Families bereaved by war, holocaust and terrorism in Israel

by SHAMAI DAVIDSON

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We hope to publish an extended version of his full speech in the Cruse Academic Papers series shortly.

The state of Israel has been racked by recurrent wars, border incidents and terror ever since its foundation in 1948. Thus bereavement following violence is an integral part of the climate of Israel. Every single family has had to face the possibility of losing one or more of its young adults on active service. Even those families who have not directly suffered such a loss have known it happen to their relatives and friends. Thus the whole population is very much involved in the shared tragedy of the bereaved families, with the funerals of the victims and the grieving families portrayed on television and the other media.

Death by violence adds a further dimension of trauma to the universal and highly stressful experience of loss. An important element in this extra trauma is the unexpectedness which precludes any preparatory grieving or mourning. Basic trust in human beings is undermined, and the meanings and symbols we normally use to cope with non-violent death are challenged. Israel's wars have resulted in the deaths of 20,000 young men, and hence almost 20,000 bereaved families. This high figure constitutes a phenomenon whose psycho-social and psycho-cultural implications are not yet sufficiently studied and understood. We do know, however, that for many years there was an avoidance and denial, comparable to the avoidance and denial of the holocaust experiences in the first years of the Israeli state. Building for the future and defence of the state in the face of immediate dangers to its security then sustained this pattern of avoidance, at both individual and social levels.

As the many diverse ethnic groups in Israel adapted their cultural mores, while having to maintain public morale in the face of the constant security danger, a model of somewhat stoical and deritualized behaviour emerged at times of trauma and grief, limiting ceremonies and customs, and disapproving of the unrestrained expression of emotion familiar to Middle Eastern and Eastern European Jews.[1] Thus a tendency to psychic numbing, as well as avoidance and denial, have enabled the citizens to continue with their work of building the country, despite continually accumulating bereavement. It is important to stress, however, that at the national and institutional levels Remembrance Days have been central events, with widespread participation.

The 1973 war had a deep impact on Israeli society. It challenged the image of invincibility that was part of the 'stoical deritualized model', and the continued denial of the holocaust trauma alongside this. Attitudes and behaviour changed dramatically. For example, up to 1973, the Ministry of Defence's work for widowed families had mainly been concerned with economic and practical needs. Their emotional needs were felt to be taken care of by the prevailing social value system. The 1973 war showed these attitudes to be inadequate, and a network of both formal and informal support systems sprang up.

Notification Teams

An important example of formal support was the work of the notification teams, who informed families of the loss, and gave immediate support. Their arrival in a street would often evoke severe stress reactions from neighbours according to their ethnic background, in order to 'ward off the Angel of Death', as it were. Yet in essence these teams were humanising a tragic event. They maintained contact with the bereaved family, visiting during the first Shiva week with its strong rituals. Thereafter a social worker from the Rehabilitation Dept. of the Ministry of Defence was responsible for rehabilitation in every way. He or she would be assisted by a team of professional helpers and non-professional volunteers as needed, helping in ways that are familiar to Cruse people.

The work of the notification teams and those that followed them proved highly significant in the mourning process. They also demonstrated a psycho-social phenomenon perhaps characteristic of war widows and bereaved parents in general: the strong need to be associated with the representatives of the institution which gives meaning to the loss—in this case the army and the Ministry of Defence.

Widows

In outcome studies[2] it has been found that there are 'high-risk' women who do not ask for help, or know how to ask, and they need it most. Those who are initially more demanding, and get more attention and help, often have the resources to return to normal life without help. So it is most important to find the women who are passive, and have low self-esteem.

Widow & Children

Often the widow seems to be concentrating on her grief, and needs help—to such an extent that she is unlikely to give her children the best support. The rhythm and manner of their mourning may also be different to hers. At the beginning, during the Shiva, social workers should try and make sure that the child accepts the reality of the father's death. The child should be encouraged to participate in the funeral and witness the burial. Sometimes the social workers had doubts about damaging the child

by telling him about finality so early, but it is felt that avoidance does not help eventual rehabilitation.[3]

Brothers & Sisters

Little written work has been done on this subject. We did find parents are often so preoccupied with their own loss that the remaining children are presented with, in effect, a double loss—loss of a brother, and also parents temporarily unavailable. Younger children do receive attention, but adolescents, especially, do not receive enough validation of their unexpressed feelings. In particular, the dead brother becomes idealised, and normal ambivalent feelings cannot be expressed any more. There is also an unattainable standard to live up to. The parents may often try to over-protect the surviving children, especially when they come of age, to prevent them from going into front-line units, with resulting frustration and even depressive reactions. There will be hesitations about the sudden availability of a bedroom, how to relate to a dead brother's possessions, and how to behave socially.[4] There may also be questioning, with adolescents, as to whether the death has meaning, whether the war was justified, etc., especially in recent years.

Bereaved Parents

This may be the most traumatic situation of all, but bereaved parents receive less attention than a widow and children. Good outcome factors include: a good quality relationship between the parents, the presence of grandchildren, an extended family, and other children. The lack of some of these features and social isolation very frequently produce a poor outcome, and indeed are among the most interminable mourning situations.[5]

The Bereaved Father

He receives less attention, so the underlying severity of his reaction may be overlooked. In Israel he may feel the need to be strong and stoical. The mother may behave thus also. The father may have fought himself, and envisaged dying himself, but not the loss of his own son. The death implies that his value system, his identity role, has failed, and he may question the *raison d'etre* of his life.

The death of a child is always untimely, but for the Jews there is a special aspect because of the emphasis on the expression of continuity, as manifested in the Kaddish prayer which a Jewish son recites when his father dies. If the son dies first, the father has lost this possibility of his own continuation being expressed, which often adds an additional dimension to the trauma.

Holocaust Survivors

The inability to mourn started in the Nazi concentration camps and other holocaust situations during the Second World War. There was the need to maintain the strength and motivation to continue the struggle for survival, often related to the hope that relatives were still alive somewhere. After 1948, most survivors in Israel energetically set themselves to help build the new country, as a creative, constructive substitute for their mourning. Many also continued for years their searching for relatives, usually fruitlessly.

A Holocaust Survivor Family Loses a Child

This situation demonstrates, in the most extreme way possible, the problems of continuity and meaning. Some such families have insisted on interminable mourning, feeling it appropriate in the situation.

Bereavement from Terrorism

Five years ago I was involved in setting up a crisis intervention team after families on a bus outing were attacked by terrorists, decimating the families. However, the special factor that helped these families to recover was that they all belonged to a co-operative on a family outing. That co-operative's whole national network rallied to give a framework of support, then and ever since.[6] They made survival and recovery a community issue, a matter of community support, and took it out of the hands of experts. A most important issue is involved here. Receiving recognition and consensual validation of suffering and loss by a 'significant community' promotes positive coping responses, reduces negative reactions and thus protects against the development of invidious long-term psycho-social phenomena.[7]

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Poetry

THE WIDOW'S COMPLAINT

You left as you so often left before,
Sneaking out on tiptoe,
No slam of door,
Off to drink with enemies of mine,
And of yours—
If you could only see it—
Drunkards and bores
Whose grossest flatteries
You swilled down with the booze
That you never had the gumption to refuse.
You won't come back this time.
No need to prepare
A welcome for you—clamped silence
And belligerent stare—
No need for morning nostrums or to hide
The whisky and car-keys,
Tighten my lips and thighs
Against your pleas,
No need for those old stratagems any more.
But you might have let me know what was in store;
Your last low trick
To leave me with no clue
That you had gone for good,
My last chance lost
To tell you what I've so long wanted to,
How much I hate you and I always have,
You pig, you bastard,
Stinking rat—
Oh, love, my love,
How can I forgive you that?

VERNON SCANNELL

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