

The Trauma Vortex in Action in the Middle East

by Gina Ross

Much has been written about understanding the Middle East crisis in the context of history, culture, and political and religious environment. Virtually nothing has been written about understanding it in the context of psychological trauma, which explains the seeming intractability of the conflict. Without this understanding, events and negotiations appear irrational and baffling. Perhaps by understanding how the "trauma vortex"- the cycle of trauma-affects individuals, families, and cultures, there could be a prospect for peace.

The "trauma vortex" is a spiraling process. It occurs when a present event that has any similarity to old unresolved trauma, reopens a flood of memories of every past injury, insult, humiliation, loss, fear and hatred. There is a hyper-vigilant search for threat and a sense of on-going danger that sets the stage for violent reenactments, with the psychological hope to finally master the deeply wounded and traumatized feelings. There is polarization of beliefs, principles and feelings; intolerance and revenge seem the only viable responses.

We have recently seen the Serbs reenact their unresolved World War II trauma in which 700,000 Serbs were massacred or sent to concentration camps. Their reenactment, stirred by a disturbed leader, lasted 14 years and cost them land, status, their place among the righteous nations and thousands of lives. Lebanon, once the paradise of the Middle East, is also just coming out of a trauma vortex that left it in a shambles of ruins, economic problems and loss of autonomy.

Both the Israelis and the Palestinians, thrown into overwhelming emotional and behavioral traumas throughout their histories, are themselves caught again in the trauma vortex. Palestinian refugees have been massacred by other Arab countries – Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia. The Jews settled in a land that the Palestinians believed to be theirs. Alternately, the Jews have been a minority discriminated against for two thousand years, have been expelled en masse from the Arab countries, and are a generation who lost six million in the Holocaust. It is essential that we understand the trauma vortex is at work in both nations.

The Palestinian experience:

- The Palestinian collective memory holds the graphic and indelible traumatic images of the Shatilla massacre, of demolished homes and broken bones. Palestinian hopes have been dashed and their pride hurt. They have felt repressed, oppressed, dominated and treated as second class people. Their daily livelihood has been at the mercy of a political process they can barely influence.

- They have lost their homes and their land. A whole generation has lived in waiting and without hope. Most of all, they feel they have done nothing do deserve what happened to them: they were not responsible for the Jewish Holocaust and they were not responsible for the exile of the Jews from their land two thousand years ago.
- The development of their economic infrastructure has been stunted by the Arab world and neglected by the Israelis and the rest of the world.
- They have been betrayed by their own leaders and given hope with promises impossible to keep. Many of their children have been reared in poverty and schooled in revolution and hatred.
- There is mounting anger and frustration among the Palestinians for the expansion of Jewish settlements, for border closures, for rough searches by Israeli soldiers at roadblocks and for late-night raids on their homes by Israelis "special units."
- They have not been encouraged by the United Nations to make concessions and thus have not been able to assuage the mistrust of the Israelis and to receive their land back. They have not been helped by the other Arab countries to make the concessions that would help them gain their autonomy.
- Many opportunities for embracing true peace have been missed. These missed opportunities have cost them many lives, poverty, bitterness, hopelessness and an independence constantly postponed.

The Jewish experience:

- They have been oppressed, expelled, raped and massacred over the centuries. They have been fighting against prejudice (and sometimes internalizing it) in their host countries where they were stigmatized as greedy, as part of an international conspiring cabal, as evil and as killers of God.
- Synagogues and Jewish schools are still being burned in "civilized" countries and anti-Semitic neo-nazi forces are on the rise. Jews all over are still traumatized by a world that did not answer their cries for help during the Holocaust; they are still haunted by the memories of the horrifying atrocities of the most organized and well planned genocide in the history of humanity.
- Israel fought five wars in its 52 years of existence. Jews remember the 1929 Hebron massacre of Palestinian Jews and the more recent graphic traumatic images of suicide bombs, attacks on civilians and children and lynching, and mutilation of soldiers.
- They face a United Nations still polarized by Christian anti-Semitism and Muslim anti-Israeli sentiment.
- The fabric of their society has been torn in agonized soul searching triggered by the use of force during the wars, the Intifadas and the occupation of Lebanon. They find themselves struggling with a hostile world opinion due, they believe, to the media's misrepresentation of the Middle East events in sympathy with the Palestinians' cause. They thought they were returning to their biblical land where they had always had a presence, to a land that had not officially belonged to the local population, whether Jewish or other, for centuries.
- They have come out of a nightmare where they hardly survived as a people, to enter a

new situation where they had to fight for their survival, create a haven for the new misplaced Middle Eastern Jews, forge a new identity, a new language and culture.

- They were misled into thinking that they were bound to western culture and did not embrace the opportunity to combine eastern and western cultures. They missed the opportunity to belong culturally in the Middle East.
- Now that their identity has been forged, they need to recognize that their need for survival has affected another people, whether they like it or not, whether it is their fault or not, and that they need to become instrumental in facilitating the well-being of the Palestinian people.

The trauma vortex of one nation is the mirror reflection of the other. Israeli mothers watch with apprehension their children go into the army, not knowing whether they'll be ambushed, captured, or mutilated. Palestinian mothers watch with apprehension as their young go to riots, dreading they won't come back alive, but believing that self sacrifice is the honorable thing to do. Both Israeli and Palestinian mothers agonize over their children. They are the ones who can help each nation become aware of the nature of its own trauma and the nature of the adversary's trauma.

Jews have to remember that the Arabs are not the anti-Semites of history and that before the state of Israel they had welcomed them in their countries. The Arabs need to remember that Jews did not come to Palestine to colonize or destroy them, but in search of a refuge and to a land they always considered their sacred land. They must remember that they have been able in the past to live together very well. The Israeli Palestinians could serve as a bridge for peace.

Israel must be able to absorb Russian Jewry if it is in danger. Their reality of a need for refuge has not changed yet. Palestinians need to be confident that there is enough land to provide for the growth of their own population and for the exiled brothers that want to return.

Jews and Arabs have to realize that they have been forced by destiny to be together again. They are both descendants of Abraham. If they are not brothers, they are at least religious cousins. They need to recognize all that they have in common: genetic ancestry, linguistic roots, music, architecture, family structure and foods. Each nation can help the other heal and each needs to surrender to the reality of the existence of the other.

Actions need to be taken

The United Nations must gather the top political brass on both sides with the top mediators of the world. The United Nations must respond even-handedly condemning abuse of military power on both sides. They must denounce the brainwashing of children and their encouragement in the front lines of violent demonstrations. The superpowers need to stop using both nations as pawns in their cold war.

The world must give an unequivocal message that it will not stand for the destruction of Israel.

Israel needs to abandon the use of threats and the language of power while at the same time defending all Israel's citizens from harm. It must attempt to understand the thinking of the Palestinians and reassure them that they are truly intent in facilitating an independent Palestinian state. Israel must attempt to belong culturally to the Middle East. Most importantly, it must do all it can to spare Palestinian lives during conflicts.

The Palestinians need to recognize how their violent rhetoric and suicide bombers rekindle the Jewish trauma of genocide and perpetuate the Israelis' mistrust making it more difficult for them to reach a satisfactory political solution. In order to do this, The Palestinians must control and not sanction mob action. They need to speak of compromise, hope and a shared future.

The media can be an extraordinary tool by reporting stories of common efforts: of harmonious joint Israeli-Palestinian experiences, of numerous cooperative projects that already exist, of peaceful coexistence, of stories of joint projects in schools, summer camps, medical, scientific and financial ventures and of stories about friendship and mutual help, such as in hospitals, clinics and neighborhoods. There are clear guidelines that the Palestinian, Israeli and international media can follow to stop the pull of the trauma cycle and guide the healing of both communities. The international media can report impartially, emphasize the attempts at restraint and reason on both sides and avoid the exploitation of traumatic images, being flashed on the screen over and over, that help escalate the conflict.

All language of blame and revenge must be utterly rejected; this language only strengthens the pull of the trauma vortex. A peaceful resolution can only come about if the tragic and traumatic nature of this struggle, historically and in the present, is recognized for the sake of all involved and especially for the sake of future generations.

We must understand and consciously acknowledge the cycle of shared trauma that is being reenacted. We must recognize that we all have the power to transform the outcome by embracing the intention and the language of healing and reconciliation and by embracing the religious principles shared by both cultures. Only this intention can lead to mutual forgiveness, peaceful resolution and the cultivation of trust. We need to express the shared grief carried in the bodies, the experiences, the stories and the cultures of both populations. True resolution and peace in the Middle East can only come from this level of intention, commitment and embodiment. There may still be "incidents," but gradually there will be greater numbers of people who have the capacity to contain and work with those expressions of pain or frustration rather than react through violence to such incidents. We need to do this for the sake of the whole, and for the sake of the land itself.

Healing is possible. Over the past generation we have learned much about the nature of trauma and healing: first on the personal and then on the collective level. There are people around the world trained to work with healing trauma who can be called upon. Special techniques exist today that can help address individual healing, such as Somatic Experiencing, Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing, Emotional Freedom Technique and others. Research has shown that since trauma resides in the body and not in the event, its impact can be reversed by working through the nervous system. Many rituals have been developed to heal trauma at the community level. There are interventions, for example, that can be done with mothers and infants of both

groups, which will help heal their collective trauma. Just allowing the voices of reason in both communities to rise and declare the intention to heal and to end the violence would be in itself extremely powerful and transformative. It can take time, but the healing process is contagious. An international trauma foundation is being formed to work with trauma in hospitals and clinics, through the written media and television as well as through the Internet.

At the economical level, compensation must take place, possibly in helping to set up the Palestinian infrastructure with UN and Israeli money. Compensation for Arab Jewish refugees from the Arab countries could be used to further help the Palestinians develop the institutions they need.

The clearly delusional selfish choice for each nation would be to allow themselves to succumb to their traumatic reactions hoping that they can expel or get rid of the other. However, the cost in loss of humanity and integrity for both population in pursuing this choice would be incalculable. Hopefully, the world will not stand for it.

Healed trauma results in spiritual transformation. What if. . . there was a good and worldly reason why both nations have been in this crucial position to share such a small and controversial piece of land? **Perhaps they are being called upon to develop a new and different understanding of the situation, with a unifying solution to the problem, so they can both be "lights unto the nations"? Perhaps this is a unique and extraordinary opportunity to join East and West and create a wise and balanced way of responding to life? What brilliance might we come to see if this were the focus of solution?**

Amen and Inshallah

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Gina Ross was born in 1947 in Syria, Aleppo, from Jewish parents whose families have been natives of Syria for centuries. She fled with her family at the end of 1947 to Lebanon. They were the last Jews allowed to leave Syria for the next 20 years. Armed with an Iranian passport (Lebanon could not issue them one as they were Jewish Syrian refugees) Gina and her family left Lebanon in 1958. Again they were the last plane allowed to leave before the arrival of the American troops. They landed in Turkey for a short while and spent the next year between Switzerland and Italy before they got their documents to move to Brazil.

Gina attended French schools in Brazil and lived in a very tightly knit Jewish Syrian and Lebanese community. Her father spoke fluently only Arabic and despite all the family's tribulations believed that the Jews and the Arabs could live very well together. Arabic food, music and dancing were a natural part of the community's life.

Gina moved to Israel on a art scholarship, in 1970. She developed a deep attachment to the country and felt very close to her Israeli family. Gina moved to the US in 1972 and raised her family in Los Angeles. Her son and her twin sister live currently in Israel. She is deeply involved with the Middle East affairs and believes peace will only come when both sides learn to care for each other.
