THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ISLAM FOR COPING WITH LOSS AND BEREAVEMENT: PALESTINIAN CHILDREN KILLED IN ISRAEL

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Abstract

In this paper, we characterize the significance of the Moslem religion for coping with loss and bereavement, with an in-depth, semi-structured interview study conducted among twelve Palestinian families in Israel after the deaths of their sons, killed during the October 2000 events. Results revealed five religious coping patterns that assisted the families to cope with the death of their sons, who are perceived by them, based on Islamic beliefs, as Shahids (martyrs). These are: The religious meaning of Shahid; Attributing death to an external power; The Koran as a reservoir; The victim as living Shahid; and The concept of God the merciful. Implications of the results for intervention as well as for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Moslem, Islam and coping, loss and bereavement, Palestinian families, October 2000, trauma and politics, state victims.

On the 30th of September, 2000, the El-Aqsa Intifada (uprising) broke-out following the visit of Ariel Sharon, a member of the Knesset at the time, in the El-Aqsa mosque, one of the most sacred places for Moslems worldwide, and the killing of seven Moslem worshipers at Haram al-Sharif on Friday the 29th. Palestinians living in Israel expressed their solidarity with their fellow Palestinians by taking part in demonstrations that took place in their own communities, during which many were injured and thirteen young Moslem Palestinians were killed; twelve of them Palestinians with an Israeli citizenship. The October events have

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turned twelve Moslem Palestinian families living in Israel into bereaved, mourning families, whose bereavement and mourning were the result of the loss of a family member in connection with a religious as well as a national cause.

_Coping with the Death of Someone Close and Significant_

Literature has dealt with the topic of loss, grief and trauma ever since the beginning of social and behavioral science research. Many researchers have indicated different elements, such as personal history, gender, age, culture, personality traits, various support systems, and so on, that may influence the nature and pattern of peoples’ reaction to grief and to the loss of someone close, as well as the way grief and bereavement are processed. These elements may also influence patterns of coping with the loss and bereavement of someone close (Witztum, 2004). Studies that deal with coping with the loss of someone close and significant, such as a son or a daughter, focus on the different patterns used, such as maintaining a relationship with the deceased and referring to him or her as if they were still alive (De Vries, Lana, & Falk, 1994; Rosenblatt, 2000). Other patterns that help people cope with the loss of someone close and significant include keeping the deceased person’s room and personal belongings, caring for the grave and spending hours in “conversation” with the deceased while expressing indifference towards the surroundings (Clark, 2001). Idealization of the deceased is another pattern of dealing and coping with the death of someone close and significant, and one of its expressions is in describing the deceased person in a positive light (Clark, 2001).

One of the major ways of coping with loss is attributing significance to it. When someone close dies an insignificant death, people may feel restless and uncomfortable regarding their role in the world and the purpose and course of their life (Attig, 1990; Downey, Silver, & Wortman, 1990; Witztum & Malkinson, 1993). The need to attach significance or purpose to loss is even more evident in cases of sudden, premature, traumatic, and unexpected death (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Murphy, 1996; Weeler, 2001). Thus, attributing significance to loss is one of the most important resources for coping with the death of someone close (Weeler, 2001; Witztum & Malkinson, 1993). Inability to find significance early in the mourning process may result in psychological distress, delayed adjustment to the loss, difficulty in personal and inter-personal functioning,