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The Hermeneutic Underpinning of Ethnic Brutality: The Jewish Israeli Case

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ABSTRACT *Memory of historical events is necessarily collective, but it acquires personal characteristics that are of the same nature as individual memory in general. This idea is illustrated through memories of an Israeli child, struggling to get to grips with the ungraspable Holocaust. The mnemonic construction of the Holocaust is then connected to the ethos of military strength in Israeli society, which ethos undertakes to transform the historical marking of the Jews as victims, sacrificed by the nations on the altar of ethnic power. Following the mythical suggestions of the story of the binding of Isaac, the narrative of Jewish national renewal builds upon the unconscious theme of victim conversion, from Isaac to the lamb. This is where the Palestinians enter the unconscious Israeli narrative, occupying, as it were, the place of the lamb and allowing the movement of the Jew away from the position of the sacrificed. The theme of sacrifice conversion marks itself in historical events such as the Naqba and the recent attack on Gaza. The paper examines the manner in which these themes feed into personal memory systems and reconstructs the workings of memory through the entire historical cycle. Finally, the paper contextualizes the unconscious themes in a particular political reality, as well as in an ethical construction of the Jewish Israeli subject. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: Israel, Palestine, holocaust, victim, memory

INTRODUCTION

The unconscious is always already structured of symbolic entities. This is not only a Lacanian truth, but the actual drive behind Freud's abandoning of the seduction theory of neurosis (Forrester, 1990). Freud's insight here is that, in order to develop a mental machinery that is predicated upon abusive seduction, the subject does not need to actually experience seduction, but only to acquire images and ideas that are related to abusive seduction. Various resistances and defenses against abusive seduction may then come into operation and create the unconscious dynamics of mental life. In this paper I wish to present a similar dynamics, only this time the specific content of the related dynamisms is not related to sexual identity and personal history, but rather to group identity and group history. Here, images and ideas that are related to the dominant themes of group identity (on an ethnic

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level) forge over time to create specific unconscious motivations, anchored in a specific history. This history is cultural rather than objective, and refers to the manner in which narratives that shape and reinforce current identifications make recourse to evidence, be it written or spoken. Some of this evidence may happen to be factual, but its factuality is often secondary to its ability to sustain ongoing motivations on a group level.

Similar ideas – where themes and principles that modulate group relations are inscribed into individual unconscious – have been proposed, as suggested above, since the early days of psychoanalysis. Freud's originary ideas could be construed as showing that family dynamics, with its Oedipal modulations, shapes the individual unconscious. Jung (e.g. 1936) has extended this idea to incorporate larger groups, including particular cultures in various historical junctures. He has further extended these dynamics to include the human species as a whole, showing that some unconscious themes that can be traced in individuals encompass the fundamentals of being human and appear universally in different cultures. Finally, Bion (1961), Foulkes (1964) and others showed that groups inscribe themselves on individual mentation within very short time spans as well. My ideas in the present paper are, in that sense, a contribution to this line of understanding the dynamics between the individual unconscious and the processes that modulate cultural groups over long stretches of time.

More specifically, in the present paper, I wish to elaborate upon a set of related themes that dominate the identifications and motivations of contemporary Jewish Israelis, especially as they feature in allowing a growing level of brutality towards Palestinians. This set of themes creates a hermeneutic network that is only a part of Jewish Israeli culture: there are other influential themes that go into the dominant group identifications in Jewish Israel (and Judaism as a whole has still other and even conflicting themes of group identifications). However, in the present paper I propose a specific hermeneutics in order to try and come to grips with Israeli brutality towards Palestinians. This increasing brutality informs the practices of the occupation in the Palestinian territories as a whole (described extensively in the testimonies of people who served in the occupied territories during their military service, and available at the website of Breaking the Silence (http://www.shovrimshtika.org/index_e.asp)), but it has been especially poignant in the recent attack on Gaza, at the turn of 2008.

The unconscious nature of the dynamisms that give rise to Israeli brutality is created in the same manner as it is created in the individual case, namely, by the need to maintain a moral image of one's identity. Thus, the prime drive behind making these dynamisms unconscious is simply the need to conceive of oneself as good and just. This need, whose sources and modes of operation are probably the prime agents of repression in Freudian theory, puts into motion a whole set of mental defenses aimed at securing a moral image of the group's identity. Arising from this is a range of truth aversion strategies, including the various forms of blindness, denial, foreclosure, etc. Consequently, Israeli self-consciousness – as it appears in the construal of the conflict by mainstream Israelis, as well as in media commentary about the related brutalities (see, for example, Dor, 2005) – must suffer a terrible twist in order to sustain a good image. These specific processes are not discussed in the present paper, but they have been discussed extensively elsewhere (Said, 1979, for example, discusses them in the wider context of Western conceptions of the orient).

At the center of my present paper is a 'case' that brings together some dominant themes of contemporary Jewish Israeliness. It is told as a personal story – a 'case' – which anchors my story in individual life, complete with a biographical story line and a subjective perspective.

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This mode of presentation should individuate my hermeneutic network, present it as a living entity, anchored in the particularity of time and place. At the same time, the 'case' also acts to limit the epistemological claims regarding this hermeneutic network. Especially, my first-person account implies the non-deterministic nature of the related dynamisms, inasmuch as its subject of enunciation (the writing author) clearly subverts its logic. This is again quite similar to the workings of the unconscious in Freudian analysis: the force of its internal logic does not imply the absence of choice, responsibility and ethical freedom, but only the terms on which these subject positions are predicated. The hermeneutic network describes the forces that operate within the Jewish Israeli scene, but does not dictate to the individual how to position herself in relation to these forces. Clearly, it is central to the ethical claim of the paper that the preferable positioning of Israeli individuals is that of resisting the current group forces. Many Jewish Israelis indeed position themselves in this manner, and my paper is also a tribute to them. In that sense, my case in particular and my paper as a whole offer a study of a 'political psyche', to use Samuels' (1993) term – a psyche that positions itself within a field of unconscious forces that, in turn, have clear political implications. The politicizing of personal biography has its mirror image in some radical feminist thought (Segal, 2008), where the personalizing of political involvement acts as a limiting epistemological and ideological framing. Specifically, political positioning is grasped as inherently embedded in a personal history, rather than in objectified truths.

THE CASE: BURNING MEMORIES

In winter 2009 I accidentally came across a eulogy that I wrote in 1970 for my then best friend, Zvika, who was killed by Egyptian fire at the Suez Canal. I received the news of his death at midnight and hitchhiked through the night to reach the funeral from my army base near Eilat. I sat to write my farewell to him in his family home, in the Kibbutz where we grew up. One of the lines in my eulogy said: 'For many years Zvika and his mother represented the Shoa for me. On hearing the word, I immediately visualized them singing "Brothers, the shtetl is burning"', a song that always sent shivers along my spine. Its dramatic melody, coupled with its violent images and the sense of helplessness, all these moved, upset and alerted me to a mysterious danger, and all at the same time. Both the text and the melody were written by Mordechai Gebirtig, a Galician poet who was killed by the Nazis in 1942. Gebirtig's poem, known as 'The shtetl is burning', was written in 1938 about a pogrom that took place two years earlier in a small Polish town. It describes the total destruction by fire of the town. The refrain says 'And you stand by lame, without offering help, without trying to extinguish the burning fire, the fire of the city.' When I started reading what I wrote so many years ago, I did not remember this image of Zvika and his mother singing, and the song of the burning shtetl had all but escaped my memory. Yet, reading my eulogy triggered an avalanche of memories. Aged six to seven, I used to sleep in the same room as my friend Zvika, in the communal children's home in the Kibbutz. His father's name was Mordechai, like that of the author of 'the burning shtetl'. Zvika's father was a Holocaust survivor from Galicia, the only one of a large family who emerged alive. He was a very silent man and worked as the chief electrician of our Kibbutz for many years. Zvika's mother was also a Polish Holocaust survivor, the only one of a large family. She was the only parent who used to come to give her son a goodnight kiss after we all went to bed. All parents would have

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been long gone by then, but she never missed a single night; she could not bear the idea that her son had to go to bed without a goodnight kiss. Her name was Nehama, which means 'consolation'. I do not know how she came to adopt this name on arrival to Palestine. It now seems to me almost obscene, to call her that. Whenever anyone mentioned her name her loss was evoked, but immediately with the injunction to reach or offer consolation. For Nehama though, there was no consolation. Rather, her troubles kept piling up until death redeemed her. As a young boy, I was so deeply impressed by her nightly visits that I told her, one day, that she was my second mother. I started visiting her home regularly, insisting on my adopted sonhood. This was how my friendship with Zvika started.

There are a number of Shoa-related scenes that I can recall from my childhood, all very powerful emotionally, all concerning the memories of those around us, in the Kibbutz, who had been there. Yet, I seldom dwell upon these memories. Until recently, the Shoa did not interest me very much at all. Were it not for an Israeli colleague, I would probably never have visited Auschwitz when I spent some days on a conference in Krakow in 1983. In the event, I did go to see Auschwitz and the visit strongly inscribed itself on my memory, but without arousing the need to know, reflect or understand. In the months I spent in Berlin, in recent years, the Shoa did not feature very powerfully at all. Not in any direct way. Throughout the various periods of analysis that I underwent over the course of the years, I never mentioned anything that related to the Shoa. Nor did I ever mention my adopting of a Shoa survivor as a second mother. *Burning memories*, it seems, do not only present with spectacular images, but might also burn themselves as part of the process of their inscription.

In my mind, the scene of being burnt in an intentionally ignited fire, like in the shtetl poem, is a scene of sacrifice. It is saturated with religious and causal overtones: a scene in which god – whatever or whoever this may refer to – demands something and his demand is met. People acquire power by meeting god's presumed or invented demand for sacrifice. The unusual emotional impact of 'the burning shtetl' derives from this logic: people, *in their quest for power*, sacrifice the Jews. This, I have come to imagine, is the secret of the burning of life as a symbol of anti-Semitism. The need of the sacrificing perpetrator to assume a transcendental meaning is matched by the parallel need of the victim. Thus, in the context of the Shoa, Geoffrey Hartman (1996) writes about the need to frame loss as sacrifice, to rationalize it as having occurred for some purpose. Indeed, much of the rhetoric that commemorates the Shoa in Israel implies – in various forms – the idea that the Shoa is ethically tied up with the emergence, in its aftermath, of the Jewish state. In a linguistic vein, 'Holocaust' means the total burning of the victim in the fire of its sacrifice. As Agamben (1999) shows, the term 'Holocaust' sanctifies the concrete Auschwitz crematoria, re-creates them by adding a metaphysical or religious resonance, both Christian and Jewish. Once the term occupies its cultural singularity, the whole scene becomes sacred – beyond comparison, untouchable. This sanctification of the Holocaust creates our blind spot – the point of entry for a vengeful unconscious. I call it 'the historical unconscious'. Here is how it works.

The scenes of the Israeli army's attack on Gaza at the turn of 2008 evoked an immense emotional reaction in me. I have close friends in Gaza whose spirit I came to admire over the course of the years. Residing in the city that saw some of the worst of the regional atrocities over many years, my friends have managed to maintain a spirit of healing and compassion that seemed admirable to me. They were, on the whole, remarkably open and welcoming to those Jewish Israelis who, like me, sought contact with them throughout the December

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attack. When photographs of the victims started coming from Gaza I became very upset: the death, the destruction, the horrible wounds that were caused by new, experimental weapons. Yet the most unsettling for me were the scenes of the intense fires and the severely burnt bodies caused by phosphorus bombs – black, shriveled bodies of people who died in a short wave of fire whose intensity is beyond imagination. To me this immediately evoked images of Auschwitz – something my analysis never contrived to do. The all but total support that Israeli Jews gave to this attack depressed me. Some of my friends who were normally engaged in Jewish–Palestinian dialogue now expressed satisfaction with the Israeli attack. I tried to understand this when I heard Robi Friedman of Haifa University in a lecture where he reanalyzed the biblical scene of the binding of Isaac. Friedman did not conceptualize the scene as a test of belief: he thought of it rather as a quest for – religious – power. Belief may have other routes than the readiness to sacrifice life – compassion, for example. But Abraham went the power way. Also, Friedman did not see Isaac as the prime victim, for Isaac was eventually replaced by the lamb. The centrality of the lamb in the scene of the binding of Isaac appears earlier in a poem by Yehuda Amichai (1986), entitled 'The true protagonist (hero) of the Binding', whose opening line is 'The true protagonist (hero) of the Binding was the lamb'. In the closing lines, Amichai says that after everybody went home from the scene of the Binding, only the lamb remained.

The lamb, Friedman reminded us, was also a living being, albeit one who does not speak. Perhaps, he said, it was this sacrifice of a non-speaking creature that ended the Bible speech on the issue of sacrifice. The morality of the sacrifice of living beings is never discussed in the Bible after this scene, as if all metaphysical and ethical issues concerning the sacrifice of living beings were resolved. I came out of Friedman's lecture saying to myself: of course, we found our lamb – the people of Gaza. As Frosh (2009) comments, my overall understanding of Israeli brutality reads well as a particular interpretation of Primo Levi's well-known saying, dated 1982, that 'Everybody is somebody's Jew. And today the Palestinians are the Jews of the Israelis.'

The role of the Palestinian, the 'non-speaking being', in replacing the Jew as the paradigmatic historical sacrifice directly and poignantly echoes a recurrent, widespread phrase in Israel regarding negotiations with the Palestinians: 'There is no one to speak with.' Of course, this phrase articulates the political argument against negotiations but, to my mind, it also constructs the Palestinians as a replacement sacrifice. This associates – in an overdetermined fashion – with another frequent Israeli dictum, this time describing, or rather, pre-scribing, the prime lesson of the Holocaust for the Jewish people: *Never again like the lamb to the slaughter*. If the Palestinians are the new historical sacrifice, then we have found a lamb to replace our Isaac. The sense of power we gained from attacking Gaza has little to do with security: Qassams may still fall as before. Hamas is now more strongly in power than prior to the attack. But now we have added another layer in the construction of Palestinians as lamb.

In the storyline that started to forge itself in my mind, the historical unconscious of Israeli Jews began working its magic during the mythological war of 1948, when thousands of Palestinians were driven out of their homes and became refugees. This retraced our own Jewish itinerary of exile and homelessness, but we still needed an adequate hermeneutics to tie these events up with our primary mythologies. Consider, for example, the Hebrew poem that most prominently captured the pre-war spirit in 1947: 'The silver platter', by Nathan Alterman (2008). The poem anticipates the unavoidable forthcoming Jewish Israeli death toll

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that is involved in the establishment of the Jewish state and construes it in terms of the sacrificing of the young. It describes the scene in which 'The nation arises, Torn at heart but breathing, To receive its miracle, the only miracle', that of a Jewish state. Next, in the poem, as the nation looks on, a young man and a young woman approach who still bear all the signs of heavy fighting. When the nation asks them 'Who are you?', they answer 'We are the silver platter on which the Jewish state was given to you.' The amazing thing for me here is that death is construed as a wholly internal Jewish affair, an entirely Jewish mythology of the sacrificing of the young. Sacrifice, here, is rendered in all-Jewish terms. Palestinians are not mentioned, *not even as an agent of death*, *not even as a hostile other*. The poem has ever since functioned as a prime national articulation of the 1948 ethos and it is widely quoted and read on official occasions. The young man and woman, I would say, were conceived of as contemporary Isaacs, and the lambs, invisible for now, were waiting in the wings for the next step: sacrifice conversion.

To be able to pursue the process of sacrifice conversion, the emerging nation had to overcome compassion, not only for Palestinians but to its own Shoa victims and survivors as well. Those who returned from the concentration camps and settled in the fledgling Jewish state reported that veteran Israelis avoided hearing their stories and abstained from offering compassion. According to Talila Kosh (2009), in the rush to ensure that 'we will never again go like lambs to the slaughter', the Israeli ethos rejected compassion and instead formed itself around the notion of the 'melting pot', whose prime agent was military service. In the melting pot, Jews of diverse origins were to become one nation. The melting pot referred to both the process and the vessel in which this process took place. In fact, 'melting pot' is a weak translation of the Hebrew expression 'kur hituch': kur is more like a furnace than a pot, a large oven that generates especially high temperatures. And 'hituch' is used specifically for the melting of metals, not for cooking. The image that governs the expression is that of a large furnace that generates very high temperatures and in which different metals melt to form a new, particularly hard, homogeneous metal. The different metals refer, of course, to the various newcomers to Israel, Jews of various denominations. That this expression should amply reflect images of the Auschwitz crematoria is nauseating, unbelievable, yet, at the same time, highly obvious.

Hebrew renders its own services to the process of victim conversion. In Hebrew, 'sacrifice' and 'victim' are expressed by the same word, *korban*, so that the exit from the victim position can immediately be tied up with the more active struggle out of the sacrificed position. The victim can never lose her or his position as subject, but the sacrifice always does. The move away from the victim position involves the positioning of a replacement victim, a sacrifice, all in the same concept. The itinerary for the new *korban* has already been set out by our own Jewish history: first exile, then ghettos, then Holocaust. The exile of the Palestinian lamb was given to us on the silver platter of the Naqba. Alterman's youngsters were, in fact, Palestinian. During the period 1948–1953, thousands of Palestinians were dislodged from their homes and we, Israelis, saw to it that this state of affairs would not change. Not so much because of any real threat that the refugees presented to us. Their threat was much greater as refugees, focusing towards us the hatred of the Muslim world. Only, without them we would have had no lamb. Yet, this was not enough. To avert compassion, we still needed a demonizing agent. 'Hamas' proved a magic word: Hamas was the incarnation of evil and all Gazans were Hamas, sometimes against their own will, but what could they do against the

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satanic spells? In a fantastic turn of irony, 'hamas' in Hebrew, if one considers it as if it were a Hebrew word, means a cry of protest and warning against an extraordinary evil. So, while screaming Hamas, we burnt the city, and we stood lame, without offering to help extinguish the fire, the fire of the city. And the story of victim conversion may not have seen its end yet. Surely, a full-blown Palestinian Holocaust is part of the unconscious itinerary.

Only through the liberation of Gaza and the restitution of Palestinian justice can we – Israeli Jews – ever hope to liberate ourselves from the throes of the Holocaust and its sacrificing logic.

DISCUSSION

People who are engaged in brutality over long stretches of time become increasingly brutal. This seems to be a general truth that, as far as I am aware, applies everywhere and irrespective of the specific intergroup power relations. Why is it necessary to summon, in addition to this universal truth, a complex hermeneutics whose working is far less certain than that of the general truth? There are a number of reasons that make it worth one's while to engage in such elaborate discussions as presented in my case here. Firstly, they may have greater explanatory power than shorter and simpler explanations. Below I give some examples of how my account can explain certain non-trivial characteristics of Jewish Israeli brutality towards Palestinians. Secondly, the above shorthand version does not and cannot explain how brutalities that seem intractable often – even if not always – come to an end of their own internal dynamics, while the longer discussion may indicate the manner in which the logic of the brutality network can be subverted or transcended. As such, understanding its cultural underpinnings may allow us to change the course of brutality and perhaps bring it to an end. Of course, this may always be done by the intervention of powers that are greater than those of the ongoing brutality. This possibility seems to me the main source of hope for a change in the course of Israeli–Palestinian events, although for the time being it seems like a far dream. Yet, even if the ongoing brutality is stopped through external intervention, it is still necessary to transform the internal dynamics of the social and cultural communities that are involved in the conflict. Otherwise, brutality may be rechanneled to other forms of destructiveness. This has been evident time and again in recent history. Understanding the underlying cultural dynamics may help us neutralize some of the destructiveness that often erupts following the political resolution of the conflict. Finally, creating complex hermeneutic networks has, in and of itself, a liberating impact on those who engage with them, be they authors, readers or even secondary consumers (users of transitory linguistic idioms, for example). This impact operates primarily on the level of imagination and therefore impacts life only through the mediation of individual experience, but this also is of value, no less than the influence on communities and political constellations.

What, then, does my case explain beyond the general truth that long periods of brutality tend to make people ever more brutal, less sensitive to the suffering of the other? I want to start with the fact that Israelis (and by that I mean 'mainstream Jewish Israelis' or 'Jewish Israelis outside of the radical circles, either right or left') are, on the whole, very sensitive to moral considerations. For example, Israeli academics responded to the calls for academic boycott with alarm and a frantic effort to counter the calls, despite the fact that the practice of academic boycott was and still is marginal. It is the moral indictment to which they responded, rather then any immediate damage. Similarly, Israelis have a need to feel that their

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army acts in moral ways, despite the obvious absurdity of this claim. This is not only hypocrisy and cannot be discarded as such. Rather, in my story, it emanates from our brutality being predicated upon a victim's position. The loss of this position, through moral indictment, is very unsettling for us.

Another thing that my story seems to explain better than the universal assumption is the specific pattern of Israeli brutality. Firstly, acts of peak brutality usually follow a period in which we experience ourselves increasingly as victims, like prior to the 2002 operation of 'defensive shield', when the levels of injury to innocent Palestinian bystanders reached new heights. This followed a relatively long period of successful armed operations by Palestinians against Israelis. Or the 2008 operation 'cast lead', which brought Israeli brutality to the level of consistent war crime (now underlined by the Goldstone report) and which followed a relatively prolonged period of Qassam shelling around the Gaza border. Of course, there is a baseline level of brutality that arises simply from the occupying situation and which does not require my story in order to be understood. Also, there is the extreme level of brutality that is exercised routinely by settlers in the OPT and whose hermeneutics also seems different from that of the mainstream. There is considerable evidence that settlers' brutality involves such dynamisms as pagan and mystical beliefs, as well as direct (unconscious) identifications with Nazi themes, which do not seem to appear in the mainstream case. These, however, are beyond the scope of the present paper.

However, the periodic, intense eruption of Israeli brutality does require an explanation. This is especially so if one appreciates the significance of the two recent attacks by Israel on civilian populations and installations, namely, the 2006 attack on Lebanon and the 2008 attack on Gaza. These were the most brutal and disproportionate attacks that Israel has ever carried out, yet they were masterminded by the most liberal government in recent history and enjoyed the support of some 95% of the Jewish Israelis, including the leftmost Zionist party of Meretz and many intellectuals and authors associated with Meretz. Never before has such a liberal government enjoyed such universal support for operations that were so blatantly brutal and disproportionate (relative to their immediate trigger). This pattern can be explained by cumulative experience of victimhood and the need to replace us, Jews, as the agency that occupies the sacrificed position.

I wish to close this paper by commenting on the nature of what I call here 'the historical unconscious', whose themes unfold through what I call 'a cultural hermeneutic network'. Surely, I do not wish to imply a causal relationship between this historical unconscious and the reigning Israeli policies towards Palestinians. The fact that there are certain forces acting in a particular social field does not imply the loss of any ability to resist, even by politicians and group leaders (see also Rose, 2007). Still, from a particular historical perspective, the hermeneutic network which I call the historical unconscious seems to possess much power in connecting between dominant cultural themes and observed group behavior. This is where the explanatory power of my case resides.

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