

Tikkun Magazine: Beyond Internalized Anti-semitism: Healing the Collective Scars of the Past

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Beyond Internalized Anti-semitism: Healing the Collective Scars of the Past

By Cherie Brown

Fifty years have passed since the end of the Holocaust. But the scars live on in the daily personal lives of the Jewish people in ways more pervasive and complex than many of us have understood. Among the Jewish people are those of the generation who witnessed - and in some cases were victims of - the Nazi Final Solution. The internalized terror of the Holocaust generation has been passed on to a new generation shaping their personal lives, their politics, and most important, their ability as Jews to see the present as a fresh, new moment filled with possibility. Yet the Holocaust is but the extreme of two millennia of Jewish persecution, a pattern of suffering so enmeshed with our sense of peoplehood that it is incorporated into our religious ritual, the history we teach to our children, and our sense of our relationship to the non-Jewish world. We proclaim, "Never Again," but our worldview, so entwined with the past, ensures that we will never forget. And in never forgetting, we often fail to maintain an objective picture of the present - separate from the traumas of the past.

As a young girl, I sat in synagogue between my parents every Yom Kippur afternoon, glued to my seat as I listened to the readings from the Martyrology service, the recitation of the pious and the saintly Jews who died at the hands of their persecutors. With every graphic reading reminding the congregants of all the suffering that had been inflicted upon Jews, including young children, throughout history, I became increasingly convinced that, as a Jewish child, I was not safe, indeed would never be safe. I choreographed dances to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I read and reread *The Autobiography of Hannah Senesh*, and silently agonized about whether or not I would have had the courage to parachute into Austria, risking my life to save Jews.

Only in later years did I come to understand the extent to which my secret fears were shared by so many other Jews. In the past twenty years, I have counseled thousands of Jews from around the world on a wide range of issues related to Jewish identity. I found that many of them had trouble sleeping. Others struggled with breathing - sometimes in the form of asthma. Many felt an underlying feeling of panic and insecurity in their daily lives, often without knowing why. Still others had difficulty making life decisions. What has struck me most is that these clients, most of whom were born after 1945, saw their difficulties as their personal problems. Rarely did they associate their individual fears with being Jewish or with the Holocaust. The need for Jews to heal these internalized recordings of terror so that they will not pass them on to the next generation should be a central priority of any movement toward Jewish renewal.

One way that Jews traditionally have dealt with the pain of traumatic historical events is to remember

and commemorate them in religious and communal services. The tears shed at the Martyrology on Yom Kippur, the sadness felt at Tisha B'Av, even the upset we feel about being threatened with extermination by Haman are all incorporated into our community experience in doses that aim to make them manageable, particularly when associated with rituals that reaffirm our fundamental belief in the goodness and ultimate power of a benign Being.

But when the pain of near-extermination is still so fresh in the hearts and minds of so many Jews, these kinds of rituals need to be supplemented with more directed counseling or support groups. In these sessions, Jews would be helped to feel safe enough to grieve openly and face the terror from the Holocaust that has led so many Jews to see themselves still in 1995 as an endangered people, or to experience their everyday world colored by panic, worry, or fear.

To give an example from one counseling session, a Jewish woman was deciding whether or not to have a child. She had agonized for months about the decision. Friends and family offered opinions, but she was unable to decide what to do. In the counseling session, I asked her to give me her very first uncensored thought in response to the question, where are you stuck back in your past? She shocked herself with her response: the Holocaust. Out came a secretly held conviction that although she had, in fact, been born in 1949, she believed that she had been alive during the Holocaust and had been forcibly separated from her parents. While she knew that the fantasy didn't make any logical sense, somewhere deep inside, she was still that small Jewish girl who had listened to stories about the Holocaust (often told by well-meaning adults who themselves were still terrified and had not been given a chance to heal their own grief about what had so recently been done to the Jews).

Young children who hear tragic stories, particularly when the victims of the tragedy are children, do not always make a distinction between what has happened to others and what has happened to them. They quickly believe that they are personally involved in the events - that they were there. And they often feel personally responsible for not being able to prevent the tragedy. Many Jewish children have thus internalized the unhealed terror in the voices and the actions of the adults around them. Even children who were never given specific information about the Holocaust or even about being Jewish, had nevertheless unintentionally had that terror passed on to them, in the generalized message that the world is a dangerous place.

It is not that young children should not be given accurate information about Jewish history, including the Holocaust. But when Jewish history is told in voices filled with terror and panic, it can sound to a child as if the same degree of danger for Jews that existed during the Holocaust still persists in the present. And this is simply not true. Compared to many periods in Jewish history, and particularly when compared with the near-extermination of Jews during the Holocaust, Jews are now living in security. And when we speak to one another as if the world of 1995 is just about as dangerous for Jews as the world of 1933, we are setting up a dynamic that can have extremely negative consequences for our lives, the lives of our children, and for all of our political decisions.

In numerous counseling sessions with Jews I have found that the passing down of this terror from one generation to the next has led to myriad other destructive reactions. There is a growing body of literature documenting that people who are abused are the very ones who then turn around and abuse others. The all-too-common cry that can be heard from some Jews - how can we, who have been so mistreated turn around and mistreat others - is a misunderstanding of the whole mechanism

of abuse. Those who have been oppressed often internalize the behaviors of the oppressor and act them out unintentionally against their own people. Thus, the hostility and brutality leveled at Jews, when left unhealed, can be internalized and then Jews may become hostile, hypercritical, or even brutal to one another. This cycle of repeating the initial mistreatment is one of the most insidious results of oppression. The vicious trashing of Jewish leaders by some Jews, when they perceive their leaders to be adopting policies that, in their minds, might possibly threaten Jewish survival, and the high degree of criticism and mistrust between Jews are manifestations of this dynamic.

To give an example of how this dynamic can operate in someone's personal life, I recently counseled a young woman who passionately wanted to set up support groups to train other young Jews in leadership skills for work in the mainstream Jewish community. She had already established one support group, but she was having difficulty convening the meetings because she kept getting paralyzed by her anticipated fears of being overwhelmed by criticism from the group's members. When I asked her when in her past she had been surrounded by critical Jews, she sobbed as she recalled memories of her parents screaming at each other with terror in their voices; as a young child, she had been powerless to intervene. Neither parent at the time acknowledged to her - nor did they probably understand themselves - how likely it was that their angry fights were dramatizations of their feelings of terror and helplessness.

The need to separate the past from the present is certainly a central theme in most counseling literature. But what has not been dealt with fully in the literature are the unique dynamics of the Jewish experience. How do we determine which patterns of behavior are in fact rooted in Jewish internalized oppression and the collective traumas of Jewish history and which behaviors are simply individual life problems for those individual Jews? When I began to lead workshops for Jews dealing with issues of internalized oppression, almost every participant initially was convinced that his or her family struggles were unique psychological problems. Through years of leading workshops and listening to thousands of Jews I have come to identify a common set of behaviors - panic, worry, urgency, hypercriticalness, etc - that emerge in so many family stories.

Obviously, everyone has at times been frightened or worried. In fact, at least half of the workshops that I have led have included joint sessions for Jews and non-Jews who wanted to work on being better allies. In contrasting the family stories of the non-Jewish participants with those of the Jews, however, I found a convincing pattern of behaviors and struggles among the Jews.

As important as it is to identify this common set of Jewish struggles, it is by no means appropriate to assume that all Jews have had the same experience. For example, in my workshops I've had Jews whose parents were anything but overprotective, anxious, or overbearing. Every Jewish person is a unique individual with a complex set of life circumstances. And no one set of descriptive patterns of behavior is accurate for all Jews. Yet the preponderance of so much anxiety, worry, terror, and hypercriticalness in so many Jews cannot be dismissed as the individual problems of a few.

And nowhere is the need to heal the terror more apparent than in Jewish communal political decisions. Why did it require a letter from Yitzhak Rabin to every rabbi in North America last Rosh Hashanah to shake them out of their silence and fears about the peace process? Why did Rabin have to take this extraordinary step and make a personal appeal, asking rabbis to back Israel's struggling peace efforts by giving a High Holiday sermon supporting the accords?

If Jewish leaders living far away from Israel weren't able to step outside of their own internalized fears sufficiently to back a major breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli conflict at a time of heightened hope and new possibility, how much more understandable it becomes that Israelis today, in the face of new acts of terrorism, throw up their hands and want to back away from the peace process. Yet the current situation in Israel calls for a courageous response and a firm commitment to stick with the peace process. It is still the only workable solution, no matter how discouraged people feel.

The present experience of betrayal is nothing like the betrayal of Jews that took place in the Holocaust, even when it feels similar. Israel is not in the same vulnerable position in which Jews once found themselves. The strong feelings of betrayal among Israelis, no matter how understandable in the wake of the recent terrorist attacks, cannot be used as the basis for present political decisions. Terrorism is such a successful strategy for our enemies because it so quickly throws us back into seeing the present as an exact repetition of the traumas and memories of the past, even when the present actually differs significantly from the past. The pull for Jews to see the present political situation through a prism distorted by the unhealed fears of the past can lock Jews into rigid responses that miss the fresh political opportunities and needs of the present.

But it is not an easy decision to live fully in the present. It requires the courage to go back and release all the internalized grief and terror connected with being Jewish. It is time that we convene ongoing support groups for Jews in which they can acknowledge openly to one another the fear and pain from the past. Participants would be helped to release the grief from the stories about the Holocaust they'd listened to (or witnessed directly) growing up; they would be helped to see the connections between the struggles in their current life and the past experiences of Jews. A major contribution of the Jewish renewal movement could be to play a pivotal role in initiating these Jewish support groups in communities everywhere.

Even Jews who never heard stories about the Holocaust would still be an important part of a support group. By listening to the life stories of all of the participants, each person could begin to make sense of his or her own experiences in light of what had happened to other Jews. In the same way that women who participated in consciousness-raising groups in the early years of the women's movement listened to each other's stories and came to understand that what at first appeared to be an individual struggle was in fact a political issue connected to a history of sexism and internalized sexism, so too can Jews, through telling their life stories to one another and releasing the grief and terror from those stories, come to understand that our difficulties are not our isolated problems but also are a result of a history of anti-Semitism and internalized oppression.

We can no longer afford to ignore, personally or collectively, how much, as a people, we are still traumatized by the past. Religious rituals will always be powerful tools to inspire us and link us to our ancient past. But ritual alone cannot heal all the internalized terror. It is time that we admit that our entire people is still in mourning and take the time to heal the collective wounds of the past.

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