

## **Taming the Beast: Trauma in Jewish Religious and Political Life**

Sousan Abadian, MA, MPA, PhD

*Associate, Cambridge Leadership Associates, Cambridge, Massachusetts*

and

Tamar Miller, MSW '80, MPA

*Principal, Peace Beat, Mid East, Cambridge, Massachusetts*

*In the next article, Shantih Clemans of the Wurzweiler School of Social Work at Yeshiva University makes a convincing case for working in group settings to help heal traumatized individuals. Most important, she asserts that trauma is not an extraordinary “on the margins” occurrence, as is a war or hurricane; rather, traumas are common and pervasive. All we have to do is look and there we find trauma in individuals and families and, collectively, in ethnic groups, peoples, states, countries, and nations. Clemans asks that we allow this story of widespread trauma to be told.*

*Endemic violence is a particularly severe expression of this widespread trauma. Working with communities characterized by generational violence and poverty, Sousan Abadian, while at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, became convinced that unresolved collective trauma was one of the root causes of intractable conflict. She observed that one way historical traumas are kept alive is through the reservoir of collective stories embedded in rituals, ceremonies, and various practices. These stories often have a narrative subtext from which people unconsciously draw lessons about themselves and others; in many cases, these narrative subtexts create the context for the continuation of trauma into future generations.*

*Educated at Yeshiva University and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Tamar Miller brings a Jewish Orthodox treasure chest of knowledge of religious practices, as well as sensibilities about the treatment of trauma from a social work and community organizing perspective. With expertise in contemporary Middle East, people-to-people peace building, it is clear to her that trauma is a sorely neglected piece of peacemaking. Here, based upon their combined experiences, Abadian and Miller consider how the dynamics of trauma continue to play out in Jewish political and religious life. As a “Jew by choice” for 20 years, Abadian brings a fresh perspective and new ways to examine old stories.*

*Our intention in this article is to open a conversation in the Jewish community in Israel and the Diaspora about how historical traumas continue to shape the meaning we make of our collective experience today. We hope to think together about how to continue to rally the rich and abundant*

*resources in our tradition and collective life as our community seeks greater fulfillment, peace, and security.*

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**POSTTRAUMATIC NARRATIVES:  
THE QUEST FOR MEANING AND  
GUIDANCE**

*Collective trauma* includes damage done to individuals, but it is much more. That is, collective trauma is much more than the sum of its individual parts. Unhealed trauma to an individual can have long-term debilitating effects by impairing people's capacity to forge loving and trusting relationships with others. Imagine the exponential magnification of the damage when a whole community of individuals is affected. When trauma to a community is prolonged and extensive, the impact socially and culturally is immense, affecting all levels of political, spiritual, and economic life. The sense of alienation, mistrust, hopelessness, and rage can become endemic, and over time, a trauma-informed worldview can become embedded in the culture of a people. After traumatic events or sustained traumatic experiences, people seek to make meaning of their collective experience, and one way this happens is through *posttraumatic narratives*. By constructing stories, people attempt to create a semblance of order out of emotional chaos and to make sense of the unfathomable. Stories are ways of managing thoughts and feelings about questions that often are forever unanswerable.

The way we fashion narratives after a collective injury has some typical patterns. We construct a story of what happened. Then we try to interpret the story about what happened. This interpretation includes some overt and surely some covert expressions and feelings we have about ourselves, others, and God. The prevailing narrative that emerges from experiences of trauma is a composite of these objective and subjective elements. In the long and short term, we attempt to glean meaning and

moral lessons from the narratives that we have created out of our traumas.

However, meaning-making is not a benign or neutral act because there are more or less constructive ways of making meaning. Posttraumatic responses fall along a continuum from generative life-affirming narratives to toxic retraumatizing narratives. Both inform behaviors and both reflect as well as fulfill the underlying moral of the story. If the story is allowed to be told and there are compassionate listeners affirming our experience, explicitly and implicitly—challenging the despair, shame, rage, and isolation that are often the byproducts of trauma—there can be collective healing. In other words, the ever-evolving narratives can prove to be generative over time such that individual relationships as well as international relations are repaired. Yet, narratives cannot be characterized as either healing or maladaptive; they range along a continuum from *generative narratives* to *toxic narratives*. The latter keep us stuck in some measure of distortion. Some are *disempowering narratives* that tell a story of being seriously flawed, damaged, unworthy, isolated, lacking in support, helpless, and unsafe; some are *falsely empowering* posttraumatic narratives that are grandiose, entitled, blaming, preoccupied with settling scores and getting revenge, categorically condemnatory, disdainful, and righteously indignant. Disempowering posttraumatic narratives are self-condemning, judging self and community as less than others; falsely empowering posttraumatic narratives condemn others and see themselves as superior.

One way we can think of both generative and toxic narratives is that, as attempts to cope with the vicissitudes of life, they are in some measure adaptive. The very act of constructing a story, especially after a traumatic event, is one of strength and agency. Since trauma robs people and collectives of power and control, the very

act of fashioning a narrative is a means of asserting authorship over those events, allowing people to gain a degree of mastery over those experiences. Yet, although all narratives may be thought to be adaptive, some are more constructive than others. On the continuum, toxic posttraumatic narratives, for instance, can be filled with revenge and entitlement, which is a healthier narrative than one filled with utter hopelessness and collapse. Still, while stories and wishes for revenge are healthier than the relinquishment of all agency, they are not healthy. If we were to assert a goal in collective healing toward peace and prosperity, it is to move up the continuum to more constructive narratives and the practices they engender.

### **THE JEWISH CHAPTER OF A UNIVERSALSTORY**

Looking through the lens of collective trauma begs questions about our current collective Jewish experience in the Diaspora and in Israel. What are the effects of years of collective trauma in Jewish history? What are the narratives that guide us and inform our spiritual health and our political choices? If the creation of the State of Israel is a historical healing for Jews, then why, as redeemer, is it a locus of more traumatic conflict? Who is Ahmadinejad in our collective narrative? What is Syria? Who are the Amalekites? What meaning do we make of the Palestinian intifada? Can we have peace? Do we have a traumatic history and a traumatizing future? What are the narratives that emanate from the experience of trauma, and what meanings do we make and remake of our collective life?

When we say “never again,” what we mean is that we, as a community, will never again be in a position “of a sheep to slaughter,” our quintessential modern metaphor of trauma. What we also mean is that we want to lay the past to rest, to free ourselves from the destructive hold that our traumatic pasts have on us. We know the anxiety and the terror of annihilation and the threats of annihilation; we know the risks; we know the possibility, if not the probability of evil. It is not, therefore, the past that we want to forget, nor do we want to

abandon vigilance about a dangerous future. Rather, we believe that our collective task is to tame the effects of the traumas that continue to rage inside our collective life. We do not want to fuel the effects of trauma so that they become so large that they continue to choke us with noxious gas. With that in mind, how do we tame this potentially toxic beast called trauma, and how do we continue to cultivate collective posttraumatic narratives that are healing and life-affirming so that we not only survive but also thrive?

Looking at the stories embedded in the Jewish experience of ritual, holidays, and politics does not mean that we engage in a theological conversation or in judgments about what are good or bad responses; rather, we look through a lens of typical human responses to trauma. For our purposes here, we are not discussing crossborder dynamics or competing narratives, say of Palestinians. We are not speaking about the story of the Other in relation to us. That is for another time, after we take a look at ourselves. Furthermore, we could use this frame of compassionate analysis of trauma to understand many different conflicts; for example, among Turks, Armenians, Indians, Pakistanis, Shi’a, Sunni, American, Vietnamese, and so on. We are thus not singling out Jews for scrutiny or judgment, but rather we are applying notions of collective trauma to the particular community among nations and peoples that we know and love, a community that has repeatedly shown its strength and courage by looking critically in the mirror.

### **A SAMPLING OF OUR RELIGIOUS AND POLITICALNARRATIVES**

Any number of Jewish communal life and religious stories might illuminate thinking through this rather new and risky subject. Questioning narratives that are familiar and at times paradoxically comforting is also risky because it evokes all sorts of feelings, principally feelings of deep disloyalty. It feels risky because we are also trying to make conscious what is hidden, trying to tease out our real fears from real threats and attempting to stand with equanimity of mind and spirit while

knowing some traumas are behind us and others are still with us. Here, we look at two examples and ask about the nature of our posttraumatic narratives: are they toxic or generative or some combination of both?

First, we analyze the holiday of Pesach/Passover as a posttraumatic narrative of slavery 1300 BCE, 3,300 years ago. Second, we consider the rituals and stories of Purim, crafted about 500 BCE during the Jewish Babylonian exile, and later under the rule of Persian kings, as a form of posttraumatic narrative. In the future, we would like to examine the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and Israel's war with Hezb'Allah in the summer of 2006 as modern posttraumatic narratives that shape collective action and are shaped by them.

### Pesach/Passover

The *Haggadah*, the primary narrative text that we use at the Seder on Passover, literally means "the telling." Broadly, the first story in the *Haggadah* is, "We were slaves; now we are free people." This is the title of our posttraumatic narrative and truly is a powerful generative life-affirming story. It is a narrative of agency and hope and one that has inspired many freedom movements around the world. Underlying its storyline is the subtext that God is on our side; we are a deserving people, worthy and capable of experiencing redemption. In this story, freedom is most prominent. What is fascinating is that this has remained the Jewish foundational story for 3,300 years, a story that does not deny or forget the trauma of slavery and yet renews the sense of hopefulness and healing each year.

Pesach in this sense may have ignited hope and inspiration for our own rescue and revival (with the help of the UN) after the quintessential trauma of the Holocaust. The creation and sustaining of the State of Israel, in part, makes concrete Pesach's generative narrative of freedom. In religious Zionist terms, this is *hitchalta d'geula* (literally, the beginning of messianic redemption). In secular Zionist terms, Israel's existence harks back to the story of the Maccabees, embedding proud independence in the collective generative narrative. These stories reconcile traumatic experience with healing and

practical actions. The combined narrative of the birth of Israel includes a belief in divine intervention coupled with the strength of human agency. The new generative story is *hope*, literally, *hatikvah*, the title of the Israeli national anthem.

Although the subtext of freedom dominates on Passover, there are other competing narrative strands that are expressed, particularly during times of threat. That is, there is another posttraumatic strand in the story, one that embodies another side of our response to slavery, persecution, and anti-Semitism. We faithfully recite, "In every generation they rise up against us to annihilate us . . ." This narrative strand is one of mistrust, despair, fear, never-ending pain. The subtext is, "*They* will always hate us. It was like that and will always be." There is also the narrative subtext of "we hate them" expressed as the appeal to God in the prayer *shfoch hamatcha* ("pour out your wrath upon the nations").

These proclamations of the nature of Jewish destiny and appeal for revenge are probable expressions of traumatization. The redactors of the *Haggadah* lived under Roman persecution. They sought inspiration from the God of the Exodus, meaning the redemptive God, and at the same time, they were experiencing an ongoing trauma. It is not surprising, therefore, that a plea for revenge and the belief in the inexorability of trauma into the future forever are also part of our freedom story. It is worth asking how these differing strands of the posttraumatic narratives combine to guide current Jewish political perception and action.

### Purim

The story of Purim takes place about 500 BCE or 2,500 years ago, following the Babylonian exile of the Jews and eventual settlement in Persia under Persian rule. The first strand of the Purim storyline follows the Jewish joke: "They tried to destroy us, we prevailed, let's eat." On a deeper, more serious note, according to the Mishnah, on the Shabbat before Purim we are supposed to read the story in Exodus about Amalek, the symbol of evil incarnate. Amalek is considered a progenitor of

Haman, the would-be destroyer of the Jews in the Purim story. And who have we now deemed to be their successor?

Jews feel under great threat today from what we call Islamic fundamentalism, so much so that we bring the story of Purim to the current threat we are experiencing from today's Persia. President Ahmadinejad of Iran has been called another Haman, and we presume that all Iranians are out to get Israelis. But is this true? If we were to lift the veil of trauma, might we find that Jews today are in a radically different position in the universe than in 500 BCE? How many Jews know that Iranian students protested against Ahmadinejad during the Holocaustdenying conference in Teheran and put their lives at risk to do so?

Our ability then to make distinctions between the evil of Amalek, the hatefulness of Haman, and today, the threat of Ahmadinejad, might be impaired in essential ways. Looking through a lens focalized by trauma can cloud our capacity to discern real differences. Traumatizing experiences draw the attention of traumatized people repeatedly. The visceral experience of what happened and the feeling states they conjure up are rage, despair, and mistrust. This galvanized attention deepens cultural grooves, so that returning to these images, thoughts, and feelings can become almost habitual default settings.

Likewise, after a terror attack in Jerusalem on a city bus, we often add other attackers to the string of haters. For example, some see Nazis in Hamas and Hamas in all Palestinians. This narrative understandably dominates under threat, but it is a toxic narrative, meaning that it is destructive, we suggest, because it covers over distinctions and inhibits discernment.

The most dramatic example of the causal circular arrow from fear to hatred to attack, and to entrenched fear again, is the murdersuicide of Baruch Goldstein, who killed 29 Muslim worshippers in Hebron after the reading of the Megillah on Purim morning in 1994. Goldstein was a physician living on the West Bank who treated many wounded Jews from Palestinian terror attacks, and some say in his defense that he just saw too much

Jewish agony. For our nonpolitical purposes here, Goldstein and his supporters created a posttraumatic narrative in a retraumatizing setting so that the Purim story, taken literally, sees Arabs as Amalekites, the archetype of wanton evil directed at us. Goldstein left the synagogue with his trauma blinders on and could not differentiate, could not discern at that moment of passion between 29 Muslim worshippers, men and young boys in a mosque, and the imminent anti-Semitic threat of annihilation. With traumatic blinders on (and our guess is with some disinhibiting alcohol coupled with a measure of belief in the dehumanizing racist ideology of Meir Kahane against Palestinians), Goldstein could not feel safe enough or trusting enough that the government of the sovereign State of Israel and her powerful defense forces would protect him, his family, and community. Goldstein expressed Purim in modern terms as a national and religious imperative heroically to protect Jews in danger, only to create another traumatizing tragedy of immense proportions. The wisdom on the street from the people who knew Goldstein was that he was not crazy. No, he was not crazy. He was a man in the clutches of what served as a toxic posttraumatic narrative in the context of a retraumatizing intifada.

A vengeful slaughter also appears at the conclusion the Megillah recounting—the slaying of 20,000 people in battle because they supported Haman. There is a good deal of discussion of this slaughter in the Talmud, and the rabbis were very uneasy about celebrating the death of 20,000 people, even enemies. Perhaps it happened, they said. Perhaps not. From a trauma lens, we consider the possibility that it is an attempt at a restorative fairy tale by an oppressed people to cope with expulsion, oppression, and near annihilation. In fact, it is a toxic narrative of revenge born from trauma, inhibiting generative fantasies. We would like to suggest the radical notion that a truly restorative tale would be Persians celebrating the survival of its Jews.

Is Purim a retraumatizing story, a generative narrative, or both? The Megillah is certainly a narrative that has agency and audacity. The

story revolves around the fortitude of Esther and Mordechai who cleverly manipulate an entire empire. But notice again the posttraumatic strain and how the victory over those who seek to destroy the Jews are framed as having taken place in utter isolation, without help at all. This narrative strand mirrors the saying in Numbers, “We are a nation that dwells alone”—*Am l’vadad yishkon*. The narrative subtext is, “We have no allies and if we do, we cannot rely on them in the long-term.” The Megillah does not even overtly mention God.

Feeling alone and abandoned by people or by God is typical of all traumatized people. We know from our experience in healing and clinical settings that traumatized people find it immensely difficult to reach out to others and make alliances because of their deep mistrust. They do not believe that anyone or anything can help them. It is not surprising then that this disempowering posttraumatic strand or subtext is part of the Purim story.

Paradoxically, this subtext that “we are alone” is not only a disempowering narrative strand but can also reflect a falsely empowering strand as well, because it is not open to the possibility that others may have provided assistance to Jews. Did Esther and Mordechai effectively influence Ahashvarosh to act against Haman to save their people solely by their creativity and craft, or did the King also have Haman and his sons hung willingly? While Ahashvarosh, in the end, did not undo the decree of annihilating the Jews, one likely interpretation is that he did not enjoy absolute power in the kingdom but had serious rivals. He did say the Jews could defend themselves, offering some reprieve from genocide and the permission to confront their adversaries head-on.

The stories we focus on and memorialize tend to be those that confirm our preconceived notions of reality. A tendency not to acknowledge acts of assistance and even generosity is a common reaction after trauma. Traumatic experiences are times of such immense terror, helplessness, and sense of abandonment that acts of assistance are easily filtered out by traumadistorted perceptual filters. Also, traumatized people often feel

undeserving of assistance and so do not acknowledge it directly. In any case, the more toxic narrative that follows trauma is often having had to do it all alone.

It is no surprise then that, while we commemorate Purim, we have no formal remembrance of a much more significant piece of Jewish Persian history and historical figure—Cyrus, the Zoroastrian king who freed Jews from the Babylonian exile and helped rebuild the Second Temple, as told in Chronicles and ultimately included in our canon. How would our self-perception and relationships with others change if we were to take in that we have a history not just of persecution but also of support (and in this case, by a non-Jewish superpower)? Instead, what we reinforce each year is the narrative subtext of the Megillah that “we have to do everything ourselves, and have done everything by ourselves.” It is this ritualized narrative that is held as a truth. Extrapolated to the collective of the Jewish people and the State of Israel today, these disempowering and falsely empowering narratives may add weight to the need to hold onto an absolute existential sense of isolation.

As with Passover, the commemoration of Purim reflects both the generative narrative strand of Jews confronting oppression and the threat of annihilation and the more toxic narratives that Jews had no allies, no other way to get help. The next time we celebrate Purim, might we ask ourselves which interpretive strand prevails—the one that is more life-affirming or the one that separates us further from others and is in the end less adaptive because it interferes with building better relations with non-Jews?

### IS THERE AN END TO THE STORY?

Becoming conscious of varying strands in our religious and national narratives is important because collective expressions deeply reflect and influence how we think about others and ourselves. Without consciousness, narrative subtexts shape our beliefs and, without notice, can misguide how we act in the world.

Surely, some toxic or disempowering narratives are not totally false, which in some

measure is the basis of their power. Although there is some truth to their storyline, the problem is that they are extreme narratives—all and nothing, right and wrong, trusting and untrusting, bad and good. The worlds' terrorists are formidable, governments with high-powered weapons can be deceitful with devastating effects, life can hurt badly, and parts of our selves and the collective can be broken. Still, these are only part of our collective story, only part of the time.

Understanding how trauma insinuates itself into communal and political life may inspire and guide our collective tasks in making the world a safer, more joyful place. Using what we know about the dynamics of trauma, we might shape better policy, build healthier civil societies, engage in more productive cross-border negotiations, and enhance Jewish communal practices. This may be so because understanding the dynamics of collective trauma counteracts extreme reactivity and opens us up to the possibility of more nuanced thinking and less fear. By employing a deeper understanding of the power and effects of trauma, our hope is that we will be better equipped to mediate polarized public conversations and violent international conflicts. Our prayer is to bring more discernment to our community as we become more practiced at folding in more of the *reality of now*.

Because “now” includes in it ongoing collective trauma for our people, we must stay awake to the fact that its toxins are powerfully at work. The recent withdrawal from Gaza by Israel is one such example of the dynamic processes of constructing and reconstructing our stories. The drama of the summer of 2005 underscores how we might be able to mitigate the effects of trauma and disentangle ourselves from its beastly clutches. A generative subtext that may have been at work was, “We, the Jews of Israel, the Israeli Defense Forces, and the Jews of the world are strong enough to withdraw—morally, spiritually, and militarily.” The moral of the story is, “Good things can happen through our own agency, will, and strength, with God’s help.”

The “disengagement” from Gaza—the dismantling of the settlements, hothouses, synagogues, and gravesites—offers an opportunity to take a closer look at the role that leaders can play in instilling faith and hope, perhaps softening the sharpest edges of the traumatic experience. Despite deep theological and political differences within the entire Israeli population, disengagement happened not only without violence but also with dignity. Before the withdrawal, civil strife, even civil war was part of the political landscape of possibility. What was at play that contributed to the nonviolent disengagement?

Ariel Sharon (whether you agreed with him or not regarding the political wisdom of the action) used his authority to help create a relatively peaceful set of events, reducing violent traumatic damage within Israel. The holding environment was strong as widespread public conversation on television and radio, as well as psychological trainings given to political leaders, border police, and Israel Defense Forces commanders, mediated messianic dreams with political agency. Sharon’s strength helped increase empathy in disparate segments of the Israeli population before the disengagement. The country prepared for the trauma, thus reducing its potentially deadly damage.

The collective posttraumatic narrative, soon after the withdrawal, began to shift back into despair with great speed once Palestinians did not respond peaceably. Palestinian factions continued to shell communities in the south of Israel without let-up, and the Jewish narrative once again was, “We did everything; we gave everything; it didn’t work.” It is true that the attempt to alter the story and the outcome, as well as repair the relationships, did not work right away. Healing traumas and repairing traumatizing relationships do not happen in one fell swoop and certainly cannot happen unilaterally. At another time, we would like to look at how traumatic narratives and their dynamics play out in Palestine. For now, suffice it to say, healing trauma is a longterm relational endeavor.

The Gaza experience and Israeli’s war with Hezb’Allah the following summer of 2006 beg

the question about whether Israeli and Diaspora Jews should stick with the collective story, “They all hate us . . . and always will. We are alone.” If these prevailing toxic narratives are not challenged effectively, despair develops into more enduring pain, stifling creative solutions.

Boundaries drawn between “us” and “them” become ever more rigid. Over time, alienation generates collective narratives of “better than” and “less than”—one religion, one culture, and one people better than another in essential ways. In extreme cases, parts of our community tend to dehumanize and even demonize the Other. Dread and despair dominate again—a characteristic response to trauma.

With so much fear in the picture, individually and collectively, we can have a great deal of trouble discerning who really is the enemy. Trauma tends to engender monolithic thinking, often propelling a dynamic of false empowerment that turns into righteous indignation and contempt for the undifferentiated Other. Was this traumatic response at work during what was framed as an existential war between Hezb’Allah and Israel? Is it difficult for us as a collective to make precise distinctions between Hezb’Allah, the government of Lebanon, other Arab and Muslim states, and Arabs and Muslim people, more generally? At its worst, the downward spiral of undifferentiated fear fuels everything from indifference to aggression to violence.

What we know now is that trauma is not the whole story. There are other stories to tell, other supports and resources to use for safety, prosperity, and peace. Let us ask, Are we truly alone or did the fact that highlevel representatives of 38 nations from all corners of the earth show up for Rabin’s memorial become testimony to the possibility of peace? Even when we are in the midst of trauma and fear, it is still possible to discern between the frozen traumatic past and today’s emerging realities. Making this distinction allows us to solve *today’s* problems, as well as to enjoy today’s blessings.

More purposeful, generative narratives allow our minds and hearts to open more graciously toward productive conversations and

relationships. We are a healthy community with a medicine cabinet full of balanced and optimistic collective narratives that tell of getting through dark times and how we and other peoples are deserving of joy and dignity. We use humor and joyful celebrations of gratitude to balance out the reality of suffering and terror of threat. Healthy narratives soothe the effects of catastrophes, and we ask the question more pointedly about whether generative narratives may even avert some of the harshest effects of trauma. Some of our ceremonies to heal our wounds of the Holocaust held at Yad Vashem, such as honoring the “righteous gentiles,” emphasize a sense of optimism that reinforces our worth as well as the worth of others. We are telling ourselves that our traumatic past does not have to hold us captive to a dark future. Deeply embedded Jewish values of pursuing justice also help channel our traumatic past and parts of our traumatic present into enlightened action.

In attempting to loosen trauma’s strong grip, a formidable challenge is managing the sense of disloyalty that inevitably arises. It is difficult to challenge narratives that we have come to consider true because our ancestors handed them down to us. Beautiful young men who fought Israel’s wars shall be honored; memories of our tortured relatives in the *Shoah* live in us; ruinous tremblings of a destroyed Temple reverberate today; and because the dead soldiers’ sacrifices are sacred, we stay loyal. Our challenge is fierce. As we “choose life” (*u’bachartem ba’chaim*), is it possible to maintain loving loyalty to our ancestors, our Temples, our sacrifices, to old ideas and feelings, and do so without retraumatizing ourselves?

*“Live the questions now, perhaps then,  
someday in the future, without noticing it, you  
will live your way into the answer.”*

—Rainer Maria Rilke from  
*Letters to a Young Poet*