

Psychological mechanisms used to defend against anxiety aroused by the encounter with otherness

By Shelley Ostroff

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The psycho-dynamic approach to inter-group mediation and dialogue groups takes into account unconscious processes and explores the mechanisms used by individuals and groups to cope with the anxiety evoked by the encounter with otherness. These mechanisms often distort reality and reinforce conflict. One of the premises put forward in this paper is that people are more likely to react with hostility to those who are perceived as different from them, when they feel there is a threat to their basic needs. The sense of threat can result from a real or imagined situation.

In this paper I will present some of the general coping mechanisms used in a variety of threatening situations and explore the way they are used specifically to deal with anxiety stemming from the encounter with those who are different. This is followed by a discussion of some unconscious processes that occur in groups and the way in which they are manifested in relation to the issue of differences between individuals and groups. I close the paper with a discussion of the work of Besod Siach, the Israeli association for the promotion of dialogue between groups in conflict. In this section I reflect briefly on the mechanisms described in the paper as they are manifest in the work Besod Siach particularly around questions of dialogue, leadership and transformation on the fault lines of Israeli society.

1. Splitting and projection

Melanie Klein suggested that an infant experiences the mother at times as the provider of pleasure and satisfaction and as such develops love and desire towards her. At other times she is the source of pain and discomfort arousing feelings of fear, hatred and aggression. The infant is unable to hold the anxiety resulting from these conflicting feelings in relation to the same person and as a result, psychically “splits” the mother into two different mothers - the “good” mother of the pleasurable experiences and the “bad” mother of the frustrating painful ones. Because at this stage of life there is no integrated sense or image of a self or of a “mother” but rather a very primitive fragmented experience of parts of oneself and of parts of the maternal figure, it is more accurate to

say that in the internal world of the infant there evolves the image of an idealized “good” breast and a “bad”, “persecuting” breast. She termed this mechanism whereby the infant copes with these qualitatively different experiences of the same maternal object as “**splitting**”, signifying the splitting of the maternal object into two separate objects the good one and the bad one.

Splitting involves the activation of the mechanism of **projection**. In the psychoanalytic sense projection is an “operation whereby qualities, feelings, wishes or even ‘objects’ which the subject refuses to recognise or rejects in himself, are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing.” (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, pg. 349)

From infancy a form of projection is used whereby the infant rids itself of its aggressive feelings and instead experiences aggression as coming from the outside.

“The child’s distress concerning the aggressive hatred within himself is relieved by splitting off and projecting the bad part - the internal persecutor - outward, onto other persons or objects, and retaining the good parts inside, idealizing them. Thus the loving, nurturing part becomes the foundation of the idealized self-concept, while the negative destructive feelings are disowned and projected outward, onto strangers or groups. (Robins and Post, pg. 77)

Between about four months and one year the infant gradually begins to relate to the mother as a whole object and becomes distressed at the simultaneous feelings of love and hate towards the same object. Whereas in the first phase, negative feelings are expelled and experienced as belonging to the external object, in this phase the infants own negative feelings to the object are no longer denied and this often leads to a sense of shame, guilt, and self-reproach.

In addition to aggressive and destructive impulses, painful feelings of reproach and shame are disowned. The young child is spared self-reproach by projecting it outward. The repression of self-reproach and its projection outward lead to the expectation of criticism from others and a distrust of others. In effect, this is a persecutory projection of critical parents, a projection of conscience. (Robins and Post, 1997, pg.78)

Splitting, and projection are the most primitive of mechanisms originating in infancy. They are mechanisms however which are used throughout life and are the basis of many other coping mechanisms. We can see in it for instance when people unable to bear ambiguity and ambivalence

divide the world into good and bad, black and white, right or wrong in order to create order and gain control.

When these mechanisms come into play in relation to “otherness”, the self is seen as all good and the other as all bad. A person will project the unwanted parts of him or herself into the other, and then deny that quality within him or herself. The splitting process is evident in the tendency to idealize one’s own group and devalue the other group, or in some cases the other way around. When guilt and shame come into play one may see an inversion of this, with one group devaluing their own group and idealizing the “other” group.

The idealization of one’s own group and devaluation of the other is common in inter-group conflict and is evident in statements whereby groups divide themselves along specific lines in accordance to what they value: such as those who place value on intellectual qualities may regard themselves as “intellectuals” as opposed to the others who are regarded as “primitives” or “barbarians”. Similarly a group may choose to see themselves as “moral, principled and hardworking” as opposed to the other group who they see as “immoral and hedonists”. A further example would be a group who saw themselves as “peace-loving” as opposed to the others who are “aggressive and war hungry”. With these artificial splits, groups project the unwanted parts of themselves into the other group so that they do not acknowledge those parts of themselves which are for instance ignorant or unrefined as in the first example, fun loving in the second example or aggressive in the third. In statements such as “the weaker sex” male weakness is denied and put into the female gender. In statements of another ethnicity as being “dirty”, “cunning” or “manipulative” these qualities are denied in one’s own ethnicity that is constructed as clean, honest and straightforward. Peavy quotes Saul alisky as saying “One acts decisively only in the conviction that all the angels are on one side and all the devils are on the other.” (Peavy, 1991, pg. 205)

Splitting and projection mechanisms are important in understanding not only what is referred to as the paranoid personality structure, but also the activation of paranoid parts of individuals and societies in times of anxiety. According to the Random House dictionary, Paranoia is the systematized delusions and the projection of personal conflicts, which are ascribed to the supposed hostility of others.

The paranoid belief system is the structure that holds the paranoid together, his protection against psychological disintegration.....This sense of being an innocent victim is associated with feelings of righteousness. A sequence can ensue that has violent potential. Under attack by the outside persecutor, the innocent victim feels aggrieved and increasingly angry. As the dynamic escalates, he can become consumed with righteous retaliatory rage. This in turn may lead him to attack his (feared and imagined) attackers in order to compel them to cease attacking him. The responsibility has been shifted in this enterprise. Instead of being guilt ridden over his own inner rage, the paranoid is now indignant over his enemies' unjust persecution of him and must defend himself against them. The aggression is required by them. It is defensive aggression. His aggression is, quite literally, self-defense. How much better to be all-powerful than to be powerless; how much better to be the center of a worldwide conspiracy than to be insignificant and ignored. Impaired in his ability to form relationships, the paranoid in his delusion finds himself the center of a vast network of relationships, the paranoid pseudocommunity in which he is at the center. This is preferable to chaos and earlier vague inchoate feelings of danger. The paranoid holds tenaciously to his comforting sense making delusion that he is surrounded by enemies. (Robins and Post pg. 82)

"Recall that the image of the enemy that the paranoid creates is often a projection of his own feelings, a mirror image of himself. The paranoid sees his actions as reactions required by the enemy....The paranoid motivations fears, anxieties, and desires will be ascribed to phantom opponents . The relationship with the enemy is thus one beginning in fantasy and externalization, but if the adversary is drawn into responding, what began as fantasy is transformed into reality. These mechanisms contribute to the psychology of nations at war, with each nation externalizing its bad objects and aggressive impulses onto the enemy. Each nation's own side is idealized, its aggression required by the persecutory enemy. (Robins and Post 94)

Projection is also a central Jung's understanding of human functioning.

In 1917, in his essay "on the Psychology of the Unconscious," Jung speaks of the personal shadow as *the other* in us, the unconscious personality of the same sex, the reprehensible inferior, the other that embarrasses or shames us: "By shadow I mean the 'negative' side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the content of the personal unconscious." (Zweig and Abrams, pg. 3)

The shadow is negative essentially because of the values that we ascribe to the qualities which we repress and become its character. Once repressed, these qualities take on fearsome and repugnant

proportions. It is these qualities that we deny in ourselves and project into others in exaggerated form. “Paranoia reduces anxiety and guilt by transferring to (projecting) the other all the characteristics one does not want to recognize in oneself” (Keen,1991, pg. 200)

The problem in military psychology is how to convert the act of murder into patriotism. For the most part, this process of dehumanizing the enemy has not been closely examined. When we project our shadows, we systematically blind ourselves to what we are doing. To mass produce hatred, the body politic must remain unconscious of its own paranoia, projection and propaganda. “The enemy” is thus considered as real and objective as a rock or a mad dog. Our first task is to break this taboo, make conscious the unconscious of the body politic, and examine the ways in which we create an enemy.” (Ibid, pg. 200)

If we desire peace, each of us must begin to demythologize the enemy; cease politicizing psychological events; re-own our shadows; make an intricate study of the myriad ways in which we disown, deny, and project our selfishness, cruelty, greed, and so on onto others; be conscious of how we have unconsciously created a warrior psyche and have perpetuated warfare in its many modes. (Ibid, pg. 202)

Other coping mechanisms

Idealization and Devaluation: As mentioned earlier the tendency to idealize one’s own group and devalue the other is a derivative of the splitting and projective mechanisms. This for instance may occur when one’s sense of self and self-esteem is insecure - when there is competition and shame.

Projective Identification: Unlike projection that takes place primarily in the realm of fantasy, Projective identification refers to a process by which an infant transfers in actuality its unwanted feelings into the mother. The infant in this way rids itself of anxiety and puts it into the mother. The mother then begins to feel the emotions that the infant has expelled. Throughout life this mechanism is employed and can explain much of what occurs in interpersonal and inter-group interactions. This interaction takes place on an unconscious level of communication. In couples for instance, a wife may be anxious about her sense of weakness and inadequacy. She may deny these feelings and through a process of projective identification with more or less subtle means transfer

these feelings into her husband. It will be the husband that then begins to own and express these feelings.

Projective identification is helpful in providing insight into systemic inter-group processes. In a country split into a right that upholds militaristic, nationalistic policies and a left that upholds pacifist humanitarian policies an interesting process of polarization of roles takes place largely due to the process of projective identification. The left, anxious about issues related to aggression disowns its own aggression and transfers it into the right who is a susceptible container for such feelings. If there is a situation for instance of possible external threat of war - the very denial by the left of their own aggressiveness will raise the anxiety of the right who will feel a need to overcompensate and emphasise their own aggressive tendencies. The right on the other hand may feel uncomfortable with any sign of weakness, emotionality or fear of bloodshed. They in turn project their resistance to bloodshed and feelings of human frailty into the left who in turn overemphasize this quality within themselves. Each takes up a role in relation to the other which is reinforced by the public discourse. A systemic situation is created where right and left need each other to hold the unwanted parts of themselves. The system however becomes polarized and leads to increasing conflict between the two.

Erlich suggests that projective identification is a way of relating to the enemy by controlling and dominating him by penetrating and intruding parts of oneself into him. He suggests that introjective identification is a similar process where one masters the enemy by his becoming a part of the self. "This is also tantamount to cannibalizing the enemy, and at a higher level - of absorbing him through intermarriage and cultural assimilation." (Erlich, pg. 11) In groups one may witness processes of intellectual, cultural or sexual seduction through which the "other" is enticed into becoming merged with ones own group.

Intellectualization and rationalization: When the encounter with otherness raises uncomfortable feelings such as discomfort, anxiety, fear or hatred, these feelings are generally difficult to acknowledge, explore or communicate.

Intellectualization is a process whereby a person "in order to master his conflicts and emotions, attempts to couch them in a discursive form". (Laplanche and Pontalis, pg. 224) Often theories are created about the other and in this way there is also an attempt to master a situation by creating

order out of chaos. An example would be in a dialogue group between religious and secular where both sub-groups get involved in abstract theoretical discussions about the conflict, providing long and detailed analyses of the situation with little or no display of emotion or personal reflection.

Rationalization Rationalization is a “Procedure whereby the subject attempts to present an explanation that is either logically consistent or ethically acceptable for attitudes, actions, ideas, feelings, etc., whose true motives are not perceived.” (Laplanche and Pontalis 375) In coping with difference which is anxiety provoking this mode of coping is evident in rational explanations for the aversion, hatred or hostility one may feel towards another those who are different. The most obvious example is the theoretical writings of Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. Other examples are the elaborate theories built around immigrants and foreign workers and the way they threaten society which justify the hatred and violence toward them.

Stereotypes and generalizations: Stereotypes and generalizations as to other groups stem also from a need to create order out of chaos. The “other” from whom we differentiate ourselves is both similar and different from us. It is this confluence of similarity and difference which is confusing and anxiety provoking. In order to master our anxiety of the other we must know him, understand him and thus control him and so we control him by defining him. In this way the unfamiliar becomes familiar and predictable. By generalizing and stereotyping (often using projection of undesired parts of ourselves) we are also able to differentiate ourselves from the other and in so doing, lessen our sense of identification with and our compassion for him. We are similarly able to clarify our own sense of identity by comparison.

Schneider looks at the reasons for maintaining the enmity in situations of war:

If I am fearful of making peace with another, it is because I perceive a threat to my self, to my integrity. It is easier for me to hold on to my individuality or uniqueness when I am vastly different from another. By accentuating my separateness I feel that I am able to strengthen my position. Making peace with another forces me to relax my strict boundaries which were set in place in order to separate me from opposite views, in order to meet the other side. (Schneider, pg 208)

In this case, stereotypes and generalizations preserve the differences between me and the enemy, they preserve a comfortable distance where the other person can be seen in a one dimensional way.

Denial: One way of dealing with the discomfort of difference is by denying that there are any differences or that differences which may exist are in any way significant. In the religious and secular groups which gather to discuss about conflict arising from their differences one may witness a process where the group focuses on the similarities between them and speak only about matters which are not divisive. While this may be seen as a positive development, in fact it is often an avoidance of the real issues which divide them and thus no significant progress is made.

Wilkinson and Kitzinger point out the refusal of Others' difference can be just as oppressive as the affirmation of differences which serve to underwrite “distinctions which are not essentially real, but which are constructed precisely in order to provide the rationale and justification for oppressive practices.”

Oppression can operate through refusal to acknowledge the differences of those in relation to whom we occupy position of privilege, whether this refusal is expressed in the liberal insistence on ‘colour-blindness’, or in the postmodern insistence on the dazzling diversity of experience within and between socially constructed and constantly shifting categories, such that no one ‘difference’ is afforded any more significance than any other.” (Wilkinson and Kitzinger pg. 23)

Exclusion: One way of dealing with difference is by expelling it from within the in - group and creating an outgroup. People who represent differences which threaten the sense of identity, integrity or self-worth of a group may be excluded by legal means or more subtly excluded from the social groups or conversation with their presence on some level being denied. This dynamic can be seen in the various clubs which exclude women, minorities or people who are disabled in some way. By excluding them either physically or in one’s consciousness one does not have to deal with the disturbing differences. The institutionalized exclusion by legal or socio-political means of certain groups stems from a desire to deny the existence of differences. (Young-Breuhl)

scapegoating.

“In its original sense, in the Bible (Leviticus XVI: 21), the scapegoat was a white goat, on to which the sins of the community were laid, in a religious ceremony. The goat was then cast out into the

desert to die, taking the sins with it. In this way the sins of the community were atoned.”

(Schaverien, 1987, pg. 74)

Scapegoating is a form of exclusion which contains the added element of projection of the unwanted elements into the scapegoat. The scapegoat is then expelled and with that the group is cleansed of those unwanted parts of themselves. In a group, one member may express in direct ways feelings which the rest of the group may have but wish to disown. The group will then attack, punish or exclude him or her in some way. Anxiety relating to the stranger, the person who holds some quality which is perceived as other and threatening is often dealt with by scapegoating him.

Identification with the aggressor:

“Faced with an external threat (typically represented by a criticism emanating from an authority), the subject identifies himself with his aggressor. He may do so either by appropriating the aggression itself, or else by physical or moral emulation of the aggressor, or again by adopting particular symbols of power by which the aggressor is designated.” (Laplanche and Pontalis, pg 208)

Erlich points to the fact that when the “other” is identified with the aggressor “the fear of the menacing figure is handled through its internalization and identification with it at the expense of the self.” (Erlich, pg. 11) In these cases the person or group adopts the patterns of thought, values and behavior of the aggressor including the aggressive attitude toward oneself, and can lead to dealing with the enemy in an acquiescent and self-effacing way, which ultimately puts ones psychological and physical identity in jeopardy.

Section 3

Group mechanisms for coping with anxiety in relation to "otherness"

In 1957 Foulkes and Anthony wrote about the group as a matrix. Drawing on gestalt psychology they suggested that what we experience in the group is not the sum of the individuals but rather a sense of the group as a whole.

"The network of all individual mental processes, the psychological medium in which they meet, communicate, and interact can be called the matrix. ... In further formulation of our observations we have come to conceive these processes not merely as interpersonal but as transpersonal." (Foulkes and Anthony, 1957, pg. 26)

The group matrix is a construct which can be conceived as an interactional field, "as the network of all individual mental processes, the psychological medium in which they meet, communicate, and interact." (ibid, pg. 26) It relates to the entity of the group beyond the sum of the individuals and derives from the dynamic interactions of the conscious and unconscious images and feelings which members bring to the group. Group members bring personal images of groups built on past experience, "inner groups", which are projected onto the current group. The interaction of these projections occurs largely on an unconscious level and influences in a dynamic way the development of the group.

"It must be remembered that what is dynamically unconscious is also at the same time subject to the primary process. It belongs to the system ucs (unconscious), that is to say it is cast in a primitive symbolic language. This language is understood unconsciously, and transmission - communication - does take place without consciousness. The group, through processes of progressive communication, works its way through from this primary, symbolic level of expression into a conscious, articulate language." (Foulkes and Anthony pg. 28)

Foulkes differentiates between the 'occupation', which is the manifest declared activities of a group and the 'preoccupations' which are the latent occupations which the group may have

Wilfred Bion working as a psychiatrist was another pioneer of the exploration of unconscious group processes. Drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, Bion like Foulkes drew attention to the way in which groups are seen to function on two different levels. He called these levels the "work group" and the "basic assumption group". When in the state of the work group, the group can be seen to have a relatively intact sense of reality and to focus in a way which actively promotes the primary task of the specific group. The basic assumption state occurs when the anxiety level in the group is high and the group tends to connect in an unconscious way around a specific anxiety. He noticed that there were a number of coping mechanisms which the group activates in order to deal

with the anxiety. These mechanisms seemed to be based on common tacit, basic assumptions that drive the groups behavior and interfere with its reality testing and ability to function effectively.

Bion identified three distinct basic assumptions which he inferred from group behavior: dependency, fight flight and pairing.

In the **dependency** group, anxiety is dealt with by the members colluding to function in a dependent way which expresses a search within the group for an all-powerful, all knowing leader who will provide guidance, answers and security. The members empty themselves of their own power and resources and revert to a regressive longing for a powerful parental figure. This is often manifested by asking the designated, formal leader many questions relating to knowledge or guidance, by raging at him for his or her fallibility or by looking for an alternative leader who will answer the needs of the group. Dependency can also be manifested in overt claims or covert behavior indicating that the leader is not needed and can be dispensed with. Much of the emotional energy in this situation is nevertheless focused on the leader.

Anxiety in groups relating to otherness and strangers may trigger the dependency assumption and the leader will be looked to to provide some form of defense against the anxiety, a means of protection from the perceived threat. In dialogue groups where groups in conflict meet, the facilitator is often urged into the role of peace-maker, rule prescriber or content provider so that the conflict will not emerge in an uncontrollable way. The group in this way surrenders their own authority and capacities to deal constructively with conflict. On a societal level, leaders may be activated to create laws and regulations which will control the threat of the stranger.

In the **fight-flight** group, the members cope with anxiety and internal conflict by focusing on a real or imagined enemy who is outside of the group. In other words, the group comes together by creating a common enemy, and displacing the internal aggression and conflict onto the external enemy thus preserving their own cohesion and identity. Even in dialogue groups between groups in conflict, the internal conflict is denied and the "real enemy" to both is considered to be a group external to the particular conflict. In the case of dialogue groups, the common enemy could for instance be the government or another religious, political, or ethnic group outside of those represented in the conflict within the group. On the societal level this basic assumption can be

reflected in a situation of war which is initiated or maintained in order to create internal cohesiveness and underplay the "strangeness" and hostility between internal divisions in society.

In the flight mode, the group may express its unity in its flight from the common enemy. In dialogue groups, the flight mode is often manifested in the avoidance of the conflict and the differences within the group. This may often take the form of endless digression and evasion of the discomfort within the group which threatens its cohesiveness. The group however is unable to make progress with exploring the differences and the conflict, which is the primary task of the group. On a societal level flight may be manifested in a collusion of all parties to create diversions which prevent dealing directly with the conflictual issues at hand.

The leader of such a group is adroit at identifying suitable targets for aggression - that is, external enemies. The leader mobilizes group hatred and spurs the group either to attack or to flee, inspiring courage and sacrifice. These actions are seen as necessary to preserve the group, and each member gains security from them. Preservation for the group in the face of the perceived enemy is key, and concern for the individual is secondary, to the point that individual needs and lives may be sacrificed in order to preserve the group. (Robins and Post, pg. 84)

When the basic assumption of **pairing** is active, the group deals with anxiety by avoiding the issues of the present and a sense of hope or belief that the future will be better that a savior will arise who will answer the needs of the group. Often most of the group will sit quietly and watch while two people engage in conversation. The accompanying feeling is one of hope - as if through this intercourse a savior will emerge which will release the group from the anxiety. In dialogue groups this is often evident in a long discussion between one member belonging to one sub-group and another from the other sub-group while the rest of the group passively watches. The discussion however does not develop the work at hand as it is the sense of anticipation which needs to be maintained rather than a concrete solution. On a societal level this may be manifested in public figures from two opposing groups whose friendly relations are witnessed with curiosity and expectation in the public eye, yet who do not effectively have the power to change anything. Their role is more to contain public anxiety.

Bion pointed out that, sometimes in a mild way and sometimes in a powerful way, these unconscious assumptions cause groups, organizations and societies not only to behave in a paranoid manner but also to make them highly susceptible to the leadership, control and manipulation of

paranoid individuals. In such cases the issue of otherness and strangeness is emphasized as a threat to the group which must be dealt with and those who are considered strangers are persecuted in order to control and eliminate the threat which they are perceived as posing.

Suggestions of other basic assumptions have been put forward by Turquet (1974) and Lawrence, Bain and Gould (1996)

Later, Turquet added a fourth basic assumption, 'one-ness', where, 'members seek to join in a powerful union with an omnipotent force, unobtainably high, to surrender themselves for passive participation and thereby to feel existence, well-being and wholeness' (Turquet 1974: 76). More recently, Lawrence, Bain and Gould (1996) identified a fifth basic assumption which they called 'basic assumption me-ness'. Here there is withdrawal and dissociation from the group, which is pre-defined as a bad object *not* to be joined. No one is actively for or against anything, but instead members are pre-occupied with getting and preserving their share. The over-riding question becomes 'what will be to my advantage?' - a climate in which any compromise may be made, but no real stand taken, in which one must always look out for oneself rather than investing in the enterprise as a whole. (Roberts, 1999)

The basic assumption of "one-ness" can perhaps be evident in instances where conflicting groups deny their differences and members use the term "we" freely as if referring to one undifferentiated entity where all the members are presented as sharing the same basic feeling or perception reality. Comments such as "We know that we don't tolerate violence and aggression" or "We feel committed to deep dialogue and understanding" are sometimes indications of this assumption.

In situations of the basic assumption "me-ness" group members may deny any sense of meaningfulness to the entity of the group. Comments such as "I came here as an individual to see what I can get from meeting people different from me - but I don't feel committed to the group and I don't have any expectations from anybody else here - everybody can do what they want." may be an example of this assumption.

In sections two and three I have presented a list of some of the psychological mechanisms used by both individuals and groups as defenses against anxiety and show how they may be mobilized in

relation to those perceived as "other". The paper is based on the belief that bringing to awareness the unconscious dynamics which occur in the meeting with otherness may contribute towards identifying and transforming the societal processes and structural inequality which oppress those who are considered as different.

Section 4

Dialogue, Leadership and Transformation on the Fault Lines of Israeli Society.

The following are some brief speculations from my perspective as a member of the Board of Besod Siach, the Israeli association for promoting dialogue between groups in conflict. The board of the association comprises nine religious and non-religious members from the political right and left. Two years ago the association decided to direct our energies towards leadership in order to gain maximum leverage for our activities.

The title of this section "Dialogue, Leadership and Transformation on the Fault Lines of Israeli Society" highlights much of what Besod Siach is trying to do but also the fact that it entails a search for a somewhat elusive path of effective action - especially when our action is often propelled by a combination of deep despair and frustration at the deep rifts in our society on the one hand and somewhat omnipotent wishes to heal these rifts on the other hand.

Paulo Freire said that "Dialogue is the tension between a passionate commitment to one's own point of view and an absolute readiness to completely give it up."

That is quite a tension - a tension between seemingly incompatible inner states! What would foster the possibility of holding such a tension and working with it - with individuals, with groups and particularly with leaders dealing with issues of political and ideological conflict, in situations where rigidity of the commitment to one's own point of view is almost a culturally ingrained habit as well as a ubiquitous defense against anxiety.

David Bohm the physicist and philosopher has written quite a bit on the subject of dialogue. He sees the fragmented view of reality, which holds a concept of either/ or truths as a manifestation of

the atomistic Cartesian culture in which we are embedded. He believes that paradox and opposition are essential parts of reality, and sees dialogue as an opportunity to go beyond the fragmented view:

“The object of a dialogue is not to analyze things or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions - to listen to everybody’s opinions, to suspend them and to see what all that means.....And if we can see them all, we may then move more creatively in a different direction. We can just simply share the appreciation of the meanings; and out of this whole thing, truth emerges unannounced - not that we have chosen it

If each of us in this room is suspending, then we are all doing the same thing. We are all looking at everything together. The content of our consciousness is essentially the same. Accordingly, a different kind of consciousness is possible among us, a participatory consciousness...” (Bohm, 1990, pg. 11)

This quote suggests that part of the ability to engage in dialogue rests on the development of some kind of observing ego with which we can simultaneously be involved in the dialogue as well as observe it with a certain level of objectivity. If all the participants in the dialogue are simultaneously doing this, the participatory consciousness which emerges can perhaps be viewed as this group observing ego.

Bohm’s quote, like Freire’s, confronts us with a sense of the rarity of the experience of dialogue in our daily lives let alone in situations of conflict. The rarity of a situation where participants in a discussion place their opinions into a common space, a space where all opinions, assumptions are brought forward and suspended, and the participants, rather than grasping their own opinions which are no more than fragments of a whole are able to suspend them and take a step back to look at the larger meaning of what the coexistence of all these assumptions implies about the systemic picture of the whole.

In a well-known dialogue between Buber and Rogers on therapy and dialogue, Buber speaks of the element of openness to surprise as a basic ingredient of dialogue, particularly surprise at encountering unfamiliar parts of oneself evoked by the encounter with the other. They also put forward the idea that for dialogue to occur there must be a sense of openness and a willingness to be changed by the process.

What is common to all the references about dialogue is the prerequisite of the flexibility of the ego to manoeuvre between inside and outside. The ability to move effectively between the tension of believing in one's own point of view and the readiness to give it up, the ability to suspend it in order to see it as part of a fuller picture, the openness to surprise and to being changed all indicate high levels of ego functioning generally possible only in situations of safety and comfort.

The meeting with the other or with "otherness" is often a trigger for mixed feelings of curiosity on the one hand and fear on the other. In order to be closer to the spectrum of curiosity regarding otherness a strong sense of security is needed. Security and confidence in one's own physical survival, one's own self-worth and one's identity. With this general sense of safety one is able to use curiosity to explore new possibilities which the other represents without feeling that it involves surrendering something of the self or that it indicates the other to be superior or that one's identity is destabilized without one's ability to incorporate or integrate aspects of the other at will.

In situations of ideological debate, especially in Israeli society, there are often real and manifest threats to one's sense of self-worth (*vulgar public devaluations of the other side by public figures*), threats to one's sense of identity (*questions of who is a Jew/ or my identity as an Israeli citizen and ability to identify with the governmental policy*) and even to one's physical safety (epitomized by the assassination but also violence among protestors and violent threats on judges and other public figures) and/or physical possessions (land) or social and legal rights (the right for free religious expression of the reform Jews). In situations like this, groups respond with the full spectrum of defense mechanisms to cope with anxiety. When the group members relate to the differences between them, splitting, projection, rationalization, idealization and denigration are but a few of the mechanisms used. It is almost inevitable that individuals use the terms "We" and "You" as if the individuals were representatives of a completely consensual system, and fall quickly into stereotypic descriptions of the other.).

In the work groups of Besod Siach, one of the central principles is to have representatives of both sides of the conflict in the board. Despite having worked together for years with periods of more or less successful dialogue between the members of the board, powerful and often traumatic societal events reawaken the intensity of the conflict between us and conversations are often coloured by the primitive defense mechanisms, in direct expressions of rage and blame. Paradoxically in less

stormy times we find ourselves holding onto the intensity of the conflict - almost unwilling to let it go. This clinging to the conflict, to the heat of the arguments seems to reflect something of the society at large.

Why is it so difficult to move towards dialogue? What is the attachment to the pleasure of victory in the heated arguments, to being “right” and “better, cleverer, more self-righteous - what is this all about?” Is it the reflection of a culture which is characterized by a history of war, socialized to dealing in a warlike mentality with an enemy?

Or is it perhaps a reflection of a need to solidify new and fragile identities in a country which has not yet established its own clear identity by using the other as a mirror, establishing one’s own value and identity by devaluing the other.

Perhaps our difficulty in letting go of the conflict between us stems from an unconscious fear that relinquishing the conflict is in some way losing a life force, a libidinal energy. What will replace the vital energy of the conflict? Will there be a void - a terrible sense of emptiness in its place. Or perhaps when we can no longer be so sure of ourselves in the face of the other we will have to encounter the pain of our own imperfection, our insecurity and our fragility. In talking to the other will we betray our side, our family, values, history or even God.

And perhaps there is another question - What will meaningful discourse with the other bring? Perhaps the fear is the fear of attraction, of love - of intercourse with what is different? What is the monster that will be conceived by the inter-breeding? And if the intercourse feels good - the intimacy may threaten the very foundations of one’s identity and seduce us to change. These are only some of the profound fears which emerge in our valiant attempts to move beyond the familiar conflict to familiarity with each other.

Is our quest a quixotic one? No doubt we are to some extent using our work on healing the external rifts as a path to mending deep splits and anxieties related to otherness within ourselves. Our goal of promoting dialogue and a multi-faceted society which thrives on difference is undoubtedly one of the most crucial issues facing Israeli society today. The urgency of the crisis however also reflects also the depth of the problem in the world today, within Israeli society and I believe

within each of us as individuals living within a culture with a predominantly fragmented, competitive, and hierarchical worldview.

What are we holding in our roles for our communities? What is the conscious and unconscious work we are doing, and on behalf of whom?. The question as to our own willingness to change constantly confronts us? It is not always clear! How do we avoid getting caught up in endless introspection in order to avoid confronting the external realities of the work we have set up for ourselves. On the other hand, how can we ensure that we do not get caught up in frantic defensive activity with leaders in society trying to change them in order to deflect an inability to change ourselves?. Perhaps the ripple effect of actually allowing ourselves to change will be the most effective form of leadership we can offer. In trying to maneuver between the extremes of fear and hope, passion and apathy, helplessness and omnipotence, our challenge is to begin to find the ways within ourselves to become strong enough in order to be soft, flexible, permeable and aware, and to use the work within ourselves and our teams as a guide for the work that we do with leaders in Israeli society.

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