

## SWASTIKAS ON CHOPPED LIVER

### On The Relevance of Psychotherapy in Social Cataclysms

By Reuven Bar-Levav, M.D.

Up on the eighth floor of the marble-rich, elegant and somewhat ornate tower where my offices are I sit hour after hour in my capacity as psychotherapist. Just a brief elevator ride below me, in the high-ceilinged and mosaic-laden lobby of this architectural masterpiece of the 1920's, a policeman was shot a few weeks ago as he tried to apprehend two young thugs who were encountered in the middle of a holdup attempt. As I work with my patients, the quiet of my spacious office is frequently pierced by shrieking whistles and the sounds of police cars and ambulance sirens. Is the world crazy, or am I, laboring as I do to save single lives as the very ground beneath me seems to be shaking violently?

My city is burning, not only figuratively but also literally. Every night more abandoned or semi-abandoned buildings or stores are set afire by young vandals, out to find another temporary escape from their depression, masquerading as boredom. Most whites have escaped to the suburbs in the last twenty years, and Detroit, not so long ago the "arsenal of democracy", tortured and twisted, is teetering on the edge of destruction. Still the seat of rich and powerful corporations, General Motors, Chrysler and Borroughs, still a city of universities and colleges, churches and museums, past and present, but, does it have a future? Do great cities also become ghost towns?

Many stupid if well meaning acts have come together to produce trouble. Previously down-trodden blacks with large chips on their shoulders and an understandable history of distrust of all authority, which always was white, did not suddenly change simply because authority now rests in black hands; decent or guilty whites have unrealistically disregarded challenges to law and order, as if that could make up for past wrongs; material help to the poor was often treated as if it were a bribe: the givers were kicked and the gifts abused. Apathy, fatalism, bitterness and reliance on others have become common, self-responsibility and self-initiative-- the exception. Many of the poor, black and white, have come to believe that "society" literally owes them a living,

even if they remain sullen and passive. Frustration and fury, often expressed in violent outbursts and in passive-aggressive stubbornness are the recognizable features of my city's face.

As whites have left and its tax-base has shrunk, the problems of the city multiplied. Its deteriorating core, like a pernicious cancer, expanded steadily and rapidly. Mean streets, crumbling buildings and crime-ridden neighborhoods have become so common in "Murder City, U.S.A." they are hardly newsworthy any more. Roving gangs of young toughs, with names like Black Killers, Errol Flynns, Sheraton Strips and Bishops have virtually taken over the streets of the scrubby east side. Citizens cower behind barricaded doors of their own homes, listening to shots and shouts that punctuate the night air. The city, neither Beirut nor Belfast, is Detroit, Michigan, my home by choice and a place whose agonies are every bit as real, and whose conflicts equally impossible to eradicate as those of Lebanon and Northern Ireland.

"Gang members have blazed a trail of terror. They accosted one youth on the street, told him to run and then shot him in the buttocks for no reason. They boarded buses and relieved all passengers of their valuables. They branched out on the Edsel Ford and Lodge Freeways, descending on stalled cars like army ants to rob, beat and rape terrified motorists. They devised a game called 'Russian', in which one punk would knock on the door of a home while his confederates hid in the bushes; when the door opened the whole mob would swarm in, smashing furniture, beating the occupants and stealing. In late June, while partygoers at the Pontchartrain Hotel watched a fireworks display for the Fourth of July, twenty hoodlums swarmed in, snatched purses and overturned tables."

"The crowning horror occurred at a Cobo Hall rock concert in downtown Detroit in mid-August, 1976. Some 125 black youths, apparently acting in unison, beat and robbed scores of patrons and gang-raped one woman. For a full hour, undermanned police outside the hall refused to intervene, on the incredible grounds that Cobo Hall had promised to provide its own security. When they finally did bestir themselves, they arrested 47 hoodlums."

All were released by the next morning.

I both work and live within the city limits. A black friend in the Michigan Legislature once asked openly why I stay, a question I have asked myself many times before and one that I still ask from time to time even now.

TIME Magazine, September 6, 1976, pg. 16.

Sitting in a darkened room in my home one evening recently, listening to music, I suddenly realized with horror that I was wondering what I would do if a gang of thugs smashed through the many French doors of the home, for I literally live in a glass house. Ought I have to have a gun for self-protection? I very much like my office and my home and prefer not to join my "liberal" friends who preach racial co-existence while moving to the suburbs, but is it realistic to remain here?

Sitting here in fear, I decide to address myself to these questions and write this article. Is this a social cataclysm I am in the midst of, and, if so, does it make any sense to continue practicing serious psychotherapy in its midst? Is it relevant or insane not to jump ship? What is reality and what is self-delusion?

Sitting here, in my darkened and peaceful room, listening to Beethoven and realizing how vulnerable I really am and how easy it would be for a determined gang to break in, my horror assumes physiologic dimensions which I experience in my abdomen. Fear is no longer a concept, but a rumbling in my middle. The imaginary sounds of crushing glass accompanied by blood-thirsty, animal-like cries have a special, personal meaning for me. I was too young to have understood the meaning of the waking nightmare known as the "Kristall Nacht" when the Nazis and their riff-raff exploded in pent-up hate and broke thousands of display windows of Jewish-owned businesses in Germany. It could have served as a signal, an early warning of the greater horrors to follow, but its significance was not appreciated by many. Am I deluding myself in believing that the circumstances and the times are different, and that it is safer here and now? What is the face of reality?

Man is a wonderfully complex animal, almost miraculously capable of deluding himself. The powers of symbolic reason are used to calculate wrongly no less well than rightly. The long arm of our civilization has reached all the way to Mars, sampling its soil, but we seem less capable of reaching within, separating emotions from hard facts. Only in the very last moment, when it is too late to change course, do we often realize that we are about to step into a trap. I derive a great deal of satisfaction from living myself reasonably and consciously, but even so, the fog of

confusion that hides the sharp outlines of reality must be burnt afresh every morning, a constant and everlasting effort. How do I recognize a cataclysm when I see one? How do I know when the first drops begin to fall whether the rainfall is the beginning of a flood? I am still in Detroit, and am still practicing psychotherapy every day, for I believe that rationality will eventually prevail even here, that blacks and whites can live together, that hatred and violence from any quarter and in any color must be curbed and dealt with severely and firmly. What I do in my office hardly seems an escape from reality into an ivory tower, but rather a direct and relevant contribution to the survival of my society. But, again and again and then again, am I deluding myself?

I remember only vaguely that Friday evening in Berlin, Germany. I was four, perhaps, five years old, and ran towards my mother who had come home from shopping, with my all-knowing, teasing and naughty smile. "Just come in and see, Mommy, we have a real surprise for you tonight". I could obviously not have understood the many implications of the surprise, but I must have sensed that it was a significant and a dramatic one. As our little family sat down for the Sabbath meal and the first course was served, I was eagerly and expectantly looking about for the anticipated reaction. Earlier that day I had helped my German nursemaid, who was like a mother to me, decorate the individual chopped liver portions that were to be served that evening. We had cut elongated red and white strips from fresh little radishes, and with them we had made swastikas on top of each chopped liver mound.

It was no longer safe, even in the confines of their own home, for my parents to openly discuss the unbelievable incident. Later on, after Gerda left for the weekend, I was closely questioned. How did it happen? What was said? Did I understand what I was doing? My father, a reasonably successful businessman who had come to Germany in his youth, seemed much troubled by this apparently innocent affair. My mother, who like her own parents was born in Germany could not absorb the full meaning of the developing, new and stark reality so fast. All she knew in her bones and muscles and skin rebelled against accepting the fact that her past was crumbling

and soon would be no more. Her city, too, was burning, her whole homeland, in fact. But the flickering flames were still small and did not frighten yet. Perhaps they would yet all be put out, extinguished before they devoured. German-born Jews were understandably often the last to recognize the danger.

My nursemaid and her S.S. boyfriend used to take me, blond and cute as I used to be, to Nazi parades which I enjoyed thoroughly, as little boys are apt to. The marching and the bands were impressive. My nursemaid and her S.S. boyfriend apparently loved me, and so I came home on my sixth birthday all dressed up in a brown uniform and greeted my father with a loud and cheerful "Heil Hitler". They had outfitted me as they did without malice and almost innocently, or so it seemed at least. But my father, wise to the early signals of danger, knew instinctively and immediately that the time had come to leave. Generations of precarious existence had sharpened his senses. His business places were already being picketed by the Nazis.

Although not objecting, Mother was far from enthusiastic about leaving. Could the German nation, with such a magnificent cultural heritage and advanced civilization really lose its humanity and actually threaten the lives of innocent people? She believed for awhile, like so many of her generation, that an appeal to the better in Man, and the basic decency of the German people would suffice to change what seemed an ominous course. If the intended victims only behaved well, lived up to their civic responsibilities and made no waves, the Germans would probably reform themselves.

Five years later, living in another country, she was most appreciative of my father's far-sighted understanding and courage. By leaving, and by leaving everything he had, she was alive and the children were alive. The next year, her own parents would be burned in a German incinerator.

As far as I know, no psychotherapy was practiced in the death-camps. People often supported each other, but they basically had to find the strength within themselves, or perish. Millions perished anyway. Under extreme stress the ego either breaks or unsuspected reserves and resources somehow emerge. In the very real cataclysm of the death-camps, physical survival was helped as much by psychological

strength as it was by physical stamina, as long as one could stay away from the devouring death machine. Under the shower spigots, once the deathly gas began to hiss, nothing helped. No psychotherapy then. The difficult question is, when?

It is no coincidence that psychotherapy has developed most prominently in the United States. Disturbances in the psyche are probably as common elsewhere as they are here, yet, the mere need to eke a living out of a hostile environment, committing most energies to the task of survival, forces a person to suppress and to repress and precludes the possibility of treating emotional stress and distortions of reality by means of psychotherapy. A minimum of personal comfort and safety is required before either existential anomie or the fear of non-being are allowed into consciousness. Extreme danger to life itself always takes precedence. Not only the psychological needs of an individual take a back seat then but one's physiology does also, as evidenced by the fact that women often failed to menstruate during the entire period of their incarceration in concentration camps, lasting several years.

Whether I should stay in Detroit or not and whether I should continue to practice psychotherapy or not depend on my ability to know whether we are approaching a social cataclysm or are in the midst of one, or not. A seemingly simple questions, it was never easy to answer. An assyrian tablet dating back to 2800 years B.C. reads:

"The earth is degenerating these days.  
Bribery and corruption abound.  
Children no longer mind their parents,  
and it is evident that the end of  
the world is fast approaching".

Timing is all. If the end of our world is truly approaching, even the best psychotherapy has neither place nor relevance. It does make an enormous difference in dying whether one is relatively sane, conscious and aware, or not. But once dead it makes absolutely no difference, except to the survivors, whether one had been sane or not. Properly conducted psychotherapy can literally be live-saving, for it enhances the ability of individuals to cope with life in terms of reality. Yet, in extremely stressful situations, it can endanger life by diverting energy that might be crucially needed for survival. Should I move out of Detroit, possibly saving not

only my own life but also the lives of my patients, who repeatedly come into the city to see me there? Instead of looking inside ourselves, should we perhaps more usefully "watch out", literally and figuratively? Should we take time from self-contemplation to train ourselves in the use of firearms for self-protection? As I work with my patients' reality distortions, am I not, perhaps, involved in the greatest reality distortion of all? Ought I give up the practice of psychotherapy and become a social activist instead, with the hope of changing society and its institutions before it is too late?

I believe his last name was Gottlieb, and I do not remember his first name. Like myself, he was barely twenty as the State of Israel was about to be born in 1948. A very contemplative and thoughtful engineering student, he spent hours worrying and wondering. His delicate, almost maiden-like features conveyed an impression of apparent fragility, but he was physically strong and insisted that he not be exempted from active duty. We had no uniforms or insignia, but even with such paraphernalia he would still not have looked very much of a soldier. A good cover for the underground.

We were members of the "Haganah", and together we carried packs of dynamite on our backs, under the cover of night and fire, to blow up a two-story building from which mortar shells and sniper fire rained on our positions. It had to be destroyed, or we would be. The explosives had to be placed inside, and we were naturally very scared, not only because we were so young. If the distracting fire failed to hold their attention, or if somehow, someone on the upper floor discovered us, we would never make it back. We were eager to get in and get out as soon as possible, once the delayed fuses were lit.

I never saw him again after that. Was his first name David? In the confusion, fear, darkness and loud explosions all around and above us, he apparently had forgotten, after emerging from the doorway, that he had to turn backwards to return to our lines. Instead, he ran, probably in panic, straight forward, into Arab Jaffa. His decapitated head was shown the next morning to boost the morale of wounded Arab fighters. Those Israelis were not invincible after all, and they need not be feared so much.

Many times since have I thought with horror of those moments and of the sheer luck that was mine in not getting confused also. Life really hangs on a very thin thread every day, it was only more dramatically evident in the stark reality of Jaffa that terrible night. Many times since have I wondered whether psychotherapy might have saved the life of Gottlieb and others who, like him, broke under stress. Should he have been allowed to go on that mission? But those few months in Palestine of 1948, just before the establishment of the State of Israel, were cataclysmic, indeed, and such considerations about psychotherapy were totally out of the question. Only hindsight permits the luxury of such speculations. There were few men, practically no arms and seven armies poised at the borders, waiting to invade the moment the British mandate expired. Heavily armed groups of local Arabs had already begun ambushing and burning, threatening to drive us all into the sea. Survival was literally the issue, neurosis or not. Psychotherapy might have helped Gottlieb, but there was no time for it. He and we had to stay alive first. It was quite irrelevant at that moment to be concerned with Gottlieb's psyche. His body was needed to stop the invaders. There was no one else.

But, in more normal and less cataclysmic days, hopes for a better society and a more livable world rest on changing the nature of Man, a tedious task of changing his unconscious needs at least as much as his conscious wants. Under capitalism or communism, in democratic as well as in totalitarian regimes, Man is noble at times, petty and greedy at others. Not only in Detroit but in London and in far away lands also, have the horrors of "Clockwork Orange", so shocking and unbelievable when first seen, already been turned into a grim reality. Even basic changes in the distribution of wealth and in the structure of society's institutions have failed to usher in the age of reason. The oppressed of yesteryear become the rapists and gangsters of today, no doubt to be replaced by new idealists-for-a-day that in their own turn will prove to be brutes and thugs. Only the slogans will be different, the deeds -- basically the same. If real hope is to be found anywhere it is only in changing the nature of Man, which is the essential task of good psychotherapy.

Long range, intensive psychotherapy is unavailable in the Soviet Union for good reason: It frees Man to follow his own star, and it is, therefore, a direct threat to homogenous regimentation. Psychotherapy endangers mindless conformity, even to ideas and policies that are officially proclaimed as "progressive". It cannot accept dictatorship, even of a "proletariat". It is unacceptable by the Soviets because they recognize it as being powerful enough to change Man, and, therefore, the system.

Such change in Man does not come easily or quickly. Even individuals only change with much effort over a long time, and the task of changing a system that way seems hopeless. And yet, the impatience of reformers and social activists is only understandable as a senseless defense against impotence. The Rabbis of Talmudic days, perhaps because they had to, were wiser. Jewish history being what it is, they knew that patience often was the only weapon available to overcome calamity. "He who saves one life is as if he saved the whole world, and he who destroys one life is as if he destroyed the whole world." Rabbi Tarfon, chivalrous no less than scholarly, wisely noted: "It is not thy duty to complete the work, but neither art thou free to desist from it."

I did not consciously remember the swastikas on the chopped liver as I developed my Crisis Mobilization Therapy, C.M.T., but could the lesson of that incident ever have left me? Shocking as it was to all but the little boy that was me, it brought things to a head by sharpening the focus on the nebulous outlines of the changing German reality. It produced a crisis in our family that resulted in my being alive today. It was an opportunity. It forced the eventual change. Not only my mother but my father also were comfortable and settled in Berlin, and being human they would have remained in their comfort until it was too late, like so many others, had this and similar crises not forced them to wake up and see things as they really were. Physically and psychologically, objects prefer to remain at rest. They normally resist change, which is produced only when sufficient work is done or pressure applied to overcome the resistance. The application of such pressure, always with

consent, is central in the technique of Crisis Mobilization Therapy, although what distinguishes it even more is its separate view of Man.\*

A crisis as seen in Crisis Mobilization Therapy is not like the one experienced by my father. It occurs in the safety of the therapeutic setting and involves strong affects but no real danger. It is, nevertheless, often perceived by the patient as cataclysmic in nature, for it threatens the emotional status quo. When faced with extreme fear Man often cowers and hides and does not dare check whether it is related to an external reality or only to his internal one. Only after such a fear of non-being begins to lose its choking grip is the courage found to tarry and look: is the situation really cataclysmic?

For my lost brothers on the streets of Detroit, burning, mugging, destroying and defacing, psychotherapy is a meaningless and irrelevant commodity. But, if ever they are to return from the street, the psychotherapist will have to help them overcome their rage. Asher Ginsburg, a balding Russian intellectual late in the last century, writing under the assumed and unassuming name of Achad-Ha'am, "One of the Poepple", tells of a visit he had made to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The space in front of the Wall consisted then of a narrow, dusty and cramped alley filled with old and fragile looking Jews, moving rhythmically in prayer, their voices monotonous and their eyes dead. They seemed lifeless and lacking in vigor, fatalistically waiting for the Messiah. He shall restore Zion. Achad-Ha'am turns from them in disgust: "If a country shall be destroyed, its sons and daughters may arise, and with hard toil and great effort they may rebuild it. But, when a people is destroyed, who shall arise to restore it?"

Achad-Ha'am could not have known, three quarters of a century ago, of the existence of the Psychotherapist. Although tedious and time-consuming, as growth always necessarily is, psychotherapy finally offers an answer. Here is a way to

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\*For a fuller discussion and an exposition of basic assumptions see my chapter, Behavior Change - Insignificant and Significant, Apparent and Real in WHAT MAKES BEHAVIOR CHANGE POSSIBLE?, edited by Arthur Burton, Ph.D., Brunner/Mazel, Publishers, New York, 1976.

restore a people. It is still only a path, not a highway, and movement along it is often slow. Although created in the image of God, Man is not God and, therefore, unable to create a new world in seven days.

Sitting up there in my office, working patiently with people in pain and in need, day after day, I am probably manning an important position in the front lines of the battle for a better future. The shooting downstairs, the need to lock car doors as I drive home, windows rolled-up, and the danger to life and limb may place me in front-line conditions more than I care to be. But, I am staying as long as I can, carefully listening to the rumble that might indicate the coming of the flood. I am not taking to the hills yet because a decisive battle is being fought here, not on the crime-filled streets, but eight floors above them.

True revolutions do not seem to take place on barricades any more. Perhaps they never did. They occur, instead, in those consulting rooms in which good psychotherapy is being practiced and Man's fears are patiently being dissolved. Here he finally achieves true freedom to be. Here he may find the strength within himself to face reality, cataclysmic or not.