one that repeats the traumatic holocaust experience of the Jewish people in Israel as both perpetrator and victim. The situation for the people in Gaza casts a shadow as long as the Nazi Holocaust. In

this there is unknowing, or in Freud's terms, an unconscious re-enactment of the victimization of the Holocaust. Who can fail to see the horrendous paradox. The people in Gaza are now the enslaved, they are imprisoned in a walled ghetto. Deprived of entitlement to a homeland and victims of an embargo, they live diminished lives in the Gaza ghetto, scavenging and smuggling food and forbidden items and, no doubt, arms. Meanwhile Israel's citizens also experience fear of annihilation. Now it is the Jews in Israel who seem not to know what is happening behind the Gaza wall. Ironically Gideon Levy (2010), the award winning journalist and columnist with the newspaper Haaretz, says that some Israelis just do not know what is happening due to poor media reportage. The Jewish Settlers feel under siege as collective punishment is imposed and the homes of Palestinians are demolished. Palestinians are subjected to searches and the need for passes to move beyond Gaza. The circle of repetition is completed in this way.

Of course the violence of all parties is to be deplored. Suicide bombings and the slaying of children is horrendous, but who are the most powerless in this situation? Certainly solving this impasse seems impossible. Gaza, to the shame of us all, is evidence of the victimization of generations of a displaced people. It is as wrong as South African Apartheid and as cruel as the Holocaust. Original victims know what events connect to their pain, but while their children and following generations absorb this pain, they remain disconnected from the original trauma (Garland, 1993).

"Hannah", my client, now in her late eighties and a survivor of Auschwitz, has deplored the situation in Gaza as like the Warsaw ghetto. She remembers the daily tally of small children's bodies lying in the ghetto streets. Hannah does not want to be part of an Israel that is an oppressor; she hopes for reconciliation. As a child of survivors I attended Jewish youth groups. We played at Jews and Arabs in a fashion as unaware of genocide as the games enacting the battle between cowboys and Indians. As a thirteen year old I absorbed the romance of Leon Uris' *Exodus*. I was simply enthralled with the idea of fighting, absorbing blindly the notion of fighting for a Jewish homeland, for my slaughtered grandparents, aunts and uncles and their children. I now understand that this was a misplaced traumatic response, a fight too late and with the wrong enemies, a fight that would only cause further suffering and not save the six millions.

Charlton Heston cannot save a people but his words ring true today. "Let my people go" is now relevant for the displaced and imprisoned Palestinians. It is only by embarking on the long and difficult process of freeing and reconciliation with the Palestinians that Israel may truly heal the holocaust wounds. Impossible some say. But the end result of all the bloodshed is a realisation that violence with its cycle of retaliation solves nothing and is self-perpetuating. At some point this is recognized in most bloody conflicts.

That is when the real struggle to achieve reconciliation can begin.

References

- Garland, C. (1993). The lasting trauma of the concentration camps: the children and grandchildren of survivors may also be affected. *British Medical Journal* 307, 77-78. Retrieved from http://www.bmj.com/cgi/pdf_extract/307/6896/77
- Grotjahn, M. (1945). Abstract of Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations: Bruno Bettelheim. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 14, 143-144. Retrieved from <http://www.pep-web.org/document.php?id=PAQ.014.0143B>

Levy, G. (2010, June 3). Gaza: Israel's Vietnam. Late Night Live [Radio broadcast].
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/latenightlive/stories/2010/2917661.htm>

Van der Kolk, B.A. (1989). The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma: Re-enactment, Revictimization, and Masochism. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 12(2). Retrieved from The Circumcision Reference Library <http://www.cirp.org/library/psych/vanderkolk/>

Biographical Note

Lyn Bender is a psychologist and social commentator with a strong concern about social justice. She is a mother of two and grandmother of three and is concerned about the world they and future generations will inherit.

