

Both Sides Now

By James S. Gordon, M.D.

2/9/2005

A few days ago, just before Condoleezza Rice landed in Tel Aviv, I returned from Israel and Gaza. I've been going back and forth with my colleagues for the last two and a half years, sharing our way of working with psychological trauma with leading Israeli and Palestinian mental health professionals.

Our method, which combines psychological self-care with such "mind-body skills" as meditation, guided imagery, drawings, dance, yoga, and group support, helps these professionals to better understand and deal with their own stress and trauma. Then we train them to use the same kind of approach with children and adults who, in staggering numbers, are suffering from anxiety and depression, nightmares and flashbacks, aggression and emotional isolation—the full panoply of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

I love the work. I'm touched and honored by the confidence that our Israeli and Palestinian colleagues have in us, and the confidences that they, and the aggrieved and saddened people they work with, share. Here, in this moment when peace once again seems possible, is some of what they are teaching us.

Hope, as the saying goes, seems to accompany life everywhere. I could feel it in the land, driving south toward Gaza through the hilly countryside in the days after *Tu B'Shevat*, the Jewish Arbor Day. Almond blossoms heralding spring in this part of the world, where Samson fell for Delilah and then brought the Philistine temple down, burst upward at the road's edge.

Hope was present in the soon to be evacuated Gush Katif settlement, where poorly guided, but still dangerous, *qassam* rockets, have for four years troubled sleep, cratered homes and schools, and taken a few young lives. And hope is still alive in Palestinian Gaza too, across the wasteland of the lengthened Erez crossing from Israel where the steel gates, like those in modern prisons, buzz open and clang shut. It struggles along too in the Jabaliya refugee camp in Northern Gaza where Israeli tanks have flattened tiny stone houses to rubble and shot, along with armed adversaries, children leaning over fallen friends.

The Israeli settlers and their children make videos to memorialize the nearby sea that feeds and freshens them and the demonstrations they make against the Sharon government's planned evacuation. They believe that the God who has so long protected them from the worst ravages of the *qassams* will now provide a miracle adequate to

prevent their removal. "A small earthquake, perhaps", suggests a school counselor who has worked with children bereaved by the *intifada's* guns and bombs.

In Gaza's refugee camps, hope – and the recovery from loss - is hobbled by apparently endless disappointment and staggering unemployment – as high as 70-80%. Still, men and women here as in Israel pray for their children's uninterrupted nights and for decent food and work, and a room or two of their own for families of 7 or 12. "Perhaps, *in shaa' Allaah*, God willing", they say, "Abu Mazen..." The sentences tend to trail off.

Armies and the use of force are a source of pride and a very mixed blessing. Israelis are caught between pride in their army's power and fear for their children who serve it. Parents are universally concerned for their lives, and also for the - the word is used so often – "coarsening" that comes too often with their time in uniform. Many young men and women, recent high school graduates who police the occupied territories, come to see Palestinians not only as dangerous, but as sub-human – and sometimes wind up firing guns at innocents as well as enemies. Others struggle for compassion. "The hardest things for me", one young paratrooper told me over dinner, "are the disrespect I sometimes show and the shoving of Palestinians who are my parents' age."

In Gush Katif the attitude is even more complex. The Israeli Defense Force – the army – that has been their shield as well as their sword, may soon put the settlers out of their homes. "It is the worst thing imaginable", one elder confides. Just as Israel is isolated in the Arab world, so they feel Gush Katif is an island in a sea of Israelis who now seem hostile to their very existence. "One Israeli against another – how do I explain to my children", a mother asks, "that they are our friends and enemies, both."

In Gaza, the names and pictures of those killed in the struggle with Israel cover the walls of homes – secular icons amidst a religion that forbids sacred ones. I talk with many young people who want more than anything else to emulate these "martyrs". "It is the best way", one sixteen-year old in Khan Younis tells me, "that I can serve my people." He is dressed in a school, not a military uniform. His friends nod their heads in agreement.

There are also children who seem wise and pacific beyond their years, and many many adults who yearn to protect them. They want relief, not revenge, a decent economy, less crowded schools, and "US aid for the Palestinians as well as the Israelis." They speak the word "freedom" often, and remind me that theirs also is the freedom President Bush is praising.

In the Western press, Hamas, probably the most powerful and deadly of the militant groups, appears irrationally and perpetually committed to senseless violence. In Gaza, the view is more complex and nuanced. "Hamas", a Palestinian Authority official tells me, "does some good and some very bad things. I am in total disagreement", he continues, "with killing non-combatants, women and children, but you see what the Israelis do to us." He gestures to the ruins around us.

"And Hamas does support the people", he goes on, "we in Fatah have much to learn from their social programs." Hamas, he reminds me, won 70% of the vote in the recent municipal elections in Gaza. He and many others believe that, in spite of the ongoing rhetoric, the terrorist acts are ultimately part of a larger, rational strategy that includes gaining seats at the head table of Palestinian governance.

History is alive and wounding in the Middle East. For Israelis, this is axiomatic. The horror of the Holocaust and its terrible consequences catalyzed the long hoped for creation of the state of Israel and now fortify Israelis against their enemies. But that's just the beginning. Israelis remember that the rest of the world has abandoned Jews many times before. Psychologists and psychiatrists in our training recall stories that shaped their childhood – ships fleeing Europe that were turned away from Palestine and the U.S., grandparents who did time in British prisons as well as German concentration camps. Now they're passionately devoted to working with those whose pain reminds them of their families' past suffering: Israeli parents who've lost children in the *intifada*, the men and women who collect body parts after bus bombings, the children who can't sit still and unpredictably strike out. Helping these people now, they feel they are also helping to heal the wounds of the past.

No in-depth conversation in Gaza is complete without discussion of the “catastrophe”, the 1948 partition which sent three quarters of a million Palestinians out of Israel - 1/3 of them to Gaza - and the “relapse” of the 1967 war. It feels indeed as if a terrible, chronic disease had befallen these people. They talk about “the right of return”, and sometimes show us, the keys to homes that they lost to Israelis. The cure – recovery of their homes – seems highly unlikely even to the most committed, but the hurt remembered sometimes seems to overwhelm all present prospects.

The divisions within each people are deeper and less obvious than I, at least, ever realized. In our trainings in Israel several people tell us that “the biggest problems we have are not with the Palestinians, but with each other.” “Between left and right?”, I ask. “Well, that too, but even more, orthodox and secular”, one Israeli psychologist says. The week of our training was the first time she has ever had an intimate conversation with an orthodox woman. Others around the table, a Hasidic physician in a black coat, orthodox women in hats, and casually dressed and coiffed agnostics, nod in agreement.

I've already mentioned the diverging Palestinian perspectives on Hamas and armed struggle, but there is much more as well. Abu Mazen's Palestinian Authority, which now aims to govern well, has in recent years provoked a mistrust that only deeds, not promises, can repair. Everyone in Gaza is confined – “the world's largest open air prison”, a new friend announces – but some much more constricted than others. The educated middle class lives in comfortable apartments. People in the refugee camps struggle - five or nine to a room, 60 of their children squeezed into each elementary school classroom – to breathe. The former hope to return to the world of international universities, travel, and possibility; the latter have not and likely never will leave Gaza's few square miles.

The children can show all of us the way. When I was first contacted two and a half years ago, almost simultaneously, by the Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma and the Palestinian Counseling Center in East Jerusalem, the words and the spirit of the communications were almost identical. We're highly trained professionals, very skilled at working with individuals, the e-mails told me, and we're totally overwhelmed by the psychological trauma that our population and, especially, our children are experiencing. We've read about the model you've created in Kosovo (where our approach has been integrated into the entire region's community mental health system), and we believe we could use your model to work effectively with far larger numbers of children and their families.

The suffering of these children troubles everyone. Some of the signs are obvious - children with missing limbs and scarred faces - but there are far larger numbers who bear the less visible psychological burden of the conflict: Bed wetting and nightmares, difficulty concentrating and aggression in school are endemic on both sides of the Erez crossing. Every parent I have met feels the pain and struggles with the consequences. All mourn young people who have been killed.

There is, however, something catalytic, even, potentially redemptive in the suffering. These children cannot be ignored. Their deaths and pain may at first provoke a desire for retribution against those who caused it. Eventually, however, it sobers all but most violence-besotted. Few really want to see the aggression of the other side perpetuated in the actions of their own children. Almost no one - neither Palestinian nor Israeli - actually yearns for his child to be a martyr or even a hero. There is a gravity in the large, close, welcoming families on both sides of Erez that pulls people toward peace, softens the hardships of the conflict and promises hope. These parents, like all of us, want their kids to live and learn, prosper and procreate.

And then, there is Condoleezza Rice. Everywhere I go, I am asked what she is like, as if she and I have been playing four-handed piano or are about to watch the Super Bowl together. "I don't know her", I say, but the questions continue. Well, reply, even in spite of her un-admitted misjudgments and dangerous misinformation about Iraq, and her self-righteousness, I am still hopeful. How could she, someone trained in history, someone intellectually aware of and personally sensitive to the consequences of institutionalized cruelty and contempt, not want to be on the side of peace, not want to fulfill the promise of healing and hope?

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