

The Sacred and Political in Dialogue: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Abstract

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This project, conceived of as a pilot study to precede dissertation work, entailed the facilitation of a dialogue group at a large conservative Jewish synagogue in North Miami Beach, Florida. The topic of study was the nexus of the sacred and political in dialogue with the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sacred, shadow and political themes were revealed from the (dialogue) sessions of a group of seven (conservative) Jewish participants who met to hold dialogue in the way of council.

This paper reviews the methodology utilized, provides an analysis of results and offers a discussion of these findings as well as a critique of the process. A review of the potential contribution made to the research site as well as to the field of depth psychology is discussed. Recommendations for future work in this topic area is provide

Introduction

I was sitting in synagogue one Sabbath morning listening to the rabbi read a list of names of Israelis who had been killed that week, casualties of suicide bombings and other violence in Israel. Ages of the victims ranged from 2 to 74 years old. I was deeply saddened that civilians and children so very young had lost their lives; I was angry that the names of Palestinian victims were not mentioned. Out of my sadness and anger I realized that a radical alternative was needed to address this crisis and that the rabbi's words reflected a symptom in what was and what was not said.

This project is a radical response to what has not been considered in my temple in relation to the Mid-East conflict: it is not to do with fighting the enemy and protecting our own, but rather it is dialogue; that is, a dialogue that listens in to the multiplicity of voices around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A group of members of this temple, was formed to facilitate dialogue around the sacred and political in relation to this Middle East conflict. Both Carol Gilligan, who expresses the importance of authentic voice, relationship, morality and compassion (1993) and Paulo Freire, who writes about the culture of silence of the dispossessed and the transformative potential of liberated voices through dialogue (1993, pp. 25-51, 68-72, 106-118), have informed this work.

This project was also intended as a pilot study toward the research work that I would later undertake as part of my dissertation. The objective was to test the feasibility of conducting a dialogue group around the sacred and political in reference to the ongoing *intifada* (uprising) in Israel/Palestine. The method utilized, the results and discussion pertaining to the facilitation and analysis of material brought forth in a dialogue group addressing this topic is what follows.

Methodology

The method that I chose to employ for this research was a series of dialogue groups conducted in the way of council. This method is community-based action research with a participatory approach to the inquiry as the subjects are engaged as collaborators and full participants in the research process (Stringer, 1999, p. 9). After a decline in the 1960's, action research reemerged in response to pragmatic and philosophical pressures and now as a disciplined inquiry it seeks focused efforts to improve the quality of people's organizational, community and family lives (Calhoun, 1993 in Stringer, 1999, p. 9). The dialogic, hermeneutic approach to research suggests a more democratic, empowering, liberating and humanizing approach to inquiry, which is the ideological basis for community-based action research (Stringer, 1999, pp. 9, 10).

As mentioned above, I have been interested in and seeking what might be a 'radical' alternative to what has so far been proposed to have a bearing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; a conflict that goes on daily in the Mid-East, one which impacts worldwide communities abroad, particularly Jewish and Arab communities, who in turn influence this crisis in the Middle East region. In the dialogue group, we share stories, experience, feelings in relation to a specific issue, problem, conflict or topic that impacts the community, locally or worldwide. As a result, we hope to acquire a better understanding of the phenomenon under discussion on a personal and communal level through the expression of authentic voice and a deep and respectful listening to the other. From this new perspective, resolution to a problem or perhaps a new way of knowing or understanding might become apparent and be integrated into an action plan for the community at large.

The dialogue process is not a conflict resolution group or a discussion with a specific purpose, but rather a sharing of experience which often reveals what the next steps might be in order to approach an issue. This type of community-based action research results not only in the ability to look at an issue through an-other's lens or just through one's own inner authority, but also provides a strong sense of community. It operates at the intellectual as well as the social, cultural, political and emotional levels (Stringer, 1999, p.11).

The dialogue groups that were conducted in this research study were facilitated in the 'way of council'. Council circles/meetings were a way of making important decisions in the Native American traditions where it is said that members knew what decisions were to be made in listening in to the stories told and to the silences between the words (in Zimmerman, 1996, pp. 1-5). The council circle is attuned to place, ceremony, sacredness and the weaving of stories. The intentions of council are to speak and to listen from the heart and to speak with spontaneity and with lean expression (Zimmerman, 1996, pp. 15-36).

In the fall of 2001, I invited the members of the dialogue group that I had conducted for my first year's summer fieldwork project in 2000 to join me in an ongoing dialogue group that would take us into 2002. The group, comprised of seven conservative Jewish temple members, met for four 2 to 2 1/2 hour sessions in November of 2001 and January, May and June of 2002. This group was facilitated as it had been for the past year (as we met periodically during the year after the first research study), in the way of council.

The dialogue group met, as usual, in the boardroom of the educational center of the synagogue. Participants were told in advance that the theme of the group would be around the ideas of the sacred and the political in dialogue. They were not told that this sacred and political dialogue would lead into a dialogue that would attempt to address both sides of the conflict in the Israel/Palestine.

At the beginning of the dialogue group series, I asked participants to read and sign a consent form. We then began by sitting in the center of the room in a circle around the central table which housed the talking pieces (a rock, a small Hebrew bible, a wooden heart), a prominent candle and a small tape recorder. I explained to the group that the tape was recording the session so that I could transcribe it accurately at a later date.

We began with a personal dedication by one member of the group while they simultaneously lit the candle in the center of the circle (symbolic of fire). We then moved on to a moment of silence and then a review of the intentions of council as well as some other rules that must be adhered to if this process is to work (for example, confidentiality). From there we began our breathing and stretching/yoga exercises that we incorporate into the group routinely in order to bring us more into body and to free our minds from the tensions of the work day. This enables us to be present to the group and to speak more fluidly from the heart.

After the beginning ceremony, above, I brought forth the first research question and we each, in turn, by passing a talking piece or by picking one up from the central table, spoke about our own experience and listened to each others' stories. When everyone had said everything that they had wanted to say about the subject, we conducted

a resonating circle, wherein people reflected on and commented about their own as well as others' expressions/stories. This was the basic format for all of the dialogue sessions.

Two sessions and part of another focused on the heartfelt expression of a sacred experience. One session dealt with the topic of the shadow, while another addressed each group member's connection to Israel and/or their own Judaism. Our final session asked for the holding of the sacred with the situation of the Israelis, with the plight of the Palestinians, and then with both the plight of the Israelis and Palestinians.

I subsequently listened to the tapes of the sessions a few times and then transcribed the dialogue. In analyzing the data, I used Amedeo Giorgi's research method which applies a phenomenologically based meaning condensation to the inquiry (Kvale, 1996, pp.193-196). My analysis of the transcribed dialogue session began with a highlighting of the natural meaning units of what was spoken in the group. From the meaning units I condensed the material into common themes or aspects. From that point, I went back and reviewed the transcript as well as the list of aspects to incorporate the flavor of the experience as it was first expressed and then compiled a list of second order profiles. This list formed the basis for the development of an essential description.

Data from Dialogue Group Sessions

I. Results of the 'sacred dialogue' from sessions 1, 2 and 4.

Research question(s) posed:

1. Please talk about a sacred experience that you have had at any time in your life. This could be a religious experience, a vision, a dream, a numinous experience (which is an unexpected, uncanny, totally different experience than anything you have ever encountered before). When you receive the talking piece, please let this sacred

experience that you are about to share be something that comes up spontaneously for you.

Also, please talk about what effect this experience had on you.

2. Talk about how you felt when you expressed the above and heard others express their stories of the sacred. Think about whether this experience reconnected you with something. How did you feel on a physical/body level? (This was the resonating circle.)
3. In your own story and the story of others, was there a relational aspect to the experience? (i.e. a relationship with the Self, with others, with G-d?)

Sacred Themes/Second Order Profiles:

1. Prayer was expressed repeatedly as an important element in one's sacred experience.
2. Relationship with, presence of and/or an experience of a sense of G-d was mentioned in the description of the experience.
3. Relationship with an 'other' or with several other persons reportedly occurred during this experience. There was a realization of the interconnectedness among all living things.
4. Ritual (Judaic) was brought up frequently as a sacred experience; i.e. the bar mitzvah (ritual of a boy becoming a man at 13 years of age), laying teffelin (wrapping one's arm and head with leather straps holding Hebrew biblical scrolls while chanting morning prayers), lighting the Sabbath candles, chanting Sabbath prayers, receiving an aliyah (call to the bima/platform to chant blessings before and after a Torah portion is read), attending minyan (daily morning and evening prayer service which also honors those who have passed away in the past year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) martyrology chanted by the cantor.

5. Continuity was expressed; i.e. the connection between parent and child, connecting back to the ancestors, back to those who have passed away, connecting back to a historic event or symbol of that event which is shared by and passed down in the family.
6. The transformative nature of the experience was implied either through enacting ritual or as a result, in one member's case, of a drug induced experience.
7. The meaning of and engagement in doing mitzvot (charitable deeds), especially with the younger generation, was mentioned.
8. The idea and presence of spiritual healing was felt in the participation of sacred rites (including our dialogue circle) and in doing mitzvot.
9. A *first time* encounter of the phenomenon was expressed by a few members as being a key factor in the sacred experience; i.e. a first time experience that is unexpected and deeply moving and that puts one in a different (transcendent) space, bringing a sense of humility and a feeling that there exists a power or force larger than oneself in the universe.

Essential Description:

The initial dialogue sessions centered around an experience of the sacred in response to the first research question, followed by resonating circles. Several different aspects, as noted above, were mentioned in stories and reflections upon what constituted a sacred experience for each individual. Themes were broadened through resonating circles and in a subsequent dialogue group meeting which further elaborated on previously revealed experiences and some new and spontaneous memories that came up in the circle.

Prayer and ritual practice were mentioned by many, if not most, of the group members as being important sacred experiences. The rituals expressed were Judaic practices such as the initiation of a boy into manhood (a bar mitzvah), girl into womanhood (a bat mitzvah), lighting and prayer over the Sabbath candles and other Sabbath prayers, the minyan (morning and evening prayer service which incorporates a mourning service for the dead), the martyrology which is chanted by the cantor on the High Holidays. Engagement in many of these rituals allowed for transformation to occur, a deep moving/stirring feeling from within to arise, an instinctual energy to come up and be released through dancing, singing and shouting. There was an awareness of a sacred bond that was entered into in performing the ritual or prayer.

Relationship, an aspect of the experience which also emanated from ritual or prayer service, was mentioned as a critical element of the experience of the sacred. Relationship with other people was emphasized as something that helped to make the experience meaningful. Relationship with or a feeling of the presence of God was experienced in chanting the Sabbath prayers and in praying to God at a Jewish men's retreat which held a ceremonial circle. Interestingly, this feeling of the relationship/presence of God was mentioned by both of the two men and by only one of the women in the group.

The interconnectedness among human and all living things was stressed in one member's drug induced experience, in other's experiences of ritual and prayer and in one member's metaphoric image of an interwoven-checkerboard world. The importance of the collective conscious (versus the individual) and the oneness of the universe was intensely experienced as transformative (personally and politically) during the drug

induced experience. The sacred bond and everlasting connection that exists between parent and child, the ancestors, the dead and the living as well as the importance of a connection back to a historic and meaningful event was expressed by the group members.

The meaning inherent in doing ‘mitzvot’ or a charitable deed was spoken of as sacred by a few of the members. The spiritual healing present through engagement in these activities (particularly a parent with a child) as well as in ritual gave a sacred meaning to these endeavors. For example, a woman spoke of the spiritual healing of attending minyan every morning for a year after her father died and the sacred meaning inherent in the ritual of her grandson being named after her (deceased) father (which is a Jewish Ashkenazi tradition). ‘Naming’ seemed to be an important and sacred ritual as connecting back to or learning about the (deceased) person one was named after (one who they obviously never knew) was mentioned by another member.

Finally, and perhaps most unforeseen, a first time experience or something that happens unexpectedly for the first time was mentioned as important in the sacred experience. A member of the group mentioned how moved he was the first time he heard the cantor enter from the back of the temple chanting the martyrology during Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). The ‘first time’ was given mention as a crucial element in the sacred experience during many of the rituals that were brought up, such as receiving an aliyah (in being called to the Torah in synagogue), being a parent of a bar or bat mitzvah and taking part in a men’s prayer circle, all for the first time. The feeling of humility and of being part of something larger was expressed in telling these stories as well as in the story of the drug induced experience.

II. Results of shadow dialogue and hosting difference (session 3)

Research question posed:

What is in your face? (re: the temple, your personal life, what is going on in the world)

What are the things that come up for you that mean a lot and that you find yourself not talking about in a dialogical manner? What is marginalized or left out that is bothering you or bottling up in you that you would like to express?

Shadow/marginalized/ what is 'in your face' Themes/Second Order Profiles:

1. There was a pervasive feeling of frustration in feeling unknown and misunderstood as a Jew in today's world; it is as if the history that the Jews have known has vanished, disappeared.
2. Frustration was expressed in there being no 'middle position'; i.e. no place for those who support the idea of the existence of Israel (as a Jewish state) and also understand that what Prime Minister Sharon is doing is not right.
3. A feeling was expressed by one member of feeling like a pariah in both the Jewish community (because of her reservations about the Israeli government) and in the Gentile community that is anti-Israel (because of her being pro-Israel).
4. Frustration was expressed about the Jewish people, who represent such a tiny portion of the world population, not being allowed to just have 'our little country'; why everyone must have an opinion on Israel.
5. Frustration was mentioned over the strong feeling that there is a 'bias of the world' which is pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli.
6. Members were frustrated with the lack of truth/knowledge circulating in the world regarding Jews and Israel, particularly in news reports concerning the Mid-East.

7. People were horrified about the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe and that the European Jews seem to accept this sentiment as a natural state of affairs.
8. Anger, concern and fear that anti-Semitism is alive and well was articulated.
9. Fear was revealed by a woman in the group who felt that we may be returning to and that she might die in a world which was like that of World War II.
10. Concern was expressed about family members/relatives currently living in or traveling to Israel.
11. Compassion was heard for Israeli friends who are 'walking on eggshells' and have expressed fear, sadness and insecurity, as opposed to their typical expression of courage and optimism, in their correspondence.
12. There was a pervasive feeling of fear that Israel and the Jewish people are alone in the world. A feeling was articulated of being out-numbered and unrecognized by the many more Gentiles in the world that do not hold Israel in their hearts like the Jews do.
13. There was a deep concern over losing the state of Israel. Some group members felt that the Jews/Israelis must hold onto the Jewish state by whatever means it takes (e.g. by expelling the Palestinians or erecting a wall to separate the two peoples).
14. People expressed frustration as the Jews and Arabs in Israel must work for peace and they are not doing that.
15. There was anger and frustration with the flawed leaders on both sides that have brought both their peoples down.
16. Some members expressed the idea that Sharon and Arafat are holding Jewish people hostage; that the Jews are at their mercy.

17. There was an expression of justification for the aggression of Sharon and the Israeli army as ... 'they are just doing what they have to' (it was said) in order to protect the Jewish state; 'force is necessary now', it was declared.
18. Disappointment in humanity was expressed (referring mostly to suicide bombing; one member referred to the Israeli occupation of the territories).
19. One member expressed a need to speak from a human point of view (versus Israeli or Arab) but to still maintain one's identity.
20. Regret was expressed by one member who said that she wished that the fact finding mission in Jenin had been conducted as ... 'that would have shown that Israel is not as brutal as the whole world is claiming', she said.
21. The viewing and listening to news reports was reported to have been curtailed or postponed as news of suicide bombings and reports of (Jewish) young people being murdered was too painful to bear everyday.
22. One member in particular felt unexpectedly drawn to and resonating with the voice of conservative/right wing commentators, like Rush Limbaugh.
23. There was an acknowledgment that we are not living in Israel so whatever we see, hear or think of the situation may not be the truth.
24. A few members expressed their sympathy for the Palestinians as they claimed that these people have been used by Iran and Iraq to deflect attention from themselves and their own country's endeavors.
25. One member expressed her view that money and oil drives the world and that we Jews don't rate with oil.

Results of Hosting Difference

Research question posed:

Lets talk about 'hosting difference' - listening from the heart to another's voice or opinion and putting our own opinions to the side for a moment in order to do that. What has come into your awareness concerning difference; perhaps it was something that you heard or a person or feeling that was different? Can you talk about an experience of hosting difference?

Essential Description

When asked to talk about shadow or marginalized material, issues that are not being brought forth in a dialogical manner, the majority of the group spoke about frustration, anger and fear over the situation in Israel. This topic was not prompted or brought up by me, the facilitator, as I made no mention of the Middle East in the question that I posed. However, once one member started talking about Israel, the ongoing conflict and its ramifications, everyone responded and spoke eagerly about their own feelings concerning this situation.

Frustration was the key word used to describe feelings associated with what has been the fallout from the conflict in Israel. Members expressed extreme frustration at the apparent lack of knowledge and understanding of Jewish history and culture by non-Jews. They were angry and concerned about this misunderstanding. Members were also shocked and horrified by the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe as well as anti-Semitic remarks expressed by Gentile acquaintances in this country. People felt like there was a bias in the world toward the Palestinian cause and an anti-Israeli sentiment circulating in the media.

Frustration was also expressed regarding the lack of a space for a middle position to be lived in; that is, there was a sentiment of feeling outcast by the Jewish community if one opposed the tactics of the current Israeli government but still believed in the Jewish state, while simultaneously there was no place outside of the Jewish community to be pro-Israel. Frustration and anger was voiced toward the flawed leadership of both Arab and Jewish people; some claimed that these leaders were holding Israeli Jews hostage by their tactics. The need to work toward peace, which is not happening, was verbalized while some members commented on the need for force now and expressed their support of the Sharon/Israeli government.

Fear and concern were the next most frequent expressions articulated regarding the situation in Israel. Fear of the relatively small population of Jews standing alone in the world without support or recognition from others of the need for a Jewish homeland, fear of losing the state of Israel, fear of returning to a world like that of World War II. There was concern about family members and friends traveling to Israel or living in this volatile place.

A disappointment in humanity was expressed, in reference to mainly the suicide bombings, while a need to speak from a human point of view, rather than an Israeli or Palestinian place was expressed by one member. Some members stated that they were drawn unexpectedly to conservative politics and commentators like Rush Limbaugh. An acknowledgment that we do not really know what is going on in the Middle East because we are not there, was expressed. There was a sentiment of pity voiced in reference to the Palestinian people who, it was felt, are being used by various other Arab nations to forward their own goals.

The dialogue that followed the question of 'hosting difference' was filled with intense anger and did not at all address the question posed; hence, I did not delineate themes. This part of the dialogue group seemed to escalate what had emerged prior to this as an opportunity to vent anger. Anger was expressed at the realization that there is a segment of the world that hates Israel and is not fond of Jews. Anger was directed at the Pope for not condemning suicide attacks against Israelis.

There was little compassion for despondent suicide bombers that one member claimed receive up to \$25,000 per bombing which, it was said, goes to their surviving family members; she claimed that these suicide bombers are 'making their parents rich' by committing suicide. One member commented that it was not the money that these people were after but that they were brainwashed and on a mission for Allah. Another group member commented that while it is difficult to hear another's different point of view, hating Israelis or Palestinians will not move us forward.

III. Results from connection to Israel dialogue, and holding the sacred and (political) situation for each and then both the Israelis and Palestinians (session 4)

Research question posed:

Let's talk about how we are connected to Israel and/or to our own Judaism. Please tell a story or describe an experience where the feeling for your connection to Israel was brought forth.

Connection to Israel Themes/Second Order Profiles:

1. Re-memories expressed of the 1967, six day war in Israel, which was experienced as a time of dread and darkness, waiting and listening, fear and concern over losing the

Jewish state. From this state of anxious waiting, came the feeling of jubilation upon Israeli victory in war.

2. Warm memories were expressed of trips to the land of Israel after the '67 war to reunite with family and friends and even people known before and separated during the Holocaust.
3. There was an expression of elation and belief in a higher power (i.e. G-d) at the miracle of the birth of the state of Israel in 1948. One member spoke about the significance of a symbol representing the birth of and connection to Israel for her.
4. A tie-in was made between the holy hymns and the feeling of connectedness to Israel.
5. A connection to the Holocaust was stated in one member's experience of growing up in a family where her mother had lost all her siblings in the concentration camps.
6. A connection was expressed to the many sacred areas in Israel where Jews have a historical and biblical presence, areas that are currently in dispute such as the site of the tomb of Abraham.

Essential Description

The connection to Israel came in re-memories of old times and living through the experience of historic events in the life of Israel; for example, the memories of fear, anticipation and hope during the 1967 six day war in Israel. People recalled being on the streets and witnessing others on the streets (in the U.S.) collecting money for Israel during that time. Warm memories of travels to Israel after this war to visit old friends and family and to visit areas where Jews were previously not permitted, of enjoying Hebrew songs that were popular and dancing in the streets of Israel were expressed with great

enthusiasm and joy. These experiences, particularly the one of meeting up with friends known before the Holocaust, were described as expansive and transformative.

The memory of the birth of the state of Israel in 1948 was expressed as a miracle and as a holy experience by one member. Another member spoke about the sacredness of and connection to Israel through a symbol, a spoon that was passed down from her mother that symbolized the birth of the state of Israel, acquired at a Hadassah (Jewish women's organization that supports Hadassah Hospital in Israel) convention in 1948. She felt connected to (the birth of) the state of Israel through this symbol as Israel's birth date, which was inscribed on the spoon, was also close to her own date of birth.

A connection to the Holocaust was mentioned as one member claimed she grew up with death as all of her mother's siblings perished in the concentration camps. This dark story prompted a change from the bright and joyous mood of celebrating Israel/Judaism and brought in the reminder of what occurred before the gaiety. The biblical Hebrew/Judaic connection to sacred land in Israel that is currently under dispute was then brought forth in the dialogue. Anger toward the Arabs (primarily the leaders and the extremists) and the way in which they treat the Palestinians was verbalized.

Research question posed (this question was presented after each member of the group recalled and retold a sacred experience that was shared in the first two sessions):

I would like you to hold the current situation of the Israelis in your heart and hold on the other hand the experience of the sacred that you just spoke of and the question is: How does the experience of the sacred (that you just spoke of) inform your heart and mind in

terms of the Israelis? Please stay with the personal story of your connection to Israel as well as your sacred experience that were both just spoken of and express what comes up.

Themes regarding the sacred informing the situation of the Israelis:

1. Empathy was expressed for Israeli people: 'those people are us, someplace else', one member claimed.
2. Outrage was voiced at the killing of Israeli children and sadness at the unavailability of a normal and safe childhood for those children.
3. Frustration and sadness was expressed over the senselessness and persecution of the Jews, which happened before and is now happening again, it was said.
4. Surprise was expressed at the ongoing normality of life in Israel as was evidenced in a package recently received from Israel through the postal system.

Essential Description

Empathy for the Israeli people and sadness and frustration was expressed over the senselessness and persecution (again) of Jews. There was outrage at the killing of Israeli children and a sadness that they were being robbed of a normal childhood.

Research question posed:

As you hold the situation for the Palestinians in your heart as well as your experience of the sacred, how does your experience of the sacred inform your heart and mind in connection with the plight of the Palestinians?

Themes regarding the sacred informing the situation of the Palestinians:

1. Sadness was expressed for the Palestinian situation, Palestinian children who have been traumatized and Palestinian youth, who join the ranks of suicide bombers to 'make their lives worthwhile', it was said.
2. Compassion was voiced for Palestinians in refugee camps and for those who feel desperate like the Jews once did in going through long periods of isolation and identification.
3. Blame for the current situation was attributed to the Palestinian authority that has not created any platform, structure or leadership for hope toward a better life; this government, it was said, has brought ruin and self-imposed despair on its people and has put its energy toward hating Israel. It has invested in the idea that death is preferred to life, people claimed.
4. One member claimed that a segment of the Palestinian population is inhumane, not human, animal-like.
5. A dialogue around the feeling of mothers of Palestinian suicide bombers revealed mixed sentiments: one member said that these mothers are brainwashed into believing this fanatical religion; another said that these women must be so cut-off from their bodies and feelings in order to express pride rather than remorse at the death of a child; while an additional member said that there must be both a sense of pride and tremendous loss felt which he claimed is human nature.
6. One member spoke about the heartwarming feeling and sense of hope in hearing about the formation of dialogue groups including Israeli and Palestinian parents of victims of violence; another member claimed that these and other co-existence programs have been kept quiet for fear of reprisal.

7. There was an expression of the need to be 'inside' the Palestinian community, versus outside looking in, in order to fully comprehend their despair.

Essential Description

Sadness was expressed for the Palestinian situation and the Palestinian children who feel they have nothing to look forward to in life so that many of them become suicide bombers. Compassion was expressed for Palestinians in refugee camps as their desperate situation was for a moment seen as similar to the Jewish periods of isolation and identification. Quickly anger replaced compassion as blame was laid on the Palestinian authority for bringing ruin and despair to their people.

There were differing opinions regarding mother's of suicide bombers as a dialogue evolved around a potential ability to empathize with these mothers and hence see the pain through a different lens. Some members felt that these mothers endorsed the bombing, experiencing pride, while others felt that these women were brainwashed by religious fanaticism or alternatively cut-off from their own bodies/feeling function. A sense of pride along with a feeling of loss was what one member imagined these mothers feeling.

Finally, the idea of needing to be inside versus outside the Palestinian community to truly know their despair, was expressed.

Research question posed:

Hold the conflict of the Israelis and Palestinians with each other in your mind and heart and again holding your own experience of the sacred, I would like you to talk about how

your experience of the sacred informs your heart and mind about both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Themes regarding the sacred informing both the situation of the Israelis and Palestinians:

1. Frustration, depression and sadness were expressed in hearing of daily bombings, violence, occupation and loss; some members felt like this violence seems endless and is the antithesis of the sacred.
2. An expression of pessimism or resignation was heard in that peace seems like a distant way off; there was a felt sense by one member that the (few) peace movements will make no difference in the process and that it is a matter now of which side will 'cave in' first.
3. There was concern that if there is too great of a loss the resultant lack of trust will see both parties cling more desperately to whatever land they now possess.
4. Sadness was expressed about this generation of children who are growing up with terrorism in their lives and psyches
5. There was concern about the lack of normality in life in Israel; that people cannot raise children in a normal, secure manner, that people are afraid to go out their front door.
6. One member expressed her realization that trauma, even at an early age, is part of Israeli and Palestinian life and that this is such a different experience of life than Americans have.
7. Another comment was made about the complexity of the situation that is reduced to simplicity by the media.

8. There was an awareness voiced of the missing feminine element in the aggression and politics of (Israeli Prime Minister) Sharon.
9. There was an awareness expressed of the lawlessness and instinctual aggression let loose, without boundaries in this conflict, which seems to have taken on a life of its own.
10. One member expressed hope, belief and trust in a loving G-d and future period of forgiveness and peacemaking.

Essential Description

The current violence in Israel/Palestine was seen as the antithesis of the sacred. Despair was expressed over the efficacy or even possibility of a peace process at this point since the losses have been so great and all trust seems to have been lost. Concern was again expressed over the absence of a normal life in Israel, especially for the (Jewish) children who are growing up with terrorism and trauma.

There was an awareness expressed by one member of the missing feminine voice in Israeli politics and the complexity of a situation that people attempt to simplify. Another member expressed hope and belief in a higher power (G-d) to help bring this situation to a place of peace and forgiveness.

Discussion

In this section, I intend to articulate and deepen some of the themes brought out in the results, but first I attend to the transference dynamics in the work, the biases and ethical concerns of the research and the contribution that such a study could make to the place in which it was conducted as well as to the field of depth psychology.

I have been putting off the analysis and write up of this research project as I have dreaded going back to the data on this dialogue group; the title I was tempted to give the project was, 'a story of a group that went wrong'. I went through an intense personal drama in conducting the above series of dialogue groups. This internal drama I believe was a result of the chosen topic, a dialogue revolving around the Mid-East crisis (while Israel is essentially at war) and the composition of the group, conservative Jewish temple members, in conjunction with my own concerns about being exiled in speaking the voice of difference.

In forming the dialogue group for this project, I asked my ongoing temple dialogue group that participated in my first summer's research study to again join me in this new project. Most of the members (7) consented to do this. I informed the group members that we would be discussing the sacred and political in dialogue, but I did not fully elaborate on what the dialogue group would be about; i.e. inviting dialogue around the sacred and political in reference to the conflict in the Middle East in order to perhaps see the geo-political situation from a different lens; a lens that could view the crisis from the perspective of the 'other' (side).

Although I did gain informed consent signed by each member, perhaps herein lies the first ethical question or perhaps obstacle to gaining true consent as what these members would be asked to do was not, I believe, clearly conveyed. They were not aware that I was going to ask them to consider the other, the Palestinians, and to potentially take a look at the shadow at the heart of this inter-cultural conflict. I sensed that while they would be interested in a dialogue around the Middle East conflict, they might not be interested in doing this difficult work. Also, I did not want to inform them

on any of the details as I wanted the dialogue to take place with spontaneity and without pre-formed judgments.

The members obviously came in with pre-formed judgments and they themselves brought up the crisis in Israel when I asked them to talk about the shadow. In bringing up their frustration about the situation in the Mid-East and all of its ramifications, some important issues were revealed; however, much of our shadow dialogue session became a catharsis for and confirmation of pent-up anger which seemed eager to be vented. As a result, tension was dispelled and I felt as though I was left holding it (not my idea of a dialogue group).

I felt that I was taking a risk in running this type of group in this place (a conservative temple) with these people (conservative Jews). The risk was a potential personal loss of the comradeship that I had developed with the group as compassion with the Palestinians (which I felt and expressed) would definitely make one an outsider in the culture of this environment. I realize that there are risks inherent in resisting splitting and holding the tension in any group, never mind one that is polarized and/or one in which the voice of difference is not welcome.

In consideration of the above circumstances, I wonder, was it ethical to go forward with the group? In answer to this question, my awareness that something had gone wrong did not surface until well into the shadow dialogue. Also, looking back, I wonder, what is the praxis of holding a group like this together? There must be something of substance or value in what I felt was a problematic group.

The above results and following discussion reveal important elements of the dialogue that did come through and I believe can be considered a contribution to the

research site as well as to the field of depth psychology. One element of value was the knowledge and experience I acquired in conducting this pilot study. I realize how important it is to host a dialogue group which is centered on a conflict with both sides of the conflict represented by the group members (i.e. in this case Jews and Arabs or Muslims/Christians). Also, the (ethical) necessity of further elaboration regarding what the dialogue group will entail and what will be asked of each participant became evident.

In addition, I felt that my own voice and those of others influenced group members in terms of their comments regarding the Palestinians. I often felt this internal conflict in expressing my own beliefs which were in opposition to many in the group; I often felt a tug to join the ‘group think’. Other times I felt the group’s attempt to appease me or to be in agreement ‘with the leader’ in listening to and trying to take a middle position, even though I sensed that that was not in their hearts. This is another reason that for future research regarding this topic area I would strongly recommend a more diverse group membership, with representation from both sides of the conflict. In a group of diversity, group members need to be willing to respectfully listen to each other’s (potentially different) stories or perhaps at the point of such despair that they are willing to attempt anything (such as listening to the other side) for the possibility of peace.

As for this dialogue group, I believe that some consciousness was painfully attained as to the awareness of the plight of ‘the other’ during our last session, when people were asked to hold the sacred and the situation of the other together. Also, the sacred dialogues and those pertaining to the group’s connection to Israel/Judaism were particularly meaningful sessions, ones in which “the promise of dialogue showed itself”

(Isaacs, 1999, p. 28). I believe that these aspects are reflected in the results (above) and the following commentary.

The following is a discussion of the results. I begin with a depth psychological review of the sacred dialogue and proceed onto the shadow dialogue. This is followed with a discussion of the integration of the sacred and the (political) plight of the Israelis and Palestinians.

Once the full flavor of stories were recaptured in the composition of the sacred and I could see them on the page before me, I was struck by how these sacred experiences were representative of the *numinosum*. The numinous, a word that Rudolf Otto termed in 1917, meaning ‘holy’ above and beyond, having a divine component (1923/1958, pp. 7,11), can grip or stir the soul with a particular affective state which is described by Otto as a feeling of the ‘mysterium tremendum’ (in Corbett, 1996, p. 11). The descriptions and affect expressed by the members of the dialogue group in the telling of their sacred experiences truly reflected this definition of the term *numinosum*.

Many of the experiences expressed in the dialogue group resembled the examples/accounts of contact with the numinosum given by Lionel Corbett in his book, *The Religious Function of the Psyche* (1996). The stories of the sacred shared in the dialogue group revealed the quality and varieties of the numinosum. Some members told of the healing potential of the experience, while others spoke of the affective intensity of this experience in the body. Also stressed was the transformational element of this experience which in many instances came through the practice of ritual or engagement in the world through acts of mitzvot (charity). A feeling of interconnectedness with others

and/or the universe was revealed as was the experience of humility, the relativization of the personal self and the presence of or contact with divinity.

The resemblance of these experiences to those reported by Corbett struck me as remarkable. Rosemarie Anderson writes that intuitive inquiry, which relies on sympathetic resonance, as was the case in our dialogue group, underscores the unique and personal voice of the individual researcher and that the “depth of the researcher’s intuitive understanding gives a universal voice and character to the research findings”; that the personal is universal (1998, pp. 73-75). This reassured me of the validity and applicability inherent in this type of research study.

I would like to focus on a few of the sacred themes brought forth in the group as they made a particular impression on me and the group members. They seem also to be closely aligned with some of the ideas of depth psychology. First of all, I would like to address the idea of relationship, the interconnectedness with others and/or the universe, which most of the members spoke of at some point in their stories in reference to the transformative possibilities inherent in this experience.

One expression of the interconnectedness of the world and its transformative effect was felt during a drug-induced experience. There was an emphasis placed on the value of relationships formed which was spoken of as occurring during the practice of ritual, such as attending the daily minyan for a year. One member gave a beautiful metaphor of a checkerboard to describe the change in his perception of ‘the checkerboard world’; he had moved from thinking that ‘as long as everyone remains in their own squares we will be O.K. and can live together separately...’ to a perception that all sides

of a checkerboard touch each other, inferring that we cannot exist in a solitary box but that we are all interconnected.

The idea of connecting back to our ancestors, historic events and the concept of continuity with and through our children also struck me as an important sacred revelation. It brought to my mind the concept of *religio*, which was the original use of the word religion, defined by Edinger as a 'linking back' (1984, p. 57). This link back to the ancestors came up in the dialogue group in stories told of a sacred feeling in naming children after their deceased grandparents and the meaning inherent in the religious naming ceremony. One member spoke of learning about his namesake; others spoke of the connection or link back to experiences that symbolized Jewish historical/family/community events. Acts of charity (*mitzvot*) and rituals participated in with children were also brought up as sacred encounters.

Finally, and probably what came as one of the most striking revelations, was the idea of the sacred felt as numinous when the experience occurred for 'the first time'. Members who expressed experiences of something unexpected, uncanny and as happening for the first time, told of an intensely affective experience, one which was deeply moving and transformative. This brought to my mind the idea of the primacy of aesthetics which Hillman writes about.

Aesthetics in Greek is *aithesis*, which means breathing in, a gasp, a primary aesthetic response (Hillman, 1997, pp. 47-48). The sacred experience of some of these group members tended to be sacred at least partially because they were experienced for the first time ever and this I believe accompanied an aesthetic or sense perception that

they felt. This *aithesis* was perhaps more moving than it would have been had the person experienced the phenomena in the past.

In reflecting on the dialogue topic of the shadow, what seemed to reveal itself most prominently was the fear of the history and culture of the Jewish people being erased. People expressed concerns about why others do not know what the Jews know about (Jewish) history. Fear ranged from that of being alone, outnumbered and unseen in this world as a Jew to the rampant rise of anti-Semitism abroad. This led to the deeply felt concern that we could return to a time like that of World War II, with Jews marching once again to the gas chambers. Maalouf claims that we are all migrants or a member of a minority which makes for a feeling that our own identity, as we have conceived of it, is threatened (1996, p. 37).

The above feeling of despair led people to believe that we must hold onto the state of Israel, a homeland for the Jews, with ever more force. There was justification expressed for the aggression now being exercised by the Sharon government to save Israel as well as expressed frustrations and disappointment in the flawed leadership of both Sharon and Arafat, who, members claimed, are holding the Jews hostage. The predominant thrust of the dialogue was that Israelis are the victims in this conflict, they are the ones suffering and being attacked heinously by suicide bombers, that they and their children cannot live normal lives. There was no mention of the shadow of the Israeli (aggression) or the plight of the Palestinians except for one comment that expressed sympathy for the Palestinians who, it was said, have been used by other Arab nations.

This defensive and self-protecting attitude, provoked by what I believe was intense fear in the re-memories that surfaced of the trauma of the Nazi regime and World War II, was tempered by a few comments that spoke to the idea of holding a middle position in this conflict. That is, some members spoke of how difficult it was to support the idea of the state of Israel as a Jewish nation and also to disagree with the tactics of the Sharon government. They felt that there was no place for this middle position in the Jewish or Gentile community. Rabbi Michael Lerner advocates a progressive middle position where he shows how it is possible to be both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian through a realization that “both sides have co-created the current mess” and that “the process of healing is to tell the story of how we got where we are in a way that avoids demonization” of the other (2003, pp. xiii, xv).

In addressing the topic of a connection to Israel and/or one’s Judaism, I could sense a glow encircling the group as stories were told regarding the Jewish western engagement in the ’67 (six day) war and the re-connection to the land of Israel in trips taken after the Israeli victory in that war. Stories of joy and warmth and deeply felt ties were shared in memories of being in Israel and re-connecting with old friends and family, some last seen before the Holocaust. The numinous was expressed in one member’s story of his deep sense of the existence of a higher power at the age of 8, in listening in to a ham operated radio which informed him of the formation of the state of Israel in 1948. This affective sensibility that held the circle at these moments re-kindled a spark in me and brought to my mind the idea of the divine spark that lives in every being and that is liberated through holy converse (Buber, 1950/1998, p. 5), as the re-memories seemed to generate hope and a trust in the world that things once were and can again be promising.

This promise seemed to be broken or crushed at the sound of a marginal voice which brought into the circle the sadness and depression felt in growing up with the Holocaust, as one member's story was about her childhood with a mother who had suffered the loss of all her siblings; this re-memory was her connection to Israel/Judaism. This reminder of the closest and most available trauma of the Jewish people sapped the joy from the circle and led to a spiral of anger and defensiveness. The grief heard was quickly turned into fear, anger and entitlement as one member expressed his qualm over the Israeli/Palestinian land in dispute which he claimed is biblically Jewish territory. Another member expressed her anger at the how poorly the Arab leaders treat the Palestinians and how these Arabs are comparable to the Nazis.

In reflection, it seems that the joy and hope in at least this group of Jewish people is tenuous and untrustworthy during these times of turmoil, and that it can be broken and destroyed by the recollection of a trauma that has not been fully told or grieved. This is particularly pronounced, I assume, in times of conflict when there is the threat of losing the longed for homeland, a place of refuge, should the worst ever happen again. Defensiveness, entitlement, anger and aggression seems understandable in light of these circumstances.

The dialogue around holding the sacred in one hand and the Israelis, Palestinians and then both the Israelis and Palestinians in the other hand was challenging. I believe that this topic as well as the presentation pushed the group members to take a look at the 'other' side. I myself felt drained of energy by the end of the session as I believed that we had really 'worked it' and I had the sense that somehow the members got a glimpse of

the lens of difference. From some of their facial expressions, I could tell that this was an important and intense dialogue, rich and meaningful in process as well as content.

What surprised me most was the expression of compassion toward Palestinians in refugee camps as well as some of the Palestinian youth that become suicide bombers in order to give meaning to a 'worthless life'. One group member compared the suffering of Palestinians to the historical suffering of Jews who have been isolated and persecuted. Another member related a story of an interview that appeared in the New York Times about a young Palestinian suicide bomber, who had survived the bombing. She described him as looking like 'any one of our kids' and expressed sadness for his feeling of worthlessness throughout his young life.

Blame was laid on the Palestinian authority for the current predicament of their people and the energy that is put into hating Israelis. No-one mentioned Israel as accountable for any of the current uprising or aggression. Generally members expressed a feeling of being persecuted again as Jews and that the Israelis, who 'could be us someplace else', it was said, are essentially victims. The outrage expressed at the trauma and murder of Israeli children due to suicide bombings was juxtaposed to the feeling of sadness expressed for Palestinian children (who, I sadly knew, did not rate as highly as Jewish children in the hearts and minds of this group).

There was a sense of despair in speaking of the future of Israelis and Palestinians and whether there will ever be reconciliation and life returned to some form of normalcy. Most people believed that too much of the trust has been broken to ever again be repaired. In light of this pessimism, or realism, a ray of hope found its way into the circle as one member expressed his faith in finding peace and forgiveness through his belief in

a higher power; a belief which was formulated during a sacred experience (as mentioned earlier) in witnessing, against all odds, the formation of the state of Israel in 1948.

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