

Can we empathize with the suffering  
of our enemy?

A small step in the long way towards  
reconciliation

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Thank you for the kind invitation to talk here about our joint project: ESO – Encountering the Suffering of the “Other” - as a small step in the long way towards reconciliation.

I feel deeply honoured and excited to give this talk in a congress dedicated to Victor Frankl, who survived the concentration camp in Turkheim and was liberated from the camp on April 27th, 1945. Three months later, in the same year of 1945, I was born in what was then Palestina, to parents who arrived in Israel as pioneers from the Ukraine in the 1930s with the aim of building a Jewish state. In 1945, they found themselves the only survivors after they realized that their families had been completely wiped out in the Holocaust. My childhood memories, as well as my evolving identity, are rooted in this background. The Israeli-Jewish identity became a most significant value for my parents; it was a value that could give them some feeling of comfort, a sense of belonging and a sense of coherence in the chaotic world they lived in. These ambivalent, somewhat contradictory feelings of victimhood, but also of coping and survival, have been deeply integrated in my identity. In many ways I have had the role of the "memorial candle" in my family, but also the role of the "successful survivor."

My country is a violent place, where people's lives are completely dictated by their ability to cope with the reality of never ending wars, terror, and violence. My way of coping with this violent reality, from the time I was a young woman till today, has been that of an active bystander. As we know from history, passivity by witnesses or bystanders has greatly contributed to the evolution of violence and doing of harm by groups, allowing violence to occur without condemnation. There is no doubt that positive social-cultural change requires active bystandership by individuals and collectives (slide 2). The shift towards active bystandership implies the capacity to disengage from our ethnocentric narratives and perceptions. It demands that we contain the emotional challenges of acknowledging narratives that contradict our collective assumptions about the conflict and accept the moral obligation to address our contribution to violence (Staub, 2003).

As for myself, being an active bystander, I have never stopped raising questions about our way of conducting the conflictual situation. I have never stopped my political and social involvement with the hope of finding ways toward reconciliation.

For many years, my active bystandership was not on the professional level. I was very much involved in different political activities, those connected to left wing parties as well as those connected to NGOs (the Association for Civil Rights; Peace Now; I was one of the initiators of the Mental Health Workers for Peace; etc.). It was only later that I began combining my activities in these areas into my academic work: conducting joint research projects with Palestinians or joint workshops with Arab and Jewish university students. (slide 3) (The first ones were conducted together with my friend, the late Prof. Dan Bar-On). Most recently it has been the ESO project which I'll describe today. This is the kind of academic work, however, that completely sweeps me away. My personal involvement is intense. Therefore, maybe it is still hard for me to define it as "academic".

A major part of this activity has been my exciting journey into personal group encounters with Palestinians. The personal group encounters are very meaningful for me whether as a participant or as an initiator. As a "product" of the Israeli educational system, I had not met any Palestinians until I was a university lecturer, where some of my students were Israeli Arabs. Unfortunately, my students today (some of them) also

meet with Palestinians only in the context of being soldiers in the army.

Despite the differences between the activities, workshops, and encounters, they all were attempts, by people on both sides, to have an open encounter and to try to gain a better understanding of the difficult conflict between us. The meetings have always been fascinating and emotionally loaded but, at the same time raising questions. Very often I felt these encounters to be very detached, distant from reality. The question about the significance of the specific encounter beyond the meetings arises each time. Does it impact our conflictual reality? (slide 4)

What has usually arisen in these encounters is the question of the pain connected with "me being a victim" and "me being a victimizer". Sometimes we have avoided confronting the question of the ability of the "victimizer" to feel the victim's pain and the question – perhaps the most difficult one of all – of the victim's ability to feel the pain of the "victimizer". The question of our ability to understand and to sense one another, in our authentic identity, is much more complicated than this difficult dichotomy. Is it possible at all to do this within the framework of such inter-group encounters? (slide 5)

This question has especially arisen in trilateral encounters of Germans, Palestinians, and Israelis. The most influential, for me personally, was the TRT project (To Reflect and Trust) under the facilitation of Dan Bar On. The method used in the TRT was life story telling. I do not have enough time in this limited talk to discuss these encounters but I will describe one session which took place in Hamburg, in 1998. We sat in the room in a circle – American Jews (sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors), Germans (sons of perpetrators), Israeli Jews, and Palestinians. A lot of pain was present in the room. A Palestinian story followed that of a Jew, a child of survivors who had immigrated to the United States, which followed that of a Jewish-Israeli daughter of survivors who tried to set down roots in Israel, and, once again, to a Palestinian story of a mother who was prevented from being unified with her children. Before the encounters I was afraid of meeting the story of Martin Borman, the son of the Nazi officer. Could I empathize with his life story? Surprisingly, the most painful stories for me were of the Palestinians in our circle. Their stories evoked in me feelings of shame and guilt. After the meeting I wrote: "Painful comments came from the Palestinian side: 'Did the Holocaust really happen?' or 'Give me a break from Holocaust stories'". Is this an expression of an inability to absorb all of these painful

stories – especially when they are told in the first person: I, my mother, my son? Do I also have permission to express my inability to take in all the pain in the room? Martin Borman's response to these Palestinians' remarks was: "Please hear my life story..." The story told by Martin, the son of the Nazi officer, was an attempt to create a bridge between the Jews and the Palestinians, between the two expressions of pain which almost could not exist together in the same room...

"I do not remember when it was my turn to talk. Neither do I remember what I told and what I did not tell of my life story. I do remember that I felt that it was a personal story – not a collective story, not a national representation, not a representation of my cohort. Just me, my mother, my husband, my children (Slide 6). But... all of the points in the personal story touch the collective memory. How significant is this?"  
(Sagy, 2000 in Bar On)

One of the hard parts of my personal story was about my son who was sent as a soldier to Ktziot (an Israeli Jail for Palestinian prisoners). We visited him there, as parents, bringing food and cigarettes. There was a dark look in his eyes during that period. I had a feeling that I couldn't "save" him from that terrible task. And against this – there was Sammy's story about how he was imprisoned there, in the same camp, for a number of months,

probably at the same time. His son was born a bit before that. We worked out the dates with one another and we even laughed. A sad, embarrassed laugh.

When I finished, the first hug that I got was from Sammy. A real hug from a person, a personal friend. I couldn't wear any other, more collective hat than. That is how I felt toward him. I believe that is how he also felt towards me. That hug still remains with me today as the strongest experience that I had during the meeting in Hamburg. But, I still have the question – can the creation of such personal relationships between individuals, solve some part of the conflict between our two peoples? I would like to believe that it could. And if so – how?" (Slide 7)

I could conclude then that the political argument - which was taking place, at the same time, outside the seminar, in the real world – in the end, paralyzed the possibility of deeper insights concerning the conflict. This argument, more than anything else, had the effect of forcing the participants to confront their helplessness concerning their ability to significantly change external reality on the macro level. Azar calls this situation "structural victimization".

The collective identity in these intergroup encounters emphasized this feeling of helplessness.

I also wrote: "I didn't feel especially comfortable either with the representational hat of the Jewish-Israeli identity. After long years of growing up completely identifying with my national collective (which characterized the entire Israeli group, at the time), I went through a deep change. Today, I have more difficult, mixed feelings. The clear sense of collective identity slowly turned into a feeling that includes alienation toward political – social elements of Israeli society today. It is not easy for me to wear my national, collective hat today. However, when I come in contact with other national groups, especially outside of Israel's borders, it still pops up. Moreover, I am jealous of Europeans whom I meet, who have developed a post modernist, universalistic identity for themselves, with no feelings of guilt, and having done so, are easily freed from national and ethnocentric feelings. Can I also develop such a universalistic identity? The significance of this kind of identity is that I can choose, at any particular moment, which group I belong (women, psychologists, grandmothers). Do I have such an autonomous ability within me?" [Sagy, 2000 in Bar-On (ed.)]

This brings me to our current joint project – the ESO. It is a trilateral and multidisciplinary project (you can find everything in it), but I will focus here on the Israeli part only, and present some results from our evaluation research. What we have attempted to create was an intragroup encounter in which the participants were all Israeli-Jews. (slide 9) We have developed this encounter with the aim of helping our students open up to hear about the enemy's suffering as a way to promote willingness to reconcile. My rich past experiences with inter-group encounters has brought me to be aware of its limitations. As I previously described, such dialogue groups, even when they are based on personal stories, cannot ignore the collective identity of the participants which, in turn, mainly address the external power relations in the dialogue. The reality outside the dialogue room increases self defense mechanisms against feelings of shame, guilt or anger. In our ESO project we have developed an intra-group dialogue, which has enabled the Israeli participants to explore their internal conflicts, and through this to initiate new thinking and broaden their openness towards the Palestinian narrative. Actually, this development of intra-group dialogue was forced on us by the external reality – the frozen talks between the sides, the growing violence, and the opposition towards cooperation with the "other" side. The planned meetings of our Israeli students

with their Palestinian counterparts were postponed and then cancelled. Thus, by the end, the project was based on intra-group dialogue only. At the end of the first year we found that the intra-group process has a value of its own in dealing with the identity threats posed on collective identity in the intergroup encounters.

What was the procedure? (Slide 9)

In the academic year 2013-14 (and we are conducting another course this academic year) 24 undergraduates participated in a course at the Education Department of Ben Gurion University entitled "Encountering the Suffering of the 'Other'". The course design combines "content and process" elements: in the first part of the course we focus on theoretical concepts. Members of the research team present and discuss theoretical concepts relating to group identities in the context of the conflict: the roles of narratives in conflict, power relations and asymmetric conflict relations, and reconciliation. Another part of the course is experimental and process oriented. This includes encounters with narratives of the suffering of Palestinians, field trips to sites that relate to Al Naqba within Israel and the Palestinian territories, facilitated discussions in which students are invited to explore their cognitive and emotional responses to the

concepts, narratives, and field excursions. Throughout the course students write a diary in which they reflect about their experiences. (slide 10). The first tour was to Lod and Ramle – two Israeli towns where many Palestinians were expelled in 1948. The second tour (Slide 11) was to East Jerusalem and the Shuafat refugee camp and included meetings with 3 generations of refugees who told their stories.

What were the guiding principles in facilitation? (slide 12)

- Encourage active listening to the Palestinian narrative.
- Invite self reflection, self questioning: what does the "other"s narrative bring out in myself?
- Observe power mechanism: what do we know and how do we play a part in social construction?
- Encourage multiple voices within the group

We monitored this course with both quantitative and qualitative evaluation tools. Due to time limits, I will present the results of the quantitative evaluation research only. We distributed questionnaires during the first two weeks of the course, after the field trips, and again after the course was completed. We included various variables in the questionnaire (slide 13): perspective taking, victimhood, respect, readiness to reconcile. Significant change results (slide 14) were found

regarding fear of victimizing, trust, perspective taking, and willingness to reconcile. One of the most significant changes was related to the perceptions of collective narratives. Shortly I'll explain this concept which was at the focus of our intervention.

What are collective narratives? How do we study their perceptions? (slide 15)

Collective narratives are composed of the stories that a group uses to represent its own history and to construct a shared identity for all group members. Narratives tell us who we are, where we came from, and who the "others" are (Liu & Hilton, 2005). In the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, collective narratives play a major role.

How can we measure collective narratives?

The questionnaire we used in our evaluation study was developed 15 years ago by a joint research team of Palestinian and Israeli researchers (Prof. Sami Adwan was one of them) (slide 16). We distributed these questionnaires among teenagers from 1999 until 2009 and have found that the delegitimization towards the "other's" narrative on both sides

has become more rigid, the empathy towards the other's suffering has decreased during this decade, and the anger has been increasing. We found high correlations, however, between acknowledging legitimacy of collective narratives of the other and the expectations of future relations. Since the level of legitimacy was very low, the expectation of conciliation in the future was also low and was connected to less openness towards peaceful resolution (Sagy et al., 2002, 2010). (Slide 17)

I will present two examples from the questionnaire. The first example concerns the narrative of 1948. The development of the collective identities of Israeli and Palestinian societies has been a dialectic process in which the negation of the "other" has played a special role. The Israeli – Palestinian conflict is so resistant to resolution because of unique characteristics of the opposing narratives that are mainly rooted in the historical event of the 1948 war. This war is perceived dramatically differently in the national narrative of each side. In the Israeli narrative, it is a War of Independence, which signifies the beginning of a hopeful period in which the State of Israel was established, thus fulfilling the Jewish national dream. For the Palestinians, this event is known as Al Nakba – The Catastrophe, the beginning of a long period in which Palestinian hopes for national self-determination and a national home

were severely thwarted, as many Palestinians lost their land, homes, and property and became refugees in many countries.

In our study the two narratives were introduced with questions. (slide 18)

- Many Jewish-Israelis view the 1948 war as an important event marking their survival and independence. How do you feel about their attitude?
- Many Palestinians view the 1948 war as a disaster/catastrophe. How do you feel about their attitude?

#### (Response Items Slide 19)

The memory of the Holocaust is a central component in the construction of the Israeli national identity. It exists in the Israeli consciousness and in the collective memory as a traumatic historical event. The memory of the Holocaust expresses itself in the attempt to take one's fate "into one's own hands". The collective memory of helplessness of the Jewish victims has created the Israeli ethos of the need for security and military strength. The mentality of a nation under siege, and the existential fear which resulted from the extinction of Jews in the Holocaust, provided a basis for the

moral justification of Israeli acts of violence against the Arab population. Moreover, the memories of the Holocaust were used by the Israeli establishment to define basic national interests.

The Palestinians have opposed the Israeli narrative of the Holocaust as the justification for Zionism and for the right of the Jewish state to exist. They have turned it into: "Your Holocaust has become our Karita (Holocaust)," as stated by Emil Habibi, an important Israeli Arab writer. The Palestinians see themselves as victims of the Holocaust. The Holocaust collective narratives were introduced in the following questions (slide 20):

- Many Jewish-Israeli view the Holocaust as the greatest tragedy that ever happened to any nation and this fact provides justification for establishing a Jewish state for the Jews. How do you feel about their attitude?
- Many Palestinians view the Holocaust as a tragedy of the Jewish people that does not justify inflicting suffering on the Palestinian people. How do you feel about their attitude?

Here are the results of our evaluation research.

We found that the Israeli Jewish students experienced an increase in legitimacy towards the Palestinian narrative and a significant increase in empathy and knowledge. (slide 21)

Surprisingly, (slide 22) with regard to their own Israeli narratives, we found a significant increase in legitimacy, empathy, and knowledge.

The significant results we found were: (slide 23)

- An increase in knowledge for both narratives.
- An increase in empathy towards Palestinian narratives.
- An increase in legitimacy and empathy towards the Israeli narrative.
- We also found a dramatic increase in the relationship between perceptions of the Palestinian narratives and willingness to reconcile. (slide 24 - results)

To sum up, I'll try to answer the question of the intra-group encounter as a tool in advancing empathy towards the suffering of the "other" (slide 25):

- Our model of intervention enabled the students to meet themselves within a conflicted relationship.

- The intra-group dialogue provided an opportunity to observe the complexity of one's own identity and to adopt a more complex view of the "other".
- The intra-group dialogue also provided a safe space to empathize with the "other" in a way that does not negate one's own identity.

Now, I will try to summarize. In this talk I have sought to explain my personal motivation as well as my difficulties in combining my research endeavor with my social and political activity, as a woman who was born into a "culture of victims" and has lived all her life as a survivor in a violent conflict. I discussed my long journey to becoming an active bystander myself and how I try to encourage my students to be brave enough to take such a position in their own lives. One of our students said (slide 26) "Now that I know all that – what shall I do with it?" This is a question, perhaps a cry, that we must deal with in the future.

Meanwhile, the special ESO project I described here, as well as the research findings, are quite encouraging. This work is still ongoing and there are many questions that demand further attention. Still, these initial reports can illustrate how small steps can bridge huge gaps.

Let me end with Victor Frankl's meaningful saying: (slide 27)

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves" (Victor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning)