

**Gina Ross**, "It is not easy for people in Israel to live, but they have exceptional strength".

# THE TRAUMA WARD

By Ilana Shtotland, Ma'ariv, published in AT Magazine  
Translated from Hebrew by Daphna Zipkin

"Focus on a negative or compulsive thought that bothers you, such as 'I can't succeed at doing anything right' or 'all men are dangerous' and the like, and examine which constricting sensations rise up in you – whether stress in your guts or sag in the chest. Focus on a single sensation at a time until the energy accumulated in it disintegrates, or form an opposite thought – 'I am capable' or 'men are usually trustworthy, but only a few are not like that' -- or simply remember a time when your life ran smoothly, and focus on what this thought arouses in your body. After this, you are liable to feel a sensation of being anchored to the ground and steadfast on your feet, of strength in your back, warmth in your stomach or expansion of the chest. At this stage, sway like a pendulum between both sensations, until the constricting sensation is released".

This is one of the exercises found in the new book by the American psychotherapist Gina Ross, "Beyond the Trauma Vortex to the Healing Vortex" (Nord publications, edited by Dr. Ofrah Eylon). "This is actually a manual for the general public", explains Ross. "This book helps people to listen to their own body, and also to free themselves on their own from the pressures of trauma, to ease the pain, and to calm down. There are people for whom these exercises will suffice to feel much better, and there are those who will need additional help. It all depends on the type of trauma and when it occurred".

Ross does not limit herself to helping the individual. The intention of her book, which has been translated into Hebrew, is much more global. "My hope is that this will also have a positive effect on the Middle East as a whole, because when a person is calm within himself, it is easier to be creative, to think rationally about solutions", she expresses with optimism. "My goal is that people in Israel will be better able to listen to one another, and succeed in forming a dialog".

## ATTACKS OF PANIC AND RAGE

For the past nine years Ross, a Jewish resident of Los Angeles, has been coming to Israel between four and six times a year to lead workshops for Israeli and Palestinian professionals, including social workers, nurses, doctors, Yoga instructors and in general those who work in the field of therapy. In these workshops, she trains people to work with those who suffer from trauma through the "Somatic Experience" (SE) method. Today there are about one hundred experts throughout the country who provide therapy using this method.

### WHAT IS ACTUALLY UNIQUE ABOUT THE METHOD THAT YOU TEACH?

"This method, developed by Dr. Peter Levine, is based on understanding the changes that occur in the body when the trauma sets within it. It opens up personal awareness of the connections between the body and spirit and works on the person's nervous system. The system is very subtle and works directly on the symptoms. Even if someone does not remember specifically the event that caused him the trauma, it is possible to treat him.

"Dr. Levine developed the system after he observed what happens to animals in nature when they encounter traumatic events. The animals do not remain in trauma, because after the event passes they release the pressure from the body, shake it out. If the animals are capable of doing this, it indicates that human beings can do it too. I teach how to be aware of your feelings when you are not well, to understand your physical sensations, and then this feeling is released.

"Sometimes people can also liberate the nervous system on their own. For example, one of my students who works with the children of Sderot wrote me a very touching letter. She wrote that just as she was teaching the children how to release the pressure after a Qassam rocket attack, a Qassam rocket actually fell, and the children ran to the protected space and immediately released themselves in accordance with what she had taught".

Ross explains that trauma is actually a meeting point between a certain event and the person's nervous system. "When the nervous system is weak and a harsh event occurs somehow, then one person can become traumatized from it, while another person, whose nervous system is stronger, can get over it relatively easier".

### **WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA?**

"Trauma is manifested by many symptoms. Sometimes they appear long after the specific event occurred, and then people do not always understand that what they feel now is actually a symptom of trauma. Trauma can be expressed in the physical sense, i.e., chronic aches, migraines, a blow to the immune system. It can also influence the feelings of the person, which can become very extreme – panic attacks, rage attacks, anger, and negative thoughts".

### **WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO GET RID OF TRAUMA SYMPTOMS?**

"There are no miracles here, and it depends in the event itself. In the wake of fresh events that occurred recently, such as a traffic accident, a falling Qassam rocket or exposure to a suicide attack, usually between 10-16 therapy sessions are required, and sometimes less. However, in the case of a more complicated trauma that has already set in, the treatment can take longer".

### **HAVE YOU EVER PERSONALLY EXPERIENCED TRAUMA?**

"Looking back I understand that I have been traumatized. Every time I took a dive, I was afraid of the water, felt that I can't breathe, and went into panic. And then I understood that my feeling of fear originated because at age 14 I almost drowned in one of the waterfalls in Brazil. I treated myself using this method, and the fear passed".

## **A PSYCHOLOGIST TO THE CORE**

Ross' affinity to the field of psychology was apparent early in her childhood. "Already at age 15, when asked what I want to be, I would say 'a psychologist and an artist'. I have always wanted to be both. I have been drawing since age ten, and since age 14 I have been talking with people trying to help them. It is something I have in my soul. At age 25 I began to study psychology, completed my studies in Los Angeles, became certified as a psychotherapist and opened a private clinic. I have worked extensively with couples who came from different cultures which caused conflict against this background.

"15 years ago, entirely by accident, I got into the field of trauma healing. I registered in a course about psychotherapy through the body, and there I met Dr. Levine, who taught the course. He explained that violence is one of the symptoms of trauma, and that trauma also affects people throughout the world, disrupts their ability to form emotional relationships, caused distrust, a loss of hope. I understood that I must bring this method to the Middle East".

Ross is fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian, which definitely facilitates all her international relationships. In the year 2000 she founded the International Trauma Institute in Los Angeles. "The focus of the institute is the situation in the Middle East, and it is important to me to convey the treatment method in order to help within Israel, our home", she says. "It is important to me to explain the influence of the trauma on the

collective, to do what I can relative to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to help people to cope with situations of trauma. For people in Israel, it is not easy to live, and they have experienced and do experience tremendous pressures – the period of the intifada, the suicide attacks, and Qassam rockets on Sderot. However, relative to the constant pressures and stress that is prevalent here, the Israelis are coping well and they also have exceptional strength”.

Even though Ross, with her blonde look and bright smile, broadcasts American chic, her biography can certainly explain why the affairs of the Middle East interest her. She was born 60 years ago in the city of Halab in Syria to a Jewish family with eight children. When she was five months old, the family left Syria and settled in Lebanon (“I believe we were on the last plane that left Syria before they closed the gate on the Jews”). Next the family wandered to Italy and Switzerland, and finally settled in Brazil. “Except for my twin sister who currently lives in Ashkelon, my entire family lives in Brazil to this day”.

At age 22 Ross decided to leave Brazil. “I was very intellectual; I wanted to see the world, to experience personal growth. I toured all sorts of places in the world, among them also Israel, and when I was in Israel I received a really wonderful welcome. Every person I met, whether a waitress or a taxi driver, everyone said, ‘come and live here’, and I decided to come. I made aliyah within the framework of the Jewish Agency, and received a scholarship to study art at Bezalel”.

#### **HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU CAME TO LIVE IN ISRAEL?**

“I lived in Jerusalem in the student quarters near Mea Shearim, and for nine months I studied Hebrew in the Ulpan. At the end, I did not manage to get to Bezalel, because just then I met my first husband. He was a Canadian Jew who came to Israel to visit his friends. As soon as we met, I forgot Bezalel. When he saw me, he said: ‘I have found the woman I have been looking for’.

We were married in Brazil, and from there we moved to live in Los Angeles. I left Israel, but I left my heart here. Till today, each time I arrive in Israel, I feel as if my soul is returning home. I also keep Kosher, and do not do business on Shabbat”.

Ross and her husband were married 23 years, and they are parents to two children – a son 33, who became a born-again religious Jew, and a daughter 31, a pediatrician. 15 years ago they divorced, “but to this day we are very good friends”. A year after her separation from her husband, Ross met her second husband, a businessman, who, among the rest also helps her with fundraising for her projects that are associated with the field of trauma.

#### **WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE IN ISRAEL?**

“I had a meeting with a Rabbi whose son was killed in Jenin six years ago. Since then, he has not been able to remember even the good moments they shared together, because his pain was so enormous. After one session, he succeeded in remembering”.

#### **YOU SHOW A LOT OF PATRIOTISM. WHY DON'T YOU ACTUALLY COME TO LIVE IN ISRAEL?**

“My family is in Los Angeles, and I also believe I can be of much more help from there. When you do not dwell in the traumatic place, it is easier for you to help”.