

Beyond boycotts? Changing behavior by addressing trauma

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Abstract

The following are reflections on a Somatic Experiencing course hosted in Israel. The trainer, Gina Ross, is on a mission to bring healing to this population that has experienced high levels of trauma. This work is crucial to prepare the ground for more peaceful relations between the diverse cultures within Israel and between Israel and its neighbors.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Against a backdrop of boycotts and sanctions, withdrawal from negotiations and peace talks, therapists from all over Israel, including Arab villages, Jewish towns, and mixed cities, came together in May 2017 to finalize their first year of studying a cutting-edge technique to deal with trauma. I am a Jewish American psychotherapist, and I flew from England to join them. Ironically, the location of the course was a trigger for a traumatic reaction among some of the participants.

Cecile (not her real name), an Orthodox Jewish woman who immigrated from France, said she was terrified at the prospect of entering an Arab village to get to the Nur Center that was hosting the training. Gina Ross, the trainer and founder of International Trauma-Healing Institute (ITI), told her not to worry. "The car will drive you there; all you need to do is hang on to the steering wheel."

Cecile found the image of her car driving her along Route 65 into the Arab village oddly calming. The vehicle became her escort and she was no longer alone. She shifted her focus from herself and her debilitating anxiety to her powerful Volvo, which had no capacity for fear. It could turn on to Route 65 flanked by Arab villages without a second thought, empowering her to do something she never imagined she could do on her own. The technique she was coming to learn, "Somatic Experiencing®" (SE), increases our resilience to cope with life's many challenges by working to contradict our limiting irrational beliefs and harness our imagination. Cecile said, "Just coming here, before even entering the building, has been a reparative experience for me."

While there is much disagreement about how to create a safe place here in Israel for everyone, there is one thing that is undisputed: living with the ongoing political conflict can be traumatizing. Therapists from all backgrounds are looking for ways to deal effectively with trauma so that people can live healthy and productive lives. Trauma can lead to impulsive, destructive reactivity or dissociation, two reactions that emerge from a distorted sense of reality. Trauma can have a negative impact on relationships between the different groups and nationalities within Israel and between Israel and its neighbors.

Gina Ross, herself a Jewish refugee from Syria and Lebanon, has long recognized the importance of all sides of the conflict learning techniques for healing trauma. She trained with Dr. Peter Levine, who developed the therapeutic technique Somatic Experiencing in the 1970s to heal trauma. Gina introduced Somatic Experiencing in Israel in 1999 and has returned to run several training programs every year since. The courses were always held in the Jewish sector, and while Gina was passionate about sharing this technique with all populations in Israel, she found it difficult to get the Arab sector to invest in this new method. They probably thought: What could Gina Ross, a blonde woman from Los Angeles dressed in a flourish of blues and pinks, understand about our trauma?

When Gina met psychotherapist Rokaya Marzuk Abu-Rekayek, an attendee at a Somatic Experiencing beginner course, she realized she had a partner for peace. Rokaya, originally from Ar'ara Village and now living in Be'er Sheva, proposed bringing Somatic Experiencing to the Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking citizens of Israel in joint trainings, with an equal mix of Arabs and Jews. (I apologize for the crudeness of the classic yet misleading dichotomy of "Arab" and "Jew." Ironically, for the purpose of bringing people together in ratios that feel balanced, it seems necessary to use these shorthand terms here). True to her word, Rokaya gathered together a group of professionals from diverse backgrounds and even secured a venue at the Nur Center in Kfar Ara, the neighboring village to her birthplace.

I met Rokaya, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, when we lived together in Acco 30 years ago as "Interns for Peace." We have been friends ever since and I was one of her recruits to this course. I had been to her village many times, so coming to the Nur Center for the training was as comfortable for me as studying locally.

Founded in 2014 by Wajih Sidawi, the Nur Center (way2wadiara.com) treats trauma and stress-related disorders for Arabs in Israel. Dena Robbins-Deckel, a member of the board of directors of Nur Center, told me it is the first of its kind to offer psychotherapeutic services with a unique sensitivity to the cultural, political and social issues of this population. Part of Nur Center's vision is to train therapists for treating trauma, and so cooperation with ITI became a natural collaboration.

2 | BEGINNERS COURSE MAY 2017

Over the past 17 years, Gina has been primarily teaching her Israel courses in English. While some Arab participants have attended the courses, this has excluded those Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking professionals who have had little opportunity to develop their English-speaking skills. In order to make this course accessible to the majority, Gina was encouraged by the participants of this cohort to teach in Hebrew, despite the fact that about a third of the participants were Jewish immigrants from English-speaking countries.

Though Gina is fluent in English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Italian, and Spanish, she is still expanding her vocabulary in Hebrew. Armed with her notepad containing a growing list of context-specific words, she taught until she came to gaps in her spoken Hebrew, such as the word "reconstruct." A symphony of participants would then throw out suggestions in Hebrew and Arabic and debate amongst themselves the nuances of meaning until a suitable translation was agreed upon and added to the list.

The basic Hebrew sprinkled with Arabic suited me, and the sidebar debates in etymology were a small and delightful price to pay to sit in a room in an Arab village with Jews and Palestinians eager to learn and work together. Rokaya's son, 21-year-old Sohel, said he enjoyed the linguistic interludes as a learning break that helped him keep up with the seasoned therapists in the room. Sohel, trained in massage, said that he reluctantly joined the course with his mother's and my encouragement. His first impression was that the method was "stupid" due to its simplicity, but when he saw it actually working to relieve trauma during the demonstrations and practice sessions, he was converted. "Somatic Experiencing really does help you and you see the changes," he said.

The course consists of three modalities: teaching, demonstration, and practice. During the first demonstration, Gina was sitting opposite Hannah (name changed), a Jewish art therapist. Gina asked her to connect to her body and notice any sensations. At that point, the mu'uzin's call to prayer came wafting in through the open windows. It

was noted. "And what are the sensations in your body when you hear the mu'uzin?," Gina asked. Hannah was silent as she went into herself.

Two months earlier, the Mu'uzin bill (officially "Limiting noise from houses of prayer bill") was introduced in the Knesset with the stated intention of protecting people from interrupted sleep. The bill bans religious leaders from using loudspeakers to summon worshippers for prayers during the nighttime. There were protests as Muslim members of Parliament called the bill racist and "a war on Islam."

I remember my first visit to Rokaya's village when the mu'uzin woke me up at 5:00 each morning. I asked her how she coped with this intolerable situation. She and her sisters laughed and said it didn't wake them. On the fourth night, it didn't wake me up either. I was amazed to learn that my body could tune out the noise once it recognized the sound and knew it didn't need to respond with any action. My sleep was never disturbed by the mu'uzin again.

During the Interns for Peace program, interns spent one year promoting coexistence living in a Jewish town and one year living in an Arab village or city. A Jewish-American intern, Michael (name changed), had finished his year in the Jewish town of Kiryat Ata and was placed in the Arab village of Baqa al-Gharbiyye. His first night the mu'uzin woke him and he had a full-blown panic attack. Consciously he believed he was safe, but his subconscious fears had not been adequately addressed. Michael couldn't stop screaming until he was driven out of the village at 5:30 a.m. He never returned.

My husband, also a former intern, lived a year in the Arab city of Shfaram and never complained of interrupted sleep. He said he only heard the mu'uzin the first week and then it just became incorporated into his dreams. Same stimulus, yet different reactions based on experiences and beliefs.

It's not the noise that threatens our health; it's the thoughts and feelings we have coupled to it. When the call to prayer is linked to beliefs of ill-intent and a feeling of fear, the subconscious mind wakes the person in an attempt at self-protection. The healthy mind will take care of the body by staying asleep.

Somatic Experiencing helps us to uncouple sensations, thoughts, feelings, and meanings that have become entangled after a trauma. Psychologists have understood this phenomenon of conditioned emotional reactions since Watson's famous experiment with "Little Albert" (Watson & Rayner, 1920). Albert was shown a rat and had no emotional response. When a hammer struck a steel bar behind his head he would cry. He was shown the rat several times while the hammer struck. Soon he began to cry and try to escape when he would see the rat without the noise. In Somatic Experiencing this is called "overcoupling." The sight of the rat is coupled with the emotion of fear because of something that happened in the past that was scary. It has nothing to do with the rat. In Israel, much of the population have overcoupled benign stimuli with negative sensations.

About two weeks after the course ended, two cars were burned in the village of Ara and a graffiti message of revenge typical of extremist Jewish settlers was left on a wall. Like little Albert, some residents are likely to associate Hebrew and Jews with attacks on their property, just as many Jews associate Palestinians and Arabic with terrorists, even though a very tiny percentage of people on either side carry out this kind of violence.

This is how trauma disrupts relations between groups of people and makes the situation much more tense and volatile than it may need to be. When our nervous system is balanced, we are able to see the event for what it is: an action carried out by frightened people who gain a sense of power and control from being part of a gang and committing a violent crime. What are those who turn to violence afraid of? Annihilation. They hear the ongoing threats. They believe they're fighting for the survival of their people, though they do it in a way that isn't constructive. While that level of stress may be understandable, their actions are trauma-based.

Gina Ross is on a mission to create a national movement in Israel to reduce the effects of trauma on the population. She has a plan to train staff at key institutions such as schools, hospitals, and the army so they are equipped with the tools to deal with trauma. The aim is to reduce these types of events and their destructive impact on both sides. If more people know how to uncover unhealthy associations and discharge feelings that, when triggered, perpetuate traumatic reactions, they can learn to respond to situations in healthier ways, leading to a safer environment for everyone.

What did Hannah, the Jewish therapist, answer when asked what she felt in her body when she heard the Muslim call to prayer during a training session?

Hannah replied, "I don't understand what he is saying."

Gina asked, "And when you don't understand what he is saying, what do you feel in your body?"

Hannah took her time to answer how she felt. While she could admit what she was thinking, it seemed more difficult for her to name the feelings that not understanding a language might bring up, such as vulnerability and alienation. Though I initially sensed a discomfort in her body posture and facial expression, I saw her relax and then a slight smile followed a deep inhale. Hannah said that as she focused on the music of the call to prayer, she was enjoying the beauty of the sound. Gina helped her ground that resource in her body. We all took a moment to listen to the chanting. It was a reminder that such a benign stimulus as prayer, that could have been coupled to traumatic reactions and taken on distorted meanings, actually affirmed the intentions of the group to participate in a profound experience of co-existence.

I felt that everyone in the room reached the point where they were able to take time out to enjoy the interruption. By "grounding the resources," or getting in touch with our ability to experience positive, comfortable, joyful sensations, we can then learn to call up these sensations at will instead of staying in fear and discomfort. Somatic Experiencing gives us back control of our bodies and minds, enabling us to find hope and peace in ourselves and with each other.

During our two-week training session, Israeli ministers backed a proposal to downgrade Arabic from its official national language status. I wouldn't be surprised if Jewish "annihilation anxiety" had a role to play in this legislation that views the Arabic language, which has been an official language since the establishment of Israel, as a threat to its Jewish character. Can sharing official language status actually be dangerous? Or has the Arabic language irrationally been linked to feelings of fear and vulnerability?

Last month, the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem sparked a violent protest on the same Route 65 that brought us into Ara village. In response, Israeli defense minister Lieberman called for the boycotting of Arab villages along this road. Instead of addressing their protest as a traumatic reaction, while recognizing that the majority of people from that area are peace-seeking citizens like Wajih and Rokaya, he declared that all Ara valley residents were a threat to Israel's security. Lieberman, who feels threatened by the BDS boycott, grew up a Jew in the Soviet Union, and whose parents met in Siberia while in exile, may have his own trauma to release.

These recent distressing events show the urgent need for the important trauma work that takes place at the Nur Center as well as the Somatic Experiencing courses that take place throughout Israel in all sectors of society. Only once we have addressed our trauma-based reactions will we be able to create peaceful intercultural relationships and live up to our ideals of social justice.

REFERENCES

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Ariel Katz has worked with Rokaya Marzouk Abu-Rekayek in Israel periodically over the past 30 years to promote understanding between the different cultures, nationalities, and religious groups that make up Israel's diverse population. She lives in England where she is a registered play therapist, and is currently in her second year of the Somatic Experiencing training course that takes place in Israel. Ariel Katz (left) with Rokaya Marzouk Abu-Rekayek at the training session.

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