LANGUAGE OF WAR, LANGUAGE OF PEACE AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE PALESTINIAN/ISRAELI CONFLICT*

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ABSTRACT *If we are serious about resolving conflict, we would benefit from addressing the language we use and how our words have the potential to stimulate and contain violence. This paper examines what lies beneath the surface when we use language and how we need a deeper understanding of its use. Language affects thoughts, attitudes and responses and leadership requires a maturity that is not about blame, retribution and cycles of violence.*

Key words: Trauma, projection, scapegoating, dehumanizing, language of hope, language of hate, language of women, adversarial language, neutral language

The language we speak has potential to stimulate conflict or contain it, as we so clearly see illustrated in the voice of political leadership. We may observe that politicians in areas of conflict have the capacity to encourage violence or create a climate in which to prepare people for peace. The language used will make a difference to the political dialogue in so far as it assists people to manage their pain and despair versus a language which can be used to provoke a culture of retribution, and hatred. Nowhere is this more true than in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Thus if Prime Minister Sharon had said, following a recent suicide bombing in Israel:

> This recent bombing is a terrible tragedy and for all those who have suffered it pains me to see. Our first response may be to seek retribution and search out those who have killed. Yes, they must be arrested and brought to justice in some way that does not exacerbate this terrible cycle of violence. We know an eye for an eye makes the world blind. We have the dignity and self respect not to engage in further acts of violence.

and if Chairman Arafat had said, after Taba:

> Life has become unbearably difficult for many of you but I am doing all that is within my power to improve your living conditions. I do not know how the future government of Israel will behave, but we need to make gestures to show our seriousness about peace and I am ready to build on Taba. This involves sacrifices on our part but it will be in our greater interest. We must oppose the occupation by every means possible, but terrorism and suicide bombing will not be tolerated. You have all suffered too much and it is time to create a culture of peace.

* Prepared for a conference in Egypt on 'Women and Peace' (August 2002).

However, this did not happen. But of course we are talking about statesmanship and not leadership here, which would involve the ability to transcend an emotional response and think of what is for the greater good. This does not seem to have been on the political agenda in the current Palestinian/Israeli conflict. We are talking about the kind of politics in which the roar of the crowd, and its appeasement, is more important than to prepare the people to behave with dignity and self-respect. The language used is a critical piece of the process of change and the words can have a significant effect on thoughts and attitude (Rifkind, 2002b). The use of language needs not to come from shallow manipulation but a deeper consciousness of its impact both in terms of the present and the long term. Politicians on both sides have failed to provide leadership for peace and tend to play on extremist responses.

All this needs to be read in a wider geopolitical context. I am not suggesting that words alone will transform any conflict and, in the end, we all know the underlying causes of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict are about territory and resources whether they be military, security or emotional and biblical attachment to the land. However, I would suggest leadership has a very important role in finding a language in which it becomes possible to lay the foundation in which one can prepare for peace.

For the past 20 years I have worked with individuals and groups experiencing their relationships and what changes they might wish to make to improve the quality of their lives. My prime trade is as a psychotherapist and group analyst. However, in practice the work is about people's inability to manage conflict that, if left unmanaged, deteriorates and may lead to a hardening of attitudes, which may be expressed in hatred and may result in violence against themselves or others. What psychotherapy offers is the opportunity for these complex emotions to be recognized and to be communicated in a language that can be heard and understood. It does not necessarily mean the kind of understanding in which one finds agreement and reconciliation but is more about the management of differences, conflict and how to tolerate each other without causing further damage or pain.

For a deeper understanding of this process it may be necessary to become more aware of the language used and the role it plays. We need to recognize that different cultures attach different meanings to their use of language and what might sound warlike in one culture may carry a degree of hyperbole and may not convey the same meaning as would be interpreted in another. Language may also be used for domestic consumption and that additional complexity needs to be added to the equation when interpreting the meaning of the words. In spite of the wide cultural context in which this needs to be understood, there is often an absence of sensitivity on behalf of the politicians as to how the words will be experienced by the other side, which may hear them as provocative, potentially escalating the conflict. These politicians may well be choosing words for their own domestic audiences and thus may be consciously stimulating the conflict at a wider political level.

It would be naive not to assume that, on occasions, there is a degree of intentionality by the politician to increase his popularity on the home front. Perhaps what one might hope for is a more mature political process in which the politician takes into account both his own popularity at home and the wider consequences for the political neighbour. This demands the rigour and discipline of simultaneously looking both inside

and out; the kind of balance in which there is both an 'inside and outside eye'. Middle Eastern politics, with its emotional reactive and other provocative language, may be seen to be more influenced by domestic than foreign policy. Henry Kissinger once remarked 'Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic policies' (Shlaim, 2001, xiv). Here Avi Shlaim adds 'The Middle East process is being held hostage to the vagaries of Israel's internal policies' (Shlaim, 2001, xiv).

It may be necessary to recognize the place of trauma here and how it contributes to a reactive language that has been unprocessed and that may magnify the potential for violence as opposed to containing it. Where there are deep roots of trauma in a society, and where early pain has not been worked through, the individual is more likely to respond in an undistilled manner that does not involve thinking through and fully incorporating the consequences of any response. How often have we heard the reactions of politicians in the Middle East responding out of rage, hurt, fear and humiliation?

Trauma: trauma may be likened to an unhealed wound (Garland, 2000) or a rupturing of the skin. Unprocessed trauma increases the subjectivity of our experiences. We are more likely to see ourselves as victims. Others are not to be trusted so we can only depend on ourselves. The level of pain is such that it is difficult to look outside ourselves, imagine the experience of the other and to empathize. The world becomes organized around our own self-experience. In this stage of cultural traumatization, which perhaps describes the politics of the Middle East, it becomes difficult to enter into the mind of the other with the necessary empathic attunement. Without this it becomes difficult to build any level of trust, interest or concern in the other, yet these represent the necessary preconditions for dialogue. This leaves one in the position of victim. The culture of perpetual victimhood distorts values, and weakens and cuts off the vital feedback mechanisms of self-criticism, robbing communities of their most valued asset: the questioning mind.

Eva Hoffman spoke sensitively of these issues at the 2002 Amnesty International Lecture on Human Rights and Human Wrongs (Hoffman, 2000). She talked of the dangers of the victim mould. The need for injustice is not to be remembered in the formulaic way where our sense of injustice is passed on from one generation to the next, almost as a badge of honour and part of one's identity. If one becomes straightjacketed into this restrictive frame one becomes unable to think or process the experience. In this context there is a deferred sense of rightness, which is passed on to the next generation. To offer the possibility of change one has to discover one's own narrative and experience, examine the past thoughtfully and move from understanding one's own experience to understanding that of the other.

Part of Israeli society today is still traumatized by the impact of the Holocaust. This is indelibly etched on their political landscape. The wholesale death of 6 million Jews who perished in Central Europe represent the terrible period in history when the Jewish people were unable to protect themselves and were unprotected by the rest of the world. The foundation of the Jewish state in its evolution has not only had to defend itself in a hostile environment but has not been able to rely on anyone else to help protect it. Thus, in certain sections of the community,

there is a passionate belief in self-sufficiency and open defiance toward the rest of the world and a disregard of outside public opinion.

Simultaneously we need to go back to 1948 with the Palestinians and their experience of the 'Nabka' and the forced flight of Palestinians from their homes. More recently we have to remember, and recognize, the cumulative trauma of occupation, the humiliation of daily checkpoints, the lack of freedom of movement, the lethal military force of the Israelis, house demolitions and bulldozing of olive groves. We have to combine this with the grinding poverty, economic decline and tragedy or radicalization on both sides. In such a climate it becomes a contest to see who is the greater victim.

Last year I ran a workshop in Kosovo for professionals working with women and children who had been traumatized by the war. The workshop participants were intelligent, sensitive Albanian women but their own unprocessed trauma and direct experience was reflected in their responses. At the time tension was building up on the Macedonian border and there were fleeing refugees moving from Macedonia into Kosovo (Rifkind, 2002a). What became clear, and rather startling, was the level of hatred at the time for the Macedonian government expressed by these Albanian women. In their minds this government was not allowed to be differentiated from the Belgrade government. Under the Milosevic government the traumas these women had experienced were horrific; for example the brother and father of one woman in the group had been killed in the war. Such was the level of stress for them that they unconsciously anticipated the re-enactment of their experience, thus leading to potential retraumatization. It was stimulating a level of panic and fear in the community, which potentially fuelled an escalation in the conflict. It was the unprocessed psychological pain interfering with the ability to see clearly. Such are the dangers of raw wounds that are unattended.

In order to explore this more fully it may be useful to examine particular psychological phenomenon and what happens when we are unaware of those processes. This will include various projections, splitting, scapegoating and trauma. The understanding of this process may help us recognize how a greater awareness may affect how we respond at a political level and its consequences.

Projection: when we feel vulnerable and our own survival is under threat we become prone to projecting our overwhelming feelings onto others. It is a psychological process in which we attempt to shield ourselves from what is unbearable. In this state of vulnerability we feel helpless, powerless and without hope. We split off from the unbearable feelings inside ourselves and place them onto others. The more victims refuse to accept the vulnerable part of themselves the more we try to humiliate them and, in the process, deny them human emotions. We then dehumanize the enemy and attribute all kinds of negative qualities to them (Hoffman, 2002). This process prevents a richer understanding and full engagement with other groups and their complexity.

Scapegoating: psychologically it is easier and more satisfying for us to blame others. We project all our bad things onto the enemy and in doing so we do not have to look at ourselves. We become trapped in a

victim culture in which we do not ask 'what can I do to change things?' but 'what is being done to me?' The victim becomes the victimizer and does not use his own experience to identify with the other but rather uses it to weaken them. It becomes an opportunity to blame the other for what has been done to ourselves thus denying the opportunity for self-reflection and personal responsibility.

Dehumanization: we become trapped, not wishing to understand the psychic reality of whom we have defined as our enemy. So, for example, the children of Chatilla and Sabra do not have individual identities – only group identities (Varvin and Volkan, 2003). In the same way that suicide bombers cannot allow themselves to humanize the relationship with those they are about to kill. They are a people, not individuals with human qualities who are lovers, parents, grandparents, who have children with hopes and dreams. We are talking about the breakdown of basic trust in which the other no longer exists in our minds. Such cultures are often deeply traumatized and it is an attempt on their behalf to reverse the humiliation of a previous defeat. The act of violence temporarily re-empowers, providing a feeling that control over the previous sense of powerlessness and humiliation has been regained.

Brutalization: We can also see how society has become brutalized by the cumulative trauma. Such brutalization is toxic in content: it toughens the spirit and corrodes the soul, leaving little capacity for empathy, humanity or a desire to enter into the mind of another or what goes on underneath their skin, in their head and what motivates them. Underneath the brutalization is hatred, the most poisonous of human emotions. It turns an object of hatred into an object. Beneath this is a terrible pain.

Adversarial language: we live in an adversarial culture where we assume that opposition is the best way to get things done. We naturally polarize, presenting as two opposite sides. We observe this in the media with politicians and in everyday interactions. To criticize is to show you are thinking. In our argument culture everything else is shaped as a battle with winners and losers. Models of co-operation and consensus seem to be weak.

The alternative does not imply the avoidance of conflict or the absence of it because this is not possible but rather the management of it in a more respectful style. If we adopt an adversarial approach the objective is seldom to listen, understand and enter into the mind and skin of the other but rather it is to win the argument and thereby reinforcement will be in position. In these conditions the leadership continues to treat the other side as its adversary, viewing negotiation as a zero-sum game where each side's gain is the other's loss. Such oppositional positions do not lead to truth but rather more self-justification. One of the assumptions that lie behind this conflict model is how we engage people in order to capture their interest. It assumes we do not want the substance of the argument that may leave a tension that surrounds it. Just as we avoid complexity and we fall into the trap of taking either side, this leads to deep polarization and prevents the more complex pursuit of understanding the process that goes on between two or more people and having a more deep understanding of how any conflicts may emerge.

This would seem crucial when trying to understand the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Too often we hear self-justification and the blaming of the other. We need to understand the historical complexities and their narrative and what has happened between two people to reach this point. This does not necessarily imply a coherent, shared narrative or even a consensus of thinking. It does, however, allow the more subtle experience of understanding each other's world and how it becomes imperative for them to co-exist.

This kind of understanding, which is painstaking and demands the sustained work of time, can only be done in an atmosphere of trust. In the present crisis, where there has been so much trauma and damage over the past two years, which has deteriorated into mistrust and hatred, it might be impossible to do the necessary work at this point. All we can ask is for a cooling off period between the parties, and outside intervention in the role of third parties, to provide support and the shaping of a just, fair and equitable solution.

The language of women: it may be true to say that women are more likely, and more able, to speak in non-confrontational language although there is much evidence to suggest that women in positions of power often speak a male language, for example Margaret Thatcher, Indira Ghandi and Golda Meir. It is often asked whether the likelihood of going to war as a political option would be reduced if women were in power. The most powerful justification for women being more circumspect and more reluctant to go to war is that they are the ones who give birth, and it is unbearable for them to see their children go off to war to fight and be killed. This might well be a primary instinct for women but in the end it will depend on our process of socialization and whether our honour and dignity has been deeply influenced with values that are indoctrinated at a very early age. Babies are not born violent; they are not genetically predisposed to want to kill. It would be more accurate to say that we are all born with the propensity to behave well or badly, destructively or creatively, and it is the conditions in which we are nurtured that will profoundly influence this. 'We may be mutually suspicious of each other but we have to be taught and led to kill' (Clinton B, *Observer*, 8 September 2002). So the culture may demand that boys are bellicose in behaviour and that mothers are expected to harden their children to become fighters, believing they are protecting the family name, religion and the nation's state.

Traditionally the highest levels of conflict resolution are male dominated (Track One) and citizen peacemaking is more associated with women (Track Two). The involvement of women in formal peace processes has been very limited and they are largely excluded at the highest levels. This may be a contributory factor that perpetuates the violent discourse, which contributes to conflict in the first instance. For example, in the former Yugoslavia, in 1995, there were initially no women representatives involved in the Dayton Peace Accord (Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, 1999, 61). Similarly in Somalia during the United Nations peace talks, no women were involved and this may have served to support the legitimacy of the warlords. If we are to understand more about the root causes of the conflict and the obstacles to peace and how they can be addressed, it may be necessary to consult and involve the women more fully.

Neutral language: if the leadership is serious about peace it needs to find a neutral language that does not blame but genuinely commits itself to understanding the often conflicting narratives of both

sides. Naturally, we devote enormous resources to justify and reinforce our own perspective whilst simultaneously ridiculing and belittling the other side. It takes an act of real statesmanship to find a language that has sufficient neutrality to be heard and understood by the warring parties. We need to find a way to treat the warring parties as political equals. This may involve reconfiguring the power balance and recognizing the party with less support and influence may need more support. It takes great wisdom on the part of the leadership to recognize this and respond accordingly. Not-withstanding the helpfulness of one side and the obstructiveness of the other party it still remains imperative to attempt to recognize the struggle of both sides. If, at this point, we find a language of blame we are likely to escalate the conflict further.

The language of hope: if leadership is genuine in its desire to end conflict it needs to find a way to encourage its population to invest in the idea of peace. By this I mean it is necessary to engage the people to prepare and anticipate what peace might look like and why breaking cycles of violence may be in their best interest. Warring parties can subside into a state of hopelessness, where beliefs in the positive aspects of human nature are no longer available. A deep despair and depression permeate the culture and it is difficult to imagine a more hopeful future. The role of leadership is to speak a language that stimulates hope. This may involve keeping the idea of peace alive and repeating the ideas time and time again until they become less threatening and more familiar with the parties involved in the conflict.

The language of hatred: it is not possible to write a paper on the Middle East without examining the impact of 'hatred' and its language. Hatred is toxic in content, corrodes the soul and scorches the spirit, but we are not born hating. Some inculcate the capacity to hate with their mother's milk, but a small baby is born with the potential for both loving and hating. We are, therefore, forced to ask ourselves the questions: what are the conditions that stimulate hatred and what are the underlying causes; and if these conditions were addressed, would they reduce the capacity to hate? What we do know is that 'hatred is the most poisonous human emotion. It blocks the capacity to empathise what lies at the heart of human association. It turns an object of hatred into just that, an object' (Hutton W, *Observer,* 7 April 2002).

If we pursue this idea we recognize that hatred feeds on itself as it destroys the possibility of entering into the mind of the other and understanding what it is like to be in the other person's skin, to understand what is going on in his head and what motivates him. If we apply this to the Middle East we know that the levels of hatred beneath the policies involved is such that many of the responses occur out of rage and the desire for retribution. The language is often knee-jerk and reactive and serves to escalate the level of hatred. In such conditions it is imperative for the outsider to recognize that what lies beneath this terrible hatred is a great hurt and fear. Once this is recognized it offers the possibility to *not* seek revenge. Again this highlights the need for the third party to find a language that recognizes hatred but offers the possibility to transform it into something less toxic.

In conclusion, if we are serious about finding a language of peace, the leadership needs to express a maturity that is not about blame, retribution and cycles of violence. It has to recognize the pain on both sides and enter into understanding the experience of all the parties involved in the conflict. This

demands that the leadership is not partisan, only appealing to the domestic agenda, but that it genuinely sees a more holistic picture of how the conflict has emerged. The leadership, however, will need to appeal to higher instincts and not baser ones. They will need to hold hope, often in the depths of despair, and to understand the trauma and pain around the conflicts. The psychological processes that I have referred to in the paper may have to be understood at a more common sense level. Perhaps we are talking about statesmanship and not leadership.

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