

# THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE SITUATION IN ISRAEL

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*In this narrative, the author reflects on the situation in Israel one year ago from the vantage point of an Israeli, a Jewish feminist (originally from America), a social work educator, and a psychotherapist.*

## Introduction

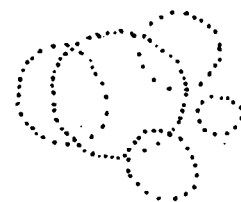
I began this article in January 2001. I sent it to *Reflections* in May 2001. It is now March 2002 and obviously more needs to be said. So much has happened since last year. It seems that the volatile current events with which we live will continue to impact upon us. Our reactions and emotional barometers will persistently demand updating according to the latest daily occurrences. But we are not journalists for a daily newspaper and we can only respond within the framework of our profession. And even as I write these very words, the violence between the Israelis and Palestinians has escalated beyond all of our worst imaginings. So I offer this update on my own observations about Israel and the connections to events internationally, acutely aware of my limitations, and still wanting to believe in the possibility of peace.

Yes, so much has happened in the last year and a half. Not only has the 'situation' in Israel developed to an 'almost war' but the events in New York City on September 11 have changed all of us and made us realize that we must redefine our visions and images of the world in which we live. The terrorist attack on the Twin Towers has made us all feel the vulnerability of our lives. There is a joining of pain across oceans and there is a helplessness as we are silenced by devastation and the uncertainty of our futures.

In the many talks and events that I have participated in during this very troubled time period, I make every effort to offer

suggestions and ideas that might help us to cope with deep pain. In Israel, as elsewhere, I find that I repeatedly return to the mechanism of denial. I present this word in capital letters and with a sense of having learned to appreciate its value. I have come to believe that we all need to build a bubble around ourselves in order to cope with incessant stress. The bubble enables us to protect ourselves, our families, and our lives while we go about our daily activities. Routine and ordinariness are our aims. We are seeking ways to maintain the normalcy of our lives. But I don't believe or intend to suggest that this bubble should be impermeable – rather the opposite. It must be penetrable. But all of us as individuals must learn how to control the flow of information. We must become experts in handling information, each person according to his or her ability to handle information. This, then, may seem paradoxical. I am essentially suggesting that we do two opposing tasks at the same time. We need our bubble at the same time that we need to let the news in. We need to protect ourselves, as we need to be aware. Essentially I am saying that we must continue to feel and know what is going on around us in order to retain our humanity.

We need to cry and to wail. In Israel there are funerals every day – young people, old people, soldiers, Israelis and Palestinians, teenagers and families, often innocently enjoying an evening out. We must not stop feeling the pain connected to these events.



Only by continuing to feel do we then continue to scream and protest this horrific mess that is happening around us. But we also need to experience joy and fun. This week in Israel we celebrated the holiday of Purim – an opportunity for children and grownups to laugh and be silly and to remind them that there is more to life than sadness. Again a paradox.

Perhaps what I have written here seems impossible to do. But I have come to believe that living in defiance of all that is bad/evil around us is in itself a marvelous victory of the human spirit. This seems to me to be a very authentic social work message – the belief in the possibility of humanity to survive and fulfill its specialness and express its fullest potentiality in spite of the appalling events which surround us.

And now I offer you my original piece, written two years ago.

### September 2000 – May 2001

During my over twenty years of living in Israel, I find myself hard pressed to recall a year as difficult as this one is turning out to be. We are talking about the year that began with the Jewish New Year, 5761 – September 2000 – the year that has been called the El Aqsa Intifada, the year that began with Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount and has since been characterized by demonstrations, violence, and terrorism. I would like to share with the readers of *Reflections* some of my thoughts about this period of time from my perspective as an American Jewish immigrant to Israel, a psychotherapist, and a social work educator. Some of these thoughts were presented as a talk at the mid-winter Wurzweiler School of Social Work Block Conference held in NYC at Yeshiva University in January 2001. Some of these reflections have been churning inside of me since I've returned and experienced terrorist attacks in my own hometown of Netanya, a seaside resort between Tel Aviv and Haifa.

### The Talk

The audience was composed of about a hundred social workers from all parts of the U.S.A. and from a wide variety of social agencies. They were interested in learning about the impact of daily violence upon the general population, our clientele, our students studying social work in Israel, and ourselves.

*"I was asked today to present some of my feelings about what is going on in Israel currently. I've been here in the States now for a few days and the most serious crisis situation that has been discussed on the news has been **the weather**. Will it snow? How much snow will fall? And how much will we be inconvenienced? Well, to my sadness and distress, every hour on the hour in Israel, the news presents another aspect of "The Crisis Situation." We live with the feeling of tension, of stress, every moment of the day. And I'm talking about life and death tension.*

*"Let me try to share with you some of the reactions of the general population, professional mental health practitioners, social work students, clientele, friends, and family.*

*"Amazingly, in a quick survey of my immediate circle of contacts I found that no one wants to talk about 'it', 'the situation.' This is a rather contradictory statement because at the same time that people are saying this they are doing just the opposite – meaning talking about 'it' all the time. In taxis, on buses, at the local bagel place, without failure someone queries: "What are we going to do?" And so the conversation begins. Strangers are now discussing 'it' and offering their solutions, which are obviously better than the politicians' views because the experts have certainly not offered anything worthwhile. Friday night discussions all focus on 'the situation,' with voices rising*

with emotion and agitation as families and friends agree and disagree and express their pain about "the mess we are in."

"There is massive denial about the awfulness of the situation. I need to clarify that this statement does not declaim or oppose the above observation but rather refers to the need of the Israelis to get on with daily living. Israelis are very good at doing this. This means that in spite of the constant broadcasts on the half-hour, if not more frequently depending upon occurrences, the general population makes every effort to go about its routine. At first, this ability to get on with things astonished me, but I've come to respect this as a desperate need for normalcy within the constant turmoil. The terrible uncertainty with which we are all living is tremendously burdensome and therefore the mundane routine is the most reassuring. I will discuss this defense mechanism later on in this writing and explore its effectiveness.

"Who you are greatly impacts upon your reactions to 'the situation.' Obviously this is not an enormously brilliant statement, but it helps to understand how varied the Israeli population is. The old timers, the born in Israel Israelis, are the most accustomed to the stress and uncertainty of 'the situation.' They remind us of times gone by when things have been worse. They see the erratic turmoil as part of the Israeli scene: "So, what else is new?" many comment. Holocaust survivors are also attuned to every nuance of tension. They are ready 'to go' at a moment's notice. After all they've already been through one upheaval so often see the picture as exceedingly bleak. I've heard many stories of survivors who keep cash money available so they can travel in a minute. The new settlers, those imbued with ideology, are enthralled with their commitment to 'saving the land.' Some 70's Zionists have begun to wonder what

happened to the country to which they were drawn. Parents of young children and teenagers are constantly worried about the whereabouts of their youngsters. And, of course, anyone with a soldier in the Army is in deep stress, to say the least. Thank goodness for cell phones. They help the Israelis maintain their sanity.



"'Living with enormous tension' becomes the daily description and observation of events. In one week, three women were murdered by their violent partners – is their personal violence part of the larger picture? While driving in the car, on Israel's very crowded roads, there seem to be even more expressions of rudeness, impatience, and dangerous maneuvers than usual – is this too an aspect of the enormous tension? Waiting on lines at banks, buses, local medical facilities has become more unpleasant than ever – another facet of the tension? I mention all of this just to give you a sense of the mood in Israel today.

"What to do – the **big** question? I wish I knew. I occasionally fantasize that if only I had magical powers, I would solve everything miraculously. To my discomfort and concern no one seems to have any good answers to ease the tensions. My colleagues and I offer some of the following suggestions: a) Dealing with children's fears is a predominant challenge. Much depends upon where the family lives, but there are some children that are going to sleep every night with the sounds of shooting. We are organizing parent and teacher groups to respond to the needs of the situation. It is not easy to distill the fears of our youngsters. We are trying to

prevent hatred from escalating and hope that our children can feel safe with thoughts of co-existence with our Palestinian neighbors. But not every family or school is as tolerant as I would prefer. Recently a television film clip portrayed nursery school aged Palestinians repeating the rhetoric of hatred toward Israel. Certainly not a pleasant sight, but even more depressing as the hope for a negotiated peace becomes ever more slim.

b) Kindness to one's partners, loved ones, and friends. As we become more aware and sensitive about each person's individual responses to tension, we need to remind each other not to tease too much and to be tolerant of idiosyncrasies. A wife who came for therapy too easily ridiculed her husband's anxiety attacks, perhaps as a way of reducing her own tensions. But then, when she was reminded to be kinder and more loving of her partner's way of coping, she realized that 'life was not at all simple.' Humor sometimes assists people in finding the right balance in dealing with their tensions.

c) Finding other ways to relieve tension. I strongly believe that we need to encourage acceptable and healthy outlets that are built into our daily life opportunities to reduce the 'pressure-cooker' situation that is emerging in Israel. Perhaps more sports? More walks on the beach? Outings with good friends with whom we can argue safely? Short trips out of the country? What is most disconcerting is that living in Israel seems to demand acceptance and adjustment to the 'adrenaline high.' Will we become a nation that cannot live without this type of excitement?

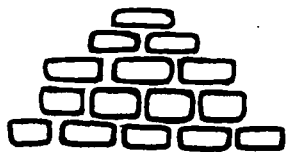
"I end this talk with sadness and distress, as I began. I hope I have given you a small sense of the difficulties of this time period."

### Further Reflections

I am writing this paper some months after the presentation of my talk in NYC at Wurzweiler School of Social Work. Much has happened since my visit to the U.S. in January. I would have to be honest and say that 'the situation' has certainly not improved; perhaps more accurately it has deteriorated. There have been elections in Israel with Ariel Sharon becoming Prime Minister. His extreme political views and approach to peace are very worrisome for those of us who are more on the left of center in our political beliefs. The newspapers more frequently use the word 'war' to describe the daily outbursts of violence. I have personally experienced several terrorist attacks close to my home in Netanya and in nearby towns. I have anxiously called the hospitals to check on family and friends. We cautiously discuss whether we should go to the movies or on a picnic or drive through a questionable road (where someone was just shot), and jokingly try to ease our anxieties with some inanity about "accidents can happen anywhere." I do not like living with fears about unexpected violence from any direction. I do not like walking down the streets of Israel, where my children grew up with amazing freedom of movement, and wondering if that strange person is or isn't an Arab terrorist. In fact, I hate it – yet this is my home and here I remain.



One of my long-time social work friends living in beautiful Boulder, Colorado, frequently asks me why I continue to live in a war zone. I am repeatedly astonished by her question and I repeatedly respond with denial – "What are you talking about? There is no war here!" I am obviously incorporating the defense mechanism of denial into my own repertoire of reactions, which I mentioned



earlier. It is most useful to rationalize, deny, use humor, and pretend that we are going about our daily normal routine. Without these defenses, we could not deal with the overwhelming fears that the larger situation threatens.

I read newspaper articles from every point of view. I have come to realize that my Zionist philosophy, emerging from my adolescence in America after World War II and the Holocaust, may be somewhat naive and misguided. I do not like to think of myself as part of a people that have been called 'occupiers,' and yet I need to acknowledge the mistakes that Israel has made in dealing with our Arab neighbors. We cannot relive history and make a different peace in 1948, one that includes the knowledge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But I continue to hope and believe that some of those politicians whom we have elected will find their way to end this useless round of violence by again sitting together with the Palestinians and talking. The terrible situation that we are living through daily is exhausting, depressing, and damaging to all. I hope that more of us will realize, very soon, that the only solution is one that legitimizes co-existence between two peoples in one land. I do not lose hope, but I often wonder if my hopes will be realized soon enough and perhaps prevent more senseless deaths. I guess my social work identity is much a part of who I am and much a part of my hope for the future and the belief in the possibility of change. Perhaps we can all hope together.



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