

In a Hall of Broken Mirrors

Psychoactive During Operation "Cast Lead": Mental Health Professionals' Activism During the Attack on the Gaza Strip.

Tova Buksbaum

I would first like to mention that this presentation is based on an article co-authored by Maya Mukamel, Lirona Rosenthal, Uri Hadar, and myself - all members of Psychoactive. The article was originally published in the *Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Bulletin, 2009*.

I would also like to make it clear, that what I am about to share with you today is my own perspective, as a Jewish Israeli activist in Psychoactive, and my expressed views, while shared by others, are not representative of any consensus or policy of Psychoactive.

And- I would like to begin with a personal story:

My birthday is in January, which this year, happened to be when "Operation Cast Lead" was at its peak. As she does every year, a relative phoned to congratulate me – and suddenly I found myself listening to her, telling me about "groups that set themselves apart and against our country". She knew about my involvement in demonstrations and other activities against Operation "Cast Lead", and she was actually hinting that by being involved I was betraying my country – Israel.

That conversation left me feeling very confused: on the one hand - I was rather amused at how she had been unable to contain herself. But, on the

other hand - I was angry and troubled - I knew that her way of thinking was shared by many people around me.

When Operation “Cast Lead” started, we, Jewish-Israeli members of Psychoactive, were all thrown into a great emotional and moral turmoil. While we felt empathy and identified with the suffering and distress of the Jewish-Israeli population surrounding the Gaza region, who had been enduring almost daily shelling from Hamas for several years - we also felt completely opposed to the manner in which Israel had chosen to deal with the situation in the Gaza Strip. We thought that this recent example of Israeli aggression was made possible by the ongoing process of de-humanization and objectification of the entire Palestinian population. During the onslaught, any remaining shreds of humanity and empathy came to an abrupt halt at the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

Four Channels of Dialogue:

As mental health professionals whose main tool is communication, we at Psychoactive were convinced of the transformative value of verbal contact, especially when the entire region was regressing rapidly into an abyss of violence and revenge. During that time we maintained channels of dialogue with people in Gaza, Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, and with Palestinians living within Israel, as well as among ourselves –the Jews in Israel.

1. Dialogue with Palestinians in Gaza

During the first days of the attack on Gaza, we were extremely concerned for the **physical well-being** of our Gazan friends in the Mental Health Community Center. The Israeli army's massive bombardments left us with no doubt that their lives were in danger. Phone conversations provided us with what we did

not see or hear via the Israeli media, as we also felt a need to **bear witness** to the death and destruction that were being wreaked upon Gaza.

Another thing that members of Psychoactive wanted to do was **to voice our opposition** to what Israel was doing, and to make it known that there were Israeli-Jews who opposed the military attack. In telephone conversations, our Gazan colleagues often repeated the question whether people in Israel were actually aware of what was going on there. “Was it really true that over 90% of Israelis were in favor of this action?” – this was the percentage the media published in their public opinion polls.

In our conversations, they raised the question whether it was the distortions created by media reportage that were to blame, and whether a better informed public would not have allowed things to proceed this way. We felt that our Gazan colleagues were asking us to convey the facts and their outcry to the Israeli public so that the killing would stop.

2. Dialogue with Palestinians in the West Bank

While the attack was going on, we continued the dialogue with Palestinian mental health professionals in the occupied West Bank. Our already delicate dialogue -- charged as it is due to occupier-occupied relations - became even more fragile during the violent attack on Gaza; the dialogue was now tainted by a sense of shame and guilt on our side, and pain and rage on theirs. Mostly, we tried to meet this pain and rage with empathy, and tried to convey our sense of responsibility for what was going on in Gaza, as it was done by our country. The dialogue was often difficult - there was little room for maneuver because communications seemed under threat of complete collapse; there were frequent moments of paralyze, and of inability to respond to pain – on both the Palestinian and the Jewish-Israeli side.

.3 Dialogue with Palestinian-Israelis.

The third channel of communication was with Palestinian citizens of Israel and inside Psychoactive.

Dialogue within Israel was not easier. We had to communicate in a situation in which, on one hand, we were citizens of the same state and partners in the same activist group, yet we - Jews and Palestinians -were also facing each other from opposing sides.

In times of extreme violence, the Palestinian population of Israel tends to be perceived as a "fifth column". Not surprisingly over 700 Palestinian-Israeli citizens were detained by the Israeli police during legal, non-violent demonstrations against "Cast Lead", and many others suffered from a generally polarized atmosphere and racist attacks in the street.

In light of the harsh realities of the street, our Psychoactive Internet discussion group became extremely important. Virtual space allowed each side to express their deepest fears in the presence of the other side. These fears rose to an extreme when one Palestinian-Israeli participant expressed her worry that what was happening in Gaza was "only the beginning", and that the Palestinian citizens of Israel were "the next in line". At the same time, Jewish-Israeli participants expressed anxiety about the fate of the Jewish state once power and control were not in the hands of a Jewish majority.

We found ourselves dealing with such questions as "whether it was legitimate to compare Israel's conduct towards Palestinians during this onslaught on Gaza with what the Nazis had done in the Holocaust?"; "whether we should join in with Israeli and international demands for a boycott on Israel?"; "whether the Israeli army's actions qualified as war crimes?. Some Jewish member demanded that Palestinian co-members would distance themselves from Hamas activities or at least recognize the suffering of the Jewish

population in Southern Israel; such requests were mostly perceived as illegitimate at a time when Israel was committing war crimes against their Palestinian brethren. During the conversations there were times when Palestinian and Jewish members felt that they couldn't transcend beyond the boundaries of their national identity and some chose to leave the discussions.

4 Dialogue within the Israeli society

The fourth dialogue channel was the one between the Israeli-Jewish members themselves. As I mentioned, there was an overwhelming consensus within the Jewish-Israeli society about the legitimacy of the attack. There were, of course, some protests and other groups that voiced opposition, but those were weakened by the overwhelming support for the attack.

For us, Israeli-Jews in Psychoactive, the discussion group was almost the only place in which we could talk about what was going on while using our professional tools, to share feelings, to discuss and plan activities. It gave most of us a sense of belonging and became a support group that gave us strength to cope with the reality outside.

Our discussions were also joined by mental health professionals who did not identify with our views - Jews from the right and center of the Israeli political map. Sometimes the effect was that there was less a sense of mutual support – which we were in such need of – but we gained diversity in our discussions.

The dialogue was often heated, and sometimes it was most difficult and filled with mutual accusations, such as telling us that we were suffering from self-hatred and that we had abandoned our Israeli and Jewish part of identity. In contrast we accused them of buying into a discourse of Jewish victimhood and therefore failing to take responsibility for the suffering and injustice caused to Palestinians.

Activities of opposition and identification during the attack

Beyond dialogue and reflection on the process, **we - as mental health professionals who are also activists** - believed that we must not remain in our reflective stance, and **felt obliged to do something within Jewish society** - activities that would express our opposition to Operation "Cast Lead" and convey our identification with the people of Gaza.

Together with other organizations, such as Neveh Shalom – Wahat al Salaam – Oasis of Peace", "The Forum of Bereaved Israeli and Palestinian Families", and "Ossim Shalom"- social-workers for Peace - we initiated, during the attack, an event called "Tent of Mourning" in which Jews and Arabs got together in Jaffa to express our protest and shock in the face of civilian suffering.

We also wrote a petition for mental health workers, sent letters to the daily press and joined other left wing and human rights organizations in demonstrations, activities and fundraising efforts for reconstructing of the Gazan Community Mental Health Center.

Reflections and Insights.

So far I have tried to present you with some idea of our activities during the attack on Gaza. I will use the second part of this talk to share with you some reflective thoughts and insights.

I would like to described our experience - Jewish-Israeli lefti wing activists during the military action - as taking place **in a hall of broken mirrors – wherever we looked, that which came back at us were distorted, cracked images of ourselves.**

Within the Jewish society itself - many of us saw how those that were closest to them supported the attack on Gaza from a sense of patriotism and loyalty to official Israeli policy. Our endless (and at times obsessive) conversations

with these people were, admittedly, useless and caused us all much frustration and distress.

Israeli public discourse rejected outright any voice that spoke out against the attack, fearing that it would injure the sense of national unity, and weaken the soldiers fighting in the Gaza Strip.

We soon realized that the majority of the Israeli society were looking the other way and refusing to face what we were trying to show them.

Erich Fromm (1955) described how societies can repress conflicting contents from their consciousness. By means of social taboos the group shields itself from experiences, ideas, and feelings of which it cannot afford to become aware as they threaten group unity and identity. The group does so by imposing intimidation, excommunication, and isolation mechanisms on dissidents, thus, threatening their sense of belonging. These fears are powerful in preventing those individuals from raising the group's awareness on forbidden issues.

Often, during the weeks of the attack on Gaza, we had an intense sense of being excommunicated and isolated from the society in which we lived.

We found ourselves complicit, whether we wanted to or not, with the cruel way in which our national collective was coping with the conflict between us and the Palestinians.

Yet much as we wished to disconnect from the violent and immoral parts of Jewish-Israeli society,

We also knew that this was impossible and that the faces that we saw reflected in the mirror - even if ugly – was ours.

While talking to Palestinians – we wanted to express our regret and the sense of guilt and responsibility that we felt for what was being done in Gaza. We wanted to meet what Jessica Benjamin called "the challenge of listening to the pain and the outcry of the other, when we, in some way, are responsible - when my flesh and blood did this to you".

At the same time we hoped to create a partnership based on general human solidarity and to belong to a group that transcends national identities. At a time when our Jewish-Israeli identity group did not allow us to maintain a sense of morality and humanity, we were in need of acknowledgement by the "other" – the Palestinian. According to Erich Fromm, the individual will try to avoid those threats of isolation and loss of identity by withdrawing his exclusive belonging to his social group, and instead sees himself as being part of the whole of humankind - as well as searching for recognition elsewhere.

We expected therefore – more or less consciously – to receive some acknowledgement for our activities during the attack, some feedback that recognizes Psychoactive as apart from the Israeli majority. We hoped to see the image of ourselves as human and ethical **reflected** in the eyes of our Palestinian colleagues and friends.

There were moments we felt this taking place: For example, when our Palestinian friends expressed their appreciation for our protest activities, and for the support and identification they received from Psychoactive members.

We felt especially thankful for the acknowledgement we received from our friends in Gaza itself. In our phone conversations they mentioned repeatedly how moved they were by the fact that there were Israelis who did not remain silent in the face of the terrible violence that was being directed at them. And we, on our part, were astonished about the absence of hatred and anger toward us. Our colleagues expressed their opposition to any injury or killing of

civilians – whether Jewish or Palestinian – and trusted us even though we belonged to the attacking collective. Our Gazan friends showed us how – to use Jessica Benjamin's (2006) words – even when there is no symmetry and under horrific violence, ethical intensities of acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the other can still be obtained.

Those were the moments when we felt that our actions were not completely meaningless, or simply overpowered by the enormity of the unfolding catastrophe; these were the moments we knew we have partners.

However, on the whole, despite the fact that we opposed the attack on Gaza, it did not count in our favor and we were still perceived as part of the attacking entity.

Hence, the fantasy of common ground that transcends national boundaries was shattered in the face of overwhelming pain and outrage. Our dialogue collapsed, time and again, into our nationality based zero-sum paradigm which overshadowed the mutual identity we sought to create.

But really now, what did we expect?

How can the victim be placed with the burden of recognizing the humanity of those who are part of the abusing collective – in the midst of aggression? Beyond those random moments I previously described - perhaps such expectations are unrealistic.

This echoes Albert Mami's words from **1954** in "**Portrait of the Colonialist**" – Mami writes about the existential impossibility of the leftist conqueror, and his distress. I am hesitant to equate the Jewish-Palestinian conflict with French colonialism, still I can find myself in Mami's depiction of the "leftist who refuses to be a part of his collective countrymen, while, he has no ability to match his fate with that of the occupied. Whom does he represent, if not himself – a marginalized force in the conflict?"

And so, this mirror too, reflected our disharmonious, distorted, and violent faces.

Does that mean that there is no place for leftists activities whatsoever, or to Psychoactive's activities in the Jewish-Palestinian conflict in particular?

Absolutely not!

I do propose, however, that we must continue to search for the best way in which we can effectively make a difference. It is quite possible that at times of surging violence the main effort should be redirected toward our Jewish brethren. That we have to search for ways how to utilize our professional trainings in order to raise their awareness to the harm - caused by de-humanization and objectification of the entire Palestinian population – **harm to both societies.**

The opportunity that we in Psychoactive had to engage in a significant and ongoing dialogue with Jews who supported the war, gave us more insight into ourselves in so far as we were experiencing our split from the Jewish collective. We saw that we took a blaming position, with too little empathy for the place those we disagreed with were coming from. We understood that the danger, for us, was to fall prey to self-righteousness, to become closed-in upon ourselves.

We realized that if we did not pay attention to these things, we might lose our ability to affect our own public from within – which would certainly not contribute to what we want to achieve with our activism.

In line with Eriech Fromm, we are a group of activists who operate outside our national collective so that we must look for ways to belong through becoming attached to trans-national human rights groups.

At the same time, however, I would like to argue that we are activists who operate *for the sake of, and within*, Israeli society – not outside of it; that we are neither more moral nor more human than our fellow members of the collective; but I want to believe that we are here to fulfill a certain role in the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. Using Kohut's ideas - every group surrounds itself with Selfobjects, for each of whom it assigns a role: artists, politicians, journalists, prophets, historians.

We can ask, against this background: what kind of selfobject is the activist? - and more specifically, the mental health activist - at times of war?! It is reasonable to assume, that during periods of war, the national collective, in order to kill other humans, has to protect itself against universal human feelings of compassion. Expressions of empathy for the enemy and reference to his humanity are threatening and therefore forbidden: they are considered a luxury, as something that is likely to weaken the national group. As a result such voices tend to get pushed aside, minimized, or even treated with contempt.

Therefore, while the activist is excluded, in one sense, the group may use him, in some covert way, as a type of selfobject: an object which is considered external, but is nevertheless part of the group in the role of the one who maintains compassion and a sense of humanity for the rest of the group – almost like a type of deposit which the group will perhaps be able to accept back in due time.

And so I hope that the day will come when we will be able to face again our collective image through the cracks in the mirror.