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A Year After the Assassination: A Nation in Post Trauma **Dr. Moti Peleg**

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It is not an uncommon phenomenon to experience lingering emotional distress following a catastrophe, long after the trauma has occurred.

The process of dealing with and/or overcoming the trauma relies on the passage of time. However, a universal reaction experienced by the survivor or the victim is to avoid and/or deny the shock and the hurt, and suppress it in the subconscious.

In recent years, there has been a growing trend to seek professional help to resolve traumatic stress and the panorama of emotions it sets off, such as anger, guilt, shame and fright.

One of the goals of treatment in traumatic stress following a tragic event is to assist the survivor or the person who witnessed the adverse event to release the negative emotions that intensified the person's defense mechanisms. Another goal is to reconstruct the "girders" of the personality that were shaken by the sudden and unexpected event and to assimilate the meaning of the loss. The need to preserve the old information prior to the adverse event while confronting the pressing reality of new information brought by the tragedy intensifies the various defense mechanisms. Thus, defenses such as disassociation, denial, avoidance and numbing of responsiveness, which are not uncommon, can become the result of the traumatic state. Most survivors of a tragedy who lose a loved one tend to feel compelled to return to a daily routine without being able to deal effectively with the adverse emotions which emanated from the disaster: emotions that are in the form of suppressed anger, helplessness, sadness, guilt, etc.

The assassination of Prime Minister Rabin created in most Israelis an emotional earthquake with aftershocks of various degrees. It caused a trauma that cannot be digested even now, nearly two years after the tragedy.

There are two primary reasons for the difficulty in resolving the traumas and/or the helplessness associated with the trauma.

1. In the short term, only a short time has passed since the tragedy. It is a traumatic stress emanating from the brutal murder of the most important political figure in Israel, the Prime Minister. The close

proximity to the state of shock and the enormous loss of a national leader prevents the public from

working through a mourning process which would lead toward a constructive way of dealing with the traumatic stress and particularly the unexpected void left by the loss of the leader.

2. In the long term, the loss is a national loss and a Jewish loss and it has a bearing on the thought process of a nation as well as its cultural values in Israel and among the Jewish people abroad, thus adding to the complexity and difficulty of resolving it.

A recent national survey taken in Israel indicates that the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin continues to trouble the majority of the Israeli people deeply and to raise profound questions about the meaning and strength of the nation.

The people of Israel would like to forget, but they experience hardship in going through the mourning process. The people rush to return to their daily routines and struggle to heal emotionally. They are not able to organize therapeutic tools in order to soften or ease the shock. They force on themselves a dramatic return to life, instead of dealing with the trauma. Any active therapeutic involvement is avoided and the suppressed feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness and guilt continue to linger silently.

It is possible to undertake a collective therapeutic healing for the public through the media, in coordination with the various municipalities throughout the country. Even a national collective therapeutic process need not overlook the individual's unique response to traumatic stress relating to such a loss. The trauma apparently doesn't allow individual citizens to take constructive steps that would result in any treatment. Instead they are preoccupied with responding to their intense defense mechanisms. The Israeli media, comprised of individuals who are themselves traumatized by the tragedy, attempt to rationalize the trauma. Thus, the media are a victim of the trauma, like the rest caught in all the cycles of rationalization, intellectualization, denial and other defense mechanisms.

The following are several questions relating to the collective Israeli traumatic stress following the assassination.

1. To what degree did the public witnessing the assassination experience helplessness, terror and rage and to what extent did the public that read about it in the media experience it?
2. To what extent did the numerous replays of the assassination on TV cause an escalation of the traumatic shock?
3. As a whole to what extent did the public experience itself differently after the assassination compared to life prior to the tragedy?
4. To what degree does denial reflect the behavior of the public?
5. To what extent is rationalization a characteristic of the public's behavior in the aftermath of the assassination?

In their book *Reaction to Trauma*, Rion and Lois Everstone argue that the cycle of events revolving around the trauma can multiply the effect of the trauma on the survivor. They postulated that a common phenomenon for people is to utilize personal values in justifying or explaining any event in life. Therefore, the trauma is intensified through personal values in any traumatized person and the traumatic effect thus depends upon these personalized experiences and values.

As to the major questions pertaining to the effect that the traumatic stress has on the national mood, several questions can be applied to the personalized or collective national values.

1. To what degree did the trauma and its relationship to national values intensify due to the betrayal of national values pertaining to the taboo of not killing a fellow Jewish brother? The Prime Minister was assassinated by a Jew, a native of Israel. Furthermore, where did the aggressive energy--which the Jewish people experienced throughout their existence in protecting themselves against outside aggressors--go? In the past, that energy was directed to the outside and now it was trapped within the people because the aggressor came from within. What did this trapped energy do to the people and how did it affect their traumatic stress?

2. The guilt deriving from failing to appropriately protect the Prime Minister: how does the national guilt affect the nation's collective traumatic stress? This guilt derives from the betrayal of an ideology and values highlighting the fact that Israelis never abandon a soldier on 'the battlefield. The most important soldier in Israel, the Prime Minister, was exposed to danger and was abandoned. How does this failed ideology affect the public's traumatic stress? How is it internalized by the people and what are its implications?

3. As a whole, to what extent do the adverse events affect the deterioration or collapse of fundamental Jewish and national values, i.e. life, Jewish solidarity, a common destiny? Israelis are forever loyal to one another. Israelis protect one another; life is a superior priority, it must be a sanctuary.

Finally, in the eyes of many, the traumatic stress following a tragedy may be expressed by the individual as a weakness. Therefore, many people who undergo traumatic stress which might escalate into posttraumatic stress tend to suppress their emotional reactions because of shame and vulnerability, feeling that no one can fully understand their unique subjective painful experience. Bearing this in mind, it is important to become aware of these and other emotions which trigger resistance and other difficulties, in getting help. Thus, the goal would be to initiate both individual and collective therapeutic processes centering on resolving the traumatic stress and addressing the symptoms of traumatic stress suffered by the individual as well as by the group.

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