



## **Imagine: Expression in the Service of Humanity** Creative Approaches to Dealing with Conflict in Groups An International conference

**Israel, Tel-Aviv & Jerusalem,**  
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This brave conference came into being when Professor Vivien Marcow Speiser, Dr. Pnina Rappaport, Professor Alean Al-Krenawi and Ms. Suzi Shoshani allowed themselves not only to be inspired by the words of John Lennon's song but determined also to take some small steps towards leading life in the direction we maybe all have imagined. They had the idea of bringing together therapists of different orientations, consultants and others working in the service of humanity to share thoughts and ideas about how to move forward in dialogue and the healing of the troubles expressed in Israel now. Their genius was in transforming, what was imagined, into reality by creating this conference. Often conferences organised in Israel are well attended by the international community but not by Israelis and Palestinians. This conference, with the financial support of a number of organisations and friends, succeeded in bringing together Israelis and Palestinians within an international community. In order to achieve this and to minimise the hazards and humiliations of crossing the Military Checkpoints, the Palestinian delegates living on the West Bank and Gaza were enabled to stay in Tel Aviv.

In this article we aim to share a flavour of the conference by mentioning some of the inspiring presentations we attended. We are not able here to do justice to all the excellent presentations that were given. We hope others will also write about them. One of Israel's greatest problems is of course lack of space. This was reflected throughout the conference where the many presenters were at the last moment given much less time than originally planned to enable as many as possible to present. All demonstrated true professionalism in being able to adapt and convey the essence of their presentations in concentrated form, which impacted powerfully on us all.

The sub-plenary session Göran Ahlin and Kate Bradshaw Tavon co-presented entitled "Destructive Heresy or Useful Eclecticism? About some Occasions of Conjoint Psychodramatic and Group Analytic Work in Conferences" was on the first morning of the conference. The theme was about combining their different psychotherapeutic approaches to facilitate dialogues in which differences can be negotiated and new standpoints assimilated in ongoing processes of interaction – a theme embodied by this conference.

The group members heard how in 1996 together with a group of colleagues, group psychotherapists and organisational consultants, they founded SOCI (Stockholm Group

Conference on Social Issues) in response to growing concern about the effects of rapidly changing societal structures on humanity. SOCI's purpose is to promote scientific research and research contacts and to spread research findings within this topical area, through the organisation of conferences and symposia. Since 1997 they have planned 10 events and carried out 8 of them – some of them weeklong experiences, some on-going events in other conferences and some one-day events. At this conference they wanted to reflect with others about what could be learnt from these experiences.

Why did they use the term Heresy in the title? It was of course used analogically – they mean that they share an opinion, at variance with the generally accepted view. There is some competition and rivalry between the two frames of reference of group analysis and psychodrama in general and their endeavour has on occasions been met with scepticism, at times open condemnation, from proponents of both schools of therapy. They have of course not found it simple and conflict-free but have felt that when professionally approaching one or another of the profound ongoing social and political conflict issues from their psychotherapist perspective, that one single method or psychological frame of reference has seemed too weak and insufficient in the light of the severity of the issue. This has been the case concerning themes like Social Disintegration, Faceless Power and Transformations, Dialogues in Seemingly Impossible Situations and others. In order to work more fruitfully with the problem issue they have then brought together work with sociodramatic and group-analytic applications during one and the same conference slot. During this sub-plenary it was clear that integration of the methods is not the same as fusion of them. They are not blended – the two methods are individual but are linked together. The conductors retain the separate identities of group analyst and sociodramatist. Difficult themes demand a range of approaches and a combination of models facilitates a climate of newness, a kind of play-space, which is new for practitioners of varying orientations. It becomes easier to leave stereotyping and stuck patterns of inter-relating.

The action used by sociodramatists is sometimes provoking for group analysts as it is inevitably coupled in analysts' minds with acting out. Here they refer instead to action in the service of the group and it is most closely related to Bion's definition of a work group, that is a group that engages in behaviour towards fulfilling the stated aims of its leader and group members. It is engaged in conscious here-and-now communication. Activity discloses the social structure between the group members by demonstrating their movement and position in space with regard to one another. Movement stimulates energy and awakens body memories in each person and by maximising what feels like natural posture and pace, group members become more aware of what psychological processes are active in them at the moment. Enactment is acting from within - enacting important inner experiences which are within a group member which otherwise may remain difficult if not impossible to express. Narration is a way of describing one's experience in way using the third person perspective. Talking about one's experience, as in a talking group involves distancing in a way action can't. According to what is happening in a group at any given moment sometimes one way is preferable to another. Reflection is our capacity to exercise introspection and the willingness to learn more about our fundamental nature, purpose and essence. Human self-reflection invariably leads to inquiry into the human condition and the essence of humankind as a whole. Their model of working, we realised, can only happen when there is a trustful working relationship between the co-conductors and a holding group climate.

Irit Halponen decided not to talk to us as she had planned but presented a film she had made about the women of the "Machsom Watch". This women's group came into being at the time of the second "Intifada" (2000) when they decided that no-one would again be able to say that we didn't know what was happening. The women had been angered and

frustrated by their own country when they saw how Israeli soldiers were behaving at the checkpoints that the Palestinians living on the West Bank and Gaza were obliged to pass through to visit family, friends, schools and places of work on the other side of the “green line”. They determined that each day they would film at the checkpoints and report to the public on what they saw. There are now 400 women watching what goes on and they have been there every day for 5 years. In the film we saw the power play used by the young soldiers to humiliate the Palestinians. We heard of a pregnant woman whose request to drive through to the hospital to give birth to her baby was refused. She was obliged to birth her child in the car and immediately afterwards, still with the naval cord attached, was forced to climb out of the car to be interrogated. An old man, who could not walk, was refused permission to be driven through. A taxi-driver who offered to take him in his car had his driving licence confiscated. In the back seat of the car transporting the filmmaker was a passenger who could not wear a seatbelt due to a medical condition – the driver was fined 500 NIS and a further 500 NIS due to protesting. A driver’s income is about 40 NIS a day. The women of the “Machsom Watch” want the world to know that they are witnessing such things, which are clearly wrong. They say that Israel is not a dictatorship yet.

Later a Palestinian delegate told us that they are living in an area without trees or flowers or water. They have no electricity or toilets. The schools have no drawings on the walls. Stories of rape and torture are commonplace and normally caring people are numbed by the longstanding period of war – not war – war. No-one knows how to adequately intervene but still we heard of many adequate interventions..

Eyad Hallaq presented a short history of the two Intifadas (1987 and 2000) and his research demonstrating the resulting consequences for Palestinian children. The Military Checkpoints affect children of all ages. It is hard for them to get to school, since each checkpoint may involve a delay of several hours and people on average must pass the checkpoints five times a day to get to school and work. They fear the military. No human rights are respected – people are assaulted, body checked, questioned and taunted, sexually harassed, physically harassed, forced to stand against a wall – humiliation can take many forms. The children have no social life. There is almost no medical care. These events have brought a collective and cumulative trauma to the Palestinian people.

Orit Lavnin-Dgani presented some of the work done by the Coalition of Women for Peace in Israel, a mix of Jewish and Palestinian women (all citizens of Israel), which has become one of the leading voices in Israel, since its founding in November 2000. They advocate for a just and viable peace between Israel and Palestine. She talked about the tours of the wall they organise where visitors are asked to come and evaluate things that they do not usually discuss. She invites discussion not only about “The Other”, but “The Other on the other side of the barrier”. Her point is that the wall is not about defence; it is about oppression and humiliation, aiming to break the spirit of the Palestinian people so that they will give up on their dream.

Perhaps what affected us most in this conference was the plethora of facts and statistics – delivered in a straightforward way – each conveying the magnitude of minutes in everyone’s day of sheer horror and despair. The holding atmosphere enabled us to take in on a cognitive, emotional and even visceral level the meaning of the situation.

Professor Zahava Solomon told us that today, in more than 36 countries around the world, children are the innocent victims of armed conflict. There are currently 300,000 Child Soldiers in the world. She has been involved in research of Palestinian children and Arab children in Israel. There have been particular difficulties in carrying out the research, which had to do with survival issues, practical obstacles, blocked roads and curfews,

targeted roads, ethical dilemmas and neutrality. Most of the interviewed children know someone who has been injured, have witnessed shootings, have inhaled gas – the statistics are between 59 - 75% in regard to these questions. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the normal response to an abnormal situation in children in the Palestinian territories. The children are growing up in an atmosphere of terror and have dreams about being hunted by soldiers. She stated that 66% of the children are diagnosed with PTSD of which 10% suffer severely from the condition. This latter group are diagnosed with Complex PTSD, which involves permanent personality changes – these symptoms are not transient. The children have a premature awareness of death, they have a foreshortened future – they age before their time even physiologically. War may even undermine their moral development since their views on stealing and moral reasoning are affected.

In summing up Zahava stated that forgiveness has been shown to have a positive impact on both physical and psychological health. McCullough et al (1997) defined forgiveness as involving three different motivational changes: (a) one's motivation to retaliate against the offender decreases; (b) one's motivation to uphold separation from the offender decreases, and (c) one's motivation for conciliation and positive thinking about the offender increases even though the offender has caused pain. However she also pointed out that as Enright and Coyle (1998) have formulated that; forgiveness is not condoning, pardoning, denying, forgetting, excusing or reconciling.

Gloria Batkin Kahn chaired one of the most powerful panel discussions in which we participated: the presenters were Dr Hilda Wengrower, Ilana Razi Ben-Meir (Chairperson of the Israel Association of Psychodrama) and Dr Eyad Hallaq.



Illustration: Panel chair Gloria Batkin Khan (4<sup>th</sup> from left), one of the conference organisers Pnina Rappaport (2<sup>nd</sup> from left) Hilda Wengrower (2<sup>nd</sup> from right), Ilana Razi Ben-Meir (3<sup>rd</sup> from right-front) Eyad Hallaq (3<sup>rd</sup> from left) & friends

Hilda Wengrower, originally from Argentina, now living in Israel, presented her research findings on the mutual images immigrant children and Israeli children have of each other "Thinking and Researching Intergroup Conflicts: A Comprehensive Approach". She used Complexity Theory and the Theory of Social Constructivism to look at (1) the macro (societal level) and the micro (individual / small group level) and (2) the causes and effects and the need for multidisciplinary understanding. She stated that intergroup conflict might be understood as a struggle for construction or preservation of identity; a struggle for power and resources (material or symbolic). Making reference to Norbert Elias theories she described the phenomenon of the establishing of outsiders when the newcomer is felt to be a threat. She talked about the narcissism of minor differences and the fear of "pollution" by something "stinking" or "dirty". The anthropologist Mary Douglas has described this expression of the other as dirty as a wish to return to the previous situation and the newcomer is stigmatised. In working with the children Hilda had the children make up stories and then write monologues for their characters. She asked them to describe what they felt whilst working on their story. In one story about a newcomer being met aggressively the aggressor felt remorse afterwards and the spectator described the social pressure to reject the newcomer. A newcomer was asked, "If you were a member of the established group how would you behave?" She replied, "If I were popular I would reject the newcomer, if not I would befriend her – you never know she might become more popular than me!" The immigrant is often presented by teachers as needy and without assets, which awakens the rejecting response. Where the newcomer is invited to tell the established group what they are interested in and what they are good at, they awaken the children's curiosity and a desire to come closer and accept them.

Ilana Razi Ben-Meir had prepared to lead a 1½ hour long workshop and had instead 20 minutes to present her therapeutic intervention "When a Monster Showed up at the Safe House – a Psychodramatic Intervention with Kibbutz Metzger Children." In December 2002, a terrorist penetrated the Kibbutz boundary defence barrier, under the darkness of night cover and killed a Kibbutz member who happened to be walking along a road and went on to enter a house and kill a mother with her two children who were sleeping. Ilana was invited by the Mate Menashe municipality psychological services to run a short-term therapeutic group (3-4 months) using psychodrama and expressive media with the Kibbutz children's group to help them cope with the trauma. The aim of the project was the prevention of PTSD through processing the traumatic experience and the re-establishment of a sense of safety. Two art therapists also participated in this project, which included working with the children from first to sixth grades. In total, five groups participated; the first grade to third grade children participated in an intermodal expressive arts therapy model using Psychodrama combined with Art, and the remaining groups were given the option of working through Art or Psychodrama.

When the 3 months of work ended, the team initiated a group meeting with the children and their parents to conclude the project and say farewell. At this meeting Ilana and her colleagues presented an exhibition of the work created during the project and a Metaphorical Psychodramatic activity representing the group story.

### MEETING THE DANGER, ENCOUNTERING THE MONSTERS, REBUILDING SECURITY AND CONTINUITY AND RE-FINDING STRENGTH

The psychodramatic work was based mainly on the metaphorical and imaginary world of the animals. Ilana came with one general concept, as summed up in the title above. Different approaches using psychodramatic and creative metaphorical language were used according to the age of the children, the specific dynamics of each group, the degree of the resistance and the level of the consolidation in the 5 different groups. The intervention took place for one and a half hours each week in the centre house of the

children, where they spend their time every day between 13.00 - 16.00, under the umbrella of the non-formal education.

Ilana's approach was to encourage the children to first build and create a safe hiding-place for themselves as animals who found themselves in a frightening and dangerous situation and afterwards to meet the monsters.



Illustration: building a safe hiding-place for attacked animals

The groups used several materials, created masks, invented stories and psychodramatically enacted them with special emphasis on reversing roles between the monster / aggressor and the victim / aggressed.

Here are two of the stories.

The first one was invented by two girls aged 11 years. This story was metaphorically the nearest story in this group (which was of the older children participating in the project) to the traumatic event of the killing of the mother and her two little children in their beds in the middle of the night. It is significant to mention that the two girls were very good friends and did not separate throughout all the activities. They were the first to tell and play their story and to play it after a few meetings, and at the same time they were most of the time wearing laughter and chuckle masks. In this story we can clearly see that the traumatic event has injured the children's belief in their parents as their ultimate protectors and providers of safety – the parents are not seen as secure and the children have developed an omnipotent defence. The children need to be brave and even to take care of their parents.



Illustration: the two photos above relate to the first of the children's stories

“Once upon a time there was a mother tiger and a baby tiger. They lived in the desert in a cave beneath a cliff. Every day the mother tiger went out to get food, while the baby stayed in the cave. One day the mother went to fetch food and on the way she was wounded by a shot from a hunter. The baby tiger stayed in the cave and didn't understand why his mother didn't come back. He decided to go out, and this was the first time! He wanted to look for his mother. The little tiger went to look for his mother and on his way he had a very scary encounter with a big tiger. The big tiger ran after the little one, who escaped back into his cave. In the cave he met his mother, who had disappeared, and had returned. She was lying down wounded. The baby tiger took care of his mother and they lived happily and well until this day.”

The second example was told and played by two 6 year old boys. In this story we can see the strengths of the friendship and the mutual help and the playfulness of the children as a strong defence against frightening and dangerous existence. This tight bonding is probably stronger in a collective society like a kibbutz.

### The mutual / common defence

“One day the tiger walked and climbed up a cliff. From far away he watched a danger. “Oh dear!” he told to himself, “the danger is coming closer what shall I do?” He saw a hawk sitting on the same cliff, and he asked him: “Hawk, what are you doing on my cliff?” The hawk did not have time to answer because the danger arrived. It was the hunter. The tiger and the hawk defended themselves together. “What an excellent team we are”, they said to themselves. The tiger asked the hawk if he wanted help him. Then they went together to the house of the tiger and they played there always together. Since then they became good friends and never separated.”



Illustration: playing with the mask of a monster: "so who is the monster really like?" The mask was prepared after hearing a poem written by Lea Shilon: "A Difficult Question". The sentence that is quoted is the last one in the poem.

The third presenter in this panel was Eyad Hallaq who was to have presented with two colleagues. Due to the re-arranged programme Ruth Feldman and Miri Keren were not able to be present. Once again he had very little time to present the results of his research programme, "Assessing Post-Traumatic Distress in Infants and Young Children: A Multi-Dimensional Approach". He warned for the life-long effects on the fear system and stress response in the children he has seen. By using a multi-factorial assessment including cultural, community, parent-child relationship and the child's biological disposition he described the dismal situation in which these children are existing. His presentation included many photographs of the children and charts describing measurements and statistics.

There was a heated discussion in the 20 minutes available after these three presentations. Perhaps because of the unbearably detailed information about the suffering of children and adults on both sides of the green line, the group had to manage extraordinarily difficult issues concerning transgressions and lack of ethics. A young Israeli participant heatedly threw out accusations addressed to the Palestinian presenter. Although the young man spoke rudely and aggressively it was easy to understand the provocation when an academic mask is used to conceal a political statement. Should therapists in Israel compare or add their statistics to compete in demonstrating their obvious suffering? Should we only measure suffering statistically? What would happen if the dialogue could occur more directly? Still we feel there was meaning to hearing the specific traumas raised in the panel presentations. The group contained and managed the explosive feelings in a mature and wise way. This was just one example of the ways in which these issues were held throughout the conference.

The last presentation I would like to mention here was made by Ivan Urlic and discussed by Earl Hopper, "To Overcome Conflicts: Creating Space for Compassion, Empathy and Forgiveness in the Process of Reconciliation".



Illustration:Presenter- Ivan Urlic (left), Panel Chairperson - Tom Hamroque, and discussant - Earl Hopper (right)

Ivan from Split, Croatia, remained after the war and researched the effects of war on the people. Ivan took up specifically the concept of the “space collapse”. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet the unimaginable has become reality but going through war leaves inner turmoil. The state of war or more accurately the state of no war- no peace was chronic. Those attacked wanted to shame the attackers and the shame was often over-shadowed by guilt. Peoples life-space had collapsed - the quality of relational space is of course vital to our existence. Space had to be produced between people in a situation where there is an asphyxial pressure on communicating. Potential space is related to real space but in Ivan’s experience a lack of perceived potential space leads to suicide. He referred to the South African film U-Carmen eKhayelitsha as an illustration of his point. He listed the stages of forgiveness: Hurting; Hating- seeking revenge; Healing – letting go of a better past; and Honesty. Reconciliation involves moving from disorganisation towards reorganisation. Recollecting a hurting event, moving through these phases and recognising the undeserved wounds enables an enlargement of the space for relationships. Truce and reconciliation enables us to move on. Vengeance leads only to revenge.

Earl responded by talking about the smallness of shame. One feels so small when shamed, cast into a state of what could be called psychic eczema, where the skin is too tender to be touched. The desire to shame someone else arises - to make someone else - “another” (sounds very like “mother”) feel what you feel yourself. Great healers convey that they can feel this sense of smallness. In Earl’s description of the 4th basic assumption, concerning flight into massification or fusion, the fantasy is created that we live in purity – that all that is strange is extruded. The dominion of the dead, he said, is the only thing that is pure. Earl urged us to celebrate impurity or authentic diversity rather than painting everything white or having just one sound. To be able to do that we need to mourn together – a message he has conveyed now on a number of occasions. It seems it is hard to do.

A high point of the conference was the panel presentation of the world famous Kashmiri conductor Zubin Mehta, Israeli violinist Pinchas Zukerman and the young Palestinian pianist Saleem Abboud Ashkar followed by their unforgettable concert, together with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra at the Jerusalem Theatre. In his panel presentation Saleem mentioned that his father who had helped him to accept western classical music, something which people of his culture normally do not, now worked to help other children from the Arab culture by bringing them to concerts in Nazareth. The music has a universal quality and gives these children the opportunity to practice and play on a world stage – to belong to the world.

On each day of the conference were two large groups – one with a group analytic orientation conducted by Earl Hopper and another with a Playback Theatre orientation conducted by Aviva Apel-Rosenthal. Delegates were also assigned to a small group, which met each day. Here many voices were heard, people were listened to and seen, each presenting their own perspective. In the large group we attended, conducted by Earl the atmosphere was holding and generous for the most part. Separation was hard and the group dissolved in chaos. The conductor was not allowed by the group to bring calm closure.



Illustration: some members of the roundtable small group: conductor Elisabeth Rothschild (far right, front row)

The roundtable small group, conducted by Elisabeth Rothschild, in which we participated, provided us with a place to respond to the powerful plenary presentations. Several shared earlier experiences of being in a room next door to a room where rape or torture was heard as it went on. Group members talked of their guilt and shame connected to their own passivity not knowing how to respond adequately and too numbed to react. We reflected that we are all soldiers and we could feel that living in another country, knowing what is going on is also being in a “room next door” and as yet don’t know how to respond.

One Palestinian woman in the large group said, “When you go home tell your family that we are human”. The comment brought a round of protests from a number of members of the group. “We who are here know that!” There followed another response to the Palestinian request to “tell them we are human...” from an Israeli man, who stood up and answered her dramatically: “I promise you, tomorrow I will go and tell my children that yesterday I met a human Palestinian”. Ilana then stood up and said: “I have never stopped saying to my children that Palestinians are human beings. I will go and tell my children; yesterday I met a human Palestinian who was invisible and became visible and thank you for becoming visible.”

The dialogue reminded Kate of the comments of refugees she met in language classes when she first moved to Sweden. It was so hard for them to meet Swedes who for the most part socialise in their own homes. The simple act of enabling them to meet Swedes represented an unbelievably profound change. Recognising the power we have to make life easier for “someone” who has been made to feel like “no-one” in simple every day contact, anyhow might free us up from the overwhelming sense of hopelessness and helplessness which is evoked on hearing the grim details of a war-torn country. Some of us work at a governmental level and others with the smallest among our populations. This was a truly inspiring conference, which brought about a sense of being able to change the status quo, not in a grandiose way, but each in our own way according to our

own opportunities and with our own methods. We hope very much that there will be future conferences of this sort.

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