

## ILLNESS OF PRIME MINISTER ARIEL SHARON

By Dr. Moti Peleg

Recently, it was not difficult to recognize a photo in a leading Israeli newspaper, the sad eyes of acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. In his facial expression there were signs of unusual tenseness and great concern as he was seating next to the empty seat of his Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who presently still lays unconscious at the Haadasa Hospital in Jerusalem. Contrary to other pictures in Israel's history showing the scenes of sudden losses of Israeli Prime Ministers, such in the cases of the sudden death of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol in the late 60's and the shocking assassination and sudden loss of Prime Minister Issac Rabin in 1995, this picture reflects the slow motion of an unfolding traumatic script leading to various degrees of a post-traumatic stress period in the society.

DSM IV, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines traumatic stress as an emotional cognitive, behavioral and physiological experience of the individual that is subjected to and or witnesses an overwhelming unexpected adverse event that destabilizes the security and the safety of the individual. According to the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, such a stress is caused in the aftermath of a tragedy such as a difficult illness or a loss of a beloved person. To what extent the definition mirrors the psychological shock in Israel in the aftermath of the grave illness of its beloved Prime Minister and how it is connected to the picture that shows the empty seat of the Prime Minister and the sad affect of the seating Prime Minister Olmert. The snap shot appears to symbolize a government on hold amidst of a prolonged traumatic stress following the illness that threatens the life of its leader. It reflects the drama of a traumatic stress of an agonized nation that suffers silently and is trapped in a limbo with a pendulum that moves from one extreme to the other.

On one hand, one edge of the pendulum strives to magically bring back to life the man that disappeared amidst a difficult period in the nation's history, a nation that relies on his wisdom, leadership and courage. On the other hand, the other edge of the pendulum pulls the Israeli nation uncontrollably against its will, to a closure, to accept the approaching death of the Prime Minister and allow a movement that would trigger the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, an inevitable process in the adjustment period that the nation is expected to undergo. It is not uncommon for individuals in a traumatized society to show symptoms of sadness, denial, restlessness, uncertainty and anxiety as they witness their leader's struggles with death. On the same token, the leader's brave battle with death even when the struggle seems to be against all odds creates a dichotomy. Considering the time factor of a traumatic stress, the longer it lasts as it is with the painful uncertainty surrounding the Prime Minister's life threatening condition, the weaker and less devastating is expected to be the post trauma in the aftermath of his passing.

Post-Traumatic Stress is defined by DSM IV as an individual's reaction to a sudden traumatic event that threatens his/her physical integrity or the survival of others near by. The traumatic event is experienced in flashbacks and distressing recollections of the event, preoccupation with mortality, restlessness, nightmares, hypervigilance, avoidance behavior and suppressed anger. In their book, "The Trauma Response", Diane and Louis Everstin, claim that the circumstances surrounding the traumatic event may intensify the traumatic reaction of the survivor. The survivor here is the Israeli society and the trauma set off by the massive brain hemorrhage that threatens the life of the Prime Minister reawakens painful memories and shock waves that the Israeli society, experienced in the past in the aftermath of the tragic event that took the life of Prime Minister Rabin.

What are some of the elements that could intensify the traumatic reaction and effect in the collective public morale? There is no doubt that the safety of the Prime Minister and his personal well being affects the security and the emotional calm of the society and is affected by events that precede the traumatic event. These could include amongst other things, public concern not only of an assassination attempt on its leader but negligence of the leader's physical health as well. Inevitably, the tragic loss of the leader prompts the survivor to reflect and analyze the circumstances preceding the event in order to defend against the shock and absorb the pain as well as learn lessons.

Another factor which might intensify traumatic stress and fear of loss relates to the degrees of the public's idealizations of the leader. Ariel Sharon is held by most Israelis as a living legend, a national hero and "Israel's Savior" that sacrificed his entire life defending fiercely Israel's survival, a man of courage with a mythological image, a solid man the "can never break down". The idealization of the man that can do almost anything is now shaken by the grim reality of his grave illness that appears to overcome him. The man that fooled death numerous times in the battlefields might not be able to prevail this time.

Subsequently, the myth which the public loved to embrace is shattered, intensifying the trauma in a society that might have minimized its leader's mortality. In a small society stricken by traumatic stress, depressive symptoms amongst

individuals are not uncommon. On the surface, many Israelis resume their daily living as usual, but, indoors there are those who admit to feelings of helplessness, sadness, worries, concerns, agitation, restlessness, uncertainties and low morale, symptoms which present reactive depression and anxiety conditions. Other symptoms reported are irrational fears, isolations, decrease in productivity and breakdown in interpersonal communication. It is recommended that the local municipalities initiate support groups for citizens who complain about these and other symptoms and encourage them to express these distressed emotions openly. In these support groups, sometimes, collective public trauma can be a trigger that brings to the surface suppressed personal conflicts and fears, thus opening an opportunity for an individual psychotherapy as well.

Psychologists and social workers would encourage the individual citizen via support group and individual treatment to verbalize their emotional distress and validates the problems expressed. An empathic approach that provides the individual a green light to feel that he/she is not alone is one of the most important goals of these recommended meetings. In addition, the role of psychologists would be to encourage the individual struggling with traumatic stress to improve the quality of their lives via good nutrition, exercise, creativity and also consider, alternative ways via spiritual paths that would lead to a better morale and positive thinking.

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