Challenges, Speculations, Risks

Invitation and Introduction

Many family therapists have made the long and psychologically complex journey from a formative youth spent in another country to a personal and professional life in Australia. All family therapists have made or are in the process of making the long and psychologically complex journey from their family of origin to a differentiated and functional psychological state. Many families we see are also engaged in these processes. It is likely that there are general principles to be encountered in this process of cultural shift as well as principles very specific to the particular contexts described. Thus to leave Israel and to differentiate from a Jewish family is likely to be similar but very different when compared to leaving Indonesia and an Indonesian family or South Africa and a South African family. Avigail Abarbanel has built on the contribution of others (most recently in this Journal, Khorshed Khisty (22, 1: 17–24) in connecting a therapist's personal experience of migration to aspects of our clinical work. We would like to invite other therapists to enrich this theme in the ANZJFT by writing further personal and clinical accounts of this most basic of systemic processes.

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Differentiating From Israel

Avigail Abarbanel

What is it like to differentiate from a country, a culture? Is it even possible? This paper describes my struggle to differentiate from Israel. I share both the emotional and intellectual dimensions of my journey. The emotional plane is illustrated with a journal entry, and the intellectual through the meaning that I give to my experiences and the conclusions that I draw from them as a therapist. This paper is not a political statement but it does illustrate, I believe, the close and complicated relationship between what is public and what is personal.

Murray Bowen (1978) believed that a well differentiated individual is able to operate *independently of* the emotional system in which he or she was formed. Differentiated individuals can interact with their families without losing their sense of self. They no longer relate to the family from within their original designated role. To me this implies the ability to make a conscious choice about the values and beliefs that I wish to uphold in my life. Rather than automatically following what was handed down to me during my upbringing I am able to be me without feeling like a traitor or worrying about what my people might think of me. Simply going the other way and rebelling against my heritage is not differentiation, as Bowen would see it. Rebellion and compliance are both a reaction and differentiated individuals do not react in the heat of emotion, but rather choose their actions.

It was my strong feelings about the recent events in Israel that prompted my current process of differentiation from my Israeli roots. Early in 2001, I applied to relinquish my Israeli citizenship in protest against Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people. This has been a very significant move for me and one which involved a great deal of turmoil.

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Being a Jewish citizen of Israel is not the same as being a citizen of a country like Australia. Being an Israeli, to me, is analogous to being a member of a deeply enmeshed family system. My differentiation from Israel follows on from the process of differentiating from my family of origin, which I began during my psychotherapy training. There are strong parallels between themes that I identify in Israeli culture and themes that I discovered in my family of origin, e.g. the culture of 'us against the world', the constant and often self-perpetuated sense of urgency and emergency, the belief that the world is generally a dangerous place and no one is to be trusted, and the theme of destructive entitlement (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1972) — acting as if one's own suffering justifies inflicting suffering on others.

My parents suffered terribly during their own upbringing. Although they did not consciously intend to pass on their hurts to their children, they did so anyway, through lack of self-awareness, or through their avoidance of painful wounds that they needed to explore and heal. In a similar way, Israeli society, unaware of the destructiveness that could be provoked by its unhealed wounds, or avoiding painful self-exploration, has been inflicting unspeakable suffering on a people who were the inhabitants of the land of Palestine at the time when the Zionist movement began to form. In other words, the only quarrel that the Zionist movement would have had with the Palestinian people at the time is that the latter happened to live on the land that the Zionists wanted (Shlaim, 2001).

The story of Israel and the Palestinians is not unlike the story of Australia and the Aborigines. The idea that someone has the right to take over a land, and ignore, marginalise or remove its inhabitants because they are in the way of the colonialists' interests is a common enough theme in human history. (Jewish history tells us that the Palestine the Jews were led to by their Jehovah was not a *terra nullius*, even then.)

The Israeli as the 'New Jew': The Creation of a National Identity

Lang (1995) and Harari (1995) both comment on the fact that Holocaust survivors who migrated to the USA, Canada, Israel, Australia and South America after the Holocaust, felt that they could not talk about their experiences.

> Often when they attempted to talk about their experiences, they encountered disinterest and an unwillingness to hear. Even worse, at times they were blamed for the crimes committed against them. They failed to fight, they didn't try to escape (Lang, 1995: 2).

This observation touches on the essence of Israeli identity. Distancing themselves from the image of those who survived the Holocaust has been a key to Israeli identity. Israeli society has repressed its history of victimisation partly because of the 'sharp contrast between the [desirable] self-image of the Israeli as a fierce freedom fighter and the abject image of the Jew as a helpless victim, led to annihilation almost without resistance…' (Rattok, 1998). I was raised on the national slogan, *Lo od ki'chvasim latevach* — 'Never again like sheep to the slaughterhouse'. The new Jew, the Israeli, is tough and will fight to the 'last drop of blood' rather than allow himself to be killed like sheep. We will show the 'goyim' (gentiles, non-Jews) that Jews do not just sit there, passively allowing themselves to be pushed around, humiliated, gassed.

Once the state of Israel was created there was a golden opportunity to begin a healing process on a national scale. But Israel kept the trauma of the Holocaust alive and real and by so doing, guaranteed that generations of Israeli children would become traumatised too. I was taught about the Holocaust at a very early stage in primary school, and when I think of the images and stories to which we were exposed I am horrified. I remember the overwhelming anguish that I felt and the fact that we were never offered any kind of emotional support to help us cope with what we were learning. We were never offered any kind of emotional support or counselling to help us cope with the traumatising nature of the material to which we were exposed.

Keeping trauma alive and constructing a whole identity around it is at the heart of mainstream Judaism. Many sufferers of trauma avoid healing because they wish to protect themselves from the terrible pain that comes with owning their victimhood. They often move too quickly to a survivor's identity; 'I just want to leave it all behind me and move on'. It is at this premature 'survivor' stage of the trauma experience that there is a risk of 'destructive entitlement' according to Cogan (2000). Although the traumatised individual might think that they have succeeded in moving on, in reality their whole existence is shaped and dominated by their trauma. There is a real risk that they will then transmit the trauma to the next generation without being aware of it. I believe that it is this dynamic that lies behind the brutal treatment of the Palestinian people in Israel. The story of Israel and the Palestinian people is the story of trauma being transmitted from one generation to the next. Trauma sufferers believe that the way they see the world is accurate but what they see is often interpreted through the eyes of their trauma. When most Israelis see Yasser Arafat they really see Hitler and faced by angry Palestinian men they see SS officers.[1]

The Palestinians were rightly angry when their land was taken away and are rightly angry about the treatment that they have received in the last 54 years at the hand of the Israeli state. Unfortunately, their reaction, attacking Israel, has only served to reaffirm the belief that everyone hates us and it is 'all happening again'. For Israelis this not a conflict with a dispossessed people but a reliving of a trauma. Israelis believe that they are the victims in this story.

I remember a conversation with my father's doctor just before I left Israel. He was taken aback when he heard that I was leaving Israel for good. He told me that he could not imagine living anywhere where there was even one anti-semite alive. In other words, he would not feel safe until

the world was absolutely perfect. My thought was that I wanted to heal regardless. The world will never be perfect just for me. There will always be people who may hate me or dislike me for their own reasons. But I didn't want this to stop me from having a chance to live a full life. I believe that this doctor's opinion reflects the opinion of most Israelis. Like many traumatised people, my people have allowed the quality of their life, and their identity, to be determined by those who hated them and committed crimes against them. Healing is a risky business that requires faith and a willingness to change one's identity. It is not for the faint hearted. To avoid healing is perhaps the safer option for traumatised people but certainly not for those affected by them.

My personal journey

I want to share with the community of therapists my journal entry from March 2001, as an example of what it can feel like to go through differentiation.

> How do I differentiate from my country? I am not really sure, but I know that I must. Each time I am exposed to the news from over there I get sucked into something. Each time it is as if a powerful rubber band pulls me right into the heart of Tel-Aviv, the heart of my past. All of a sudden I am right in the midst of these anxious, and familiar people. And I feel the familiar pain, anger and the same old sense of betrayal and humiliation. It is as if no time has passed at all!
>
> My life right here with Ian in our house, my daily reality here in Australia, fades away and loses its hold on me. I no longer belong here in my life but I don't belong there either. It feels like I am just a visitor, a passer by, as I have always been. I experience myself as hanging in mid-air between the two worlds — the world I couldn't live in and that I have always wanted to leave, and the world of my own creation.
>
> The world into which I was born felt like it had no foundation. I realise now the many lies and the deceit on which our life in Israel were based. We committed an appalling crime. We dispossessed the Palestinian people. The further I delve into Avi Shlaim's revisionist history of Israel, *The Iron Wall*, the more I realise the extent of the propaganda on which I was brought up. Still, I do not need Avi Shlaim to tell me any of this. He adds numbers, facts and documents, but the picture that he paints has been familiar to me for a very long time.
>
> I feel angry to remember how I have been used as cannon fodder for an ideological monster, for the 'greater national good'. My enthusiasm, my tender need to belong, my love of music, were all exploited for the sake of a nationalist machinery. For as long as I can remember I sang in choirs and almost always I have been picked out to sing solo. My mind is full of songs that I used to sing so passionately and proudly. These songs have always been an unconscious part of me and I never gave a second thought to their meaning. The beautiful, stirring music has always resonated deep within my soul.
>
> Recently some of these songs have begun to surface almost against my will and their true, awful meaning has become more and more difficult for me to deny or ignore. Only our sentiments, our feelings for Israel and for Jerusalem mattered, our suffering, pain and love of our children, as if no one else existed or had similar sentiments. I sang war songs that celebrated our victories and our heroes, rejoiced in the destruction of our enemies, mourned our own losses, never considering the losses of others. We were the centre of the universe. I cannot believe that I used to sing such nationalist propaganda, such a distorted version of the truth, with such passion. Examples are ample. Right now I am thinking of the wonderful, inspired music and lyrics of Neomi Shemer, who is known in Israel as the 'National Poet'. Many of her songs do such a good job in perpetuating Golda Meir's amazing myth, "A land without a people for a people without a land"... Neomi Shemer never once mentions in any of her work that another people has been living in the land of Israel. She creates an idealised and simplistic version of life in Israel, in which we are all peace loving, heroic, and very innocent. Songs like 'Yerushalayim Shel Zahav' (Jerusalem of Gold) paint a picture of an empty country to which we have simply returned, and that our return has revived from a long sleep. Here is my translation of verses 3 and 4:
>
> "How the water-holes were left to dry,
> the city square is empty,
> No one visits the temple mount
> in the old city.
> And in the caves in the rock
> the winds are wailing
> And no one walks down to the dead sea
> By way of Jericho."
>
> And then verses 7 and 8 read:
>
> "We returned to the water-holes
> To the market and the square
> A shofar calls in the temple mount
> In the old city.
> And in the caves in the rock
> A thousand suns shine —
> And we shall descend to the dead sea
> By way of Jericho!"
>
> I was seduced by such beautiful, stirring music to sing messages that are now abhorrent to me because of their inaccuracy and one-sidedness. I am angry because I can no longer justify singing these songs in public or even to myself. It is painful. I must give up a part of my very soul if I am to be true to who I am now and to what I now believe.
>
> My world was a world where people had no time for one another. There was never time to stop and think, everyone was always in a hurry, pushing and shoving to get on the bus as if their very existence depended on it. It was a world where no one had a kind word for anyone, patience and compassion were painfully rare, and tolerance and forgiveness were just not part of my reality. This was true both inside and outside my family. Anxiety and hardness were everywhere.

But I was not the only one who suffered. There were the others too, the Arabs. I used to see them passing among us like ghosts, building our apartments for us, washing dishes and cleaning in our restaurants, a broken people, shabbily dressed, nonentities. I saw the look in these men's eyes. Always men. Always the same look. There was something in it that bothered me, a kind of insult mixed with pride. What were they thinking? As a child I did not understand, and my family never discussed this. All I knew was that I was supposed to stay away from 'them', never talk or have anything to do with them because they were somehow different and dangerous. The thought that we had a great deal to do with the suffering of these people was inconceivable then.

One afternoon, some time during my two-year compulsory military service, while I was on the bus going from Tel-Aviv to Haifa, three soldiers from the Border Patrol Corps came in for a routine security check. They didn't approach anyone but headed straight to the back of the bus where the only Arab passenger was sitting. He was an old man who just sat there quietly clutching the plastic shopping basket in his lap. The soldiers recognised him as an Arab by his appearance. They approached him, guns on shoulders, their faces sealed and hard, and asked for his ID card. There was something chilling about this. Bits of Holocaust stories, of situations where Jews were singled out flashed quickly through my mind. I didn't like it. I sat only two or three rows away from him and I saw everything. I thought I could feel his humiliation and it felt terrible. I imagined I saw something in his eyes, a mixture of insult, squashed pride and resignation. (The only other time I ever saw such a look was on the subway in New York city, in the eyes of a homeless old man holding his shoes in his hand and eating a candy bar for dinner. He too was avoiding everyone's eyes just like the Arab on the bus to Haifa.)

The whole incident seemed to me to be nothing more than an unnecessary display of force and superiority. There was no other reason to bother an old Arab man. The most difficult part for me came when I suddenly became aware that I too was dressed in military uniform. I then realised that regardless of my personal feelings and beliefs, in the eyes of this Arab man I was an accomplice in his humiliation! I still cannot shake the feeling that I am personally responsible for what has been done to the Palestinians even though I no longer live there. This feeling tears me apart.

Throughout my life in Israel, I felt that I was expected to ignore much of what I saw around me. I was told the 'right' thoughts to think, the 'right' songs to sing and the 'right' version of history to repeat. There was a sense of security in it that was supposed to be enough, only it wasn't enough for me. There was too much anxiety around me for me to feel really secure. One of the many things that didn't fit in my mind and that I couldn't understand was how a peace-loving people such as ourselves (for that was what I was told we were) could be so horrible to one another. I also did not believe that we were acting out of necessity and self-defence alone when it came to the Palestinian people. Necessity does not involve deliberate humiliation and robbing people of their dignity.

I saw it all and it hurt me, but most of the time I thought that there was something wrong with me. As an adolescent I tried many times to speak up. I tried to say that maybe things weren't right, that maybe there was something wrong with how we treated the Arabs. In response I was often told that I was naive, that I didn't know what I was talking about, that I had no idea about the true realities of the situation. When I insisted, there was always someone there to remind me of how unfair things have been for us, and that I didn't know what it felt like to lose someone close in a terrorist attack. It was true. I never have lost anyone close in that way. I had to wonder whether I was missing something. I often walked away from such conversations feeling guilty and stupid, as if I wanted too much, was too idealistic or unreasonable.

Eventually at the age of twenty seven (and only forty three years after the controversial birth of the state of Israel) I couldn't take it anymore and I left. I had no proof, no evidence, only a gut feeling that being there was wrong, that I couldn't live there and be true to myself at the same time. When people asked me why I left Israel I kept saying that I didn't want Palestinian blood on my hands. I suffered a great deal of turmoil because of guilt. Being a Jewish Israeli meant accepting that because we were victims of horrific abuse, we had acquired the right to dispossess another people. To challenge this view meant betraying my people and exposing them to danger again.

I came to Australia at the end of 1991 and here I started to create a life after my own heart, my own dreaming. I trained to be a psychotherapist, and I have worked very hard to heal my own trauma and wounds. I have been teaching myself to engage with life and with people fully, and have dedicated my life to love, compassion, understanding and dialogue.

I know in my heart that I make a difference in the world now because I live my life for the most part faithful to my own values. So how is it that a piece of news from Israel can drag me back and devastate me so easily? Why can't I watch what is happening there and remain myself, secure? Why do I lose my own world so easily, and what makes me feel so personally responsible for Israel's choices? What is it that still binds me, what do I still want with them?

What I always wanted was to belong and I never really did. The true cost of belonging in Israeli society was too heavy for me. When I realised how much of my integrity and sense of self I would have to sacrifice in exchange for belonging, my whole world was shattered and collapsed on top of me. When I left Israel I thought I collected all my pieces but maybe I left a few behind?

How do I disentangle myself, leave them to their own reality and live mine peacefully without feeling responsible for their choices? What do I need to do to collect the pieces of me that are still there so that I can truly be whole, liberated, differentiated, free to live life fully as I have chosen to live it? What do I keep and what do I let go of? This is so painful and so confusing.

The wisdom of my psychotherapy training guides me to feel the pain and not fight it. This is the key to healing. But if I feel the pain I might come to a point where I will be able to say good-bye for the last time. A part of me

resists. A part of me still doesn't want to heal because healing means really leaving...

I will feel the pain, I will differentiate, I will say good-bye. But it frightens me because I don't know where I am going.

I think I am like those who walk away from Omelas in the story by Ursula Le Guin. Omelas is the perfect city whose happiness and stunning beauty is made possible by the sacrifice of one child, abandoned to a dark life of misery and deprivation in a dungeon underneath the city.

> At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. … They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates … They leave Omelas, they leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness and they do not come back. The place they go toward is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas (Le Guin, 1975*).*

Implications for Practice

My personal journey to differentiate from Israel has brought up some thoughts that might be useful to family therapists, and therapists who work with their clients on differentiation.

When I first began my journey to differentiate from my family of origin I did not know that I would also have to differentiate from my culture. The more complex the picture of my family grew, the more it became obvious that events that affected my family had a lot to do with Jewish history, and not just strictly with family history. It became clear that the ways members of my family dealt with their history was culturally dependent. For example, on both sides of my family I discovered the belief that 'Things never work out for us'. This is partly to do with a family history of poverty and deprivation but it also strongly resonates with Jewish culture. It is a central theme in Jewish faith and identity that things never work out for *us*, that others always hate us and will at some point in time try to hurt us. Much of my family's interpretation of the family story was clearly dependent on this very Jewish theme.

In the process of exploring my Jewish background I have become increasingly aware of a close relationship between trauma and persecution, and a tendency to emphasise the 'force of togetherness' (Bowen, 1978). In the last months of 2001, we were given an opportunity to observe this principle in action within American society. In response to the September 11th terrorist attack, the US President declared a 'war against terrorism' and decreed that 'If you are not with us then you are with the terrorists'. This is a striking example of how a sense of threat and persecution can strengthen the force of togetherness. When we are under threat we all have to stick together. If you are not with us then you exclude yourself from our group, and therefore automatically become a member of the enemy group. Suddenly the world consists only of 'Us' and 'Them'.

When togetherness is emphasised, those who do not feel, think, agree, act in the way that the group does, can be seen as traitors. This may crush the attempts of individuals to take stands on principle, and will make the task of differentiation a lot more difficult. When working with clients it is important to consider the following:

1. The extent to which group trauma (even several generations back) may have impacted on the tendency towards togetherness in the client's culture.
2. If the force of togetherness in the client's culture is particularly strong he or she might stand to lose a lot from differentiating. From my experience, clients who come from particularly oppressive backgrounds know this instinctively. I was recently told by a new client from one particular ethnic background that his previous (Anglo-Australian) counsellor said to him: 'Just stand up to your parents and stick up for yourself ... ' It is important that therapists be sensitive to what clients stand to lose, and acknowledge this rather than 'sell' the idea of differentiation to their clients. It can be hard for therapists whose cultural background is relatively free of trauma to understand that for some clients healing may involve a terrible choice between themselves and their family and/or cultural group. (My mother has cut off all contact with me since receiving a copy of an earlier version of this paper.)
3. Clients who come from traumatised cultural groups will experience difficulty with their own process of healing from trauma. If group identity is strongly shaped by trauma, then any member of the group who heals risks losing not only their sense of belonging, but their very identity, which is what they have in common with their group. This was happening to me in Israel when I felt a strong desire to heal my own wounds. Since Israeli identity is so strongly shaped in reaction to Jewish trauma, losing a connection with the trauma means losing my identity.
4. The dynamics of trauma *are* complicated. It is likely that groups who were victims of persecution behaved at some point in their history as perpetrators towards other groups. There are many examples of this even in recent history. Think of the last time you watched a conflict on the television news and tried to figure out who the 'good guys' were and who the 'bad guys'. It is human to want to simplify our picture of reality but in truth it is possible that no one is completely innocent. Victims can have a devastating effect on others and owning one's role as a victimiser may well be necessary on the road to differentiation.

As you work with clients it is important to consider what feelings, beliefs, themes and behaviours surround the experience of being a member of a *perpetrator group*, and in what ways these may express themselves in your client's life in the present. I wonder, for instance, what role guilt might be playing in Israel's extreme aggression against the Palestinian people.

This paper is not a political statement but it does illustrate, I believe, the close and complicated relationship between what is public — the history of a nation — and what is personal — how an individual may experience this history and its impact. This relationship I believe to be at the heart of any process of differentiation from any cultural group and something that psychotherapists need to take into account in their work.

Endnotes

1. This view has been expressed by other Israelis. One famous example is Amos Oz's message to Menahem Begin after the Lebanon War: 'This urge to revive Hitler, only to kill him again and again, is the result of pain that poets can permit themselves to use, but not statesmen … even at great emotional cost personally, you must remind yourself and the public that elected you its leader that Hitler is dead and burned to ashes' (Shlaim, 2001).

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Keys to the City for the Defenders of Darwin

So what if there were fifty of them on that bus!
We don't give group discounts —
Seemed to think that might entitle them
but we don't do that here at the Military Museum.
It's not as if we didn't have to put ourselves out for them —
They took long enough just filing in, walking sticks, red caps and all,
But I saw to it that each paid his dues.

And that shuttle bus driver — Is she a slow learner or what?
(Should have checked her ID)
The idea, the nerve of crossing the chain we lowered
For the cars of dignitaries attending the Parliament House reception!
Reckoned he was a dignitary — some nerve, that —
After all, we had the list.
Don't they teach them protocol these days?
She came back with two more
Wearing their ribbons and clutching their sticks like the first one.
Can't she get her head around it?
Like the PM said, 'We'll choose who comes in here!'
Hasn't he made it clear enough?

Note: On 19th February 2002, Darwin celebrated the 60th Anniversary of the Defence of Darwin. Surviving Defenders of Darwin, all in their eighties, returned for the event.

Helen Pavlin, Darwin, NT