

When our Shadow Makes us Blind and Deaf to Suffering: The power of a cultural complex in Israel

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Abstract

When facing information about life under continuous trauma caused by humans, there is a part of the psyche that resists knowing. Various mechanisms of denial and disavowal are used in order to avoid knowing. Drawing on the concepts of collective shadow and cultural complex in the Israeli context, this paper examines the obstacles to seeing, hearing, and acknowledging the human experience of trauma suffered by Palestinian people. This paper offers a discussion of the threat that knowing presents to the conscious mind, and asks under which conditions will we be able to face this knowledge? How is it possible to agree to know, when the suffering is caused by our own group, and in our name? In light of Erich Neumann's idea of "New Ethics" based on taking responsibility for one's shadow, the paper looks at shadow projection processes that compromise the possibility of acknowledging the other's suffering. This paper describes the archetypal themes and historic processes that are at the basis of the Israeli cultural complexes of victimhood and power and tries to explain how the collective trauma of the past is used in the service of denying and justifying the suffering perpetrated in the present. It also offers a description of the effect that socio-political processes in contemporary Israel regarding the ongoing occupation of Palestinian lives have on the ability to take responsibility for our shadow and acknowledge the other's suffering.

In October 2015 I was asked by Amnesty International to comment on a documentary film screened in Jerusalem cinemas named "Shivering in Gaza" (2015). The film tells the story of a trauma treatment intervention conducted in Gaza by a Dutch therapist, Jan Andreae. The title, "Shivering in Gaza" elicited extreme reactions in the Israeli public screening the documentary and its screening had been banned in the south of Israel and was seriously threatened in Jerusalem.

I would like to consider the events surrounding this screening as examples of a collective psychological process of dealing with shadow contents in the Israeli context. I am writing as an Israeli analyst trying to understand collective psychological processes in the society that I am part

of. I have no intention of analyzing Palestinian society, and I do not pretend to offer a balanced description of the two sides. I believe that one should look at one's own shadow.

C.G. Jung's concept of the shadow relates to a part of the psyche that consists of the tendencies the ego considers to be unwanted (Jung, CW 9.I, 1959/1968, p. 284, para. 513). These are the parts that we judge to be bad and shameful.

On a collective level, the culture's unwanted characteristics develop throughout the history of the group and are expressed in the values of the culture, as well as in cultural products such as myths, legends, and art (Neumann, 1990). The group's unwanted parts become the content of the shadow, projected in order to eliminate all that is bad and evil and maintain the goodness and cohesion of the group (Shalit, 2004).

The archetypal shadow is the dark side of culture and of human nature, repressed and rejected from the light of consciousness, and considered evil (Jung, CW 9.I, 1959/1968, para. 567, p. 322). This evil is what the ego experiences as harmful and damaging to its continuity and sense of safety. The ego, as the center of conscious personality, developed within the collective values that are transmitted through education, and identifies with those values, thus experiencing contradictions to them as threatening, and therefore evil (Neumann, 1990). Society, beginning in early infancy, teaches the growing child what is considered morally "good" and what is considered "bad" and inappropriate (Neumann, 1954; Neumann, 1990).

The shadow contents are alienated from consciousness because they form a threat to a person's or a group's self-perception of being good and living according to a moral code with high values, and so the shadow contents tend to be projected on the other, who is perceived as evil, and thus dangerous (Jung, CW 9.II, 1959, para. 15 p. 9; Neumann, 1990). These dynamics are characteristic of Neumann's "Old Ethics." In his "Depth Psychology and New Ethics" (1990), written in Tel-Aviv during WWII while the Holocaust was going on in Europe, Erich Neumann presents three forms of ethics, and their development in the individual psyche and the collective psyche, in regard to the collective. The first form is the collective group ethics, characteristic of a state of "primal unity" (Neumann, 1990, p. 59) of undifferentiated consciousness, in which the group and the individual are one. It is a state of unconscious existence, in which there is group responsibility, but no individual responsibility. The second form, evolving during history and representing the differentiation of the conscious from the unconscious, is the "Old Ethics." In this form there is a clear distinction between good and evil, defined by collective laws and values which informs individual moral judgements. Under this form of ethics, the differentiation of the conscious from the unconscious creates the distinction between good and bad, and elicits the need to deal with what is considered bad or evil. These mechanisms are suppression (*Unterdrückung*) in which the ego sacrifices personality characteristics and tendencies which are not in line with its moral values, judging them as bad and placing them outside, and repression (*Verdrängung*), in which these characteristics are alienated from the conscious ego but keep acting independently in the unconscious leading to shadow life, in a way that might be very dangerous, when this shadow is

projected on the other. These collective values are the base of the conscience that dictates the individual's moral decisions. The third form is the "New Ethics," which involves acknowledgment of the shadow side and the evil within, and taking responsibility for the conscious parts of the psyche as well as for the unconscious shadow parts.

When confronted with our own shadow acts, various means are taken in order to avoid awareness of our shameful and hurtful deeds. These means will be discussed in the next pages, within the Israeli context.

In the spirit of these ideas, I will try to suggest an understanding of the reasons that make the screening of "Shivering in Gaza" and the human experience that it brings to our awareness, intolerable for the Israeli conscious.

The attempts to prevent the screening can be understood as an example of "actively wanting not to know" (Sharona Komem, personal communication, 2008). It is different from not wanting to know, which can be a rather passive process. Wanting not to know forces us to make an active effort not to let information reach our consciousness or deny information that evades this attempt at complete avoidance. This process lies within Neumann's (1990) explanation following Freud's term (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 438) suppression.

In contemporary Israel, with all the available information about the atrocities of occupation, it becomes more and more difficult not to know, and requires stronger psychological measures of denial and disavowal of the Israeli acts, and of their effect on Palestinians lives.

In his book "States of Denial: Knowing about atrocities and suffering," the Israeli/British sociologist of South African origins Stanley Cohen (2001) asks what do we do with the notion of suffering of others and what does this knowledge do to us. In the case of Palestinian suffering and Israeli knowledge, the answer involves complex mechanisms. For Cohen, denial is the term describing people's way of not knowing what they know, or ignoring the implications of the facts, finding rationalizations. For Freud, denial or disavowal (*verleugnung*) is a defense mechanism that serves the refusal to recognize traumatic reality perception. This process lies in the basis of psychosis (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 118-119). Cohen (2001) describes an array of denial responses to information that is threatening to individuals, societies, or organizations: repression, disavowal, ignoring, re-interpretation. If the information is registered, there is denial of its moral, emotional, or cognitive implications by neutralizing or normalizing. Cohen describes the reactions that reports about the torture of Palestinian detainees received in Israeli society: denying that the events happened, discrediting the reporting organizations, renaming the events as something other than torture, and justification on grounds of security. In other words, the information is well known.

In his comprehensive discussion of various forms of denial used by victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, Cohen (2001) elaborates on the feelings of shame, guilt, and loyalty experienced

by the citizens of a perpetrator country. He mentions a global reason for denial: the inability to face unpleasant truths. When these truths have to do with deeds done by our own society, they involve complex feelings compromising the readiness to know. Jessica Benjamin (2015) writes that acknowledgment of the harm done to the other can pose a great threat to one's own identity and to the narrative of one's own suffering.

Back to "Shivering in Gaza" screening. On the way to the cinema, a taxi driver told me that the documentary must not be screened as it portrays Israel in a shameful way. When I said that the film is about trauma treatment in Gaza, he told me that Palestinians do not suffer from trauma because they are not human. His statement demonstrates the split that divides humans and non-humans, projecting the shadow onto the Palestinians. Neumann (1990) described the shadow as containing everything bad or sick, asocial, ugly, useless, sexual, animalistic, and infantile. Everything that is opposed to the self-perception of a civilized human. The taxi driver's statement can be viewed as a representation of this split, attributing the non-human parts of the self to the Palestinians. This statement holds a component of reality denial, and calls for understanding of the reason for this disavowal.

On the same day, a Jerusalem municipal council member tried to prevent the screening of the documentary in the Jerusalem cinema, and threatened to sanction it: "I will do anything in my power to prevent screening this false documentary about our soldiers!" (Anderman, October 17, 2015). It is obvious that there is something about the documentary that conscious cannot tolerate and therefore must be eliminated by any means. Her statement presents the group collective ethics, in Neumann's (1990) terms, any doubt or question about the goodness of the collective, the "we" notion, is experienced as dangerous and needs to be fought with all might.

The city council member also wrote: "These days, when Israeli security forces work day and night to defend our security, terrorism assisting organizations such as Amnesty are raising their heads again" (Anderman, October 17, 2015). In fact, the documentary does not mention Israeli soldiers, or Israel. But the council member does not know that, and the facts of reality do not matter to her. This can be seen as an example of the disavowal of reality, along the lines that Cohen (2001) proposes.

The council member's statement, and the taxi driver's words reflect the psychological processes of disavowal and projection of the shadow, characteristic of a state of mind that prevails in Israeli society. This state of mind is rooted in the cultural complexes of extinction versus redemption, as well as power and aggression as opposed to weakness and fear, described by the Israeli analyst Erel Shalit in "The Hero and his Shadow" (2004). Shalit presents the basic sources and myths determining Israeli society: disconnection from the land following 2000 years of exile led to the development of spiritual connectedness between the Jewish people, based on shared beliefs and religious practices, distinguishing them from the people among whom they lived. The loss of the connection to the land led to emphasis of the spiritual component and alienation of the physical component, resulting in weakness of the body and centuries of victimhood. Zionism was

established as an actualization of the redemption motive, which was kept alive over the years in myths, longing and prayers. The Zionist ethos that is influencing the Israeli society today, promotes physical actualization of the spiritual ideas, and emphasizes power as opposed to fear. Weakness and victimhood are of the past, and not to be experienced ever again: *We shall never again go like sheep to slaughter*, stresses the Israeli ethos. There is a split between power and weakness, aggression and victimhood. The weakness is despised and feared, and power is highly valued, and perceived as protection against annihilation. Aggression is justified as unavoidable and necessary for survival. Yet victimhood is used to cultivate a sense of constant fear of maintaining a threatened mode of existence. Shadow parts are split off from consciousness, generating a compensatory reaction. It is an interesting example of the dynamics of a cultural complex.

The concept of the cultural complex (Singer & Kimbles, 2004) tries to explain the group's psychic life. Within the individual realm of psychic life, the complex influences consciousness and prevents adjusting to inner and outer reality, impairs judgment, and compromises human contact (Jacobi, 1959). Similar to individual complexes, cultural complexes are autonomous and have a repetitive character. They have a hold over the individual psyche as well as of the group collective psyche, influencing imagination, behavior, and emotions, setting free powerful irrational forces which are rationalized by the complex. They are not accessible by consciousness, and they tend to accumulate experiences that justify them. They have a bi-polar nature: when a cultural complex is activated, the consciousness of the group identifies with one side of the complex, while the other, the denied shadow part, is projected onto another group. That can be very dangerous. Cultural complexes emerge through the group's experience, history, trauma and memory. They develop out of the interactions between the cultural unconscious and the archetypal psyche on one hand, and with the society's reality of the life of the group—communities, media, education, etc., on the other hand. Under the grip of the cultural complex, perception is distorted, the emotions are intense and the cultural identity is overtaken by the effect of the complex (Singer & Kimbles, 2004). In the case of Israeli society, it seems that the cultural complex of victimhood forms collective identity and defines reality perception, which is sometimes distorted.

Israeli society lives in an ongoing traumatic mode of experiencing reality. This mode has a dissociative nature. Donald Kalsched describes the dissociation as “a trick the psyche plays on itself” (1996, p. 13)—a trick that splits the unbearable experience, and makes part of it inaccessible to conscious, thus leaving elements of the traumatic experience in the unconscious where they become shadow parts. The traumatic events and relationship turn into an autonomous complex in the psyche, forcing itself on the conscious mind, as Jung described it (Jung, 1928, in Kalsched, 1996). Thus, trauma has a life of its own inside.

The cultural complex of the threat of annihilation of the Jewish people is based on a constitutional trauma of danger of extinction of the Jewish nation, since Biblical times, coming to a peak with the Holocaust. This constituting trauma that shapes the Israeli identity was already described by many writers (e.g., Gampel, 1992, 2020; Firestone, 2014; Ullman, 2011). The biblical myth of Amalek represents the archetypal aspect of this cultural complex. The bible describes Amalek as

a tribe attacking the people of Israel on their way from Egypt in the desert, the first group to fight the Israelites (Exodus 17:8-15), threatening the existence of the newly emerged nation. Amalek has become a symbol of evil, which the Israelites are commended to annihilate: *"Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them. Put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys,"* God orders King Saul (1 Samuel, 15:3).

In this myth, the threat to the Israelites exists alongside the command to annihilate Amalek; thus, the Israelites are both victims and aggressors. As happens in many myths of fighting groups throughout history, the evil is attributed to the other by the group that tells the story, projecting the shadow of archetypal evil. The history of the Jewish nation is pervaded by threats of extinction of Jewish lives, beliefs or practices, from the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE to the 20th century Holocaust, emphasizing the threat to survival. This constitutional traumatic mode is alive in the Israeli collective unconscious, and is sustained in the collective conscious public discourse by means of mass media, political agendas and the educational system beginning in kindergarten. For example, many high school children participate in journeys to concentration camps in Poland, journeys that are organized by the Israeli ministry of education, under the imperative to remember and not to forget, and the ethos of "Never again," which are widespread in Israeli society. At the same time, Arab school students in Israel do not learn about the "Nakba," the Palestinian disaster following 1948 war. The notion of the threat of annihilation and extinction of the Jewish people and the state of Israel is used to justify policies and acts. For example- the law of return (1950)¹ grants Israeli citizenship to any person who has a Jewish parent or grandparent, to their children and spouse, but not to other people who wish to become citizens. The Jewish immigration to Israel is called Aliya- ascent, presenting the symbolic value of the act, and the emphasis on the Jewish character of the nation state. In this line of action, Palestinians, who were born on the land which is now the state of Israel and were deported during the 1948 war, are denied the right to return to their homes.

The American-Israeli Jungian psychotherapist and a Jewish Rabbi Tirtza Firestone (2014) described very similar ideas about what she named the Jewish cultural complex, based on tribal survival trauma. Firestone (2014) describes the Jewish cultural complex as a primal sense of threat and fear for survival, combined with massive traumatic events leading to merging of lived reality with co-constructed mythology. This combination creates extreme defensiveness and a strong need to hold to the longed-for homeland as a sanctuary from the world. Firestone presents a profound discussion of the way in which the daimon of trauma (Kalsched, 1996) uses the Israeli power to protect the traumatized group psyche, and of the identification with the aggressor dynamics that lead to becoming perpetrators towards the Palestinians.

¹ https://www.nevo.co.il/law_html/law00/72231.htm, in Hebrew

In traumatic states, the conscious is possessed by the sense that one's life is threatened, and becomes entirely survival-oriented. Time, space, and context cease to exist and the person re-lives the traumatic events again and again. This state of mind prevails in Israeli society, leaving no space for complexity, and thinking processes are blurred. There is no distinction between kinds and levels of threat and danger. It does not allow any distinction between current events that are happening within a specific political context that has causes and possible solutions, and the constitutional Israeli trauma of victimhood and survival. It seems that under a symbolic equation (Segal, 1957), Palestinians and Nazis are the same, Amalekites. In situations dominated by the experience of a life threat there is an attack on thought processes and on linking (Bion, 1959), and the notion of cause and context cannot be remembered. The Palestinian attacks are dissociated from the current context of decades of Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and lives, and are thus experienced and presented as antisemitic, driven by hatred of Jews just for being Jewish. The current context is denied and forgotten, and only the belief in a threat to the Jews prevails, timeless and placeless. The perception of reality is taken over by the complex.

So why did the screening of a documentary about trauma treatment in Gaza in Jerusalem pose a threat to the Israeli conscious? And what is the danger that Amnesty International presents that led the Jerusalem municipality member to call it a "terrorism assisting organization?"

The danger is of connections and relatedness. Relatedness opens the way to complexity, and complexity compromises the clear distinction between good and bad, between ego and shadow and between "us" and "them." Thus, the active effort not to know is meant to protect the conscious against information that it cannot tolerate.

In such an ever-traumatic mode of thinking there is no place for two subjects, and it is impossible to see the suffering of the other. There is clear good and clear bad, victim and perpetrator. We can easily recognize them and distinguish them. In such a line of thinking, Amnesty International can be perceived as a terrorism assisting organization, because by screening "Shivering in Gaza," Amnesty is forcing the Israeli viewers to see the people in Gaza, the people who suffer trauma, and does not allow the active not knowing to go on. Firestone (2014) thinks the Israeli inability to see the suffering of the other involves a disturbed feeling function. The feeling function is impaired due to the activation of the dark side of the hero complex that cannot afford feelings, and needs to present power, after centuries of weakness and suffering. In such a situation, compassion is very compromised, and needs to be defended against.

Watching this documentary, seeing the faces of the Gazan people, their homes, their children and their pain, might compromise the dissociation that keeps the shadow away from the conscious. Seeing the humanity of the Gazan people makes it impossible to deny their suffering, and raises profound questions about Israeli responsibility for this suffering.

The Israeli cultural complex of victimhood makes it very difficult to acknowledge our perpetrator shadow part. Ullman (2011) also relates to this point from a relational psychoanalysis point of

view, saying that Israeli mental health professional world is very developed in the treatment of suffering and trauma, but much less responsive as professionals witnessing the harm done by our group to the other. She cites the Jewish American psychoanalyst Sam Gerson who writes: "The imperative to bear witness and the seductions of blind denial are the everlasting legacies of the response to trauma" (2009, in Ullman, 2011). The effects of the cultural complex can be seen in Ullman's description of the Israeli oscillation between poles of denial and witnessing, in coexistence of denial and disavowal in certain areas, with profound professional occupation with trauma, trauma treatment, and the traumatic context (Ullman, 2011). The Israeli traumatic context in which the Palestinians are perceived as perpetrators.

The various mechanisms of denial that Cohen (2001) mentioned come to life in order to prevent the acknowledgment of the Palestinian suffering. The philosopher John Kekes defines evil as severe and unjustified suffering inflicted upon sentient beings (1998, p. 463). Acknowledgement of the Palestinian suffering might lead to recognition of evil within us, Israelis, and compromise our self-perception as victims. Acknowledgement makes things complicated.

As the Jerusalem city council member said: "The film stains our soldiers' morality" (Antman, October, 17, 2015), implying it is not the soldiers' acts that stain their (or our) morality, but the film. If the documentary is not screened, perhaps the clear-cut distinction between moral and immoral can be preserved.

According to this line of thinking, Breaking the Silence² activists are perceived as traitors, for confronting the Israeli public with details of the everyday suffering of Palestinians under occupation, and challenging the notion of goodness and justification of Israeli actions. By telling what they have done as soldiers sent by the state, Breaking the Silence activists are complicating the clear distinction between good us and evil them. Indeed, they betray the intact one-sided self-perception of the tribal collective, and compromise the projection of the shadow that permits this self-perception to prevail.

Suppression leads to suffering because the suppressing individual sacrificed parts of the shadow to the demands of the collective values, that cause shame and guilt (Neumann, 1990), but repression leads to projection of the shadow. The shadow is always visible when projected on the other (Jung, 1959, para. 16, p. 9), thus preserving self-perception, and the split between good and evil (Stein, 1995). In this way the Palestinians are perceived as violent, murderous, and immoral, keeping the Israeli self-perception of morality and goodness intact.

Encounter with our shadow parts is a painful one, since it forces us to see the dark and shameful parts in ourselves, and not in the other that we project upon. This is the danger that Israelis face

² Breaking the silence is an Israeli NGO of veterans who are committed to exposing the Israeli public to the reality of Palestinian life under Israeli occupation in the occupied territories. By testifying about what they have done as soldiers in the occupied territories, they try to elicit public debate. <https://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/>

watching “Shivering in Gaza.” It is almost impossible for the collective Israeli conscious, based on a well-preserved narrative of victimhood, to acknowledge Palestinians as victims of trauma. To do so is dangerous because it means that we are the perpetrators causing their trauma and therefore acknowledging our own shadow, in our acts.

Jung stated in many of his writings that no one is free of evil within, and no one can be entirely good: *“None of us stands outside humanity’s black shadow”* (Jung, CW 10, 1970, para. 572, p. 297). He thought that denying the shadow is dangerous, because *“negligence is the best means of making man the instrument of evil”* (ibid). Therefore, Jung considered the task of owning one’s own shadow to be a crucial one: *“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular.”* (Jung, CW 13, para. 335, pp. 265-266)

Jung called for self-knowledge, as the way for an individual to deal with the problem of evil. He related to this need for self-knowledge as a moral imperative, in response to cultural and mass processes of projecting evil on the other (Jung, CW 9II, 1959, para. 14, p. 8). This imperative is also valid on a collective level, as described by Erich Neumann in his “Depth Psychology and New Ethics” (1990), and forms the essence of the new ethics that stems out of acknowledgement of our own shadow.

Screening “Shivering in Gaza” in Jerusalem for an Israeli audience calls for acknowledgment and owning the shadow—but is very difficult to achieve, as the case of the reaction to the screening shows. Nevertheless, individuals and groups that insist on owning the shadow and bringing it into the collective’s conscious, have a very important role to play in promoting moral responsibility and development of individual and collective conscious (Neumann, 1990), despite the attempts to silence them. Firestone (2014) thinks that the healing of the Jewish cultural complex will be possible with the restoration of the feeling function in the collective psyche by processes of grieving the trauma that might allow the empathy and justice to return. I believe that we need to take responsibility for our shadow acts by using the thinking function, but that encounters enormous forces of resistance. Perhaps the transcendent function can be of assistance here.

In the years that passed since the events described in this paper, aggression and racism within the Israeli collective have grown blunter. The cultural complex now takes an even stronger grip over the Israeli society. The inability to see Palestinian suffering and acknowledge Israeli responsibility for it becomes justified and prevails the public discourse, whether actively, by denying the suffering and justifying it in various ways, or passively, by ignoring the news about it out of indifference or out of helplessness and despair. Voices such as the taxi driver’s voice, and similar ones, are now part of political agenda of parliament members who receive growing public support. Jung’s and Neumann’s calling for owning the shadow seems very far away.

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