

A Few Notes for the Soul During a Crisis Period

Limor Alon

Limor is an alum of Amitim from 2004 and an expert clinical psychologist.

Resilience and (no more) vulnerability.

We have become very accustomed in recent years—thanks, also, to the field of psychology of which I am a part—to view the soul in terms of its vulnerability. Its overly widespread use within the idea of trauma, and the ideas of sacrifice, abuse, and depression (often used to define a natural response to difficult events in life), indicates an increased value of the concept of the soul's vulnerability. This is at the expense of a concept that was more widespread in earlier generations: the concept of resilience, which gave value to overcoming difficulties and strength in the face of hardship—even if at the cost of emotional detachment. We've often blamed our parents' generation for their emotional deficits, viewing those deficits as a lack of a connection to something essential in the human experience, something that they were "missing." And perhaps we could allow ourselves to think that way because we no longer saw ourselves as in an existential struggle and so we had the time to process our emotions.

But all of this was almost instantaneously overturned on October 7th and we learned an important lesson about ourselves: In fact, we have an innate natural resilience. And we have the ability to build resilience that we do not yet have at the time of this *sui generis* crisis. Almost immediately after the massacre, we saw a conversation about resilience taking over the social networks. Although some will say that it's a denial of the depth of the hurt, I claim that it's a natural and successful response to such a profound crisis—a response that we forgot we possessed. In my understanding, as a culture, we have underestimated the natural capacities of the soul—which carries the wisdom of multiple generations—to overcome even the most challenging life events, even if at a necessary cost. For example, we got used to calling "emotional detachment" and "disassociation" pathological concepts.

I think that there's tremendous consolation in the knowledge that when suffering becomes too much, the soul knows how to do truly strange, almost mystical things, including almost detaching itself from the body and watching the horror from the outside, like one watches a movie, or something that is happening "not to me." In fact, in my opinion, it's also connected to the comforting idea that the soul separates from the body, and it's a form of clinical evidence that this separation is truly possible and sometimes even happens while we are still alive. All of this is to say that sometimes emotional detachment is okay and even the best outcome of a given situation. And, in general, we can trust a bit more in the DNA of our resilience and surrender ourselves to it. The soul has intuition, it knows how to overcome, and, yes, it knows how to survive.

The strength of the collective.

And here, something else we forgot. For years, in psychologists' offices, we discussed our heartaches, we cried and suffered with our personal scars discreetly, intimately, without others hearing. And while, as a psychologist, I have no doubt in the immense power of these private encounters (among the most beautiful and healing kind of encounter that there is), after the massacre, it was clear that private encounters alone could not withstand the distress, fear, and deep fracture within all of us. It was clear that we needed to stand in some kind of symbolic circle, to bow our heads, to cry together, to console one another, just to be reminded that we are in this together. We were reminded on October 7th that mourning involves a touch on the shoulder, eye contact, a squeeze of the hand, and a "Hey, how are you?" And, yes, the collective recognition that we are now shattered but, in the future that is hard to see from here, we will rise and continue on.

Do we all know how to take care of someone who is coming out of hell? Not professionally, but you might be surprised to discover that your intuition about it won't be far off. So, in my personal opinion, in the current situation, it's not only (although also!) necessary to rush to psychologists, but also to sit in groups, to be part of the collective, and to be together. And to trust in yourselves. And if you want advice on how to even help a survivor, then let them tell their story and tell it again. Help them arrange the sequence of events, what happened earlier and what happened after. Help them feel that there was a causal connection between the events. Help them create a story of reasonable reactions to an unreasonable situation and free them from guilt in favor of strengthening their natural intuition. For example, "I escaped" was actually, "I was looking for shelter, it was dangerous."

And most importantly, believe that together we can strengthen and hold each other. What one soul cannot bear, the collective knows how to bear. The collective has methodologies that psychology doesn't have (humor, hugs, and hot tea, for example), and it has a lot of value. Aside from that, yes, go to therapy, even if only for a few sessions, and give yourselves that private space. It doesn't contradict [the collective approach].

When the abnormal is the norm.

Or what if we specify and say trauma and not PTSD, but not depression, existential fear rather than anxiety: The body has entirely natural reactions—for which we don't need to be punished, be ashamed of them, or feel guilty about them—in response to difficult life events. What many of us are experiencing right now can be described as a trauma response and not a PTSD response (in fact, the "post" is something that cannot be measured right now). It's sadness and not clinical depression; it's real fear because of a real threat and not irrational anxiety about a non-existent threat. We need to normalize the pathological this time because, as the saying

goes, “Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you.” The reactions at the moment mostly correspond to reality, even if they feel extreme. Of course, most of them is not all of them. And it doesn't mean we shouldn't stop, process, go to therapy, and do everything that is required, as mentioned earlier. But as a public, in my opinion, it's not advisable to get carried away with the pathological discourse that, again, sustains the idea of the soul's vulnerability.

In truth of fact, we have strengths. And yes, it's not a cliché—from this, too, we will rise, as we always have. And maybe we'll even learn something from this. And maybe it won't be for nothing. And maybe some value will develop from it—and who knows, the optimists will even say peace [may come from it].

The difference between an ongoing event and one that has ended.

The link between the massacre (an event that has ended) and kidnappings and the war (an ongoing event) implies that, in a way, we are still in mourning over the massacre because the existential threat is still live, and the consequences of the war and the waiting for the kidnapped [to be released] are still here. And in another sense, we are already a few weeks in, starting to collect the shards of everything that broke within us on October 7th (we are already talking about it in the past tense), and what it means both now and with an eye towards the future. It may possibly feel strange that a process is both happening and not happening at the same time. But that is indeed how it is at the moment. It's a kind of overlap of situations.

Action and activity

When you find yourself being carried away by the news, thoughts, painful imagery, or agitative, unproductive conversations, stop. Do something. Play with your kids, listen to a song, bake a cake, volunteer to do something, help someone in a small way. Passivity is depressing; activity is uplifting. Any activity will do. My mother always says, “When hands are busy, thoughts calm down.” And even if you are not totally focused, it's not terrible. Stay busy.

Pride and less shame and guilt

After the massacre, it was amazing to see how many people felt that they are not enough right now: not giving enough, not donating enough, not present enough, not doing enough PR. Even people who saved lives felt that they did not save enough lives. I found myself asking a simple question to everyone I spoke with, to balance this existential ground: What are you proud of about yourself? In this season, on this day? And you know what, the answers were amazing! Try it. From now until the end of the war: What am I proud of about myself today?

Here's mine: I am proud of myself for sitting myself down to write these thoughts to you and to be reminded that I, too, am a part of this beloved and precious collective of Amitei Bronfman, which is most relevant to these current days in which the question of what it means to be a Jew has reached our doorsteps.

May we hear good news [in the coming days].