What Challenges Face Attempts to Alleviate Social Suffering within Israel/Palestine?

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The Israeli/Palestinian 'conflict' is rightly characterised as one of seemingly intractable difference, routinised violence, and systematic oppression. The manifestations and causes of intense suffering among both Jews and Palestinians are many and deeply ingrained – from racist attitudes and practices, to the threat and realisation of terrorist violence (both state-led and subversive); from the pervasive militarisation of society, to the tyranny of living under occupation. Given such a context, this essay limits itself to the examination of two particularly under-theorised aspects of suffering<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[1]<!–[endif]–> in Israel/Palestine: namely that which is experienced by the inhabitants of Israel *within* its internationally recognised pre-1967 borders – as opposed to the suffering of those living in Occupied Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza – and, further, that which is primarily generated by *structural* (as opposed to direct) violence. In other words the focus is on Israeli society proper, in which both Jewish and Arab citizens theoretically enjoy the equal rights afforded by Israeli citizenship<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[2]<!–[endif]–>, and, furthermore, on the less material, discursive factors that are forming barriers to 'healing'.

Thus this essay first briefly explains the significance of 'structural violence' in Israeli society, before going on to critically examine dominant conceptions of 'suffering' in the Israeli context, arguing that the pragmatic and rationalist bias of this notion itself – in other words, the way we conceptualise 'suffering' – constitutes one major hindrance to 'healing'. Finally, I consider the role of silence and memory in perpetuating suffering in Israel, looking specifically at the two imbricated elements of Holocaust memorialisation and the construction of the Other, arguing for a more processual rather than essentialist conception of suffering, community, healing and memory.

I. VIOLENCE

The notion of 'structural violence' is used here to refer to agentive processes and systems which cause suffering through means other than direct, physical violence. The value of the term is principally its emphasis on forms of suffering rooted in more sustained and insidious processes, which tend to be neglected by the privileging of direct/mass violence and the catastrophic event on the hierarchy of moral atrocity. Within the Israel/Palestine context this fixation is evident in representations of both Jewish and Arab suffering which tends to focus on, respectively, terrorist intimidation and anti-Semitic persecution, and the direct violence (or latent threat thereof<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[3]<!–[endif]–>) employed by the Israeli state to oppress Palestinians, particularly in the Occupied Territories rather than within Israel itself. Though these sources of suffering are certainly important, excessive attention to them obscures the equally deliberate implementation of policies which cause extreme suffering through indirect means.

For example, land ownership and organisation (see Halabi 2004) is structured in a large part through the Jewish National Fund, a Zionist 'charity' just over one hundred years old whose principle objective has been to procure land in Israel/Palestine exclusively for Jews. The JNF exerts relentless pressure, either buying or simply confiscating Arab-owned land, but cannot be held accountable for such discriminatory practices because of its quasi-official status: a mechanism allowing the state to pursue discriminatory policies by proxy. And whilst ensuring that Jewish citizens have ample land on which to build communities (even providing financial incentives to those who are prepared to

populate new settlements), the state simultaneously refuses to grant planning permission within already dangerously overcrowded Arab towns, forcing Arab families to build illegally or live in ever more cramped conditions. One Arab town planner in Israeldescribed his situation: "It feels to me like a subtle way of ethnically cleansing me off my land… These plans are about making life impossible for us, the Arabs, to remain here… If it continues like this, anyone who can leave will do so" (cited in Nathan 2006:38). In addition to these land policies, as one recently published report details,

laws conditioning certain social and financial benefits on a military service discriminate against most of Israel Arab population. An additional issue presented by the report is Israeli legislation allowing severe interrogation methods against detainees suspected of security offences, most of who are Arabs. The report also claims the people responsible for the deaths of 13 Arabs from Israel Police fire during the events of October 2000 were not put on trial. Further claims in the report are that Israel prevents its Arab citizens from marrying Palestinian partners if they wish to reside in Israel; the state exercises extreme discrimination in the budgets it allots Arab towns; Arab citizens have been evacuated from their Negev homes under the claim that the homes were illegal; standards for accepting Arab students into higher-education institutions are discriminatory; state laws give official status to Jewish cultural institutions, but not to Arab ones; and the government has not issued any amendments to address the protection of Muslim and Christian holy sites. (Stern 2007; in reference to the Adalah Legal Center's 2007 report to the UN on Arab Minority Rights in Israel)

State policies in every aspect of life – land, education, law, security – are designed to systematically discriminate against and marginalise the Arab population of Israel. It is clear that"[g]enocide need not be suffered as total physical destruction… The conquerer or occupier, with a sadistic sense of mercy, lets his maimed victims live" (Marks 1984:15).Marks describes her encounter with a young Palestinian student who describes Israel's policies as 'genocidal', as the annihilation of a people, because "she is not allowed to read the books of her people, sing its songs. She is only allowed to eat and sleep. It is like death" (1984:17). In this context, suffering must be seen as resulting from the "soft knife" of structural violence: the disruption of the everyday, the transformation of 'living' into 'coping', and the drastic diminishment of agency (Kleinman and Das 2001:1). Furthermore, this conception of suffering offers greater transformative potential, since it locates agency in seemingly abstracted 'violent' processes.

II. SUFFERING

The modern discourse of pain is quite unique in its detachment of suffering from both the sufferer's social context, and from other forms of knowledge. Ancient physicians – as well as contemporary health practitioners in many non-Western traditions – saw physical health and suffering as inseparable from the broader context of human existence, incorporating religion, ritual, and social relationships, as well as other realms of knowledge. In Taoism, for example, "[s]ince every aspect of nature is united in Tao, it follows that no suffering or distress can be isolated; nor can the alleviation of suffering be broken up into disparate parts" (Bowker 1997:368). Yet since the Enlightenment period and concomitant faith in science and progress, the concept has been imbued with a peculiarly rationalist emphasis on suffering experienced by, or manifested in, the individual. As Kleinman *et al* imply (1997:xxv), in the context of *social* suffering this rationalist emphasis has a pragmatic function: it permits the enormous and complex processes to be "split up into measurable attributes", each assigned to a different area of expertise. If social suffering can be pathologised in this manner, its 'symptoms' can then be 'treated'. In Israel, this compartmentalising of suffering is evident in the numerous 'co-existence groups' with which Nathan (2006:167-74) becomes increasingly frustrated. These are often initiated by Israeli Jews, yet are ultimately constrained by Jewish members' refusal to 'talk politics' – i.e. to either acknowledge Arab suffering or discuss what may be causing it.

This rationalist conception of pain even *pathologises* socially rooted suffering. One pertinent example in Israel, to which Nathan refers as "a traumatised society" for precisely this reason, is military conscription and correlated ideas about the state of Israel and what it means to be a good citizen. All Israeli male Jews are conscripted at the age of seventeen or eighteen (except those studying at religious schools) for at least three years, and may be called up later for reserve duties; the refuseniks are thus "effectively criminalised for much of their adult life" (Nathan 2006:195). The violence of enforcing an occupation and the enmity of the Other, combined with intense social pressure to conform to the nationalist ideology, produces traumatic effects on the young soldiers that even permeates their non-

or post-military lives. Thirty to forty percent suffer from 'mental health problems' during their first year of service; suicide rates are high (in 2003, they were higher than the number of those killed in combat); illegal drug use is rife; and Israeli society experiences "rocketing levels of domestic violence… as well as the high death toll on the roads" (Nathan 2006:196-7; 210).

This collective suffering is addressed through the provision of medical and psychological support. Indeed, the extreme stigma associated with failure to fulfil one's duty in maintaining the nation's security is such that it precludes any attempt to address the institutional and structural causes for such suffering. This treatment transforms social suffering from the lived experience, and its moral/political *meaning*, into an individualised narrative of victimhood which can measure and thus account for only the ability or failure to 'cope' (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997:9-10). Unfortunately, as Chopp notes, "Events of massive, public suffering defy quantitative analysis," (1986:2) and furthermore, this approach patently obscures forms of suffering which can only be understood as generated within a complex nexus of social forces, including macro-level processes, ideologies, memory, conflict, and belief – in addition to individual practices. To analyse the *distribution* of suffering "one must embed the individual biography in the larger matrix of culture, history and political economy" (Farmer 1997:272). Dominant discourses in which suffering is individualised and compartmentalised, in denying "the social origins and structural sources of human misery", also serve to individualise the responsibility for – and thus responses *to* – suffering (Chuengsatiansup 2001:31). Such discourses impede the development of more holistic and potentially transformative approaches which seek to locate agency (and therefore responsibility) within 'structural' problems, and as such must be seen as discourses of power.Thus the way in which suffering and violence are conceptualised according to a pragmatic and rationalistic bias can in fact prohibit 'healing'.As Adelson (2001:80) points out, social suffering requires a *social* response.

III. SILENCE, MEMORY, DISTANCE

Thus far our investigation has been characterised by an explicitly normative concern: namely, the alleviation of suffering. However, as Langer (1997) argues, this notion of 'healing' may be inapplicable – or worse, dangerous. He insists, in reference to the Holocaust, that the suffering experienced was so *utterly devastating* that any attempt to "mak[e] the inconceivable conceivable" – to apply concepts such as reconciliation, moral maturity, "the simple context of an agenda for improving the future"; in other words, to apply *meaning* – or any attempt to rationalise "atrocity" by pathologising it, transforming it into 'suffering'; memories into 'symptoms'; testimony into 'therapy'; all the while seeking a 'cure': all this serves only to normalise extreme violence, to humanise and thus legitimise atrocity, and to distance ourselves further from foreign suffering (1997: 51-6). He advocates a discourse of 'atrocity' and 'alarm' and, to some extent, acceptance; a discourse which dispenses with the redemptive promises of 'healing'.

Unfortunately, this notion of incommensurable and absolute atrocity has been used in the Israeli context to create a monopoly on suffering. Zertal describes the "culture of death" and victimhood by which Israeli society exists as a shrine to the memory of the Holocaust, noting Ben-Zion Dinur's elegiac speech before the Knesset in which he says "not a word about the living; their previous lives, their culture… nothing about their rehabilitation, heritage, and memories. Holocaust commemoration, which the State of Israel instated in law, was a memory without rememberers" (2005:1;86). Memory which is not politically expedient, one example being the alternative narratives of those Jews accused of 'collaborating' with the Nazis, is suppressed. "[T]hese accounts deal with ordinary, normal people, and expose the fragility and imperceptibility of the line between good and evil, right and wrong… their troubling message could not be compulsory material for a nation establishing and defining itself as absolute good against the Holocaust's absolute evil" (2005:88). Langer's condemnation of efforts to humanise that which he deems *in*human and *in*conceivable is premised on a very particular view of suffering that insists on preserving atrocity, eschewing any transformative potential as "an offense to the witness" (1997:56). However, though this analysis is based upon "the testimonies of hundreds of Holocaust survivors" (1997:54), other accounts suggest some Holocaust survivors feel that such "offense" is in fact caused by a perceived failure to seek lessons from past injustice, a failure to confer meaning within the present context onto what was suffered in the past. For example, one survivor now living in Israel said, "'you know what we do to the Palestinians was what was done to us in Europe. We Jews have to realise that we do not have a monopoly on suffering, we don't have to be special in everything'… He and other survivors said they felt the memory of the Holocaust was being cheapened" (Nathan 2006:163).

Ramphele, *contra* Langer, argues that it is precisely "[t]he investment of personal pain with meaning [that] transforms it into suffering, which then becomes a social process" (1997:114). Here the difference between somatic or individual pain and specifically *social* suffering becomes crucial, and exposes the limitations of identifying one with the other. The former is to an extent observable, measurable, rational, even static: as Langer would have it, suffering can be collectively experienced but not collectively healed. The latter, however, is "a social status that we extend or withhold… depending largely on whether the sufferer falls within our moral community" (Morris 1997:40). Thus it becomes possible to alleviate suffering not through violence or even necessarily by transforming political structures deemed to be at their root – it is in fact possible "to reinvent suffering by extending or contracting the borders of a moral community" (1997:41).

Presently, essentialist conceptions of social suffering exploit the Holocaust to reinforce the Jewish self-perception as "not history-makers but history sufferers" (Arendt 1978:96), and are used in Israel to forestall criticism and to justify the refusal to recognise suffering experienced by the Arab Other. This can take an extreme form, for example in the equating of Arabs with Nazis (Zertal 2005:173;196; for examples see Seidler 1991; Shamir 1988), but is clearly evident in everyday discourses too – as Marks notes with dismay, "the Jews in Israel see only themselves", seeking distance from Arab suffering (1984:21; see Sacco 263-4). And as Das insists (1996), to fail to recognise another who expresses that they are suffering is an act of violence – participating in its perpetuation – itself. However this polarisation is not, as Morris suggests, permanent and intractable, but may transformed through ideological practices. As important (if not more so) as material or political transformation is the repudiation of essentialist notions of suffering, memory, and community, if a common consciousness is to be forged in which it becomes impossible to deny suffering experienced by the Other.

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<!–[endif]–>

<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[1]<!–[endif]–> The conspicuous lack of theory/discourse is made graver in the context of Cavell's argument that the absence of theorising about social suffering constitutes a "silence" perpetuating that suffering itself (1997:94-5).

<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[2]<!–[endif]–> 'Israeli Arabs' number approximately one million; roughly one fifth of the population of Israel, and thus a large (and growing) minority. Of course, a fundamental contradiction exists in Israel's status as both a "Jewish state" – the sovereign state of the Jewish people – and as a 'democracy', which derives from the separation of (Israeli) citizenship and (Jewish) nationhood. A non-Jew may possess Israeli citizenship, but there is no such thing as Israeli nationality (Jiryis 1976:6). This distinction forms the basis of a bureaucratic and legal structure which systematically excludes non-Jewish Israeli citizens (see below).

<!–[if !supportFootnotes]–>[3]<!–[endif]–> This Foucauldian discipline, in which the threat of direct violence for Arab communities became subsumed into a wider systematic framework of oppression, has formed a conscious part of Israeli state policy. "It is possible," as one government minister recommended, "to impose a curfew on an Israeli-Arab village or to close off areas and prevent entry into them, or to arrest and banish people, or to imprison people and blow up their houses, it is possible to bring back the system of [travel] permits and so on, without a return of military government" (cited in Jiryis 1976:68). It is also pertinent to note the common observation among Arabs that there seems to occur one massacre every generation, for which the perpetrators enjoy effective impunity, "as if to

remind Arabs that they should not forget the insecure nature of their citizenship" (Nathan 2006:86). The 1956 massacre of forty-nine Arab adults and children in Kafr Qasem, who were unaware of a curfew, resulted in the commander responsible for the order being tried and eventually fined one piaster, i.e. the lowest possible sum of money. In 1976 six unarmed protestors in Sahknin were killed by police; and in 2000 in the police shot and killed thirteen unarmed protestors in the Galilee (Nathan 2006:85-6).

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