

Kairos Puget Sound Coalition Seattle
7th Fall Conference
Sat., Oct. 23rd 2021

Exiting Zionism - A former Israeli's awakening

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Thank you for the introduction and good morning, day or evening to everyone wherever in the world are. Thank you to the organisers, to all who are present, and to those who will listen to the recording at a later stage. I am grateful for the invitation to speak to you.

(For anyone who is interested, the text of this talk and some slides that I have prepared will be available to download from tomorrow through a link that I will give the organisers. I will also make the talk available on Academia.edu for those of you who have access to it).

My purpose in speaking about Palestine is, of course, to lend my voice to the voices of the Palestinian people in the hope that the world finally listens to their plight and does the right thing. When the world's powers, repeatedly and habitually collude with perpetrators of crimes against humanity, it remains up to activists — as individuals and in groups — to speak out and try to lead to change. But it is not easy to do this in a hostile atmosphere, where those who commit the crime also control the narrative about the crime.

In the case of Israel in particular, activists have been facing something that I have been familiar with from my early childhood in Israel. It is the accusation that anyone who criticises Israel is guilty of the crime of racism against Jews, also called antisemitism. Therefore, another hope I have in speaking, is that through talks such this, I can help activists stand firm against baseless accusations of antisemitism, which are an attempt to disable and silence the critic. Accusations of antisemitism are also intended to deflect attention away from the crime and the suffering of the victims, and from those who are perpetrating the crime. I hope that by the time I finish my talk, you will feel more confident about speaking out, and you will not allow yourself to be silenced or confused.



In her short story, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* my favourite author, the late Ursula Le Guin, tells the tale of the happy, perfect city of Omelas.

All the citizens of Omelas live peacefully in beautiful surroundings in their well-tended city. But the city has a secret. In order for the citizens of Omelas to enjoy this incredible perfection, a single child must always be kept locked up in a dark dungeon underneath the city. The child is kept in nakedness and darkness. It is not fed well nor treated well and it is not allowed to develop or thrive. It is kept in filth and deprivation; the epitome of utter misery.

From time to time, people go down to visit the dungeon and look at the child. Sometimes they are affected by what they see. They feel disgusted or disturbed, but then they go back up to their beautiful, sunny city, put what they saw out of their minds and get on with their perfect lives. No matter how they feel about it, they accept that this child kept in the dungeon is the price that *has* to be paid, the sacrifice that *has* to be made for the continued happiness and the perfection of their existence.

The last paragraph of the story reads:

“At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.”

I used this quote in a paper I wrote back in 2003 when I was still in Canberra and was still wrestling with the experience of leaving Zionism, my version of Omelas. The paper, 'Differentiating from Israel'¹ was published in a peer reviewed family therapy journal because family therapy theory can inform us a great deal about topics such as this. In many ways this is the focus of this talk.

Background and a few 'disclaimers'

When I began to speak out for what I saw as the unfair treatment of the Palestinian people back in 2001 in Australia, I thought I was a lone voice. The reactions around me seemed to reinforce this impression. Back then most people have not heard of anyone with my background who openly questioned Israel and who was prepared to speak and write about it publicly. I am a former Israeli citizen, born and bred in Israel. I served my full term in the Israeli military and I am a granddaughter of holocaust survivors.

It didn't take long for me to realise the advantage that my accidental 'credentials' were offering me. I thought that given the general support for Israel around the world, and the indifference, even widespread hostility towards the Palestinians, there was a better chance people would listen to me. I felt that it was my duty to use who I am and my background to support the Palestinian cause, simply because my voice was more likely to be heard.

(Disclaimer 1)

But soon, I also began to feel uncomfortable. I realised that Jewish and Jewish Israeli voices were being listened to quite readily. But I wasn't sure how many Palestinians got the opportunity to speak publicly and have their stories heard by people who were *really* prepared to listen.

I still don't think that my story is that important. In a caring and compassionate world, victims shouldn't need others to speak for them just to validate their experience of suffering, injustice and victimhood. Surely victims everywhere, humans who suffer at the

¹ Australian New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy. 24(1). 2003. pp. 41-46

hands of other humans, should expect to be heard and supported directly and unconditionally by everyone. Yet the evidence from studies on trauma for example, points repeatedly to the fact that if someone was a victim early in life, they are much more likely to be victimised repeatedly throughout their life, compared with people who have never suffered trauma or mistreatment.

The world as it is does not like victims. More often than not, victims are dismissed, ignored, maligned and dehumanised. They are often further abused or let down by the very people or organisations that are supposed to help them. Many people would like to believe that if someone has been victimised, they must have done something to deserve it. Most people need their world to make sense. It does not make sense to most people that someone can be victimised randomly, just because they happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, or because they had something someone else coveted, or for no reason at all. So the attitude of finding fault in victims and blaming victims for their own suffering is sadly the prevailing attitude almost everywhere.

(Disclaimer 2)

When I spoke up, I was often told I was 'courageous'. That too puzzled me. What is wrong with our human affairs that it should require *courage* to state the obvious, to speak out against a crime or to protect and advocate for victims? Why do we need *courage* to do the right thing? Why is it not straight forward?

(I don't have the time in this talk to address these important issues. Perhaps we will have time later in the discussion, or you might want reflect on them in your own time).

(Disclaimer 3)

Over the years I have been asked many times about the losses I have suffered for speaking out and the personal price I have paid. I want to make it absolutely clear that whatever losses I might have suffered because of my choice to stand with the victims of my people instead of with my people, do not even begin to compare with what every Palestinian has suffered from the moment Zionism began to create a foothold in Palestine.

Whatever losses I might have suffered, I have also gained a great deal. I have met incredible people that I would not have met if I hadn't spoken out. I can live with myself and can die well when my time comes.

Growing up in Israel (Slide 2)

I was born in Tel Aviv in 1964 and grew up in Bat Yam in 'downtown' Israel — a side of Israel of which few people are aware. I don't know if this is still the case these days, but when I started to speak out, Israel was still largely romanticised and had something of an idealised image in the Western world. Influenced by popular culture and by Israel's sophisticated and relentless propaganda machine, the *Hasbarah*, many outside Israel believed the same myths that we, inside Israel, were taught at school.

They believed that we, the Jews who settled Palestine, were heroic people who triumphed over millennia of oppression and victimhood and rose from the ashes of the holocaust to 'make the desert bloom'. They believed, as we ourselves were taught, that we brought 'progress' to a 'primitive' land filled with malaria-infested swamps, a backward and largely empty land. People thought of us as courageous, hopeful, peace-loving pioneers and this is what school told us we were. When people thought about Israel, they thought of the lovely rural scenery of the Kibbutz, of ingenuity, of progress, courage and idealism. But this fictitious and fraudulent image couldn't be further not only from reality and the reality of the Palestinians, but also from my personal experience.

Bat-Yam, where I grew up, was an ugly and soulless urban desert with social problems, poverty, drugs, alcohol, family breakdown and crime. These were caused largely by the way Israel treated the Arabic-speaking Mizrahi Jews it shipped en-masse in the 1950s from countries like Morocco, Iraq and the Yemen. They were hastily put out of sight, housed in makeshift shanty towns called in Hebrew *ma'abarot*, meaning 'transit camps', in Bat-Yam and elsewhere. Israel was in a rush to improve its demographics, the more Jews, the better. It was not interested in people's welfare, especially not the welfare of Mizrahi Jews who were perceived in the dominant Ashkenazi culture as primitive and inferior, not much different to how Ashkenazi culture viewed 'Arabs'.

The migrants were promised good housing and work to entice them to leave their good and often well to do lives in their home countries where their ancestors lived for millennia. But when they arrived in Israel, they were housed in tents and corrugated iron shacks. These were supposed to be temporary but lasted decades. These proud families with a rich culture and history were thrown into abject poverty and deprivation. The word *ma'abarot* came to mean something negative, but it was not the people's fault. One of those *ma'abarot* was only a few minutes' walk from my primary school. These transit camps were finally demolished, but not before generations of those proud Mizrahi Jewish families were destroyed through displacement, poverty, racism and discrimination. They were the 'blacks' of Israeli Jewish society and suffered decades of racism and discrimination not unlike African Americans.

We lived in one of sixteen, almost identical flats in a square building over a noisy street, where the walls were thin and everyone knew what went on in everyone else's flats. Those buildings were built in a hurry during the 1960s mostly by Palestinian labourers from Gaza, exploited as slave labour. Labour laws and employment rights were reserved for Jews only.

Walking to and from school down our densely built-up street, I watched these men build endless rows of almost identical buildings. I didn't know who these men were. All I knew was that they were Arabs, that they were dangerous and that I should ignore them, hurry up when passing a building site and never speak to them.

We lived in better conditions than the people of the *ma'abarot*. We were the 'whites' of Jewish Israeli society. My father was born in Palestine to a Greek Jewish mother and a Turkish Jewish man. He was a Middle Eastern Jew with a darker skin, but he did not suffer racism because he did not speak Arabic and his accent was not the same as the Mizrahi Jews who came from Arabic-speaking countries. He used to make jokes about Moroccan Jews in particular, whom he saw as violent and primitive.

My mother was the daughter of German-speaking Romanian Jews from Bucharest. They and two of their children survived forced labour camps in Romania. My grandmother had four children when she was sent to the camp. The two younger ones died of starvation and

disease. The two older ones survived, just. My mother who was born at the end of the war as a refugee in Bucharest always saw herself as white, European and superior as did her parents when they encountered Mizrahi Jews in Israel.

I was, in effect, 'mixed-race' by Israeli standards, but still not doing quite as badly as the 'black' Jews. Because my skin is slightly darker than that of European Jews, I was referred to occasionally in my twenties as, 'that Iraqi woman'. Not many people are aware of the Israel that I knew as a child. It was a harsh, nasty, unkind and racist place, even to its own people.

But my real problem was in my own family. As a child I was severely abused in a number of ways for years by both my parents, each in their preferred ways. My abusers, my parents, were Jewish – not Palestinian, Muslim or Christian. At school I was repeatedly told that we, Jews, were innately more moral and ethical than all other people. But my ongoing nightmare at home made me recognise instinctively, albeit unconsciously at the time, that Jews were *not* special, certainly not innately more moral or ethical.

Not all anti-Zionist Jews had a bad childhood. Many activists I know grew up in safe and loving families. Their journeys out of Zionism are different to my own. This became especially obvious to me when I edited the book, *Beyond Tribal Loyalties: Personal stories of Jewish peace activists* and had the privilege of collating and editing the stories of others who have been through a similar journey to my own. But my history of childhood abuse played an important role in what was to become a kind of an awakening later in life.

When you grow up in a schizophrenic universe with one reality on the surface and something quite different and quite nasty hidden underneath, you learn that sometimes things are not what they seem. You learn to not just trust automatically, or believe everything you are told about how things are.

Military Service 1982-1984 (slide 3)

I served in the Israeli army between 1982 and 1984. During my service and under Prime Minister Menahem Begin and Defence Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel invaded Lebanon a second time. Many years later as dots were starting to join up, I realised that my unit in the

central headquarters of the army in Tel-Aviv, and my commanding officer whom I adored, played a role in the Sabra & Shatilla massacre in September 1982.

Although I have not killed anyone myself, the kind of highly classified work I did for the army meant that I colluded with this crime against humanity, albeit as a small cog in a large machine. During that time my boyfriend, who was an officer in the armoured corps, was rewarded for murdering Palestinians in Southern Lebanon using what was then classified, new tank-mounted, heat-seeking technology provided by the US. Other very close friends who served in the Israeli navy indiscriminately bombed civilian buildings in Beirut from the sea killing, traumatising and displacing many innocent Lebanese people. Other close friends who served in the air force bombed or helped bomb civilian targets in Lebanon. Israeli soldiers invaded civilian homes in the South of Lebanon, looted and defaced private homes and properties.

None of us debated or questioned the morality of this. We did not have a concept of ourselves as people who could do bad things. We believed we were at war that we had no choice about and were just serving our country. We believed we were doing our duty, each in our own way, to help our country survive enemies who wanted to destroy us for no other reason than us being Jews. When we managed to get a weekend pass, we did what most young people did, try to distract ourselves and avoid reality as much as possible. Our concerns were centred mostly around ourselves and our little existence.

Leaving Israel

I moved to Australia in November 1991 at the age of twenty-seven with my first husband who was a Captain in the Israeli army. I left Israel not because I was politically enlightened. I was a university student at the time, and one of my majors was Political Science. One day I attended a seminar organised by our department hosting the future generation of the Likud and Labour parties. They spoke to us about their respective visions for the future of Israel. When I came home after that event, I felt depressed. It was then that I felt we had to leave. It was obvious from listening to both parties that neither saw anything for the future of Israel except a life by the sword. I could not imagine my future in such a place where war, tension and militarism were never going to end. I was not afraid for my life or my safety. I

was afraid of suffocating in Israel's anxious pressure cooker. I did not think about the Palestinians. I only thought about myself.

It was during that year at university that I came across the word 'Palestinians' for the first time. The professor who used that word spoke about how Palestinians were forced onto the lowest economic rung in Israeli society. I remember being genuinely puzzled. I didn't know who the Palestinians were. I then began to understand that my professor was talking about the same people I was taught to see as the inferior other, the bad *Aravim*, the Arabs. He was talking about the same people I was supposed to fear and despise and who I was supposed to see as my sworn enemy. This professor not only talking about these people as human beings. He expressed concern and compassion for their condition, in that context the economic injustice our state was inflicting on them.

The word 'Palestinians' did not exist in our vocabulary or in Israel's collective consciousness, because to call a people by their name is to recognise their existence. Israel did not recognise the existence of the Palestinian people and I did not meet a Palestinian as an equal until 2001, ten years after moving to Australia!

I know I harboured some uninformed, unnamed doubts that were percolating quietly under the surface. I describe this disjointed collection of early life impressions and experiences in my story in *Beyond Tribal Loyalties*. My path to leaving Zionism was not a simple or straight forward one. It was made out of little experiences that made little sense in their time, but that ended up gradually joining together to the picture that I now recognise as the Zionist ethnic cleansing of Palestine and its settler-colonial project.

My training in psychotherapy and the start of my journey

In 1997 I began my graduate degree in individual and relationship psychotherapy at the Jansen Newman Institute in Sydney. It was in our second year, when we trained in family therapy that I became acquainted with Murray Bowen's work and in particular, his 'Differentiation of Self' theory.

What Murray Bowen called 'differentiation of self' is a process of growing from our primary

group, usually our family of origin, and maturing into the unique individuals we have the potential to become. Bowen defined differentiation as the 'amount of self you have in you' and thought of it as being on a scale from the bottom up².

At the bottom of the scale are people who are not well-differentiated and do not possess a good sense of self. They tend to be governed by their emotions, are reactive and have trouble standing in the world as separate beings. They tend to try to remain enmeshed in their relationships and tend to be chronically fearful or anxious.

As differentiation improves and people move up the scale, their sense of self becomes more solid, they are less governed by their emotions and they are capable of living their life based on their own values without feeling anxious. They can maintain their sense of self in close relationships.

The lower the differentiation, the more likely people are to oscillate between conformity and rebellion, much like teenagers do. The higher the differentiation, the more stable people's identity becomes across situations and groups. People feel secure to be authentically themselves and live consciously according to their beliefs and principles in relationship with others.

My late teacher and mentor Dr David Jansen, believed that if we, as psychotherapy students, did not commit to the ongoing process of increasing our level of self-differentiation we had no right to sit in front of clients. He argued that poorly-differentiated therapists are less likely to be safe to their clients and will not be able to offer them much.

A year-long 'differentiation of self' project was a compulsory part of our degree. We were required to apply Bowen's theory to ourselves and engage actively in a process of increasing our own level of differentiation from our family of origin. Without completing this project satisfactorily, we could not graduate. The expectation was that we would engage fully in this difficult process. It had to be written up and we had to show evidence of the impact the

² Kerr M., Bowen M. (1988). *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*. NY: Norton.

process had on us. Going through this process included looking at our family history as far back as we could, honestly and objectively.

Amongst other things, we had to examine the values, principles and beliefs that the family has passed on to us down the generations, consciously or not, intentionally or not, and think about how these impacted on our development, identity, character and choices. We had to evaluate how much of what we were given by our family's history was helpful to our development and how much wasn't. We were encouraged to think about this objectively and decide what we wished to keep and what would we want to discard. Bowen believed that we have a choice about this and he wanted us to exercise this choice. What Bowen was not so good at is looking at the emotional impact or the cost of such a process. This is something I had to learn myself.

My evolution

In 1999 after my graduation, I moved to Canberra where I began working in private practice. During my first two years in practice in Canberra, two processes began to unfold at the same time. One was in my external reality and the other, internally.

In 2001 I renounced my Israeli citizenship after Ariel Sharon's infamous march to the El Aqsa Mosque that sparked the 2nd Intifada. The only way I can describe what I felt was that I was fed up with Israel's behaviour. I was angry at what looked to me like a flagrant display of unnecessary brute power by a narcissistic thug and his helpers. Renouncing my citizenship was my symbolic way of expressing my desire to not be a part of that country. I felt that although I lived far away, as long as I carried an Israeli passport and an ID card, I was still complicit in what Israel was doing. I was angry and determined, but at the same time felt shaky and fearful. I was troubled by worries about what the people at the Israeli Consulate in Sydney might have thought of me when I contacted them to enquire about renouncing my citizenship. I was fearful of being judged. My act was morally correct, but it was motivated by a feeling of rebellion, indignation and anger mixed in with a lot of self-doubt.

A few months earlier, I heard Professor Avi Shlaim speak on radio about his new book, *The Iron Wall*. I was deeply disturbed by what he said but ordered the book anyway. It was hard

to read. That book caused me to question everything I thought I knew about Israel's history and the conflict with the Palestinian people. The book told me that everything I was taught and believed to be true, was in fact a lie.

Externally, I was increasingly exposed to narratives that challenged my beliefs and my identity. Israel kept doing bad things that despite Australia's general sympathy for Israel were still reported in the media. I couldn't hide from what I was seeing and hearing. It was really happening and it was obvious the Palestinians were harmed and were suffering. I began to take part in rallies that supported the Palestinian plight and began to publish opinion pieces in the *Canberra Times*. I was increasingly invited to be a speaker in rallies and other protest and educational events, many by trade union groups or socialist groups that were sympathetic to the Palestinian people. I was invited and welcomed as a speaker by Muslim groups and organisations all over Australia and was also invited by progressive Jewish groups, especially in Sydney who wanted to hear what I had to say. My background seemed to offer me credibility and a foot in the door.

As a result of what I was writing, I was also increasingly approached by Australian Palestinians and by people from all the Arab countries that I was raised to see as my sworn mortal enemy. This was the first time in my life that I met Palestinians and people from Arab countries as equals and really heard what they had to say. I remember thinking more than once, 'I wonder what so and so in Israel would think if they saw me now'.

One of the people I met through a Canberra-based pro-Palestinian group I joined was Ali Kazak. Ali was at the time the Head of the Palestinian Delegation to Australia, the equivalent of an Ambassador except Palestine isn't an independent state so they only had a 'Delegation'. Ali made a point of meeting and spending time with all the groups and the individuals who expressed support for the Palestinian cause. He always insisted that if we wanted to support the Palestinians, we should work with Palestinians.

Ali saw something in me that I was blind to at the time. In my own mind I was a nice person who cared about my fellow humans, was prepared to speak out against injustice and abuse and could empathise with human suffering. But I still did not understand the reasons for the

so-called 'conflict' between Israel and the Palestinians, for Israel's strong feelings against them and for the suffering of the Palestinian people. I didn't know why *they* were angry with us and I didn't know that I was a Zionist.

Ali recognised this because he saw the same thing many times before in well-meaning Jewish people. He could see that I did not know about the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and that I did not question Israel's right to exist *as an exclusively Jewish state at the expense of an entire people*. He saw that I still had an unconscious sense of entitlement. In one of our meetings Ali challenged me and mentioned the word 'colonialism'. Ali was right of course. Zionism, from what I learned at school was an idealistic, mostly socialist movement that we identified with noble values like social justice, equality, secularism and progress. Zionism was presented at school as the political manifestation of the yearning of 'our people' to return to 'our' ancestral land after 2000 years of exile and of persecution. We were taught that the land was empty and that the 'small' number of Arabs who did live on it were just hired peasants from other Arab countries who occupied the land but didn't come from there. They did not really belong there but just lived there temporarily.

Regardless of who occupied the land before us, we were taught we had a right to have a state of our own, a Jewish safe haven, free from persecution. We were taught it was OK to do whatever it took to ensure our survival, that the end justified the means. There was never any discussion of the morality of this. Survival was everything. It never occurred to me to question what Zionism did or to see it for what it is, a settler-colonial project intended to replace the indigenous people of Palestine with Jews. We were given an almost water-tight simplistic narrative that was difficult to question. The gaps in the narrative were papered over by lies or omissions. If pushed to the corner, the argument was that as Jews we were always under existential threat and it was 'us or them'.

I remember feeling confused and disoriented, almost physically dizzy when Ali challenged me. I had no idea what he was talking about and I didn't know what to say. But the seed was planted.

At the same time in my psychotherapy practice I had a wave of cult-leavers who came to see me for therapy. Some had already left their groups and some were trying to leave and were being harassed in a number of ways both as a form of punishment for leaving, and as pressure to go back. As I heard the stories and listened to these clients' struggles, I began to realise that I understood them and even identified with them more than I had expected. I found it strange and wondered about why it was that I really understood the turbulent and intensely difficult experience of leaving a cult.

As my activism was developing and growing so were my internal struggle and turmoil. I began to realise the similarities between my cult survivor clients' psychological struggles as they were leaving their groups or contemplating leaving, and my own feelings as I was learning more and more about Zionism and Israel's true history.

In those days I felt a lot of fear and shame. I felt like a bad person. Each time I sat down to write an article, usually in response to something Israel did, each time I was supposed to speak at a rally or attend another function with people I was raised to think of as my enemy, I felt like I was doing something terribly wrong. I felt shame and a paralysing fear sometimes before I spoke and sometimes as a backlash after a speaking event or after something I wrote had been published.

My feelings were reinforced by an avalanche of hate mail I started to receive, threatening, weird phone calls in the middle of the night and death threats. This was something I was neither expecting nor prepared for. I didn't just have troubling feelings of my own. Others now confirmed to me that I *was* a bad person, a traitor to my people and that I was so bad, that I deserved to die for it. The word 'traitor' in particular was mentioned more times than I can count, along with 'Nazi', or being labelled a person 'filled with hatred' and the now well-known phrase 'self-hating Jew'. I was subjected to unsolicited amateur psychoanalysis that declared me insane or someone who was unconsciously and unfairly projecting my unresolved childhood anger against my mother on innocent Israel. I was told that by speaking out I was 'giving ammunition to the antisemites' thus aiding and abetting the enemies of my people, which therefore made me a member of the enemy group.

In one ongoing and particularly threatening attack I was told, 'put up or shut up'. There was no doubt that these attacks were intended to silence me. If I acted on my intense and troubled feelings, I would have stopped what I was doing and kept my mouth shut. I did consider this option, albeit briefly on a number of occasions and for a while there I was really frightened.

This was a difficult time but it made me curious. Why should speaking out for what I believed, why should supporting a group victimised by injustice and violence elicit such feelings in me? And why did my actions invite such a violent and threatening reaction from members of my own group? I realised something was strange here, something that I needed to look into.

One thing I knew was that my fears and the guilt and shame I felt did not begin with these threats. They were in me before the threats began. The threats just 'pressed those buttons', triggered and reinforced those feelings. I experienced these feelings from the moment I began to even contemplate speaking out. There was an innate recognition in me that I was crossing a line I was not supposed to cross and that I was breaking one of the most important rules I was brought up with. You can feel sympathy for others, yes, but you don't 'air the dirty laundry' on our people, especially not to gentiles, even if you don't like what Israel is doing.

Eventually the penny dropped. I realised that differentiating from my family of origin, the process I went through four years earlier in the second year of my degree was not enough. If I wanted to continue to do what I was doing without being tortured by constant fears and self-doubt, I now needed to differentiate from my entire country, the society and culture that raised me and that in important ways also shaped me.

My education in family therapy, especially Murray Bowen's work, offered me the validation I needed for my feelings. It made me realise that what I was feeling was understandable under the circumstances. It also gave me the intellectual framework to make sense of everything I was going through.

The tension between separateness and togetherness

Bowen argued that all human beings experience a tension between 'togetherness and separateness' throughout their lives. On one side we are pulled by our natural need to be a part of our group and feel accepted by those who matter to us and to whom we are attached. On the other, we are pulled by our equally natural human need to develop our unique identity and reach our potential.

But why *should* there be a tension between belonging to a group and becoming an individual? The answer is that most human groups require sameness and conformity as the price of belonging. The more psychologically enmeshed the group, the more it will resist the process of differentiation of individuals within it. The more secure and mature the group, the more it values diversity and independent thinking, and will not see those as a threat to group survival.

My differentiation process from Israel made me look at some of the beliefs Israeli society had instilled in me. Some of these beliefs are:

- Everyone has always hated us the Jews and this is unique to us. No other people is, or ever has been, as hated as we are and our suffering can never be compared to anyone else's.
- We are always under a threat of annihilation and another holocaust is imminent.
- The hatred against us, 'antisemitism' is special and *not* like 'ordinary' racism.
- Antisemitism is like a genetic mental illness that is passed on through the generations in the non-Jewish world and it will always be there.
- All non-Jews are potentially antisemitic, even if they appear nice and friendly. Non-Jews cannot be trusted because one day they will turn against us again. Those who do not, will turn their backs on us and will do nothing to help us.
- We are different from all other people. We are more ethical, just, moral, intelligent and by nature more democratic than any other group on Earth. That is the main reason we are hated.

- The *holocaust* was unique. It cannot, and must never be compared with any other genocide. Learning a universal lesson from the holocaust is to deny its uniqueness and it is what antisemites do.
- There have always been attempts to annihilate us. It goes right back to Biblical times. The holocaust was the most recent in a series of attempts and the most calculating, well-organised and comprehensive attempt.
- The world is unsafe for Jews. Any feelings of safety are either a delusion or they are temporary.
- Israel is the *only* place in the world where Jews can be safe. But because everyone hates us, they do not want us to have our state so we always have to fight for its existence.
- The Jews who died in the holocaust were weak. They went 'like sheep to the slaughter'. Israel's role is to create a powerful 'new Jew' who will never again be a victim.
- We are a peace-loving people. *All* our wars were imposed on us (wars of no choice- *mil'hammot ein-breira*).
- Our Israeli Defence Force is the most moral in the world. It's *only* for defence. It never attacks without provocation. It never hurt innocent people.
- Anyone who does not like Israel or who criticises it is an antisemite

It was not difficult to see why I felt such an affinity with cult-leavers. The characteristics of the Jewish Israeli belief system I grew up with are *identical* to the belief systems of many cults. For example:

- Cults tend to believe they are special and different from the rest of the world.
- Cults tend to be fearful and consider the group to always be under existential threat.
- Cult members are often told the world out there is dangerous to them and the only safety for them is in and with the group.
- Group members are often told they are misunderstood or hated by those outside the group.
- In many cults the survival of the cult is seen as the most important value and that it must come before anything else.

- Conforming to the cult's beliefs and way of life is the key to group, and therefore individual survival. People should accept conformity as the price they pay for belonging.
- Cults differ in their levels of oppression. The degree to which questioning a cult's beliefs or thinking independently are allowed, is proportionate to how oppressive the group is. The more threatened and insecure the group, the more oppressive it is likely to be. Everyone in the group knows the boundaries that cannot be crossed. These are taught from the start of life and are reinforced throughout life by the cult's teachings and its rituals and practices.
- Individual identity is secondary to the identity the group provides, or rather individual identity becomes synonymous with group identity.
- Loyalty to the group is the highest value each individual can have in their life. Loyalty is absolute, even if members think the group is doing something wrong.
- Typically, in cults it is not permissible to discuss with the outside world what is going on in the cult. This is considered disloyal and a threat to the group.

What I am referring to is in fact cult-psychology. Cult psychology is typical of enmeshed family-systems and it can exist in almost any context of group interaction. It does not have to be religious. It is a type of pack mentality that must have evolved in hostile conditions when humans were under constant mortal threat. Gathering together in groups proved a better guarantee of individual survival than being alone and preserving the group must have become a priority if people wanted to survive.

There are those who are born into this kind of psychology and are indoctrinated into it as I was. And there are people who join later. Cult-psychology tends to draw to itself people who are already fearful and who are looking for clarity about reality, existence and about their purpose. They have little tolerance for ambiguity and are searching for safety by huddling together with others. If a cult was given an option to create its own state, Israel is the example of it.

It was no wonder I felt what I felt. I was pushing through forbidden boundaries I wasn't conscious I even knew. When it came to a choice between universal values, which would include supporting the plight of Palestinians, and the value of loyalty to my people, I

was expected to put the latter first. By not making loyalty to my people my most cherished value, I was not only a traitor but a person of extremely bad character.

Bowen was clear that physically leaving is not the same as differentiation. What I did by moving to Australia and by renouncing my citizenship, he called 'cutting off'. Through the conscious process of differentiating from Israel, I became aware that differentiating meant leaving the group psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. I had to let go of the identity that Israel expected me to have and become my own person. But in order to liberate my individual identity from my Israeli identity, I had to go through an intense emotional struggle. It is the same struggle anyone who leaves an enmeshed cult-like group or family goes through. Groups that are too enmeshed and insecure make it difficult or impossible for people to differentiate. They prey on our natural instincts and desire for meaning and safety in life. They are guilty of not allowing people to develop to their potential and in cases like Israel of forcing people to collude with, whitewash or cover up unspeakable crimes.

Conclusion

In order to recover from my trauma and earn the right to be a therapist and sit in front of clients, it was necessary for me to differentiate from my family of origin.

To work towards becoming a decent human being and not waste my life as a bystander, watching and saying nothing as a crime against humanity unfolds in front of my eyes, it was necessary for me to differentiate from my entire culture. I have made a conscious choice to replace loyalty to the group I was born into with loyalty to my own values, to universal values and to something greater than all of us.

I do not believe any one human being or group are more valuable than another. All humans desire much more than just survival. We need to work to create a world where all human beings are enabled to fulfil their potential but to do this work well and sustainably we have to have a solid sense of ourself.

Thank you for your time and patience.