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Psychoanalysis and Peacemaking in Traumatized Societies: Healing History

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My presentation is a combination of analysis and prescription. I stray off the psychoanalytic path in that I am inclined to be actively prescriptive—reflecting my diplomatic, policy background. Vamik Volkan* and I have participated in many exercises in what we call “track two diplomacy,” unofficial interaction with representatives of groups on conflict. Learning a great deal from Vamik and other colleagues over the last 25 to 27 years has made me feel more and more confident about the theoretical basis for interventions—not that there has been a great deal of peacemaking but there has been some advance in the theory of peace-building.

Vamik and I have participated in track two work including a major effort in the Egyptian-Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also in the US-Soviet conflict over the years. In the latter case one of the conceptual and cognitive contributions was developing the idea of the need for enemies and the psychology of enmity. In the need for enemies—and of course allies—but particularly enemies, once the Soviets began to understand this concept, they were very, very clever. They actually had KGB officers join the International Society of Political Psychology who started to give papers on the subject at the annual scientific meetings. The enemy psychology idea also appeared in speeches of Soviets from Gorbachev on down. The message was that we understand the psychology of enmity, and we have decided that we are not going to be your enemy anymore. We are not going to play this game. You want our rockets—take our rockets.

Of course, America was stunned by this Soviet position. Our leaders did not study psychoanalysis. Although, ironically, President Ronald Reagan, who was not given credit for much wisdom, actually had more wisdom than most of his subordinates on this subject. His willingness to disarm and agree to complete nuclear disarmament was remarkable at the time. He was not allowed to do it. Neither was Gorbachev.

In any event there is a record of linkage between theory and practice in diplomacy and while I must confess that I have not immersed myself in the works of Sigmund Freud, whom I admire enormously—indeed it is great honor to have been invited to participate in this part of the 150th anniversary of Freud’s birthday celebration in Vienna—I was fascinated by his theories of psychodynamics. Especially appealing was his suggestion that beyond its use in therapy for individuals, psychoanalysis be used as an instrument of

research. Thus it is as an instrument of research that I have tried to apply it to ethnic and sectarian, large group conflict especially where there has been a lot of killing--of significant traumatic loss.

What Vamik described as large group conflicts are identity conflicts—conflicts involving the collective sense of self—explained by psychology of the self. One of the concepts I learned some 25 years ago was that of narcissistic rage—the kind of rage that an individual or a society feels when his or its sense of self-worth has been assaulted either violently, physically or through verbal assault or insult sustained over a period of time. The natural instinct is to react in vigorous defense of the self. If the author of the insult or aggression is stronger than the individual or nation under attack, then the resultant aggression may be displaced on another, less strong group. In an individual, that may mean kicking the cat when he or she has had a fight with his wife or husband. In a group conflict, it may mean picking on a weaker group that has not actually earned the rage. Frankly, narcissistic rage is what makes the world go round. This is the history of humankind.

All the ethnic and sectarian conflicts we have been dealing with in the last 25 years—Vamik, Gunduz Aktan** and I have been working on Turkish-Armenian, -Greek and -Kurdish issues-- all these conflicts have had a history of hurts, a memory of hurts that have been passed from generation to generation. Unhealed wounds from history—wounds to the self-concept, to the sense of worth that endure because the authors of those wounds or their descendents have never acknowledged them, never acknowledged the injustice of the hurts, never apologized, are what we must study and address.

Believe me, talking about apology is not something you do with the tough guys in traditional diplomacy. Tough guys do not apologize. In Washington DC, there is a slogan that says, “Never explain; never apologize.” But we have been finding that those nations which have been guilty of aggression, of inflicting hurts and which have the moral strength to acknowledge the hurts they have inflicted on other individuals and nations and express remorse can actually transform the relationship with their victims.

Now specifically, I would like to speak about the Middle East. This is what I call my mother conflict. More specifically as it has evolved in recent years the Jewish-Muslim-Christian conflict or what could be called the savagery in the Abrahamic family. Recently there was an op-ed piece by a regular columnist in the Washington Post, Charles Krauthammer, which moved me a great deal. He quoted former Iranian President Rafsanjani saying, apparently, that the use of a nuclear bomb on Israel would leave nothing on the ground, whereas a similar bomb from Israel would only damage a portion of the Muslim world. Krauthammer wrote in barely concealed despair saying that the logic is impeccable, the intention is clear, a nuclear attack would effectively destroy tiny Israel. While a retaliatory attack by a dying Israel would have no major effect on an Islamic civilization of a billion people stretching from Mauritania to Indonesia.

It really struck me because the imagery of tiny, vulnerable Israel—Krauthammer is a very politically conservative Jew—was not his usual defiant tone. The thing about the more

vigorous or militant defenders of Israel is that they practically never show any empathy or sympathy for the hurts that the Palestinian people have endured over the decades. This has been particularly true as the resistance to the occupation since 1967 through the first and the second intifadas including the horrors of suicide bombers has grown. The bitter irony in this op-ed piece which essentially anticipates the battle of Armageddon with a nuclear armed Iran contains no acknowledgement that he and other writers like him may have had a role in provoking the defiant calls, such as that of President Ahmadinejad, that Israel be wiped off the map.

Predictably, Ahmadinejad's threat has set in motion planning for preemptive military action against Iran. Certainly contingency planning for such action in the U.S. is going on all the time. And certainly it is going on in Israel. There is a growing sense of foreboding that the Iranians will not yield, that Ahmadinejad will not change, that Rafsanjani's clinical description of how the nuclear destruction of Israel might result in some retaliatory nuclear harm to the Muslim world—but not much considering there are 1.2 billion Muslims--dominates Iranian thinking.

And so we are at a very depressing stage now. There are, in part, political reasons to explain the threats. The Iranian president is said by his Iranian critics to be constantly trying to generate populist support at home. He won his election because of an allegedly corrupt clerical elite. Ahmadinejad was able to mobilize resentment against that corruption. On the American side we have an American president who has already initiated an unprovoked war with Iraq on a very flawed basis of intelligence reports. And he is also clearly becoming weaker politically every month as poll numbers come out. Thus, there is a gnawing concern that he might be feel compelled to take military action for domestic political reasons or because he has a way of looking at the world which is based on his Christian fundamentalist view that the world is divided between good and evil. Iran had already been assigned to the "axis of evil." And there is a strong belief in Armageddon and the end of times and the Book of Revelations that is well-rooted in a significant portion of Protestant America—evangelical or more specifically, fundamentalist America.

So it is a time to worry. I don't have any simple solution, but I think it is important to point out that one of the big dilemmas is that there is very little evidence of empathy. And in fact it is doubly sad if not potentially tragic in that there is a history of a Jewish-Muslim symbiosis going back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad that has been lost in the later centuries as the Muslim military advances and political successes started shrinking with the retreat of the Ottoman Empire—twice from the gates of this city, Vienna. There is a history of Muslim loss here. In fact Muslim imperialism was counter-attacked by Christian imperialism. It seems ludicrous to speak about Muslim and Christian imperialism. It is not exactly what the prophets of each religion had in mind. But once the prophets died, politics took over. While religious slogans have been heard in a good deal of the history of political conflict, the dynamics have been far from religious. The fights have had to do with the arrogance and presumptuousness of powerful men willing to squander wealth and lives of soldiers and civilians to expand their power or assure their survival.

The point I would like to make here is that one thing that is not being discussed as the world watches this potential tragedy in Israeli-Iranian or American-Iranian, or Middle Eastern tragedy if military means are used, is that it is a drama. But there is no discussion of the Christian role in it. I just referred to Christian imperialism. Of course there has been Christian imperialism. When Napoleon occupied the Nile Delta in 1798, it could be said that this was the beginning of Christian imperialism in the modern era. It was called European imperialism by post-Enlightenment, secular scholars, journalists and politicians. But to Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists and Chinese of varying religions, it was Christian imperialism.

Fast forward to today and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I want to discuss the moral challenge to Israel in its relationship with the Palestinian people and the Arabs in its neighboring states, Iran and the rest of the Muslim world. Twenty percent of the citizens of Israel are Palestinian Arabs. Then of course there is the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza. I contend that the defiance of Israel and its uncritical supporters in the Diaspora—and I hasten to add that there are many Jews in Israel and abroad who are critical of the policies Israel chooses to defend itself and survive—is harmful to Israel’s interests. There is strong criticism of Israel’s lack of empathy for the Palestinians from the liberal, humanistic sector of the Jewish community, but it has not been able to prevail at the highest levels of policy-making.

What is not discussed because the world does not know how to discuss it, nor do Jews and Christians, specifically, is the fact that the narcissistic rage of Israel displaced on the Arabs and Muslims before and after the state was established was really earned initially in the Jewish experience in Christian Europe through the centuries. This phenomenon has been traced by Biblical scholars back to the wording of the Gospels, particularly, the Fourth Gospel of John. And to a lesser extent to Matthew. This wording had Jesus saying to the Jews in a ludicrous way, if I may say so, that they are the children of the Devil. Now although there is no definitive biography of Jesus, what consensus of historians and theologians we have affirms that Jesus was a pious, observant Jew. Yet the wording and translations of certain Gospels and other parts of the New Testament have left the impression that the Jews were a separate people. The accounts of events leading up to and including the Passion and his crucifixion suggested that Jesus was a “Christian” being oppressed and resisted by the Jews. But almost everyone involved at the time was Jewish, except for the Romans. “Christianity” did not come into being as a name for the Jesus movement of Jews and later Gentiles for several decades after the crucifixion.

It is frankly inconceivable that the Jesus we know in the synoptic Gospels i.e. Matthew, Luke and Mark, the Jesus of the social gospel, of love, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness, would condemn his people—“the Jews”—as children of the Devil. The Gospel of John was written by an author as yet unknown perhaps seventy years after the crucifixion. Scholars have speculated about intra-Jewish political pressures affecting the Jesus movement while the great majority of Jews chose not to accept Jesus as the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible. This could have inspired the polemical language in the Gospel of John. Furthermore external stresses had to be a factor since the

Romans continued to brutally repress Jewish resistance to their rule and indeed destroyed the Second Temple in 70 CE and exiled the Jews from Jerusalem and Judea.

This is not simply a scholarly debate of no consequence for real life. This is because this polemical anti-Jewish language in the Gospels laid the basis for a dogma in the evolving Church that became strongly rooted when St. Augustine wrote that Christians should not kill the Jews. Rather, they should be allowed to live, but with their heads bowed low in a state of permanent degradation. So that they never forget the crime they committed in killing Christ. That literally became the dogma throughout all of Christendom in Western Europe and the Eastern Church centered in Constantinople. It also became the basis for episodic persecution of the Jews, pogroms, murders, quasi-genocidal massacres because they carried the permanent stain, in perpetuity and collectively, for the murder of Jesus Christ. That is a terrible burden for a people to bear.

It absolutely requires this kind of analysis to understand how this history of brutal anti-Judaism in the New Testament and anti-Semitism evolved throughout Christendom in Europe ending up in the obscenity of the Holocaust. Where did it start? There has to be some explanation.

It is important to address this because when modern Zionism got its start in the late 19th century—again in this city of Vienna, when Theodore Herzl launched his movement-- It was not justified as an attack of narcissistic rage against Christendom for its crimes against the Jewish people, but it was a quiet assumption that frankly Jews simply would never be respected, never be accepted, never be assimilated no matter how hard they tried. In Germany they tried so hard to be the best kind of Germans, but they never could be finally accepted. And so the Zionists decided that they have to go someplace else and look after themselves. The Christians will never accept them as equal, valuable or, God forbid, beloved human beings.

As I said, Christendom really earned the narcissistic rage of the Ashkenazi Jews. And here I distinguish between the Ashkenazi—European—Jews and the Sephardic Jews who lived under Muslim rule. The latter had an entirely different experience. I explain in a very simple way that for Muslims, Jews were never a problem “to be solved.” They were part of the neighborhood. They and the Christians were protected minorities. In times of stress they could be repressed—as other minorities were repressed—but there was not a dogmatic, theological reason to make their lives miserable. And indeed there were important periods of history—Al-Andalus in medieval Spain being the most glorious example--of a collaborative cooperation in civilization building that was essentially a Jewish and Muslim partnership. This collaboration literally laid the basis for the Renaissance in Christian Europe. So the psychological distinction in being Jewish under Christian rule and being Jewish under Muslim rule is very, very important.

I want to cite a very poignant description by a Jewish colleague of mine and Vamik’s named Ofira Seliktar who wrote in 1984 about the Holocaust. I treasure it because it is the most painful, poignant statement—and for anyone studying psychodynamics to get

painful, poignant statements are of enormous value in attempts to get to the roots of emotional dysfunction. She wrote:

The Holocaust presents the Jews in Israel a problem—the inability of cognitively understanding the tragedy. The problem of anti-Semitism has always been a puzzling cognitive phenomenon to the Jews. The Holocaust, more than any other violence committed against the Jews is less explicable. The Israelis do not view the Holocaust as only a German atrocity committed against the Jews, but rather a *culmination* of centuries-long persecution of the Jews. Since the Holocaust is perceived as being outside the normative syntax of human relations which cannot be explained in rational terms, it is regarded as a mystical event. This view contributed to the current phenomenon in Israel of mystification of the persecution urge of the Gentile world toward the Jews. Accordingly, the Holocaust is the crucial but not the only indicator of the mystical and congenital spiritual deformation of Gentile society. Totally unrelated to what the Jews are or do, they are singled out to stay apart, condemned to an eternity of almost cosmic loneliness by the unaccepting Gentile world (unpublished).

The value of the utter frankness—the baring of the heart and soul—of the pain that Ofira describes is so important to Gentiles, especially Christians, to understand the depth of the wound and the task of healing that Christendom is almost totally ignorant of. I read this statement once to close colleague of mine in the State Department. He is a Jew, a very close friend, who was to go on to increasingly higher responsibilities in Middle East diplomacy. I read it to him and he started to quietly weep. He was a very secure person. He was not under pressure. His personal life was one success after another. But this statement of Ofira's hit him right where his deepest pain lies. And I think he also cried because a Gentile, a Christian friend, was reading it to him in awe about the depth of the debt that Christendom owes the Jews of Europe.

I have had these frank conversations with Jews, with people I know well, to constantly reinforce this conviction that there is an enormous task for Christendom. I think it is very appropriate to be in Vienna, this major center of Europe, because there is a great leadership responsibility in Europe and all of Christendom. And we have to know about it. We have to care about it, because it affects the way the Israelis think about their future or their fear for their lack of a future. It affects the fact that their rage is undiminished, but intensified against Arabs and Muslims. It also justifies in the minds of the Israeli security establishment the beating up the Palestinians to keep them from—certainly--suicide bombing but also to also keep them from having any chance of military success against the Jewish state. It also explains, in part, the wild and reckless language of the Iranian president in threatening the destruction of Israel. This is reactive counter-defiance. We have to deal with this rage and counter-rage as the challenges to our psychologically sensitive diplomatic initiatives

I am personally engaged in my retirement from the Foreign Service in a number of applications of cognitive therapeutic approaches to try convince Jews that Christians can understand the burden of history and the enormity of their (our) debt. For instance by

communicating the importance of the Bible research I have been noting. This approach is inspired, in part, by Judith Lewis Hermann who is a clinician--a psychiatrist--at Harvard Medical School, who wrote *Trauma and Recovery*, which is conceptually available to the lay public. In dealing with victims of violent trauma individually, the book explains how psychiatrists, physicians, healers, social workers, and even police try to get victims of traumatic loss to get a grip on what happened to them. By cognitively explaining how the attack happened, that their story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, that the victim is safe now, that the nightmares and the dissociative experiences, and the panic attacks are not really necessary any more, because the story had an end.

But the tragedy in large group conflicts—Israel, the Palestinians, Iran--is that the end is not in sight. The challenge as I see it is to find ways to communicate to Jews in general but also to remind Muslims and Jews how essentially harmonious their relationship was from the time of the Prophet, despite a serious political—not theological—conflict in Medina. The Prophet of Islam conceived of Christianity and Judaism as part of one broad community of monotheists with the Muslims. Further, the holy books of Jews and Christians were part of a great *Um al-Kitab*—the Mother Book that God kept in heaven and sent down to humankind in three segments. First, God sent the Hebrew Bible. When the Jews did not follow the rules as they were set out, he sent down the *Injil*—the Gospels or New Testament, and Jesus to proclaim this book as the new Prophet. And when the Christians did not follow the rules as Jesus prescribed them, he sent down the Qur’an as the final installment—part three—of the Great Book. But they three peoples are all part of the same community.

Politics being what it is, after the Prophet Muhammad died, competition, imperialism, conquest ensued and words were put into the Prophet’s mouth in terms of traditions that are totally inconsistent with what is known about his attitudes towards the monotheistic communities—the People of the Book. These words and political conflicts set off antagonisms and the false claims that polemicists use now in the Muslim, Christian and Jewish conflicts to justify a history of antagonism and hatred that contradicts the Prophet’s view. There is remarkable similarity in this phenomenon to the aggressive words attributed to Jesus in the New Testament and in the polemics between the Jews of the Jesus movement and the Jews who chose not to join it.

I guess what this all boils down to is that the work of diplomacy that is psychologically and psychoanalytically informed requires study of sacred literature and the history of human relationships. It requires an understanding that claims of the Muslim extremists—Bin Laden and the others—are totally un-Islamic. It requires study on the part of secular intellectuals who never have bothered to study sacred literature to bone up, understand and be able to debate with the extremists and point out where they are simply falsifying history and actually being heretical against what the Prophet Muhammad actually stood for.

These are the tasks facing us. Time is rather short because of the dynamics of leaders and their survival could mean there are just a few months left before a military engagement takes place with Iran. We have to get to the Iranians. We have to engage with Iranian

clerics. And teach them all this liberating knowledge that I am only able to hint at just now.

Thank you.

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