

# IN BETWEEN POLARITIES

PSYCHOSOCIAL PERSPECTIVES  
WITHIN ISRAEL



PresentPast

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**EDITORS**

AMCHA Germany

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# In Between Polarities

## *Psychosocial Work in Times of Crisis*

DR. JULIANE SOLF, AMCHA GERMANY

14. NOVEMBER 2025

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

Welcome – together with our partners from Wahat al-Salam | Neve Shalom – to *»In Between Polarities – Psychosocial Work in Times of Crisis«*

When we planned this forum, it was difficult to find a venue willing to host it. Many were interested, but in the end, several said no. So we meet here, in this Children's Foundation – on a smaller scale than we first imagined, yet perhaps exactly on the right scale.

All of that tells us something about this moment: how uneasy it has become to speak about pain, power, and recognition – and how essential it remains to do so.

AMCHA and Wahat al-Salam | Neve Shalom share a conviction: that peace and healing begin with the recognition of another's suffering. Not as a gesture of generosity, but as a question of ethics – of courage.

Emmanuel Lévinas wrote that the face of the Other calls us to responsibility – through the shock of vulnerability. Judith Butler said that *»grievability must be equal – or there can be no humanism left.«* Both remind us: we cannot choose whose pain we acknowledge.

The Palestinian psychiatrist Dr. Samah Jabr, reflecting on the psychological effects of prolonged conflict, once wrote:

*»The Israeli occupation is not only a political issue, but indeed a mental-health problem.«*

She was not making a political accusation. She was naming what it means to live under continuous threat – when trauma is not past but present and shapes how people relate to each other, love, and imagine the future. To recognize this is not to take sides.

It is to face the human cost of conflict in all its dimensions. At the same time, Israelis have lived for decades under the constant shadow of terror – suicide bombings, rocket attacks, hostage-taking, and the fear that violence may erupt anywhere, at any moment. This reality, too, has left deep traces in Israeli society – in people's sense of safety, in relationships, in how fear and empathy coexist.

As José Brunner has written, such experiences create *»a moral injury that seeps into everyday life,«* where fear and grief harden into defence.

Both Jabr and Brunner, from the perspective of very different realities, ask us to see what violence does to the human mind: how trauma, in its many forms, infiltrates perception and empathy. Their voices remind us that trauma belongs to no single people – it crosses all borders, all narratives – and that the courage to face it is in itself a political act.

This is also what connects *Neve Shalom* and the *AMCHA PresentPast* exchange: the insistence that healing and justice require recognition, reflection and responsibility – across languages, histories, and lived experiences.

Psychosocial work in times of crisis is never neutral. It is an act of witnessing – and of refusing erasure. It asks us to remain human when dehumanization seems easier. And it asks us to recognize our own positioning – to see how we other, and how we are *othered*, even as we try to heal.

That awareness – fragile, uncomfortable, yet deeply human – is where ethical practice truly begins.

Today is not a public event but a working space for colleagues from Israel, Palestine, Germany and Europe who hold stories of violence, care, and hope.

WE ARE HERE TO ASK:

- How can we listen without erasing differences?
- How can we speak truthfully without wounding further?
- And how can we live political responsibility through care and courage?

Throughout the day, we will move through practice and reflection: from stories of community mental health under silencing to creative and bibliotherapeutic work and shared circles of resonance.

We will not aim for closure, because this work has no simple ending. It continues in each of us, wherever we return to.

Let's begin with openness, honesty and the willingness to stay present – even when it hurts. Welcome to »*In Between Polarities*«.

# Care, Courage and Respect

## *A day on Dialogue, Creativity and shared Humanity*

MYRTHE ROSENBAUM, AMCHA GERMANY

14. NOVEMBER 2025, KREUZBERGER KINDERSTIFTUNG, BERLIN

A cooperation between AMCHA Germany and Wahat al Salam | Neve Shalom

On November 14, 2025, AMCHA Germany and Wahat al Salam | Neve Shalom (Israel) convened a one-day gathering in Berlin under the title *»In Between Polarities – Psychosocial Work in Times of Crisis«*. The event brought together around thirty practitioners from Israel and Germany, all engaged in psychosocial practice, dialogue facilitation, and therapeutic approaches to collective trauma and memory. Unlike a public conference, this was a deliberately intimate space designed for reflection, exchange, and the nurturing of professional relationships across borders.

The day opened with a welcome address by Juliane Solf (Managing Director, AMCHA Germany) and Roi Silberberg (Director, School for Peace, Wahat al Salam | Neve Shalom), who joined digitally from Israel. Their introduction emphasized the courage required for holding emotional space in times of crisis, and shared brief personal experiences under the theme *»A moment when I realized psychosocial work is also political.«* These personal words set an atmosphere of openness and grounded the group in the realities of their practice, highlighting the inseparability of psychosocial care and political context.

The morning program featured an in-depth lecture by Najla Asmar (Founder, Maana Center for Community Mental Health), who spoke about

developing a Palestinian community mental health center in Israel and sustaining community-based work amid silencing and marginalization. Her reflections underscored both the challenges and the resilience inherent in grassroots psychosocial initiatives, as well as the potentially life-saving and identity shaping components of mental health care in settings of crisis. The lecture was followed by a bibliotherapy workshop led by Noa Katz (AMCHA Israel), which invited participants to explore expressive writing as a medium for trauma reflection and dialogue. Through selected texts and guided discussion, the group discovered how writing can open pathways to empathy and healing.

After a short break, facilitators Liron Tal and Wasim Biroumi (WASNS) led a reflective workshop on the dynamics of change and resistance. Participants examined what drives transformation, what evokes regression, and how psychosocial practice can navigate these polarities. The session encouraged open inquiry and collective sharing, creating both space and a framework for practitioners to articulate the tensions they encounter in their work and their lives under conditions of war, violence, and ongoing trauma.

Following a shared lunch, the afternoon program shifted toward creative expression in order to continue the conversation in a more haptic way. In a practice-sharing session, Shirley Algaze and Rina Buberoglu (AMCHA Israel) guided participants through an art workshop, using visual arts as a tool for dialogue and trauma reflection. The process allowed participants to engage with complex emotions in non-verbal ways, demonstrating how artistic practice can foster connection and insight across divides.

Finally, a combined panel and resonance circle moderated by Slieman Halabi (University of Wuppertal; WASNS) brought together all of the day's facilitators – Najla Asmar, Noa Katz, Liron Tal, Wasim Biroumi, Rina Buberoglu, and Shirley Algaze. Each offered brief reflections on the theme *»Psychosocial Work as Political Practice: Polarities, Ethics, Risks, Possibilities.«* The ensuing dialogue with the whole group wove together diverse perspectives, producing a collective reflection that was both challenging and deeply impactful.

The day concluded with closing remarks from Slieman Halabi and Lukas Welz (Chairman, AMCHA Germany), followed by final words from the organizers. They emphasized the importance of sustaining dialogue across divides and nurturing resilience in the face of crisis.

Throughout the event, a dedicated safe space was available for retreat and emotional reflection, facilitated by Arabic-, Hebrew- and German-speaking team members from AMCHA and WASNS, underscoring the organizers' commitment to care and attentiveness when dealing with such sensitive topics.

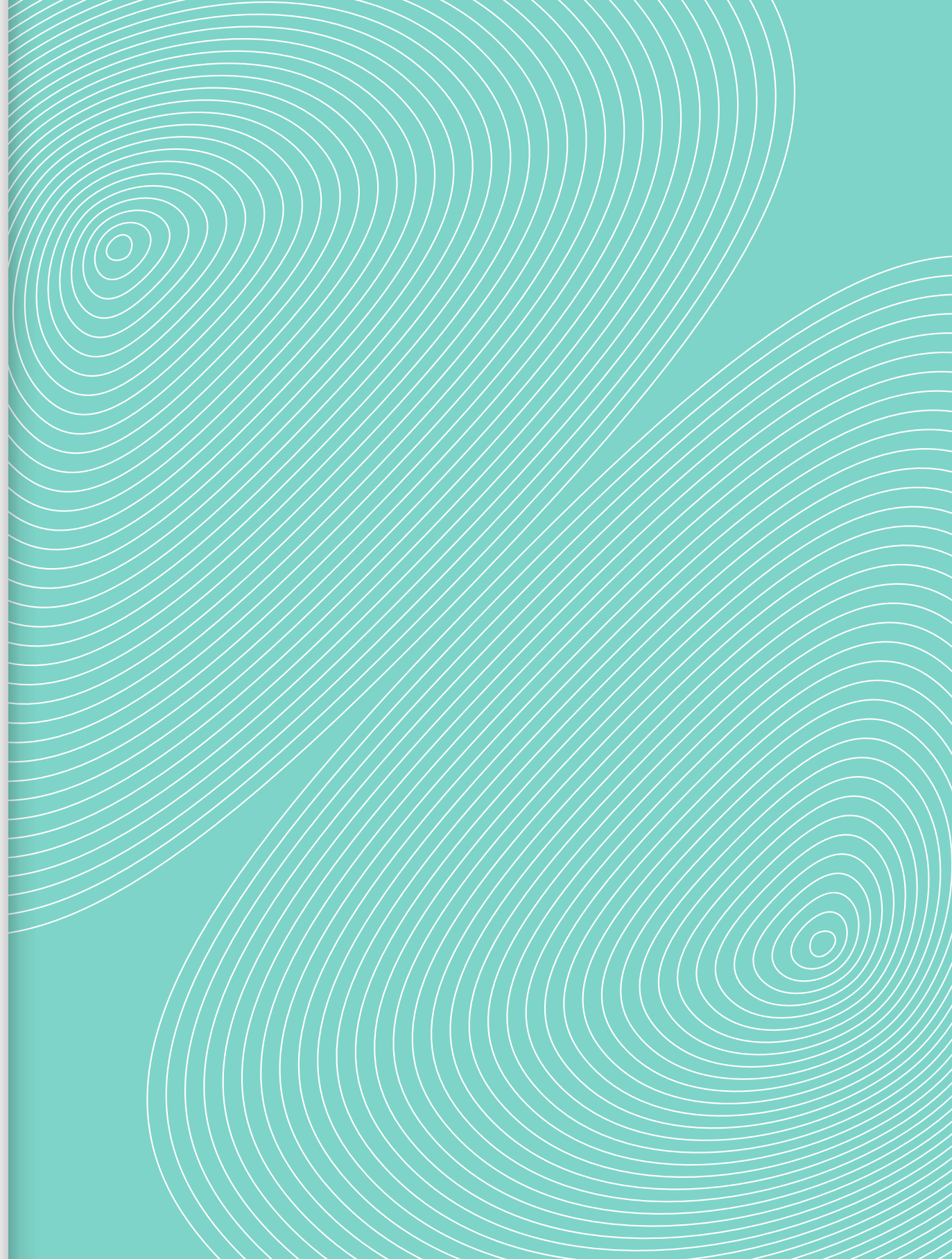
Rather than seeking to produce resolutions or declarations, the Berlin gathering offered participants a rare opportunity to pause, reflect, and resonate with one another's experiences. In a time of ongoing crisis in the Middle

East, global crises, and deepening divides, the event was a testament to the power of dialogue, creativity, and shared humanity, reminding everyone present that psychosocial practice is not only about healing individuals, but also about sustaining communities and fostering resilience.

On behalf of the organizing team of AMCHA Germany, I would like to express deep gratitude to all participants of the Berlin Forum: Your openness, insight, and generosity – especially from those who facilitated workshops or shared personal inputs – helped create a space that was not only intellectually rich but also emotionally safe and deeply human. Together, we navigated complex and often grave topics with care, courage, and respect.

It was truly moving to witness how this collective effort fostered genuine connection and trust among participants. The atmosphere you helped cultivate – warm, inclusive, and brave – laid the foundation for meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding.

We believe this Forum marks the beginning of something powerful. The ground has been laid for future collaboration, and we are excited to continue this inspiring line of work together.



# Context Sensitivity in Dialogical Encounters

LIRON TAL, CLINICAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND DIALOGUE FACILITATOR,  
WAHAT AL-SALAM | NEVE SHALOM

WITH THE POEM »BOMB ALERT« BY NAAMA HOCHSTEIN, WRITTEN DURING THE EXPERT  
EXCHANGE MEETING IN BERLIN, NOVEMBER 2025

## BOMB ALERT

*In Berlin a bomb inside  
don't touch me  
I will explode.*

*In Berlin a bomb inside  
don't touch me  
I will shed tears.*

*In Berlin a golden autumn  
maybe the path is through the window  
the route of escape is through the back porch  
I drove all night to get to you*

*In Berlin a man pressed my muscles  
from shoulders to hips.  
reminded me of my contours:  
wide/narrow/wide.  
Love is a wound that you may gently touch and rub.  
I point to show you: here is where it hurts.*

*In the spa my body among other bodies  
round/dark/soft  
The dim light, the steam and the quiet music  
make our eyes kind.  
Swimming between warm water and cold air  
Movement is pleasure*

*In Berlin the smooth German body shapes  
of national-socialist sculptures.  
A woman with a bow and arrow  
aims with concentration  
like I do when I write as it darkens in Germany  
then I float through the golden leaves  
I float all night, I float away*

*In the archive of the Documentation Center for Flight and Expulsion  
a Syrian woman with the saddest eyes says:  
»I could not stay in Syria  
because I could no longer bear to hear the children crying from hunger.«  
When it grows dark in the garden  
a rat crosses the path,  
then another, and another.  
A man shudders: »Disgusting.«*

*In Berlin I said »Excuse me please«  
eight times.  
I said »Nazi«  
five times.  
My cousin said »Europe has changed.«  
My friend said »Europe has not changed.«  
I chatted in Arabic with a Lebanese taxi driver,  
who said, embarrassed:  
حببتي، أختي، أمبرتي، حلوتي، حياتي*

*In Berlin a bomb inside  
Will it detonate or be defused?  
Do not lie in the narrow room.  
Put on something cozy  
walk through the Tiergarten  
as much as you need,  
stroll through the golden leaves  
trembling on their branches,  
on the branches full of birds' nests.  
קן לציפור בין העצים  
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall  
die Blätter werden durch die Luft schweben  
die Vögel werden von den Zweigen stürzen  
die Nester werden durch die Fenster fallen  
I walked all night to get to you*

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I share my reflections following my participation in the AMCHA conference organized in collaboration with the School for Peace in November 2025. These reflections are based on an integration of context-aware psychotherapeutic approaches and the field of encounters between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel.

AMCHA is an organization of mental-health professionals specializing in psychotherapy for Holocaust survivors and their descendants as well as trauma and its intergenerational transmission. Given the escalation of violence toward Palestinians in recent years and the beginning of a public recognition of the multigenerational trauma of the Nakba, a group of clinicians at AMCHA began considering how knowledge from the fields of trauma and intergenerational trauma might also be relevant in psychotherapeutic work with Palestinians. This important development represents a challenging journey towards reflection and growth in a period that is exceedingly violent and painful.

To understand the challenges of this aspiration, it is useful to draw on therapeutic approaches that take into account social and political context, differing identities, and power relations. Over the years these approaches have been described under different names.

Fanon (1967) described the psychological experience of the Black subject under the devaluing gaze of the white subject, and the internalization of inferiority delivered as a cultural message. He reframed therapeutic aims for Black patients as the establishment of a personal and collective identity freed from white cultural constructions. Martín-Baró coined the term »psychology of liberation« arguing that therapists must stand with the oppressed and support their liberation from structures of social oppression (Landsman, 2021). Classic social-psychology studies describe the sense of inferiority experienced by low-status groups, which manifests in favoring and valuing the outgroup (Clark & Clark, 1974). Research also supports a link between critical political consciousness among marginalized groups and indicators of well-being (Seider & Graves, 2020).

Beginning in the 1980s, thinking developed around culturally sensitive therapy and psychotherapy with minority groups in Western societies. These approaches, which are known under labels such as »ethnic sensitivity« and »cultural competence«, take cultural difference into account and seek to learn from and adapt to it. Over time, critics argued that these models emphasize »knowledge« about a group's culture and customs. A deeper understanding emerged: culture is embedded in relational contexts and power relations, and a lack of awareness of this is a characteristic of perceived cultural superiority (Shoshana, 2021; Meir, 2022). In response, new approaches developed that focus on power and social context.

For example, Roer-Strier's and Nadan (2020) »context-informed therapy« showed that in cases where Israeli clinicians treating Palestinian children

were unaware of the sociopolitical context, they were influenced by racist attitudes that shaped their diagnoses and recommendations, meaning that they sometimes failed to identify the children's needs and over-referred them to criminal rather than therapeutic frameworks. Meir (2022) described the need for »culturally safe psychotherapy« noting that when therapists are unaware of political and social contexts, of their own power, or of cultural difference, their interpretations become biased and are experienced as unsafe. According to Meir, culturally-safe services must include representatives of the client population among staff and decision-making bodies.

Factors that bias mental-health services include a lack of awareness of inequality, of power relations, of privileged social positions, of institutional racism, and of unconscious internalized stereotypes among clinicians. These can manifest themselves during treatment as aggression or microaggressions. For example, Krumer-Nevo describes poverty as a violation of human rights and illustrates a case in which a social worker's lack of understanding of poverty led her to view the mother she was treating as incompetent, advocating for a stance that takes into consideration the point of view of the person dealing with poverty (Krumer-Nevo, 2022).

Within the field of politically-aware psychotherapy, Avisar (2014) offers a structured framework for a therapeutic stance that views the clinical encounter as a site where personal and political threads intertwine: symptoms and interpersonal relations are understood as part of broader structures of power, oppression, and privilege, and the therapist is called upon to recognize their own position within this matrix and to act in ways that consider both individual well-being and collective social justice.

Intercultural insight does not replace other interpretive layers, but when taken seriously it can wholly transform existing formulations or add a crucial interpretive dimension.

## DIALOGUE-BASED ENCOUNTERS

The field of intergroup dialogue has similarly moved beyond the idea that »people to people« encounters, in which individuals get to know each other personally and learn about each other's culture, are sufficient for bringing about change. Social-psychology research shows that such encounters do not in fact result in profound changes in attitude. For a generalization of what is learnt about the other to occur and a deep understanding of identity groups and their relational dynamics to emerge, the political context shaping intergroup power must be made explicit as it arises in the group (Adler, 2000).

The desire of mental-health practitioners at AMCHA to apply trauma-treatment knowledge to Palestinian trauma requires that the political context is taken into account. For example, psychotherapy with Holocaust survivors took place after the genocide had ended, in other words, the violence was no longer taking place. In contrast, Palestinians have experienced ongoing trauma since 1948: the trauma of the Nakba has become

intergenerational, violence against Palestinians continues (Abu-Haq, 2023), and since October 7 the violence has intensified dramatically with mass destruction and killing in Gaza, escalating dispossession and violence in the West Bank, and silencing and persecution of Palestinians in Israel. In psychotherapy treatment where present-day violence exists in the life of the patient, the first therapeutic goal is to stop the violence; only then can psychological challenges be addressed. Furthermore, regarding the Holocaust there is broad societal agreement about who the victims and who the perpetrators were. Holocaust survivors receive full societal recognition as victims of unjust, brutal violence. By contrast, the Nakba and ongoing violence toward Palestinians are not recognized by the state; mass mechanisms of denial, concealment, and justification are in place, characterized by dehumanization and demonization. Continuous trauma under conditions of denial has profound implications for treatment.

### THE NEED FOR EXTENSIVE IDENTITY WORK

There is a growing understanding of the need for a deep exploration of the identity of both the self and the »other«, as well as the dynamics between them, when engaging in cross-identity therapeutic work. Clinics in which Arab and Jewish patients meet require ongoing reflection on how ethnic and political relations shape the therapeutic encounter (Karkabi-Salameh, 2021). Organizational structures and psychotherapeutic strategies need to take the political context into consideration in order to prevent a replication of power relations within the therapeutic context (Meir, 2022). Therapists must step out of their comfort zones and develop contextual awareness through reflective examination of themselves and their political identity in relation to the populations they serve, understanding political context and power relations, and adopting reflective stances toward theoretical concepts (Korin-Langer & Nadan, 2012).

At the School for Peace, extensive knowledge has been gathered regarding such intergroup processes. Each identity group undergoes a different process and has different needs. I will give a brief illustration of this knowledge:

Palestinian participants need to be heard, to tell their story, to relate their suffering and the injustice they face, because in real life, Palestinian voices are silenced (Halabi, 2000). One core assumption guiding facilitation at the School for Peace is that the asymmetric power relations between Jews and Palestinians must be addressed. For example, being responsive to Palestinians' refusal to participate in »normalization« such as the expectation that dialogue-based encounters proceed »as usual« while violence is taking place. Palestinian participants need to speak about history and politics as lived personal and psychological experiences. This echoes the feminist phrase »the personal is political« especially regarding phenomena with political dimensions that are rendered invisible in the context of marginalized groups (Hanisch, 1969). As Abu-Haq writes: »One cannot separate the subject from her history,

geography, or the politics around her... we therefore understand that one cannot address the Palestinian subject without addressing the Nakba, the persistent, ongoing Nakba within and around us...« (Abu-Haq, 2021).

In contrast, Jewish participants in the groups often wish to avoid the past and instead seek to focus on the present and future; they prefer to speak about personal rather than political identity and fear political discussions. Research echoes these observations: members of marginalized groups prefer structural and social explanations, while members of dominant groups prefer psychological explanations (Kraus et al., 2012). Jewish Israelis in dialogue-based encounters tend to seek common ground and unity. Palestinians generally resist this, arguing that focusing on »shared humanity« obscures inequality and oppression. Eisikovits formulates the need not »to reconcile« not »to unify« but »to bear one another« (Eisikovits, 2021). Sharon (2025) describes how, at critical historical moments, calls for unity silence dissent and leave power in the hands of the powerful.

When the Palestinian group's needs are met, when they have space to tell their story, when they receive recognition of injustice, and confront internalized oppression, they grow and become stronger within the encounter (Helms, 1990; Halabi, Sonnenschein & Friedman, 2000). This process initiates a parallel process of change among Jewish participants, an essential but painful one. The distress of the Jewish participants must also be recognized, otherwise regression and escalation of conflict may result. The Jewish group, too, needs holding and recognition.

The facilitator must hold a paradox: acknowledging the asymmetry and unequal power relations, while simultaneously recognizing suffering on both sides. For healing and growth it is necessary to identify anxieties, needs, and subjectivity, even within the hegemonic group, and to offer empathy and recognition. Despite the asymmetry of mutual recognition, the hegemonic group often needs gestures of recognition from the oppressed group, gestures that are not to be understood as capitulation, but rather an extension of the human circle to include the suffering of the oppressor as well. This model draws on psychodynamic theories of change and mutual recognition (Benjamin, 2005; Kohut, 2005).

### WORKSHOP REFLECTIONS

During the Expert Forum, Wasim Biroumi and I facilitated a 90-minute workshop focused on dealing with what arises when encountering Palestinian voices. We invited participants to recall a moment of encounter that had touched them and produced a noticeable shift. Because this was a group already engaged in long-term reflective work, they had significant capacity for introspection.

For example, one therapist described realizing the depth of their denial of the Nakba. They connected two memories: first, a classmate's denial of the Holocaust during his childhood, a denial that persisted despite his first-hand

knowledge – the fact that the therapist's own mother had been in a concentration camp. The second was their own difficulty believing a Palestinian participant's story of what happened in his village in 1948, again based on first-hand knowledge. Only when books by Israeli historians were published confirming the participant's account did he finally believe the story.

Another therapist described the dissonance between the fear they had felt toward Palestinians before meeting any, and the surprise they experienced in actual encounters – witnessing the humanity and vulnerability of the Palestinian families they met.

Alongside the insights, there was also a natural fear of engaging with these explosive topics, and of undergoing such a difficult process during such a painful time for all.

There are many additional dynamics in encounters between Jews and Palestinians of different kinds. Sonnenschein (2008) described the sense of threat to identity that Jewish participants often feel. Clinicians have written about various dynamics in psychotherapy: between Jewish therapists and Palestinian clients (Buxbaum, 2018), between Palestinian therapists and Jewish clients (Srour, 2015), between Palestinian therapists and Palestinian clients, and also about the ways that political realities shape therapy (Mona Karkabi, 2021).

The mental-health practitioners at AMCHA are engaged in a brave and important process in this difficult period. One hopes that despite the challenges, they will continue seeking ways to use their knowledge to heal the wounds of those who live in this land and remain committed to the journey, a journey that includes painful self-reflection, but is also instructive and fosters personal and professional growth. As in the poignant poem by Naama Hochstein quoted at the beginning of this paper, this is an emotionally charged journey, combining history with the present. It encompasses the possibility that emotions may explode upon an encounter, the potential for vulnerability within it, the yearning for connection despite the challenging context, and the sorrow that we have not yet succeeded in providing all our children with a safe and just world.

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# Moral Injuries and Multigenerational Transfer of Trauma

DAVID SENESH, PH.D, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND SUPERVISOR FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY,  
AMCHA ISRAEL

BASED ON A PRESENTATION TO THE »PRESENTPAST« EXPERT-EXCHANGE GROUP ON 30.10.2025

Personal intense aversive events and toxic collective traumas demonstrate a ripple effect that reverberate in families, communities, and society at large through indirect vicarious impacts. At the same time, vertical effects of trauma transfer also interface with former ones, reinforcing their impact at any given time. Our Amcha PresentPast Expert-Exchange group of Israeli and German professionals embodies these processes with the added value of a safe space for reflective communication. In preparation for another face-to-face workshop in Berlin, this paper was presented at an online meeting on the moral aspects of these processes.

Moral aspects of extreme events, such as the recent war in Gaza since October 7th, have similar post traumatic effects, but have not yet been formalized in medical classifications such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM, 2013) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD, 2022) They accompany many posttraumatic processes especially in cases of relational complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and their typical symptomologies.

Moral trauma was defined by Shay back in 1994, in addition to the general aversive effects of trauma on the human psyche, as the betrayal of one's own core values by ignoring or by behaving in a contradictory manner. My presentation addressed the three major aspects of moral trauma that differ from the formal concept of PTSD:

- 1 The inner moral aspects of human existence are often ignored in most psychiatric classifications and nonjudgemental forms of psychotherapy, in an attempt to keep them culture free and value free. During the group meeting we practiced Milton Rokeach's Value Confrontation procedure (1973), whereby members of the group were asked to rank a list of 18 terminal values according to their relative personal valence. In most cases, the main challenge is to rank the top ones such as peace, security, well-being, equality, and freedom. These values form the basis of a reliable personal worldview that might be shaken at times of conflict and war and may result in a moral trauma.
- 2 The comparative sense of victimhood that favors exclusivity may result in decreased mental capacity to be attuned to the suffering of others. Each party in a conflict may then adopt a sense of »justified victimhood« partly as a mental mechanism to justify its own violent transgressions. These parallel processes become clear in multicultural conflict and dialogue groups such as our PastPresent group, whereby members become more aware of their own biases in their personal narratives and collective (hi)stories.
- 3 Unlike most cases of interpersonal trauma that result from violent »acts of commission«, moral trauma is also the result of »acts of omission« (Shay, 1994; Carey & Hodgson, 2018). In the presentation I described the similarities between a combat field and a family conflict zone where many maltreated children are trapped, which may result in their physical, sexual, emotional and moral abuse. In her iconic book, Judith Herman (1994) presented a wealth of evidence on how abusive maltreatment by one parent is complemented or mirrored by the neglect, denial, and betrayal of the other parent. On a national level, incidences of war crimes that are often hidden by silence and impunity resemble the dynamics of an abusive family. In my presentation for the group I talked about my participation in the Public Committee Against Tortures in Israel (PACATI) where cases of torture are documented and analyzed by a forensic team of professionals, while at the same time being denied by the authorities and ignored in the public discourse.

In my presentation I also shared two cases of clinical supervision of psychotherapy with Israeli soldiers, whereby incidences of moral trauma have been repressed and »forgotten« not only by the clients themselves but also by their respective therapists due to their social undesirability in wartime and the application of mental censorship. The concept of »betrayal trauma« was further extended to »double betrayal trauma«, whereby individuals find themselves in situations where their acts (or lack of them) contradict their lifelong values and morals. Moreover, these actions are ordered and even

hailed by their commanders and politicians as exemplary. When they are later tortured by their own post traumatic symptoms of shame and guilt, the soldiers often find themselves in emotional solitude and fail to gain the necessary recognition and support in their groups of reference. I shared several personal and professional experiences whereby my own personal value system as well as my professional ethics were questioned following my own experience of combat and imprisonment as a POW in the 1973 Yom Kippur war. The prospects of healing from the moral aspects of PTSD and the potential for Post Traumatic Personal Growth (PTPG) were already addressed by Litz et al. in 2009.

The group therefore discussed the need to expand its scope of interests. A PresentPast focus on generations of the Holocaust in the German-Israeli group seemed to ignore their transgenerational effects on the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This serves as an opportunity to open the door for a Past / Present / Future group that includes German alongside Jewish and Palestinian Israeli professionals and discusses both the horizontal and vertical expansions of the different kinds of trauma occurring in the lives of so many people nowadays.

To conclude, we are all stakeholders in these cycles of political conflicts as victims of victims, perpetrators who become victims, and victims who become perpetrators. With this in mind, we have a shared responsibility to manage and solve these conflicts and to heal their related prolonged and expansive post-factum consequences. A coalition of German, Jewish, and Palestinian professionals can live up to that purpose. I concluded my presentation with a warm welcome to our Israeli group colleagues arriving to Berlin alongside our Palestinian and Israeli colleagues from the Wahat al-Salam | Neve Shalom School for Peace, where such inclusive expansions may allow further exploration of this subject matter within an exclusive secured sanctuary of peace.

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# The Maana Story

## Building a Context-Aware Model of Mental Health Care for the Arab Community

NAJLA ASMAR, CHIEF PSYCHOLOGIST, NAZARETH HOSPITAL AND DIRECTOR, »MAANA CENTER« FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND TRAINING

### INTRODUCTION - FROM ABSENCE TO MEANING

The Maana Center was born out of crisis, from a deep gap that was both personal and systemic. During the 2006 Lebanon War, as the north of Israel faced the wave of missile attacks, it became clear that there was no dedicated structure to address the psychological needs of Arab patients, families, and medical teams. The Arab population in Israel had long suffered from a shortage of accessible, culturally, and linguistically appropriate mental health services. This absence was not only clinical; it was existential. It meant that pain could not be named, experiences could not be recognized, and communities could not find spaces to heal.

The center was named Maana – a word that carries a dual meaning in both Arabic and Hebrew. It translates to »meaning« in Arabic (مَعْنَى) and »response« and in Hebrew (תְּגוּבָה). This dual resonance captures the essence of the center's mission: to offer a professional response to psychological suffering, while helping individuals and communities reclaim meaning in times of loss, fear, and fragmentation. The name Maana also serves as an acronym for »Mental Aid and Guidance Center in both languages.

What began as a small initiative, born from an emergency response, grew into the first and largest Arab mental health and training center in Israel. Over time, it evolved into a comprehensive structure that integrates clinical care, professional training, research, and community-based interventions. The story of Maana is not only about building a center; it is about building meaning – ma'na – in a landscape where meaning has too often been silenced or denied.

### FOUNDING MAANA – NAVIGATING FOUR CORE CHALLENGES

Building the Maana Center was an act of vision under conditions of scarcity and doubt. The process unfolded through four central challenges that have shaped the center's identity.

#### 1 Financial limitations

From the outset, there was no stable source of governmental funding. Maana began with minimal resources, no dedicated budget, no permanent infrastructure, but above all the determination of a small team. The hospital offered partial logistical support, but most funding came from private donations and small philanthropic foundations that believed in the vision. Each stage of development: recruiting staff, renovating space premises and launching training programs, required creativity, persistence, and faith in the value of the work. The financial struggle, paradoxically, strengthened the team's sense of purpose and independence.

#### 2 Stigma surrounding mental health

One of the earliest and most profound barriers was the stigma attached to psychological care in the Arab community. Mental health was often associated with weakness or »madness,« and families hesitated to seek help. We understood that our first task was to change public perception. Through community lectures, collaborations with schools and municipalities, and public awareness campaigns, Maana began to build a new language of mental health, one that emphasized resilience, prevention, and collective well-being rather than pathology and shame. Over time, this effort shifted the discourse from secrecy to openness, from fear to understanding.

### 3 Shortage of Arab professionals

Only about 1.4% of psychologists in Israel are Arab, and very few had access to supervision or training in their native language. This created both a professional and ethical gap. Maana therefore assumed the task of training and capacity-building in addition to its treatment mission. We established supervision groups, internships, and later comprehensive psychotherapy training programs in Arabic, enabling young professionals to develop within their own cultural framework. This investment has gradually established a generation of Arab clinicians who are both competent and culturally grounded.

### 4 Establishing institutional credibility and identity

Finally, we faced the challenge of earning recognition and legitimacy both within the community and among national institutions. For some, an Arab mental health center raised questions of credibility or alignment with existing systems. For others, especially within the community, there was skepticism toward anything »official.« We needed to build a professional identity that was both firmly rooted and respected: maintaining scientific and ethical standards while embodying cultural authenticity. Gradually, through consistent clinical excellence, partnerships with ministries, hospitals, and public visibility, Maana became recognized as a leading model of culturally grounded mental health care in Israel.

Together, these four challenges shaped the DNA of the Maana Center. They demanded persistence, innovation, and faith in the idea that mental health must grow from within the community it serves. Overcoming them was about creating a foundation strong enough to hold both the vulnerability and the vitality of an entire population.

## FROM CHALLENGE TO GROWTH: BUILDING A MODEL FOR CONTEXT-AWARE MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Overcoming the early challenges of funding, stigma, the shortage of professionals, and institutional recognition defined its identity. Each obstacle became a catalyst for innovation. Over time, the center grew from a fragile initiative into a comprehensive mental health institution that today stands as a model of culturally grounded and context-aware care for the Arab population in Israel.

### EXPANDING CLINICAL AND PROFESSIONAL STRUCTURES

As the vision took shape, Maana built a multidisciplinary team that includes psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, art and movement therapists, and family therapists. This diversity allowed the center to provide lifelong holistic care, from early childhood interventions to adult and geriatric therapy.

Alongside clinical treatment, Maana integrated training and supervision as part of its organizational work. The recognition that effective mental health care requires culturally competent professionals led to the establishment of new educational frameworks inside the center itself.

### TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF CLINICIANS

Realizing that the shortage of Arab professionals was both a barrier and an opportunity, Maana became a training hub for emerging therapists. The center introduced structured internship programs and supervision groups.

Later we launched a comprehensive psychotherapy school for Arab and Jewish professionals, known as Crossroads.

This program marked a breakthrough: for the first time, Arab and Jewish therapists could receive advanced psychoanalytic training, in an atmosphere that acknowledged the socio-political realities shaping their patients' lives. The school enhanced clinical competence and opened a space for dialogue, reflection, and shared learning between Arab and Jewish mental health professionals, a rare form of partnership in a time of polarization.

### BRIDGING THERAPY, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY

Maana's growth extended far beyond the clinic. Recognizing that mental health cannot exist in isolation from social and political realities, the center began developing community-based initiatives that link therapeutic knowledge with collective well-being.

Simultaneously, Maana launched »Inbar Centers« in collaboration with social services and philanthropic partners to provide mental health support and rehabilitation for young adults at risk of violence or social marginalization. Each of these initiatives was grounded in the same belief: that therapy must reach people where they live, in schools, municipalities, hospitals, and community spaces.

### EVOLVING INTO A LEADING MODEL

As the center matured, it became increasingly recognized as a model for culturally responsive and ethically grounded mental health care. What distinguishes Maana is its philosophy: that healing must integrate context, identity, and belonging. The center's structure now embodies this principle, combining clinical excellence, professional training, research, and community resilience under one roof.

Maana's evolution has shown that growth in marginalized contexts is possible, not despite the difficulties, but because of them. Each challenge generated creativity, and each act of care became a small form of transformation, personal, social, and political. Through this process, Maana has built more than a center; it has built a movement of meaning, one that continues to redefine what mental health care can look like in a divided and wounded society.

## DURING CRISIS – THE TEST OF RESILIENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

The true test of Maana's vision came during times of national crisis and the latest war. For the Arab community in Israel, each outbreak of violence carries fear, grief, and a heavy weight of silencing and exclusion. In such moments, Maana's dual mission, to care and to give voice, became both more difficult and more essential.

### SUPPORTING THE CAREGIVERS

The first responsibility was inward. The therapists lived in areas under threat, hearing sirens with their families while continuing to support their patients. Maana's leadership understood that before extending help to others, it was vital to create support structures for the clinicians. The center organized supervision circles, reflective meetings, and sessions of psychological first aid for the staff, spaces where they could process fear, anger, and fatigue while remaining connected to their therapeutic roles.

### MOBILIZING SUPPORT AND CONNECTION

Within weeks of the outbreak of the war, Maana turned its attention to the broader community. Recognizing the widespread distress and isolation among professionals, the Center launched the Community Mental-Health Support Project: a series of online Arabic-language lectures and discussions for mental-health practitioners across the country.

Over 1.500 therapists joined, many reporting that it was the first time they had felt truly visible and had been addressed in their own language. These weekly meetings became more than a learning environment; they evolved into a collective container for processing trauma and strengthening professional identity amid fear and political fragmentation.

From this initiative emerged Masarat («Pathways»), a continuing-education platform offering focused courses on trauma, liberation psychology, and context-aware care. Even as the war intensified, these online gatherings provided a source of connection and continuity, demonstrating that professional dialogue can itself be a form of resilience.

Together, these initiatives helped form a professional network that now extends across cities and villages, linking practitioners who once worked in isolation.

### REACHING THE COMMUNITY

Parallel to the professional programs, Maana expanded its outreach to communities and institutions. Teams delivered resilience workshops for teachers, healthcare workers, and municipal staff across Arab towns and mixed cities. In many places, these were the only structured psychosocial interventions available.

The center also trained community leaders and volunteers in Psychological First Aid (PFA), enabling them to respond immediately after traumatic incidents. This clinical knowledge, that was shared with the community, became a tool for empowerment and collective care.

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Amid the chaos, Maana's team understood that children needed new ways to understand and express their experiences. This led to the creation of the storybook «The Light That Never Goes Out», telling the story of Karim, a boy who learns to find his inner strength during war.

The story was distributed free of charge online and later as a printed book and was used by parents, teachers, and therapists to help children voice their fears and regain hope. It was later adapted into a puppet theater performance, reaching schools and kindergartens and turning the language of trauma into the language of imagination.

### EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS

The period of crisis also deepened Maana's network of collaborations. The center partnered with other Arab and Jewish institutions and international donors to expand access to psychological care. Programs continued to operate and even grow during this time, proving that mental-health work can thrive amid instability when it is rooted in community trust and cultural understanding.

### A LESSON IN COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Through these experiences, one principle became clear: Mental-health work in times of crisis is inseparable from social responsibility. To care is not only to treat symptoms; it is to witness, to connect, and to restore meaning in the face of chaos. For Maana, the war underscored the power of context-aware care, a practice that acknowledges both the shared pain and the shared humanity of those who live through conflict.

### REFLECTIONS AND THE FUTURE: CONTEXT-AWARE PSYCHOTHERAPY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR HOPE

Looking back, the story of Maana is one of resilience, vision, and the constant search for meaning. What began as an emergency response during wartime has evolved into a comprehensive and pioneering model of mental-health care for the Arab population in Israel. Along the way, Maana has shown that therapy is not only a private process but also a social and cultural act, one that must be rooted in people's lived realities.

The core of this journey is context-aware psychotherapy, an approach that recognizes that psychological suffering does not exist in isolation from language, identity, or history. Every personal story carries within it the echoes of collective experience. For the Arab community in Israel, those

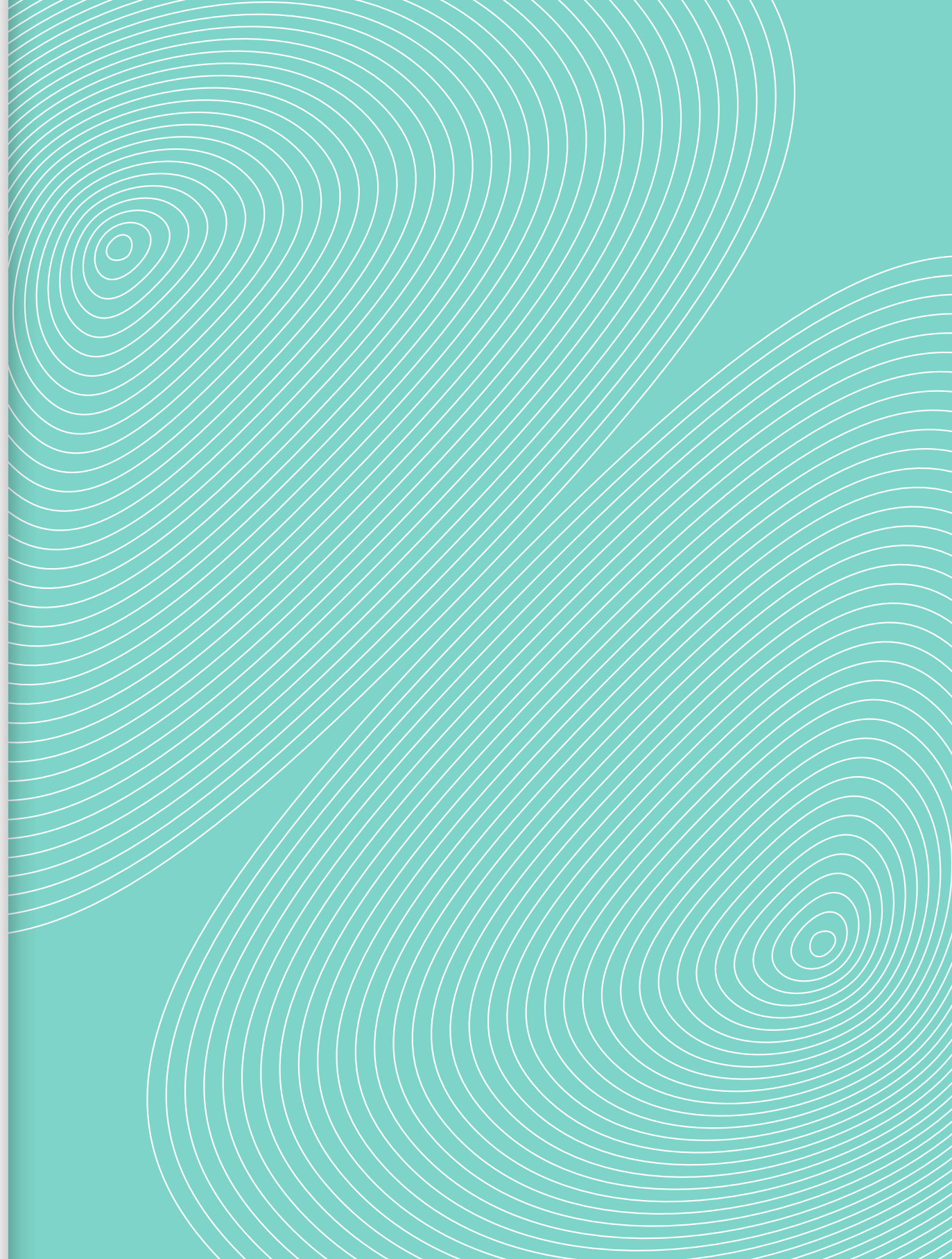
echoes include displacement, inequality, and silence, all of which shape the emotional landscape of both patients and clinicians. To offer care within such a reality means to listen with both psychological and political awareness, and to make space for pain that is often unseen or unspoken.

At Maana, this approach has become a living practice. It informs every level of the center's work, from individual therapy sessions to community programs, from training young professionals to conducting research. It shapes how our therapists think, teach, and respond in moments of crisis. And it constantly reminds us that neutrality, when detached from social reality, can become another form of distance or denial.

Today, Maana continues to expand its clinical, educational, and research activities. Through programs like Crossroads, the Arab-Jewish School for Context-Aware Psychotherapy, we are creating spaces where professionals from different backgrounds can study together, reflect on shared and separate identities, and build new forms of professional and human partnership. These encounters are fragile and complex but they are also where hope begins.

The challenges ahead remain substantial: long waiting lists, limited funding, and a political climate that continues to test trust and solidarity. Yet Maana's experience has proven that meaning can be rebuilt even in the midst of fragmentation. Healing, when grounded in context, becomes more than recovery, it becomes a quiet act of resistance, of reclaiming dignity and belonging.

Our guiding belief remains simple yet profound: mental health is not a privilege; it is a right. And in a region still defined by division and fear, to care is to insist on connection, to remind ourselves and our communities that, even in dark times, the light of hope and meaning does not go out.



# The »School for Peace's« Work in the Field of Mental Health

RAFAEL BARKAN-BOCARSLY, SOCIAL WORKER AND GROUP FACILITATOR,  
SADAKA-REUT ARAB-JEWISH YOUTH PARTNERSHIP, WAHAT AL-SALAM | NEVE SHALOM

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A Reality of Crisis and Psychological Instability

The ongoing cycles of violence in Israel and Palestine have produced a sustained mental health crisis with far-reaching psychological consequences. The destruction in Gaza, described by some legal<sup>1</sup> and human rights<sup>2</sup> experts as genocide due to widespread civilian killing, targeted starvation, and the collapse of basic infrastructure, has generated unprecedented trauma across Palestinian and Israeli societies.

Among Palestinians within Israel, the war has intensified emotional distress characterized by fear, isolation, and repression of political expression. Widespread surveillance<sup>3</sup>, professional retaliation<sup>4</sup>, and criminalization of speech<sup>5</sup> have contributed to anticipatory trauma and racialized stress, narrowing the space for authentic emotional and political articulation.

In Israel, the October 7th Hamas attack and its aftermath produced a parallel surge in trauma. According to Israel's Ministry of Health<sup>6</sup>, demand for psychological support rose by over 300% in the weeks following the attack, with children exhibiting acute stress symptoms and schools struggling to cope. Psychologists have warned that Israel's health system is ill-equipped to meet the needs of individuals, and scholars have argued that Israeli society is experiencing a form of »national trauma<sup>7</sup>« compounded by moral injury connected to the war's consequences, including distress among those participating in military operations.

1 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/top-genocide-scholars-unanimous-israel-committing-genocide-gaza-investigation-finds>

2 <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/un-special-committee-press-release-19nov24/>

3 [https://www.adalah.org/uploads/uploads/Criminal\\_Proceedings\\_Report\\_Eng\\_Nov\\_13.pdf](https://www.adalah.org/uploads/uploads/Criminal_Proceedings_Report_Eng_Nov_13.pdf)

4 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/06/16/doctor-without-borders>

5 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67181582>

6 <https://www.gov.il/he/pages/07112023-02>

7 <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10994954/>

## II. MENTAL HEALTH IN PEACE AND DIALOGUE WORK

### Responding to Evolving Needs: The SFP Method and the Limits of Classical Psychology

Across hundreds of dialogue sessions since October 7th, SFP has observed the profound emotional strain on Palestinian and Jewish participants attempting to remain present within increasingly polarized environments. Palestinian participants often reported feeling silenced, as the repression surrounding them in the public sphere echoed in dialogue spaces. As facilitators have noted, this creates a painful paradox: Palestinians are invited into dialogue by institutions or workplaces, only to find that the very conditions of the dialogue mute their voices, by not allowing them to express their views on Israel or what is happening in Gaza. Simultaneously, many Jewish participants, reeling from existential shock, demanded explicit condemnation of the October 7th attacks from their Palestinian peers. This dynamic, rooted in a desire to feel safety and control, has revealed sharp asymmetries in power and whose and what emotions are allowed to be expressed.

Mental health workers operating in this climate are at once uniquely situated to affect change, while simultaneously faced with the compounding challenges of moral injury<sup>8</sup>, burnout, and ethical dilemmas. The School for Peace trains these practitioners in critical<sup>9</sup> and contextual<sup>10</sup> approaches that integrate political reality into therapeutic understanding, addressing how power relations and collective histories shape distress, and works with them to develop new approaches when existing ones are insufficient.

From its earliest years, the School for Peace identified the limitations of classical Western psychological paradigms. As articulated by Ramzi Suleiman, individual-centered theories fail to fully grasp the impact of collective narratives, structural violence, and asymmetric power. This critique became foundational to the SFP method, which centers group identity, intergroup dynamics, collective memory, and political context.

Practitioners in our programs have described how mainstream mental health services often lack psycho-political analysis. One clinician described the dissonance of treating trauma in a respected Israeli mental health institution built atop a destroyed Palestinian village, whose history the institution has never acknowledged. Others described supervision that remains insulated from political realities, emphasizing neutrality or countertransference while avoiding the structural inequalities and historical violence that shape both client experience and therapist subjectivity.

To meet these needs, the School for Peace has expanded its work with mental health professionals and continues to develop training programs for Palestinian and Jewish practitioners. These programs introduce dialogical and socio-political frameworks that practitioners later apply in clinical, educational, and community contexts.

8 <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8366182/>

9 <https://www.developmenteducation-review.com/issue/issue-3/soft-versus-critical-global-citizenship-education>

10 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/capr.12623>

This work reflects a core belief: emotional truth must be addressed for justice and reconciliation to become feasible. In a context marked by fear, denial, and systemic repression, confronting trauma is inherently political. Doing so expands the capacity of individuals and groups to imagine futures beyond violence.

### III. MENTAL HEALTH AS A POLITICAL TOOL

Detaching mental health from political reality reinforces existing structural power. Trauma in this context is collective, continuous, and rooted in occupation, discrimination, fear, and intertwined historical narratives. Psychological well-being is inseparable from these conditions.

Psychoanalytic and social theories deepen understanding of these dynamics<sup>11</sup>. Vamik Volkan's work<sup>12</sup> on large-group identity illustrates how unprocessed collective trauma becomes embedded in national consciousness, influencing intergroup behavior and contributing to cycles of violence. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, applied by sociologist Amalia Saar to Israeli attitudes toward Gaza, helps explain psychological mechanisms underlying dehumanization.

Palestinian participants frequently experience racialized trauma<sup>13</sup>, shaped by chronic exposure to systemic oppression and political silencing. Jewish participants confront existential fear and moral distress, influenced by intergenerational trauma rooted in the Holocaust. For Palestinians, the Nakba is not only a historical event<sup>14</sup> but a lived, ongoing experience<sup>15</sup> of dispossession and erasure; for Jewish Israelis, inherited narratives of annihilation cultivate hypervigilance in times of crisis, traits which have been linked to right-wing extremism<sup>16</sup>.

D. W. Winnicott's theory of the «potential space»<sup>17</sup> offers a useful lens for understanding dialogue in this context. Since October 7th, Jewish participants often attempt to establish emotional control through demands for moral certainty, while Palestinians often seek unconditional recognition. This tension threatens to fracture dialogue spaces but also underscores their unique capacity to hold complexity. The potential space, sustained through ethical facilitation, allows participants to process trauma in relation to one another rather than retreating into isolation.

### IV. MENTAL HEALTH AND DIALOGUE

Our work is grounded in liberation psychology, developed by Ignacio Martín-Baró<sup>18</sup>, which insists that healing requires naming the social and political origins of suffering. Dialogue becomes not only a method of communication but a form of resistance that restores voices and enables critical awareness.

Therapists are not neutral actors. Their political, cultural, and emotional positioning shapes therapeutic possibilities. In our programs, practitioners examine moral injury, intergenerational trauma, and the influence of structural inequality on their professional roles. This resonates with context-informed, counter-hegemonic<sup>19</sup> approaches articulated by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian

11 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/pcs.2015.46>

12 <https://www.proquest.com/docview/198186398?sourcetype=Scholarly20Journals>

13 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0011000006292033>

14 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/sadi13578>

15 <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15670.doc.htm>

16 <https://nyaspubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2010.05693.x>

17 <https://colouringinculture.wordpress.com/2014/05/25/playing-and-reality-potential-space-for-creativity/>

18 <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674962477>

19 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1473325015595545>

and Dorit Streir, who argue that mental health work in colonial or asymmetric contexts must interrogate the systems that generate suffering.

In bi-national frameworks, mental health professionals serve as bridges across divided communities. They help clients navigate identity conflict and ethical ambiguity, while examining their own investments in national narratives and power structures. This dual role positions them as essential contributors to justice-oriented social transformation.

### V. CREATING SPACES FOR SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

Requests for «safe space» arise frequently in dialogue and therapeutic settings, reflecting a deep longing for protection in a violent and unstable environment. However, genuine safety cannot be guaranteed within conditions shaped by occupation, racism, war, and repression. As Bell Hooks notes<sup>20</sup> in her analysis of learning environments, the aim is not to promise safety but to cultivate spaces where risk, honesty, and vulnerability can coexist in the service of growth and critical engagement. In this sense, safety is not a precondition for dialogue but an evolving relational achievement shaped by the group's willingness to confront discomfort and power dynamics.

Rather than guaranteeing safety, our goal is to create spaces that support the development of resilience and the capacity to cope with an unsafe world. Judith Herman underscores in her foundational work<sup>21</sup> on trauma that safety is always relative in contexts of ongoing threat; what matters is the creation of conditions that allow individuals to build internal resources, trust, and relational grounding even when external danger persists. At the School for Peace, facilitators work to construct environments that minimize unnecessary harm, foster honest expression, and build relational trust while acknowledging structural conditions that shape vulnerability. This includes naming asymmetries that influence whose emotions are legitimized, whose speech is perceived as dangerous, and who carries greater political risk when speaking. By making these dynamics explicit, the dialogue space becomes one that strengthens participants' tolerance for complexity and difference, and builds professional and personal tools for resilience.

In moments of collective rupture, these resilient spaces become essential. While they cannot insulate participants from real danger, they enable mutual recognition and relational processing that rarely occur elsewhere. Such spaces offer holding, dignity, and a measure of psychological spaciousness that supports participants in enduring and responding to external realities that remain unsafe.

### VI. CONCLUSION

In times of collective trauma, psychological work must encompass the political and emotional complexities shaping people's lives. The School for Peace's collaboration with mental health professionals reflects the recognition that healing cannot be separated from the conditions producing harm.

20 <https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/2/75394/files/2020/07/Engaged-Pedagogy-by-bell-hooks.pdf>

21 [https://beyondthetemple.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/herman\\_trauma-and-recovery-1.pdf](https://beyondthetemple.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/herman_trauma-and-recovery-1.pdf)

Therapeutic spaces can no longer be imagined as neutral. They must become ethically engaged environments where psychological insight and political accountability coexist. Through its programs, the School for Peace supports Palestinian and Jewish practitioners in confronting intergenerational trauma, asymmetrical fear, and structural injustice. These efforts cultivate new models of care attentive to both individual experience and the collective realities that shape it, contributing to the possibility of a more just and humane future.



# »We create safe spaces for open dialogue and an atmosphere that conveys people can speak freely with each other here«

THIS INTERVIEW WAS RECORDED BY MYRTHE ROSENBAUM ON DECEMBER 4TH 2025

»Our approach often leads to politicizing the activity, politicizing the discourse, because we talk about what is going on in the outside world, while trying to reflect on what is occurring inside the group-encounter«

**Myrthe:** To begin with, could you provide an overview of WASNS and the School for Peace with a focus on its methodology and dialogue work?

**Roi:** The Wahat al Salam | Neve Shalom community is an intentional community and it's the only place where Jews and Palestinians have chosen to come and live together. It started in 1978, when people who came to participate in discussions and dialogue in what became later the School for Peace decided to stay on the hill and to bring their families and live side by side.

And this is how the WASNS community started. It was given the lands for the village from the nearby Catholic monastery in Latrun. It is a shared community in the sense that we try to have everything equal, to share power, and to take democratic decisions on many things. There is a small municipality and the municipal board, who are in charge of the buildings and of the shared property.

There is a hotel in the village, which is owned by the community, a public pool, and a very vivid cultural life with events and political happenings that we try to keep up. Also, there is another NGO, which runs the educational institutions of WASNS and is in charge of the bilingual school, the kindergartens, the spiritual cultural center, and the School for Peace. This NGO is called the Friends of the Educational Institutions of WASNS. The municipal board, the NGO, and all the institutions are run democratically and with the attempt to retain as much equality as possible in terms of the distribution of power. There are almost 400 people living in the village, half of them Jews and the other half Palestinians.

The School for Peace was in fact the first establishment founded within this community, it is what started it. People came to talk and to hold discussions on the relations between Jewish and Palestinian inhabitants of the area. Around 1980, a structure for dialogue was founded and named the School for Peace. From the beginning, it was a unique educational institution focused on dialogue between Jews and Palestinians. In the 1990s, we developed a unique dialogue-based method that focuses on several principles:

1 The psychological perspective: In psychology it is well known that there are interpersonal dynamics in groups, support groups, or therapeutic groups, that differ from dynamics between individuals.

At the School for Peace, in our dialogue groups or conflict groups (as they used to be called), the focus is not on the personal. The focus is on group identity. We bring together two groups to have dialogue. Participants of the group have their individual identity, but when you are part of a group, you are looked at through the identity of this group that has come to meet another group. The other group has come to meet you and has never met you before. They want to meet you because you are a member of a certain group with a certain identity. Our perspective and facilitation put this in focus.

2 The second principle is based on our version of Contact Theory. We are very aware of the fact that we have come to talk about the relations between groups, and we put this fact in the foreground.

According to Contact Theory, if you bring people together, it can help to reduce racism, stereotypes and so on. And we are saying that one of the things that could happen as a result of mutual encounters is that you display less animosity towards a certain person. It is very personal. On an individual level, encounters can lead people to realize »person XY is special and being very nice. They are not like the other people in their group.« If this is the perspective, stereotypes towards the group do not diminish.

This is where we come in and we adopt a group approach to this mutual encounter, as I said before. But we also discuss relationships between the groups, which is the focus of the discussion.

- 3 We focus on the power relations between the groups. We are aware not only of how the groups are situated and how they feel towards each other, but that their relations are set in a context, in a situation, where one group is stronger than the other.

Maybe I can add another point here; I'm not sure it is a principle as such, but it is a key aspect of our work. We compare the relations during the activity to relations in the outside world. This often means politicizing the activity, politicizing the discourse, because we talk about what is going on outside, while trying to reflect on what is occurring inside. Are there similarities? Are there differences? And if so, why?

These are the principles of our methodology for dialogue work.

**Myrthe:** Thank you very much for this interesting insight into the foundations of your work. Can you tell me a bit about how your work and the field itself have been changed by the ongoing war and violence and the humanitarian crisis in Palestine and Israel since the events of October 7th?

**Roi:** We have noticed several influences on our work and several changes. However, you also need to remember that more than two years have passed since October 7th. There has therefore been some kind of dynamic or fluctuation since then. But I will share some points that have changed, even though maybe the changes were not instantaneous, but rather more gradual, or fluctuated during those two years. I think an important aspect is silencing; or you could call it political oppression. One should also mention that there is perhaps a weakening of the freedom of speech. This was very dominant right after October 7th.

But up to today, the situation has changed – mostly for Palestinians, but also for Jews. The situation is much less democratic. What people are allowed to say openly is significantly changing. And there is a lot of policing of speech in many places, which, of course, influences dialogue, on the one hand, because people are not used to speaking out because of the political situation. And on the other hand, there is also fear of saying something that will come out. This is something we are working on a lot: creating safe spaces for open dialogue and an atmosphere that says we can talk here, this is a place to talk and this is a place to be truthful.

Another difference is that the work focussing on power relations has declined. As I said, we used to work a lot on the unequal power relations between Jews and Palestinians. Doing so was really a need of Palestinian

groups, and in a way it was also important for Jewish groups to be reminded of the differences in power relations and the inequality that exists.

This sort of work is carried out much less frequently as it is much clearer for everyone who comes, and to most people engaged in dialogue, that this is the actual situation, in other words, that we are in a situation of inequality and of unbalanced power relations, and that there is one group that is doing something to another group.

Maybe I can add that right after October 7th, there was a need for the Jewish side to hear words of solidarity and to have recognition of their pain. This need was not always met by the Palestinian side. Yet it is certain that both in the short term and the long term, after October 7th there was no shift in the power relations. By now, the situation has become much clearer: there is undeniably a strong side and a weaker side.

Another difference we face is regarding recruitment for programs. First of all, there are less people interested in meeting the other side and holding talks and discussions. But those who are interested often seem to feel like it is much more urgent and much more important now; they are more committed. They are willing to pay higher fees; you could say they are willing to sacrifice more to be a part of a dialogue. This is a big difference for us.

**Myrthe:** I can imagine. What would you say are the biggest challenges that result from this situation for your work? And how do you and your colleagues deal with these in your day-to-day life and work?

**Roi:** I think people feel very alone in their opinions. This is also connected to the hardship and challenge of going from a dialogue activity into activism and trying to make a genuine change in reality. It is a very difficult step for many people. It has always been difficult to carry out this work within our political and societal reality, but specifically in this current environment and atmosphere it is very difficult for people.

**Myrthe:** I cannot imagine what a difficult balance it is to be a psychosocial facilitator who has to provide strength and stability in so many ways to people on a daily basis, when at the same time you are just as shaken, frightened, and insecure as everyone else because of what is happening. This must be an incredibly difficult balance.

**Roi:** Yes, it is difficult. But it also helps to have responsibility and to have a role in such a chaotic reality. To have some kind of function and structure helps a lot. One thing that strengthens us is that we have regular consultations with parallel facilitator groups that are going through a process together. At present, I feel weakened because over the past few months we have had a lot of activities that required colleagues to travel, so we did not have time for

many staff consultations. This has an impact on our strength as facilitators. Another balancing act, and a lot of polarities, lots of challenges.

**Myrthe:** On a more practical level, how do you integrate mental-health support into the broader peace building initiatives at the School for Peace? Or would you say that these two are intertwined to begin with?

**Roi:** We understand the importance of mental health for peace building and we are trying to be engaged with the field of mental health and to contribute to it. We foster mental health approaches that consider conflict and sensitivity of and awareness to the different identities and histories of people; a context-aware mental health practice, if you like.

Besides that, we know that being part of a group in a time of crisis is very strengthening and helpful, even if it is not a therapeutic group. Specifically, when something is happening between Jews and Palestinians, which is always the case, and you are in a group and you can address it, it can make you stronger mentally.

**Myrthe:** In the WASNS article in this publication, the author speaks of dialogue becoming a therapeutic act and of mental health as a political tool<sup>1</sup>. What innovations or approaches do you believe could strengthen the link between mental health and peace building in the future?

**Roi:** I think the two are connected. I feel there is a greater need to connect the psychological therapy process to reality, to the outside. Psychological processes are very important. It is very important to be like an isolated transference bubble. It works both ways in context-aware therapy, in other words, the real world influences relations, transference, and therapeutic relations and the outside world, our histories, and our identities influence therapeutic relations.

At the same time, what you do in the world, and more importantly, what you do to the world, influences your mental health. Once you are aware of this, you understand that it is a two-way street. It is not only about how to become mentally stronger, but also how to take on more responsibility in the world, which also helps your mental health. So in that way the two are not separable, they are one connected dynamic. I do not want to deny the importance of the nucleus therapeutic process. But to be aware of this two-way street as a therapist is almost a professional necessity and an obligation at this time.

**Myrthe:** Just a few weeks ago, colleagues from AMCHA Israel met with colleagues from WASNS in Berlin at the Forum »*In between Polarities – Psychosocial Work in Times of Crisis*«. Under this theme and beyond, how do you think future collaboration between WASNS and AMCHA could work and how could

it contribute to strengthening mental health facilitators in environments fragmented by ongoing war and violence?

**Roi:** I think it is crucial for the School for Peace to share and to spread the importance of how we see mental health, how we see the field of mental health. I feel AMCHA is a perfect partner because of the reasons behind its foundation, its rationale, and its view or innate perspective regarding group identity. I am not sure yet about concrete activities, but I am sure that conceptually it should involve shared learning, dialogue and moving toward activism. We are a very transformative organization, we changed ourselves and we very much want to influence our participants. Many of them come to the School for Peace to go through a transformative experience and our aim for our relationships with partner organizations is that we go through a process of transformation together.

**Myrthe:** One guiding principle shared by WASNS and AMCHA is that we dare to investigate areas that hurt the most, despite the fear of doing so, and I think that there is a lot of potential for cooperation here. I am positive that we will come up with some very inspiring concepts together for the future.

Thank you very much for your time and for these valuable insights and I wish you every success for the School for Peace and the courageous work carried out by you and your colleagues!

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<sup>1</sup> See *Agents of Change* by Rafael Barkan-Bocarsly in this publication

# Agents of Change

## A Political Dialogue Course for Jewish and Palestinian Mental Health Professionals in Israel

DR. ROI SILBERBERG, DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL FOR PEACE, WAHAT AL-SALAM | NEVE SHALOM

In 2024–2025, amidst one of the most politically and emotionally charged periods in recent memory, the School for Peace (SFP) at Wahat al-Salam | Neve Shalom launched a new edition of its *Agents of Change* program – this time dedicated to Jewish and Palestinian mental health professionals. The course brought together psychologists, social workers, art therapists and counselors into a shared, transformative space – to grapple not only with their professional identities but also with their national narratives and political realities.

### THE SCHOOL FOR PEACE APPROACH

The School for Peace is a political-educational institution working for over four decades to promote equality and justice through critical dialogue between groups in conflict, with a particular focus on Palestinian-Jewish relations. Our method is based on a dialogical framework that openly addresses asymmetries of power and centers collective identities, often overlooked in traditional »interpersonal« dialogue work. Rather than promoting abstract »coexistence« we seek to create spaces where difficult truths can be spoken, and where individual and collective transformation can occur.

### COURSE RATIONALE

The »Agents of Change« course for mental health professionals was developed in response to a growing gap between professional practice and political reality. In contexts of prolonged conflict, mental health work does not take place in a neutral space. Therapists, counselors, and social workers operate within structures shaped by power relations, collective trauma, silencing, and moral injury – yet these dimensions are rarely addressed explicitly in professional training.

In Israel and Palestine, this gap has become increasingly acute. Mental health professionals are expected to support individuals and communities affected by war, loss, displacement, and systemic violence, while simultaneously being encouraged to maintain a stance of »professional neutrality«. This expectation often results in internal conflict, emotional exhaustion, and ethical ambiguity. Questions of national identity, political accountability, and structural inequality are pushed to the margins, despite their centrality to both personal distress and therapeutic encounters.

The course was designed as a response to this tension. Its aim is not to politicize therapy in a simplistic sense, but rather to acknowledge that therapy is already embedded in political realities. By creating a structured, facilitated space for critical dialogue, the program enables participants to explore how their national identities, social positions, and professional roles intersect – and how these intersections shape their work with clients, institutions, and communities.

At the core of the course lies the understanding that meaningful therapeutic practice in times of conflict requires more than individual resilience or technical skill. It demands ethical clarity, collective reflection, and the capacity to hold complexity without denial. Through dialogue, learning, and activist-oriented thinking, participants are invited to examine the limits of existing professional frameworks and to imagine alternative forms of practice that are responsive to injustice, inequality, and collective suffering.

Ultimately, the course seeks to support a transformative process in which participants come to recognize their potential not only as caregivers, but also as agents of social and professional change – capable of

influencing discourse, developing initiatives, and contributing to a more just and accountable mental health field.

### A COURSE STRUCTURE ROOTED IN DIALOGUE, LEARNING, AND ACTIVISM

The program was composed of nine day-long sessions and two intensive weekend seminars. Each meeting integrated three key components:

**Dialogical Work:** Bi-national and uni-national dialogue sessions, facilitated by trained experts using the SFP method, creating a space to explore identity, emotions, and collective narratives.

**Learning:** Lectures, workshops, and political tours providing frameworks for understanding structural violence, collective trauma, moral injury, and liberation psychology.

**Activism:** Each participant was invited to develop a personal or collective initiative as a form of political-professional agency, supported by peer mentoring and staff consultation.

The integration of these elements supported a holistic and embodied learning process – one that demanded emotional risk, political clarity, and deep self-reflection.

### THE 2025 COHORT: COMPOSITION AND CONTEXT

The 2025 cohort of the »Agents of Change« course for Jewish and Palestinian mental health professionals was launched under extraordinary circumstances. The course was originally scheduled to begin in June, but just days before the opening seminar, war broke out between Israel and Iran. The launch was postponed by three weeks, during which participants, facilitators, and organizers reassessed whether and how to proceed. Ultimately, the decision to go forward reflected a shared understanding that the very conditions making dialogue difficult also made it essential.

Interest in the course was significant, especially among Jewish professionals. Dozens of applicants responded to the call, many of them with strong backgrounds in social engagement and therapeutic work. However, during the interview stage, it became clear that not all candidates were ready for the process. Several withdrew after realizing that the emotional and political weight of the course might be too much to carry in this moment. One candidate, for example, was supporting her daughters as they began their IDF enlistment and felt the inner dissonance would be too intense. Another, a group facilitator working with reserve soldiers returning from Gaza, feared that the course would further destabilize her already overextended emotional resources.

Recruitment among Palestinian professionals was slower and more challenging. A number of applicants expressed interest but hesitated to commit, concerned about the political visibility and emotional exposure the course might entail. Some work in highly institutional or governmental roles and felt their participation could raise professional or personal risks. Others, when exposed to the course framework in the interview stage, felt unprepared to enter a space of such high emotional demand. As one candidate expressed, »I'm not ready to sit with Jewish women and talk about what's happening – I'm still trying to survive it.«

As a result, the final cohort was not numerically balanced: eleven Jewish women and eight Palestinian women were selected. Participants included clinical psychologists, social workers, art therapists, and a school counselor. Ages ranged from 23 to 57. Geographically, they came from across the country – from Sakhnin and the Triangle region in the north, to Jerusalem and the central area. Several participants are deeply involved in community-based practice, and four are affiliated with Amcha, an organization supporting Holocaust survivors and their families.

From the opening seminar, it was evident that this would be a complex and emotionally charged journey. The group entered into the process carrying fresh trauma, fears, and political exhaustion. Palestinian participants openly asked themselves what they were doing in this space, and whether dialogue was even possible or desirable under current conditions. Some expressed deep mistrust or skepticism, unsure whether they could – or should – engage with Jewish colleagues while war was ongoing. On the Jewish side, participants expressed caution and fear of speaking too openly, concern about inadvertently causing harm, and a sense of helplessness in the face of mounting polarization and grief.

Yet despite – or perhaps because of – these initial tensions, the group showed up. The course did not aim to resolve or dissolve these contradictions. Instead, it provided a rare and intentional space in which they could be held, examined, and spoken. It is this willingness to stay present in discomfort, to hold complexity without collapsing into silence or aggression, that laid the foundation for what became a profoundly transformative process.

### FROM OPENING TO EXPOSURE: ENTERING THE NAKBA, ENTERING THE DIALOGUE

The first seminar included a powerful lecture by historian Lina Dalasha on the Nakba. Her presentation – delivered with clarity and emotional resonance – opened a historical and emotional gateway for the group.

In the first part of the lecture series, we invited historians from both national groups to present their respective narratives. While this approach is often fraught with tension, in this case, the structure allowed each group to hear its own voice articulated in full. For the Palestinian participants, this was particularly meaningful. One participant reflected:

»I know these stories from home, but I've never heard them presented like this – clearly, chronologically, and publicly. It felt like something was being restored.«

After the lecture, a participant shared her experience of silencing at work. In the early days of the war, she had posted on social media a short message: »Enough with the war.« Within hours, colleagues pressured her to remove the post. When she refused, she was dismissed. Her voice trembled as she recounted the ordeal – but in this space, her words were met with quiet, steady affirmation. The silence in the room was not avoidance, but presence.

#### THE JAFFA-TOUR: HISTORY AND RESISTANCE IN THE PRESENT TENSE

Following the seminar, we conducted a political tour in Jaffa led by former city council member and activist Abed Abu Shehadeh. The tour was a turning point for many in the group.

Walking through the layered landscapes of Jaffa, Abu Shehadeh wove together the collective story of Nakba, dispossession, and ongoing discrimination with personal anecdotes from his own family history. He described how Palestinian residents who remained in the city after 1948 still face housing insecurity, erasure, and municipal neglect.

What made the tour so impactful was not only the content – but Abu Shehadeh's presence. His energy, clarity, and connection to his city offered a powerful model of political engagement rooted in place. He emphasized the strength of community and the capacity to resist invisibility, even in the most hostile conditions. Participants responded with gratitude and a renewed sense of connection.

The day ended at Beit al-Shabiba, where the group met with two activist-therapists: Inas and Adi Ronen Argov. Both shared their experiences of working at the intersection of care and activism, and spoke candidly about burnout, moral clarity, and sustaining hope. Their stories offered inspiration – not because they portrayed strength without struggle, but because they named the struggle itself as part of the strength.

#### ACTIVISM EMERGES: FROM DIALOGUE TO THE STREET

By the time the third session approached, something had shifted in the group. We had planned to discuss activism formally – but instead, we let go of the agenda. The group was already moving.

That week saw the first anti-war demonstrations in Sakhnin and Jaffa, and several course participants joined. They sent pictures to the group, some standing quietly in circles holding signs, others chanting slogans of dissent. A few met afterwards in a local café. It was not a »planned module« – but it was exactly the kind of embodied, responsive learning that the course aims to nurture. The street, the home, the café – all became extensions of the classroom.

#### SESSION FOUR: POLICY, POWER, AND THE THERAPIST'S ROLE

In the fourth session, we invited Prof. Roni Strier to speak on policy change and the role of social professionals in shaping public discourse. Drawing on his decades of work in critical social work, Strier asked a pointed question: »What does it mean to be a therapist right now – in this war, in this country, in your community?«

The responses were immediate and visceral. One participant said: »It's hard. We're broken ourselves. We have to gather our own pieces before we can offer anything to our clients.«

Another added: »I meet my clients in the clinic, but I also meet them in the supermarket, on the street, in the shelter. There's no »neutral« space anymore.«

Strier encouraged the group to rethink their frameworks – not to abandon professionalism, but to recognize that ethics are not neutral, and that silence is never apolitical. His session helped deepen the course's central question:

How can mental health professionals be both witnesses and actors in the face of structural and political violence?

#### PREPARING FOR ACTION: A COLLECTIVE TURN TOWARD ACTIVISM

As the course enters its final phase, the group is now preparing for the activism component with a renewed sense of purpose. Despite the emotional weight of recent months, participants are approaching this stage with energy and motivation. Many have begun forming ideas for local initiatives, workshops, or creative interventions rooted in their communities and professional spheres. What once felt abstract – »being agents of change« – is now taking tangible form. While each initiative will reflect the unique position of its initiator, the group shares a common understanding: activism, in this context, is not separate from therapeutic practice, but an extension of its ethical commitments. The work ahead is challenging, but the participants are no longer facing it alone.

# How the Past Shapes the Present

## *Social-Psychological Insights into Collective Trauma*

DR. SLIEMAN HALABI, SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST, UNIVERSITY OF WUPPERTAL /  
WAHAT AL-SALAM | NEVE SHALOM

A year has passed since I joined Amcha's last conference in Berlin, and a lot has happened since. This year, we meet again in Berlin to talk about *»In Between Polarities«*. Together with Jewish Israeli therapists, two other Palestinians, and a few Germans, including the Amcha organizing team, we have the task of reflecting on collective trauma, memory, and navigating psychosocial work in times of crisis. *»Crisis«* is a keyword which brings all these elements to the surface. This crisis is not any crisis; it is not COVID or an economic crisis. This crisis is above all a moral crisis emerging as a response to the extremely high civilian death toll in Gaza, the severe humanitarian deprivation faced by the population, the displacement, and the continuous bombardment and *»flattening«* of whole apartment buildings on a daily basis. The crisis is a moral one because it is happening in front of our eyes; it is televised worldwide while we go about our lives, some of us bearing a feeling of guilt for eating and drinking while Gazans are starving, others feeling guilty for being citizens of the state that operates this war machine, yet a large number of others, not only in Israel, feeling that these are all legitimate actions of self-defense, and collateral damage is unavoidable. Above all, it is a crisis for humanity, for maintaining differentiated compassion, whereby empathy for the many Israeli civilians who were killed, kidnapped, or traumatized in the brutal Hamas attack must coexist with the call for justice for Palestinians.

The Israeli sense of existential threat and historical vulnerability is real and must be part of the emotional landscape we acknowledge. At the same time, empathy for Israelis has increasingly been framed as incompatible with empathy for Palestinians, and empathy for Palestinians as a denial of Israeli grievances. In light of this crisis, the key question is how a fruitful and constructive conversation might enable critical reflections on this crisis while navigating professional and personal relationships.

The difficulty with such a conversation stems largely from the frustration that whatever we do seems powerless to stop the horrific war. We feel powerless in the face of the powerful forces that enable this catastrophe. Many of us continue to ask ourselves: why does humanity not seem to learn anything from the past? When will we learn that prejudice, hatred, exploitation, occupation, and all the horrors of war are not the right path for salvation? Seeing the current event within a historically inclusive perspective guides my understanding of human psychology and behavior. I am also aware that many people, including scholars and political actors, analyze reality in less universal terms and focus more on the factors and dynamics specific to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, detached from past events such as the domestic issues within Israel or among the Palestinian people that led to such violence. These divergent perspectives on how to make sense of the world and reflections on how history shapes the present are highly significant to any nuanced discussion on collective trauma because these perspectives, as will be explained later, have downstream consequences regarding the extent to which we are able to recognize the pain of those who belong to the outgroup – the group to which we do not belong.

This article offers some insights from social psychological research into collective trauma and its impact on intergroup relations and conflict. Understanding the psychological power of collective trauma and the political apparatus that mobilizes the masses for reasons of national interest should contribute to Amcha's goal of achieving a critical reflection on memory, therapy, and psychosocial work. In this article, I assert the claim that working on collective trauma requires going beyond the classical approaches to the individual psyche and attending to the social, historical, and political processes that shape how entire groups remember, interpret, and mobilize their past. This input should not be treated as a review of the research on collective trauma but rather as a beginning, an attempt to lay the groundwork for practitioners and others to consider how this knowledge can enter the therapeutic space. It may also encourage them to recognize that what they encounter in therapy is shaped not only by individual histories, but by broader national processes of coping with collective trauma and genocide.

My general interest in genocide began with a visit to a small Holocaust Museum during my undergraduate studies, which I attended together with my university class and our Hebrew literature lecturer. The museum was established by a Polish-Jewish couple who survived the horrors of the

Holocaust. They dedicated an entire floor of their home to commemorating their experiences. It was the first Holocaust museum I had ever visited. Until then, I had learned about the Holocaust primarily at school and through films broadcast on Israeli television on Holocaust Remembrance Day. Seeing objects such as the concentration camp uniform displayed in a glass case at the entrance was a profoundly different experience to seeing them on a screen. I was moved to tears and felt scared of what I was about to witness.

As we met the couple, I could not begin to imagine what they had endured, nor how they had managed to rebuild their lives after being displaced, moved from one camp to another, and faced with imminent extermination. What I found particularly remarkable was their decision to turn their home into a space of remembrance, welcoming visitors and recounting their survival story.

We all gathered in the study, sitting on the floor in front of the couple and our lecturer, who moderated the encounter. After listening to their testimonies and asking questions, the wife distributed copies of her husband's memoir. I did not initially receive one and was too shy to ask for a copy. Then I noticed her whispering something to our lecturer, who subtly pointed towards me. The wife walked directly over, handed me the book, and said in Hebrew, »Read it.« Only then did I understand that she had been looking for Arab students – who she believed especially needed to read this history. Her gesture felt strange and presumptive, as if she assumed I might dismiss or deny the importance of the Holocaust.

Despite these feelings, I read the book with great interest and was motivated by the desire to understand not only the couple's experiences and how they coped with the trauma, but also, like many social psychologists, how such atrocities were possible in modern times. The husband's story began in Poland and ended with his migration to Israel. It was fascinating, but one photograph unsettled me. It showed him as a young soldier during the 1948 war, pointing a rifle alongside other soldiers at several Arab men who were standing by the entrance of a Christian Orthodox school in Haifa. I felt confused. How could someone who had endured the unimaginable consider this moment as »revenge,« as he described it?

At the time, I did not understand that I was projecting my own expectations onto him, expectations that many people hold about victimized groups: that having suffered so deeply, they should be especially committed to never harming others. My reaction was not a judgment of him or of Holocaust survivors, but the beginning of a deeper inquiry into how collective trauma can shape people's moral worlds and political views. What I was encountering was a complex psychological reality, one that social psychology later helped me make sense of. In what follows, I turn to the concept of collective trauma to show how past atrocities become woven into group identity, and how they shape moral lessons for future generations.

Collective trauma refers to the society-wide psychological impact of a catastrophic event. It is not just the historical record of what happened, but a shared memory that is continually reconstructed as the group tries to understand and give meaning to the event. Importantly, collective trauma is not limited to the direct experience of survivors. Collective memories of trauma persist long after the original events, carried by later generations who were never personally exposed to the violence but nonetheless come to »remember« it as part of their group identity<sup>1</sup>. These descendants, and the group as a whole, reconstruct the trauma through national narratives, commemorations, and socialization practices, allowing the event to shape their perceptions, fears, and moral frameworks even in the absence of firsthand experience. Research into the links between past and present are a well-known branch of social psychology. Among other lines of research, research that is relevant to this article has focused on how people interpret past trauma and make sense of it, and how this influences their relations with other groups. Because this memory is not fixed, people can draw very different interpretations and moral lessons from the same traumatic history; these can at times be contradictory.

One important dimension of the ways in which people interpret collective trauma relates to the scope of its inclusiveness. Members of the victimized group vary in the extent to which they perceive the past victimization of their group as similar and comparable to the victimhood of other groups, or as exclusive and incomparable, illustrated by the notion that »no one suffered as much as we did«. These divergent perceptions have important consequences for attitudes towards outgroups. For example, a study was conducted among 504 Jewish Israeli participants, who were asked to indicate whether they perceived the Holocaust as a crime exclusively against Jews, against Jews and other victimized groups, or against all humanity. Participants also voiced their level of support for humanitarian policies (e. g., transferring food and medicine to Gaza) and militaristic policies (e. g. using harsh military measures even if civilians would be harmed), as well as the extent to which they felt morally obliged not to inflict harm on others, or morally entitled to harm others in order to protect the ingroup<sup>2</sup>. The authors found that participants who construed the Holocaust as a crime exclusively against Jews expressed greater support for militaristic policies, less support for humanitarian policies, a greater sense of moral entitlement, and a lesser sense of moral obligation compared with those who viewed the Holocaust as inclusive of other victim groups or of all humanity. In other words, the findings highlight the significance of an inclusive perception of the Holocaust – perceiving the Holocaust as a crime against other groups and humanity as a whole enabled Israelis to treat the Palestinians less harshly than those who perceived the Holocaust as a crime against Jews alone.

Another important factor that contributes to the impact of collective trauma on relations with the outgroup stems from making sense of the past.

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- 1 Hirschberger, G. (2018). Collective trauma and the social construction of meaning. *Frontiers in psychology* 9, 1441.
  - 2 Rosler, N. / Branscombe, N. R. (2020). Inclusivity of past collective trauma and its implications for current intractable conflict: The mediating role of moral lessons. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59, 171 – 188. (doi:10.1111/bjso.12336).

Collective trauma shatters the worldview of individuals and their descendants – the world feels unsafe, and trauma can feel eternal. People try to make sense of it by drawing lessons for the future that enable them to take control over preventing further victimization by previous perpetrators, but also current adversaries. Yechiel Klar, a social psychologist at Tel Aviv University, has examined these lessons among Israelis. His work was inspired by the historian Yehuda Bauer's work on comparing the Holocaust to other genocides<sup>3</sup>. Bauer argued that although each atrocity is unique, comparisons are necessary: genocides and mass killings do not repeat themselves identically, but they recur in similar forms, each with its own »characteristics of particularity«. Precisely this combination of uniqueness and comparability grants such events their universal moral significance. Understanding the broader mechanisms through which perpetrators, victims, and bystanders behave under such conditions, Bauer suggested, can help us derive meaningful lessons for preventing future catastrophes. To this end, he proposed adding three commandments to the Jewish-Christian tradition: »Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander« (p. 67).

Klar investigated how these lessons – including »never forsake your brothers« – shape Israelis' understanding of their collective past and their attitudes toward Palestinians<sup>4</sup>. The lesson »never be a passive victim again« was, he argues, reflected in a view of the Israelis as being perpetually threatened, which is linked to greater moral entitlement, the belief that the ingroup is justified in doing »anything in self-defense, even acts that can be considered moral transgressions.« Those who embraced this lesson supported actions that could severely harm Palestinian civilians more strongly and felt less group-based guilt for such harm. In contrast, the lesson »never be a perpetrator« was linked to a greater sense of group-based guilt and less aggressive attitudes and emotions toward the Palestinians. Moreover, these lessons affected people's cognitive ability to recall the suffering of others. In one experiment, Israeli participants read about a Jewish-Israeli family that was hit by a Palestinian missile or a Palestinian family in Gaza that was hit by an IDF missile. Individuals guided by the lesson not to become perpetrators accurately recalled the suffering of both the Israeli and the Palestinian families, whereas those guided by the lesson of never again being a victim recalled the suffering of the Israeli family more accurately than the suffering of the Palestinian family<sup>5</sup>. These findings underscore how different lessons drawn from the same collective trauma can foster either justification, harsh treatment, or empathic acknowledgment of outgroup harm.

Why some people embrace one lesson of collective trauma over another remains one of the most pressing and least understood questions in this field. Although not yet examined systematically, existing research suggests that individual differences such as universalistic versus traditional values or political orientation (left vs. right) play a role. Yet these lessons do not

emerge in a vacuum. They are embedded in the political climate and shaped by the forces that cultivate, amplify, and mobilize them.

In a recent publication, Amalia Sa'ar argues that in the aftermath of October 7th, »national trauma« has become a master script in Jewish-Israeli public discourse, an overarching cultural narrative that dictates how events should be interpreted and which emotional and political responses are deemed legitimate<sup>6</sup>. In her account, trauma does not remain a private wound; it saturates headlines, media commentary, social networks, and everyday conversations, flooding the political arena with emotional language. This framing casts the collective as permanently endangered, making vulnerability appear self-evident and beyond debate.

When trauma becomes the dominant lens through which politics is viewed, Sa'ar warns, political critique is recoded as emotional insensitivity, or even betrayal. Questioning the conduct of the war, the structural nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or the scale of military violence becomes nearly impossible because trauma is culturally positioned as something that cannot be challenged and from which no moral demands can be made. According to this logic, the mobilization of trauma stabilizes the image of the group as an eternal victim, narrowing the space for critical debate and framing dissent as incompatible with collective pain. As this master script takes hold, the capacity for empathy toward Palestinians shrinks dramatically.

In light of these dynamics, our task in Berlin is not to resolve the moral crisis we are witnessing; none of us can stop the destruction in Gaza or mend the lives shattered by it. What we can do is create spaces where collective trauma is neither denied nor weaponized, and where its psychological effects can be examined without triggering defensiveness or silence. The challenge is to hold trauma as an object of inquiry of moral lessons and responsibilities rather than a tool of justification. From this starting point, several implications for therapeutic and dialogical work become clear.

First, we must recognize that empathy toward the outgroup is not a simple individual disposition but the outcome of how collective trauma is interpreted, narrated, and politically mobilized. As shown in the studies reviewed above, interpretations that cast the group as uniquely and eternally victimized reduce the capacity to acknowledge the suffering of others. Conversely, interpretations that universalize the lessons of trauma create openings for moral responsibility and for seeing the humanity of those construed as adversaries. Therapists and practitioners should therefore consider how clients' political and cultural environments shape the emotional boundaries of their empathy.

Second, psychosocial work must make space for the plurality of lessons that people draw from historical trauma. The lesson of »never again to us« can coexist with the lesson of »never again to anyone,« but there is often a tension between these orientations and they are easily polarized in times of crisis. Encouraging clients, communities, and professionals to explore

3 Bauer, Y. (2002). *Rethinking the Holocaust*. Yale University Press.

4 Klar, Y. (2016). Four moral obligations in the aftermath of historical ingroup victimization. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11, 54 – 58. (doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.05.015).

5 Schori-Eyal N. / Klar, Y. / Roccas, S. / McNeill, A. (2017). The Shadows of the Past: Effects of Historical Group Trauma on Current Intergroup Conflicts. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 43, 538 – 554. (doi:10.1177/0146167216689063).

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these tensions, rather than forcing premature coherence, may help loosen the rigid victim-perpetrator binaries that exclude ethical reflection.

Third, we need to examine how the public discourse on trauma, especially in Israel after October 7, constrains what can be said and who can be heard. When trauma becomes a totalizing interpretive lens, it limits the legitimacy of questioning state actions, impedes acknowledgment of out-group suffering, and pathologizes dissent. For practitioners, this means that therapeutic work cannot be separated from the political atmosphere: the very language with which clients make sense of their pain may be saturated with national scripts that demand uncritical reflection.

Finally, creating genuinely dialogical spaces, such as the Amcha forum, requires acknowledgement of the emotional asymmetries and power differences that shape intergroup encounters. Palestinians and Israelis do not enter these spaces with equal freedom to express pain, critique, or fear. Pointing out these asymmetries is not an obstacle to dialogue but a precondition for it. Only when these conditions are recognized can conversations move beyond competing narratives of victimhood and toward shared ethical reflection.

These suggestions do not offer a roadmap for cultivating inclusive understanding of victimization across group boundaries, nor do they presume that shared understanding will emerge easily. But they point to an important possibility: critically examining how collective trauma is constructed, transmitted, and mobilized at different levels of analysis (individual and group level) can help reopen the moral and emotional space that has narrowed so drastically in recent times. In doing so, we may be able to reclaim some capacity for differentiated compassion, not as a political stance, but as a psychological and ethical practice necessary to address profound human suffering.



# Transgenerationale – Wounded Generations: *Perspectives after October 7*

DR. JULIANE SOLF, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AMCHA GERMANY

24 NOVEMBER 2024, BARENBOIM-SAID AKADEMIE, BERLIN

AMCHA Germany in cooperation with the Barenboim-Said Akademie

In 2024 AMCHA Germany organised the symposium »Transgenerationale« in cooperation with the Barenboim-Said Akademie. It was followed in 2025 by »*In Between Polarities*«, a forum of experts which addressed many of the topics from the previous year in greater depth.

Both the symposium and the forum focused on the process of dialogue in crisis settings and the dual responsibility faced by psychosocial experts in environments marked by conflict: to support individual healing and at the same time to facilitate communication within society, taking account of the »double bind« of being a specialist while also being affected by the circumstances.

The symposium and its key findings were an important milestone in the work of AMCHA Germany. Let's take another look back at the event:

On November 24th, 2024, the symposium »*Transgenerationale – Wounded Generations: Perspectives after October 7*« took place in Berlin. The event was organised by AMCHA Germany in cooperation with the Barenboim-Said Akademie and was part of the project *HAKARA – Facing Transgenerational Trauma*, which is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

The symposium examined the psychosocial, political and cultural dimensions of trauma in the conflict in the Middle East in the light of the events of October 7, 2023. International experts from the fields of psychology, social science and politics as well as practitioners discussed clinical, theoretical and biographical perspectives on the conditions governing the development, memory and transmission of individual, collective, transgenerational and transnational trauma. The keynote speech by Prof. José Brunner (Tel Aviv University), three thematic panels and the concluding hands-on session led by representatives of an Arab-Jewish women's dialogue group provided the opportunity to explore these themes in detail.

## KEY FINDINGS

### TRAUMA IN THE CONTEXT OF ONGOING VIOLENCE: EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF NEUTRALITY IN THERAPEUTIC PRACTICE

Prof. José Brunner explained that trauma cannot be understood as a finished »post-event« occurrence but is rather a continual burden, as defined by the concept of »continuous traumatic stress«. In this situation, the therapy room itself becomes the scene of political projections. Therapists report on the attribution of concepts of the enemy or a shift in the role of perpetrator, victim and witness. Under such conditions, the standard neutral stance is barely tenable; instead practice requires that therapists carefully introduce their own political and moral viewpoints without forcing these on the client.

### TRANSGENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVES: THE POLITICS OF MEMORY AND PSYCHOSOCIAL TRANSMISSION

Several contributions demonstrated how historical trauma such as the Shoah or the Nakba are embedded in contemporary interpretative frameworks. The concept of »chosen trauma« (Vamik Volkan 1998) describes how collective psychological scars become narratives that shape identity and justify political measures. At the same time, it was stressed that collective memory is not a static archive but instead can and must be continually redefined through societal negotiation.

## RECOGNITION INSTEAD OF SOLIDARITY: ESTABLISHING DIALOGIC PRACTICE

The panels and reports from practitioners emphasised the need to create intimate spaces where different narratives can coexist. The primary aim is not to achieve reconciliation but to recognise the perspective of others – a decisive step towards a sustained approach to addressing collective trauma. Biographical methods (for example lifeline collages) and Arab-Jewish women's groups demonstrated how retaining ambivalence (the »ruptures« in one's own narrative) encourage empathy and self-reflection.

## POLITICAL INSTRUMENTALISATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES: THE CHALLENGES OF PSYCHOSOCIAL WORK

Melanie Klein (1952) devised the term »splitting« to describe how traumatic experiences can lead to dichotomous views of the world. This is a short-term defence mechanism that, however, leads to increased polarisation and escalation in the long term. In this context, therapists navigate between the need for clinical integrity and the risk of marginalisation due to political positioning. The symposium called for a shift in perspective from false neutrality to a reflective sense of responsibility driven by dialogue.

## LOOKING FORWARD

The symposium »Transgenerationale – Wounded Generations« made it clear that psychosocial practitioners working in environments marked by conflict have a dual responsibility: to support individual healing and at the same time to facilitate societal communication, specifically in cases where language, memory and identity are contested. If it integrates political and historical reflection, therapy can become a place for resistance against simplification, dehumanization and political instrumentalisation.

AMCHA Germany would like to thank all of the speakers, participants and cooperation partners for helping to make the symposium a success. The event was the springboard for more in-depth follow-up events and emphasised the crucial role of psychosocial work at the interface between trauma, history and political responsibility.

## TEN KEY CONFERENCE FINDINGS

### »TRANSGENERATIONALE – WOUNDED GENERATIONS: PERSPECTIVES AFTER OCTOBER 7«

#### 1 Reflections on therapeutic neutrality

Conventional neutrality proves impossible in political contexts (Gampel 1982); instead, conscious self-reflection on one's own values and projections during the supervision allows a situation where all parties listen.

#### 2 Integrating transgenerational perspectives

Trauma is transmitted from generation to generation (Volkan 2001); family case histories and multi-generation groups mean that inherited burdens are apparent and can be addressed.

#### 3 Constructive approaches to collective narratives

»Chosen trauma« creates identity but can also encourage polarisation (Volkan 1998); the tension can be moderated by integrating collective commemorative rituals sensitively and at the same time emphasising individual narratives.

#### 4 Respecting cultural and contextual sensitivities in treatment plans

Standard treatment plans rarely suffice in cases of societal conflict. Narrative, creative or community-based approaches (e.g. lifeline collages) in combination with local rituals increase relevance and trust.

#### 5 Handling projections and concepts of the enemy

»Splitting« is a short-term defence mechanism that, however, impedes long-term development (Klein 1952). Addressing concepts of the enemy in a protected space, for example through a moderated perspective shift, makes it possible to gradually eliminate fixed attributions. .

#### 6 Protecting personal memory from instrumentalisation

Personal suffering must not be marginalised for the purposes of political propaganda (Volkan 1998); private rituals and individual spaces for commemoration preserve the autonomy of memory.

#### 7 Prioritising recognition over reconciliation

According to Herman (1992), the precondition for healing is a comprehensive recognition of the injustice suffered; pain and anger are thereby given the necessary outlet before ways of forgiving or reconciling are considered.

### 8 Approaches to reactivated past trauma

New experiences of violence can make old wounds reappear (in the sense of a »time collapse«, Volkan 2001). Sharing experiences of life trauma makes it possible to contextualise both past and present trauma and to process them in more depth. .

### 9 Encouraging dialogue-based formats for empathy

Sharing experiences of suffering heightens empathy (Volkan & Itzkowitz 1994); moderating exchange between groups, for example through Arab-Jewish women's groups, can build bridges, provided that participation is voluntary and the groups are guided by professionals.

### 10 Ensuring practitioners have options for self-care and reflection

In contexts marked by politicised trauma, practitioners are particularly at risk of secondary trauma (Gampel 1982; Roth et al. 2014); regular supervision and advice from colleagues on related cases are therefore essential.

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# A Present Past

LUKAS WELZ, CHAIRMAN, AMCHA GERMANY

This publication is more than a collection of specialist articles. It illustrates the shared vision of the authors of this publication and of AMCHA in Germany and Israel, who have supported this process of exchange and dialogue for many years. It demonstrates something that is not new, but must be emphasised more than ever today: psychosocial work is always connected to political realities, to situations of violence, to unresolved conflicts – and to the question of how people maintain or re-establish relationships under these circumstances.

When the exchange and dialogue commenced in 2015 under the name *PresentPast*, the focus was on addressing the Shoah and its psychosocial consequences. From the outset, there was a clear understanding that the past has not faded. It continues to impact on people's lives and families, on relationships and on societal frameworks. In this sense, psychosocial work is about recognising the significance of these effects without regarding them in isolation or taking them out of their historical and political context.

For AMCHA, this work has always gone hand in hand with the support provided to survivors of the Shoah. It never addressed their psychological scars alone, but rather the social framework in which these scars persist. In this process, memory was not a static space, but rather a space of tension between past and present – between lived experience and the reality of life today.

This present-day reality has become noticeably more intense in recent years. The October 7 massacre in Israel, the war in Gaza, persistent uncertainty and increasing social tension define everyday life in Israel and Palestine. These are the circumstances under which psychosocial work is carried out today – unobtrusively, often unmentioned, but effective. Present-day reality comes to the fore in therapy sessions, in groups and in professional relationships, even when it is not the focus.

The contributions to this volume reflect the present, not as a programmatic displacement but rather an intensification of elements that have always been part of AMCHA's work, focusing on their relevance for today. Questions of belonging, vulnerability and responsibility are redefined under circumstances of continued tension. Well known specialist concepts are not abandoned but continue to be applied – in the awareness that the social climate has changed.

The Israel-Palestine conflict was never the explicit focus of AMCHA's work. And yet it defines the reality in which this work takes place – the lives of clients and of therapists and professionals. At a time where society is increasingly divided following the events in Gaza, in a situation of ongoing violence and uncertainty, this reality cannot be ignored. It has an impact on the therapeutic process, on relationships and on the fabric of society.

Psychosocial work cannot disassociate itself from these tensions to address them in haste or to alleviate them; it must recognise them as a part of the divided present. In this sense, dialogue becomes particularly important when social cohesion is under strain – not to extend a task but rather to secure recognition of others and to attempt to retain a sense of community in fragmented circumstances, that is, to make a contribution in accordance with AMCHA's historic experiences.

From the start, *recognition* and *community* were the guiding principles of *PresentPast*. Recognition in the sense of acknowledging the experience of others without playing it off against one's own. Community is not about consensus, but rather maintaining difference. It does not emerge from alignment but through relationships – even where it remains fragile.

*PresentPast* was and continues to be an attempt to create a space for these relationships. This is not a protected space distanced from reality but instead a space at the heart of reality. It is a space where different perspectives can coexist but also remain distinct. This space is vulnerable. It requires time, trust and the willingness to open up to things that may cause aggravation or uncertainty.

The contributions to this volume reflect this stance. They present Israeli, Palestinian and German perspectives on transgenerational trauma and moral injury, community-based approaches to psychosocial care and mental health services as an opportunity for interaction. Together they demonstrate that psychosocial work remains incomplete if it does not reflect upon

history, on the past and the present, and that reflection requires a practical framework to yield results.

For AMCHA this is not a theoretical experiment but established practice. For decades, its work has centred on creating spaces to revive a sense of community – in families, in groups, in society. Its reality dictates that this process is bound up with conflict. *PresentPast* never promised to eradicate tensions. It made it possible to recognise them and to work with them.

Ten years after the start of this exchange, this publication shows just how viable this fundamental objective is – and how it remains a constant challenge. Recognition and community cannot be achieved definitively. They must be sought again and again in a present that is constantly evolving.

I would like to thank all the authors and contributors for their continued willingness to share this vision, to exchange perspectives and to uphold ambivalence. This book is intended as part of an ongoing process of recognising psychosocial work as a societal responsibility and of viewing community not as a static concept but as a continual task.

## The Authors



**LIRON TAL** is a clinical and social psychologist with a private practice located in Jaffa, where she provides therapy to both Israeli Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel. She has been a leading facilitator of Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian dialogue groups for the past 25 years at the School for Peace, Wahat al-Salam | Neve Shalom. Her extensive work there spans various programmes, including youth groups, »agents of change« groups for diverse professionals such as mental health practitioners, and running intensive facilitator training courses. In addition to her therapeutic and group work, for the past two years she has provided emotional support and consultancy services at human rights organizations. Liron is also a lecturer at Reichman University, where she teaches courses on Jewish-Arab dialogue and Gender Studies.



**DAVID SENESH, PHD**, is a senior clinical psychologist and supervisor of psychotherapy and a senior lecturer at Levinsky College of Education in Tel Aviv (Israel), Bar Ilan University (Israel) and a seasonal adjunct professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City (USA). His academic teaching encompasses: Psychology for Clinical Criminology, Restorative Justice, School Psychology, Animal Assisted Therapy and Music Therapy. David is on the board of directors of »Be-Nafshenu«, an organization dedicated to psychosocial work with disadvantaged groups in Israel. His research interests are in areas of discourse analysis, narrative psychology, post-traumatic stress disorders, moral injuries and moral resilience, and restorative processes.



**NAJLA ASMAR** is a senior clinical psychologist and the founder and director of the Maana Center for Mental Health, a department of Nazareth Hospital in Israel. Founded in 2006, the center is today the largest mental health facility serving the Arab population in Israel. Najla holds a BA in Psychology from the University of Haifa and an MA in Clinical Psychology from Tel Aviv University, and is a certified psychoanalytic and psychological practitioner. Najla has worked for many years at the Developmental Psychological Treatment Station of the Ministry of Health in Haifa, Israel, and is a graduate of the Psychotherapy program and the Experienced Therapists' programme at the Psychoanalytic Society in Israel.



**DR. ROI SILBERBERG** is an experienced political educator and Director of the School for Peace, Wahat al-Salam | Neve Shalom. He holds an MA in Human Rights Studies from the University of Malta and a PhD in Philosophy of Education from Haifa University, Israel. He has worked at the School for Peace, WASNS since 2006 and became its Director in 2020. Roi has published work in Hebrew and Arabic, specifically for teachers interested in politicizing their pedagogical practice and addressing issues such as racism and the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. As a lecturer at the teacher training department of the university in Beer Sheva, Roi shares these practices with future teachers. Roi is also the founder of AMAL, an NGO focusing on teaching Arabic to Jewish pupils using critical pedagogy methods.



**DR. SLIEMAN HALABI** is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Personality and Social Psychology at the University of Wuppertal in Germany, having earned his PHD from Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany. He received his qualification as a group facilitator from the WASNS School for Peace in 2011 and has worked for several NGOs promoting dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. Slieman has also worked at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence in Bielefeld, Germany. His research primarily focuses on social and political psychology, with a particular interest in social identity, intergroup relations, and conflicts. He has conducted research in various settings, including Germany, the UK, and Israel.



**NAAMA HOCHSTEIN** is a clinical psychologist with a private practice located in Jerusalem, Israel. She participated in a programme for Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian mental-health practitioners at the School for Peace, Wahat al-Salam | Neve Shalom in 2007/2008, which was pivotal for her involvement and thinking about psycho-political issues. For the past 4 years she has been an editor at Crossings, a journal of psycho-political and cultural thought. She is a PhD student doing research on the history of psychoanalysis and teaches psychoanalytic theory at the Summit institute.



**DR. JULIANE SOLF** is the Executive Director of AMCHA Germany. Previously, she was Deputy Director at ERIAC, the European Roma Institute for Art and Culture, which works for the recognition and visibility of Roma art and culture. Juliane has worked as a researcher, collaborator and advocate on the claims to rights and on visibility of Romani (women) in Europe. Juliane holds a PhD in Political Theory from the Open University in London and she has worked as a researcher, project coordinator and consultant for Romnokher, the Open University, the University of Hildesheim, the German Anti-Discrimination Agency and the European Roma Right Center.



**LUKAS WELZ** is the Executive Director of the Federal Association of Psychosocial Centres for Refugee Survivors of Torture, War and Persecution (BAFF). BAFF represents the interests of 47 member centres that have adopted the human rights-based psychosocial approach. Since 2011, he has been chairman of AMCHA Germany, where he has developed and established programmes to promote transgenerational support through AMCHA Israel, as well as transnational networks in Ukraine, in the Sinti/Roma community in Germany and the Czech Republic, and in German-Israeli relations. Lukas has worked in the German Bundestag, designed exhibitions and led qualification programmes for civil society actors at the interface of dealing with the past and self-empowerment, including in the Sinti / Roma community.



**MYRTHE ROSENBAUM** is a social anthropologist specializing in anti-Semitism and racism research and works at AMCHA Germany as a project manager for transnational expertise and knowledge exchange, focussing on consolidating the Community of Practice (CoP) and establishing the »PresentPast« competence hub. Previously, she gained many years of experience in providing psychosocial care to traumatized people as a shelter and counselling centre manager in the field of refugees/migration. Myrthe gained her MA from University of Hamburg, Germany, and is a PhD student researching the emotional coping spaces of those affected by the collective trauma of October 7th.



**RAFAEL BARKAN-BOCARSLY** is a social worker and group facilitator currently working for Sadaka-Reut Arab-Jewish Youth Partnership, an educational nonprofit. He holds an MA in Conflict Studies as well as an MSW from Hebrew University, and has written and lectured on a range of topics such as the intersection of gender and militarism, decolonial methods of bi-national partnerships, and political power dynamics in Israel's welfare system. Additionally, Rafi gives sociopolitical historical tours of Jaffa, and facilitates educational programming with Jewish Israeli high school students through the Jerusalem Rape Crisis Center.

# IN BETWEEN POLARITIES

PSYCHOSOCIAL PERSPECTIVES  
WITHIN ISRAEL

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**EDITORS** AMCHA Germany

**TELEPHONE** 030 / 28 09 80 38

**E-MAIL** info@amcha.de

**INTERNET / WEB** www.amcha.de

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**EDITORIAL TEAM** Myrthe Rosenbaum,  
Juliane Solf

**LECTORATE & TRANSLATIONS** Caroline Pearce

**DESING & TYPESETTING** Jérôme Werner,  
Hartmut Friedrich-Pfefferkorn

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