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Stories from Teaching in Israel: Making Connections in Times of Danger

Irle Goldman

Chapter 1 – Introduction

For the past seven years, I have been privileged to be able to teach a group process class to Master's degree students who are training to become group leaders and holistic counselors at the Israel branch of Lesley University. I return from teaching with many stories about my experiences in the Israeli classroom. This article is a description of some of those experiences to help the reader gain an understanding of the process, culture and dynamics of teaching Israeli students.

The vignettes are arranged to form a narrative that presents and explains the *whats* and *whys* of the Israeli experience—especially why the Israel classroom experience is such a blend of confrontation and connection. From my observations the students progress from the importance of good beginnings to the challenges inherent in the Israeli situation, to stories of resilience and resolution through altruism. I offer these stories to share one teacher's perspective of what happens in the Israeli classroom and to contribute to a dialogue about this topic. I understand that the stories say as much about my own cultural perspective as an American coming to teach in Israel as they say about Israel. The names and details in the stories have been changed and paraphrased to protect the confidentiality of the students. I hope these stories will help you to share in my passion, satisfaction, challenge, and love of teaching in Israel.

Chapter 2 - In the Beginning: Hospitality and Pictures

Israelis are often described as both very hospitable and challenging. One recently returning Israeli remarked, "We are planning on returning to Israel's warm, rude and enveloping embrace with both dread and anticipation. You cannot live there, but, once you have, you can't stay away either" (Beinhert, 2008, p. 8). These characteristics are reflected powerfully in classroom dynamics. That is why a good start is especially important.

It is said that the formalities of introduction and hospitality are important in the Middle East. I found this to be true in beginning my classes in Israel. Whenever I begin a class I take pictures of my students so that I can better remember their names. I also go up to each and introduce myself individually. The students often remark on how

important these particulars of introduction are for them. One student remarked that she would now start her kindergarten classes by taking pictures of her pupils.

Daniel Siegel describes the importance of these connections from the brain chemistry/ relational point of view as ‘attunements’ (Wylie, 2004). Carl Rogers (1961) sees the value of this respectful behavior based on Martin Buber’s description of the I/Thou relationship.

When the students later might challenge my teaching or my competence (a frequent occurrence in teaching in Israel especially as compared with the sometimes overly deferential attitude of American students) these beginning gestures provided a bond that contained the connection between us and often helped us to get through those conflicts successfully.

Chapter 3 - Behind the Bunker: Trauma, Connection and Disconnection

Sarah and Chaya were paired to participate in a mindfulness exercise. In this exercise, one student witnesses and mindfully attends to a personal story that the other student chooses to recount. I was observing them.

“People think they know me,” began Sarah. “They see me as a successful businesswoman, gregarious and outgoing. They don’t realize that I spend most of my time behind a bunker, reliving my best friend’s death. We were both on a bus in Tel Aviv when a bomb went off. She died next to me. I lived. I keep thinking about that moment...wondering if there was anything different I should have done.”

She continued, “I want to thank you, Chaya, because this is the first time I have ever shared with anyone else where I really live, with her, there, not here.” Sarah and Chaya stared at each other for a while. I sat with them in awe. I was feeling that, if this were the only thing to happen in this class, this allowing another to come into a wounded and isolated space and be witnessed by another, my coming to Israel to teach would have been worth it.

But this was not the end of the story. To my surprise, during the feedback session, Sarah remarked, “This has been an OK class, nothing special, but I felt I needed more theory.”

I couldn’t believe what she had said. I knew the profound emotional experience she went through because I was there. I was suddenly struck by the realization of how important it is to stay behind the bunker while the war is still going on, literally and figuratively.

As Judith Herman (1992) has described in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, “(the victim of trauma) is caught between floods of intense, overwhelming feeling and arid states of no feeling at all” (p. 47). “Trauma robs the victim of power and control; the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor. The first task of recovery is to establish the survivor’s safety. . . .No other therapeutic work should even be attempted until a reasonable degree of safety has been achieved” (pp. 159-160).

For me, as a teacher, this meant witnessing and feeling the overwhelming sense of danger that each person in the class and in the country experiences constantly and understanding what they have to do to protect themselves emotionally. My job is not to fix them but rather to be with them and their feelings, respectfully.

Chapter 4 – Appreciations

In one of the first classes I was teaching in Israel, my friend and colleague Bob Fenton assisted me. Bob had been living in Israel for 20 years.

Towards the end of the second day of teaching I turned to Bob and asked, “Bob, the class seems to be going well but all I hear is complaints. In the States, the students would be talking about how well this is going for them. What’s going on here?”

“Well,” Bob answered, “I’ve been living here for 20 years and I’ve rarely heard an appreciation.”

That’s when I grasped the larger cultural and psychological phenomenon. Israeli friends point out that this politeness can reflect the superficiality and lack of intimacy in American culture. Israelis can talk to each other more directly and honestly, they suggest; they have gone through more crises and life-threatening experiences together than we have. Thus, I learned to take the critical posture less personally and judgmentally and to stretch myself to become more comfortable with conflict (a real challenge for me) in a country that has been under threat of one kind or another for most of its existence.

Chapter 5. Power and Control: The Chair Sculpture

No experience better describes the effects of the ongoing turmoil, danger, fear and trauma on the Israeli psyche and relationships than what happened during a student led activity, “The Chair Sculpture.” This exercise took place on the fourth day of a weeklong class on “Group Dynamics and Leadership.” The class was divided into teams and told to organize a group experience for the rest of the class that would demonstrate a group developmental stage. One team chose to demonstrate the

Power and Control stage. This team asked each member of the class to decorate a chair with symbolic portraits of who they were and how they thought of themselves. Over the course of an hour, using many art materials, the students elaborately created a representation of their identity. They described with colors, shapes, and materials how they saw who they were. The class was then asked to build a sculpture out of all the chairs, silently.

Slowly and deliberately, and with great hesitation, the participants took their self-identified chairs; placed them, stacked them, organized, moved them, and rearranged them. Whose would be on the bottom? Whose would be on top? Whose would be on the edge? Whose would be in the middle? The rearrangements were being rearranged. Finally, one student grabbed a chair on the bottom, screamed, "We are all being destroyed." She pulled the bottom chair out and caused the whole pile to topple. It came crashing down. The other students responded in very different ways. Some yelled, some screamed, some clapped, some were silent, and others pulled back.

I was filled with feelings of fear, anger, and confusion. This was one of those moments in teaching where there was no clear direction. It was a moment of danger and opportunity. The class could shut down and disconnect from each other and from me. I wanted to do something to try to prevent that from happening.

I asked them all to sit in a circle not knowing what I was going to say to them. There was silence. Then these words came out from me.

"If we, here in this class cannot figure out how to deal with what has just happened, then I do not believe there is any hope to deal with what is happening in this part of the world. Let us sit together in a circle, talk and figure out what the next step is."

We sat for over two hours. Each student was given time to speak of their reactions. A whole variety of feelings poured out: rage about how someone put a chair on top of theirs; jealousy for those students who were able to take their chair and rearrange them again; impotence at their inability to respond; confusion about what was happening; disdain for and criticism of the whole exercise.

By the end of this process the students were able to continue to work together on a level that was different from how they had started, less idealized and more respectfully, less passionately and more solidly.

Chapter 6 - It's Never Too Late To Have A Happy Childhood!

In a society so full of pain, suffering, violence and loss, what is the hope for healing? I find myself asking regularly, "Can this class help the students in some way to deal with their situation? Is there anything I, or the course, has to contribute?"

I find the answers to those questions to be yes, there are moments, times and experiences that I do believe are useful for healing, and they happen unexpectedly. Through the exercises, through watching videos, through reading the articles, through conversations over lunch, through my teaching and their learning, students report how much they have gained from being in the class. But, I never can predict how or when (just as I cannot predict what will trigger conflict and difficulty).

Let me give you one example:

It was the first day of the “Human Development” course. Since this was my first time teaching this course in Israel, I asked my friend and colleague Vivien, who had taught this course previously, how she would begin. She suggested a simple guided imagery leading them through the course of their lives and the central experiences back to infancy. I decided to try this. I had them image the various important developmental times of their lives, paying attention to what their challenges were, how they dealt with those challenges, and what their joys and satisfactions were.

The next day a student began the session excitedly. “What you did with us yesterday changed my life,” she said.

I responded incredulously, “You must be kidding. I know this exercise can be powerful but I never heard of it ever changing people’s lives so quickly.”

“No, even my husband agrees,” she continued, “He said that usually I come back from these sessions agitated and exhausted and last night I came home with excitement and happiness.”

“What about the imagery was so life-changing?” I asked.

She responded, “I always knew I had a hard childhood, with many losses and fears. I had forgotten about how I dealt with those difficulties, how I overcame some of them. When you asked us to pay attention to the strengths that we developed when we encountered those difficulties, I realized that I had more than those hard experiences. I remembered my resilience, my power, my decisions. I also remembered the embraces from my family, and the fun and the nice times. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to think of my life in the same way again. Thank you.”

Another student, Rivkah, wrote to me beautifully describing this process:

At the end of the course, we said goodbye and everyone hurried on their way. While I was walking to the car, I started crying like I haven't for a long time. It was a cry of pain that came from deep inside. It was a cry of longing for a relaxing, accepting, forgiving and

supportive figure that is so missing in my life. I wished to make you family, a close person whose relationship would allow me to go through a corrective experience of trust and connection.

I realized that this class reminded me of my relationship with my grandfather, whom I miss a lot, the only person in my life who was dedicated and loved me unconditionally. When close to his death he was disappointed in me. I tried to explain and get his support but he refused to cooperate with me. Perhaps he was too ill, exhausted from life, sick of suffering. It was important to me to be parted from him in peace. My experience of saying good-bye in this class allowed me to do that.

You never know what's going to happen in class or in reaction to class. What I do find consistently in the Israeli classroom is a desire to integrate their isolated parts and the courage to take the next step towards embracing hope and connection. Victor Frankl (1946) describes in *Man's Search For Meaning* how his own survival in the concentration camps was dependent on his dream of being reunited with his beloved wife. Perhaps the hunger for meaning and connection evidenced in the class reflects an ongoing healing mechanism that counteracts some of the negative effects of the chronic conflict. I certainly hope so.

Chapter 7 - The Altar: Symbolizing the Change

I sometimes ask students to bring items from home that symbolize their challenges (as students, group leaders, human beings) and that symbolize their ideals and goals. We begin the day by placing these on a decorated table (The Altar) in the center of the room with each student explaining their symbolism. Wedding rings, family pictures, plants, diplomas; these were some of the objects that students brought on the morning of the Altar Exercise. For one student, the wedding ring symbolized her challenge while for another it symbolized her strength and talents.

As Yaffa described, "When we were asked to bring an item to the altar, I brought a shell to represent listening, in order to learn to listen better. I learned that listening, in every group process, personal or interpersonal, if sincere and honest, is critical for the individual's experiencing. How the individual feels is created by listening and could cause positive change in how the individual experiences the group."

We end the course with each student talking about how this class helped them to deal with these challenges and to get them closer to their goals. Sometimes, students ask to borrow other students' Altar items because they've become so significant to them. Eitan reported, "In one of the activities, we had to choose a present from the altar to give to one of the group members. I chose to give Na'ama a shell that would help her to hear even the weak and delicate supportive voices deep inside of her. While giving

her the gift, it became clear to me that perhaps I would wish that same present for myself. In fact, any item could have taught me something about myself, about my needs, desires, hopes, and wishes.”

Chapter 8 - Being a Mensch

What is my teaching all about? One of the mantras I often repeat to myself while teaching is Marshall McLuhan’s (1964), “The medium is the message” (p. 9). To me, this means that whatever I would like to teach in the class, whether it is group leadership or counseling skills or self care, I first want to model it by my behavior in class. What we experience in class is what we learn.

I have never heard this educational approach described as well, as concisely and beautifully, as I did from an Israeli student at the end of a weeklong intensive in group leadership.

“Oh, now, at the end of this class, I get it!” she remarked, “You are teaching us that to be a good group leader is to be a mensch, a good person (in Hebrew, a Ben-Adam). A good group leader treats the group members with respect and humor and challenge and caring and taking them seriously. In this way, we create a nurturing environment that allows them to grow. And the way you taught that was by treating us respectfully, consistently in the way you talked to us; in the way you dealt with us; in the way you cared for us, during this week, whatever happened.”

As David Treadway (2004) stated so eloquently, “After all the theories are considered, and the techniques are applied, what we offer our clients is our own flawed humanity...If we do our best, grace happens. Sometimes” (p.66).

Chapter 9 - Goodbye: Endings

Good endings can heal many wounds. A good ending is an important part of any course but Israelis seem to have brought it to a high art. Perhaps because they are taught this skill in school; perhaps because it is so important to a society in which losses are central. Class endings in Israel are usually marked by caring connections, appreciations, gifts to teachers and other students and invitations for home hospitality.

The gifts that are offered are personal. They have included, for instance, a CD for me of music that I enjoyed hearing in class, or flowers from one students’ garden for all of the other students with stories of how and why they were grown and what they mean to the student. The invitations to visit their homes are seriously offered with attempts at finding the times that I might be able to drop by.

It is in the saying good bye that I see one of the real strengths of Israeli society: an intimacy and valuing of the educational experience and the time spent with the teacher and classmates in the face of a political situation in which endings can be violent and tragic. Students often remark the Lesley experience is their oasis of calm, connection and safety in turbulent times. The endings allow them to leave this oasis safely and with appreciation.

Chapter 10 - Putting It All Together, The Final Projects and Altruism

It feels like an afterlife, a déjà vu, when I receive the student's final papers one to two months after I have returned to the States and am in the midst of teaching other classes. For the final project students are asked to integrate the course content, group process and their individual interests and styles to describe a group that they would like to lead. It is this project that completes the educational journey from connection to suspicion to competition to working together to creation and contribution through altruism (*Tzedahah* in Hebrew).

George Vaillant (2000) describes how altruism is the psychological defense that creates alchemy and symbolically transforms lead into gold. It takes the conflict and stresses of the human condition and creates what is best for society. "When used to transform conflict, altruism involves getting pleasure from giving to others what people themselves would like to receive" (p. 92). The quality of altruism is what I see when I read the final papers.

Judith Herman (1992) describes this process as the 'survivor mission'.

Social action offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy, and resourcefulness but that magnifies these qualities far beyond her own capacities. It offers her an alliance with others based on cooperation and shared purpose. Participation in organized, demanding social efforts calls upon the survivor's most mature and adaptive coping mechanisms of patience, anticipation, altruism and humor. It brings out the best in her. In return, the survivor gains the sense of connection with the best in other people...than can transcend ordinary reality. (pp. 207-208)

Students have described how they would run a support group for children of holocaust survivors, for wounded veterans, for spouses of wounded veterans, for divorced mothers, for victims of violence, for survivors of terrorist activities, for creativity training for kindergarten teachers. Let me let them describe this process to you.

This is how Na'amah described the connection between what she wants and what she gives to her group of wounded soldiers.

I have noticed that I yearn to hear words that are optimistic and positive that feel like a healing, a kind of a cure for a sore wound. These expressions have had such a good influence on me, that I found myself saying expressions to my patients with an optimistic content that believes in their abilities and compliments them. The patients were very touched and even cried at these words.

Devorah described her goals for leading a group of Ethiopian fathers.

In the end result all conflicts are based on trust or a lack of trust. I wonder if in our society the majority of us have not yet resolved this issue for ourselves and we unconsciously continue to deal with it in our personal relationships. I want to be calm, relaxed, and happy and accept the fact that what is going on in the group, reflects where the group is and not the quality of my leadership. I want to put aside the effort and the interminable search for perfection and simply let things fall where they may.

When the leader conducts herself with courtesy and cordiality, the group is at ease and there is more room for creativity.

Chanah details how she will bring herself to the group of mothers.

I will bring myself: my ability to listen, my ability to contain, my trust, my creativity, my joy and my love. I will bring the tools I have acquired over the 16 years: movement, touch, shiatsu, yoga, plastic arts, voice, writing, OH cards, and music. I will bring the experience I have garnered accompanying women in the course of their pregnancy and birth. I will bring my experience as a mother of two toddlers. I will gladly bring the whole of myself.

This is how Dina describes what she will bring to her group teaching poetry to wounded veterans.

I want to succeed in touching the intelligence, talent, wisdom, and uniqueness of every participant. The group leader should serve as a kind of hopeful mirror, in which the participants' strengths are prominent. True enthusiasm of participant actions can pour a lot of oxygen into what may sometimes be a vacuum. I am talking about a true vision. It does not necessarily come from an optimistic view of me as a leader, but from the belief that everybody has a special role, pure essence, and a marvelous corner. The group leader that knows this gives the participants a chance to be seen and illuminated in their best "costumes." People perceive how others perceive them and this influences their

actions. Such a mirror will create the atmosphere that I believe is needed, of open minds, hope, and enthusiasm.

What better description of the altruism that is seen in this class than these comments from Shoshanah:

I have become familiar with an instruction style from which I can adopt the components matching my own personality as an instructor. The instructor provides the participants with personal attention and affects the group atmosphere by projecting warmth, concern, honesty, enthusiasm and a sense of partnership and equality. I have learned that, as an instructor, I must have a sense of mission and believe in the importance of the additional value I bring with me, which helps both the group members and their surrounding in the present and the future.

And finally the words of Rena:

Deepening and sharpening the matter of universalism as it touches on altruism – the entire theory that revolves around the “me, you, and us.” The understanding of how much we are intertwined one in the other; something that affects me affects those around me and all of us together; we are one. How important to accept and to acknowledge who I am and to display that acceptance in other ways related to tolerance, giving, and love for the other since that way we influence the “us.”

This sense of giving, of altruism, is a counter-balancing force in Israeli society and in the classes I teach to the need for self-protection and individuation. It is a transformative process. It reflects a deep understanding that we can only get through this conflict together, as hard as that is individually, relationally, and politically. This is the hope I see from teaching in Israel. I see this in the class and I see it in the country. May it continue to grow and flourish, nurtured by Lesley University’s mission, structure and students.

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