

The noted American psychologist, Gina Ross, arrives here with a pretentious goal: to free the Israeli residents around Gaza as well as the Palestinians from their psychological distress. The method: a unique treatment based on animal instincts.

“You are better immunized than any other people, but whoever is continuously beaten will fall in the end,” she explains.

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TO TAME THE TRAUMA

What is the difference between a deer in the forest facing a tiger threatening to attack, and two vehicles on the brink of a head on collision? The answer: the deer is likely to escape unharmed from the encounter, while the two drivers, even if they do not ultimately collide physically, will carry the consequences of their near-miss for many long years, if not for a lifetime. This trauma, asserts Gina Ross, a Jewish-American psychotherapist, is preventable. Ross (61) visits Israel these days in an effort to treat the traumas unique to the people living in Zion (Israel), with an emphasis on those who reside near the Gaza strip and who endure almost daily rocket fire. Furthermore, she plans to assist the other side, and to treat the traumas from which the Palestinians suffer as well.

“Everyone experiences trauma; there is not a person who does not experience trauma,” Ross is quick to explain, “Israelis live under extraordinary, constant tension, hence they are immunized more than anyone else. However, even with immunity, a person who is beaten without stop will fall in the end, and if we do not want this to happen here, we must take more action. In any case, I would argue that Israelis are not so different from the standpoint of needing to heal the trauma.”

Ross brings us a trauma treatment methodology called “Somatic Experience” (SE), a technique developed by Dr. Peter Levine. Ross is the founder and president of the International Trauma-Healing Institute and an international trainer in the SE method, who authored the book “Beyond the Trauma Vortex into the Healing Vortex,” a manual for implementing this method. She visits Israel about five times a year, and during this visit she will lead workshops on this topic in Ashkelon and Sderot in order to teach both the residents and professional caregivers the secrets of the method, which may help lighten their lives a little.

The methodology is based on the world of animals in nature, and Ross claims that animals in nature perform a “shakeout” at the end of each encounter and go back to normal behavior, and that people must also do something to “cleanse” after a traumatic experience. “This activity releases somatic energy from the body, energy that was stored during the traumatic event,” explains Ross. “The methodology utilizes well the connection between the body and mind, and precisely defines what is trauma: a response to an event that is never resolved, and, in the physical sense, a situation in which the nervous system loses balance. Sometimes a person will experience a traumatic event and will come out of it intact, and sometimes the person will experience an event that seems benign and simple, yet will nevertheless suffer from trauma. The specific reaction depends on how the nervous system functions before the event, during the event and afterwards.

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According to Ross, the best example is a traffic accident. “A person experiences a traffic accident without casualties,” she describes, “thinks everything is all right, gets out of the car, exchanges information with the other driver; they argue a little, and both get back into their respective cars and drive home without paying attention to their body. However, after a day, a week, or even several years, the energy that was trapped in the body begins to form symptoms expresses in muscle pain and digestive problems, and is apt to cause even more serious problems, because the immune system and the nervous system have been injured.”

In order to prevent a trauma situation, explains Ross, the drivers could have acted differently. If they would stay in their cars for a few moments, they would notice what is happening with their bodies and allow for the energy to dissipate, and they could emerge from the experience unharmed,” she maintains. “Deep breaths and shaking are some of the ways to get rid of the energy,” details Ross, “the process is likely to occur naturally, but the excitement from the event and physical responses that do not have closure stress people who immediately continue onward, and essentially imprison the energy inside which later must erupt somehow.”

TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF THE MIND

However, even for the person who acts in the usual way, and is already traumatized, Ross has a unique treatment. “Healing the trauma is submerged in the primitive part of the brain, hence we must address it in its own language, which means to penetrate directly into the trauma through the body language, and not feelings or thoughts like in standard therapy. It is more important to let the body do its own work, because everyone is born with this ability, and apparently throughout time we have repressed it.”

In another example Ross tells of a woman she met at an airport, after that woman fell on the floor. “I sat next to her on the plane, and asked her to tell me exactly where she feels the pain, to become aware of her sensations,” remembers Ross. “In this way we went over all the locations in her body that hurt, until they asked me to return to my seat. After about half an hour I went back to her, and she was amazed that that the pains were gone, and only one body part remained painful – the one we didn’t yet get to. I am simply trying to return people to their natural, organic side. People today believe that if they tremble, it is not okay, so they stop shaking and go against the instincts. The methodology actually reinforces the return to our instincts, but with awareness and an understanding of the relationship between the body and the mind.”

It is possible that her occupation with trauma stems from Ross’ childhood, which could have caused her physical damage, but she claims to have actually succeeded in dealing with the hardships in her life. “My family and I have coped well with trauma; everything seems like an adventure. When I was five months old, we escaped from Syria to Lebanon on the last plane to leave before they closed the place to the Jews. In 1958 we got out of Lebanon moments before the American forces arrived, and from there we went to Europe for a year and then on to Brazil, where my family resides to this day. I made aliyah to Israel, and after nine months I met my husband and we moved to the United States. I didn’t feel the trauma, and only after I studied and understood the concept did I see its influence on my family. I personally have a wonderful life. I came to sunny Los Angeles, very quickly learned English, did what I loved, and everything looks good.”

Through the years Ross has dealt in various areas, such as family therapy, marriage and partner therapy and spiritual growth. “Suddenly I realized that if I want a spiritual world, it is imperative to heal the trauma,” she recalls. “I understood that violence stems from trauma, thought about anti-Semitism in this world as an example, and simply wanted a world that is safer for my children. Actually, even if it sounds

like a cliché, I came to the field of trauma in an effort to fix the world, or at least to clarify to people that it is possible to live in a different way, that it is possible to change circumstances.”

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LIVING UNDER CONSTANT STRESS

Ross was not satisfied with just providing personal therapy at her clinic in Los Angeles, but directed herself toward the collective, and from there to therapy in the Middle East. “In therapy you are able to cause people to free perceptions and feelings which they hold toward certain groups of the population, members of different religions and nationalities, and to understand why these pose a problem for them, what fears they stimulate, and to try to connect to their needs in order to arrive at a dialog. I have worked with groups of Israelis, and in the near future I will work with groups of Palestinians with the goal to try and change something in the perception of each side toward the other. Usage of SE in this instance can treat the collective trauma and to change much within our reality. The people who implemented this method are amazed by the changes it creates.”

An additional project in the area of trauma healing, on which Ross is working these days in her country, deals with treatment that is specific to each sector of the population. “I began to study public sectors,” explains Ross, “such as news media, doctors, teachers, military personnel and psychologists, and my intention is to publish a book for each sector which will serve as a guide for coping with the traumas originating from the specific profession. In the end it will address everyone.”

This week, Ross will lead trauma healing workshops in Sderot and Ashkelon. “The method is specifically useful to the type of personal stress which is currently found in the south,” declares Ross, “I recently worked with a woman after a Kassam rocket fell in her place of work. Luckily for her, she was not at work that day, but in spite of this she has not been able to return to her usual routine, and when she came back to work, she was under constant anxiety. I worked with her to translate her thoughts and feelings following this incident into sensations and this freed her. I am going to teach people how to do this by themselves, and teach the caregivers how to free a person from shock.”

In Sderot this process proved itself with a speed that surprised even Ross herself. “The book was published during Passover, and a month later a woman who introduced herself as a resident of the town arrived at one of the workshops and asked to thank me. I was quite surprised, because the book was not yet well known. She said that it changed her life, the way she behaved during a “red” alert siren, and her relationship with her children. She told us that before she tried the exercises in the book, she used to become hysterical during an alarm, running and screaming. Today she remains calm and even taught her children the method so that each one will know his role. Everyone at the workshop was stunned by the change which was effected so quickly. At first, I didn’t believe that people could simply read, exercise and act, and I targeted the book primarily to caregivers, but I am constantly being approached by people who want to help spread the method after it helped them. These are the things that make me most happy.”