Massive Trauma and the Healing Role of Reparative Justice

By Yael Danieli *

Emphasising the need for a multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary, integrative framework for understanding massive trauma and its aftermath, this chapter examines victims/survivors’ experiences from the psychological perspective. It describes how victims are affected by mass atrocities, their reactions, concerns and needs. Delineating necessary elements in the recovery processes from the victims’ point of view, the chapter will focus in particular on those elements of healing that are related to justice processes and victims’ experiences of such processes. Although not sufficient in itself, reparative justice is nonetheless an important, if not necessary, component among the healing processes. Missed opportunities and negative experiences will be examined as a means to better understand the critical junctures of the trial and victims’ role within the process that can, if conducted optimally, lead to opportunities for healing.

A. Conspiracy of Silence

It was in the context of studying the phenomenology of hope in the late 1960s that I interviewed survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. To my profound anguish and outrage, all of those interviewed asserted that no one, including mental health professionals, listened to them or believed them when they attempted to share their Holocaust experiences and their continuing suffering. They, and later their children, concluded that people who had not gone through the same experiences could not understand and/or did not care. With bitterness, many thus opted for silence about the Holocaust and its aftermath in their interactions with non-survivors. The resulting conspiracy of silence between

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Holocaust survivors and society, including mental health, justice and other professionals, has proven detrimental to the survivors’ familial and socio-cultural reintegration by intensifying their already profound sense of isolation, loneliness, and mistrust of society. This has further impeded the possibility of their intrapsychic integration and healing, and made mourning their massive losses impossible.

This imposed silence proved particularly painful to those who had survived the war determined to bear witness. Keilson similarly demonstrated that a poor post-war environment ("third traumatic sequence") could intensify the preceding traumatic events and, conversely, a good environment might mitigate some of the traumatic effects.

Because the conspiracy of silence most often follows the trauma, it is the most prevalent and effective mechanism for the transmission of trauma on all dimensions. Both intrapsychically and interpersonally protective, silence is profoundly destructive, for it attests to the person’s, family’s, society’s, community’s, and nation’s inability to integrate (and constructively respond to) the trauma. They can find no words to narrate the trauma story and create a meaningful dialogue around it. This prevalence of a conspiracy of silence stands in sharp contrast to the widespread research finding that social support is the most important factor in coping with traumatic stress. This applies as well to justice processes. When done optimally, these processes can lead whole societies to begin to dissipate the detrimental effects of the conspiracy of silence.

Nagata reported that more than twice as many Sansei (children of Japanese-Americans interned by the U.S. Government) whose fathers were in camps, died before the age of 60 compared to Sansei whose fathers were not interned. Nagata

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