

## Social closeness at a time of social distancing

### The 'case' of the Israel Psychoanalytic Society in time of COVID-19

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*"The individual is a group animal at war both with the group and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his groupishness" (Bion, 1961)*



This picture by Yossi Triest (which was ironically named 'Wild analysis') was followed by a long chain of pictures showing abandoned chairs and couches, which were found in the area of permitted walks of 100m from home. The 'displaced' encounter with the abundant clinics created an uncanny feeling as well as longings to return to normal work-life in the first week of lockdown.

## The Here and the Now

The shock of COVID-19 sent us as individuals to cope with a "once in a life-time" unknown situation. COVID19 is a traumatic event on many levels: the personal, the collective, the present and the historic one. The interplay between these levels results in a unique experience in every place.

The pandemic has sent psychoanalytic societies to look for ways to contain and work through personal and professional implications.

As the pandemic crossed continents and countries, we were globally confronted with similar threat of illness, death, bereavement, confinement, and the need to adjust to a bizarre and unknown situation. The threats were similar, yet the solutions differed from one individual to another, from one group to another.

Various psychoanalytic societies mobilized different modes of coping, ranging from "each to his own," to containers for sharing the collective trauma via 'listservs', 'townhall meetings', 'mail exchanges' and 'open Zoom meetings'.

I am writing in Israel as the country is 'reopening' rather quickly, the pandemic seems to be contained, (but expecting a 'second wave'), and the death toll is relatively low. Most people are returning to the "normal" or rather to the "new normal".

As with many traumatic events, once they are over, there is a dissociation between the factual and the emotional memory. Although we are just a few weeks after the first shock wave and it is still fresh in our memory, it is difficult to connect to the shock, anxiety and malaise that prevailed for many of us , difficult to connect to the restrictive state of mind (and body) that characterized the acute period.

Below is the story of some of the ways members of the Israel Psychoanalytic society (IPS) coped with COVID-19 as individuals and members of the Society.

To appreciate the specificity of the Israeli situation, the actual situation as well as past 'ghosts' need to serve as background.

**The political situation:** On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. About a week before that (on March 2<sup>nd</sup>) Israel held its third general election in a year. The two main rivalrous parties were the right-wing Likud, headed by Prime Minister Netanyahu, who is facing trial on charges of corruption, and Blue-White, an "anti-Bibi", anti-corruption new center party. The third elections, like the two previous ones, resulted in a stalemate, leaving the formation of a coalition as the only solution.

**Ghosts of the past:** Israeli society has an 'alert button' which is readily mobilized by dangerous situations, such as war or terrorist attack. When pushed, this 'alert

button' sets off a 'survival mode' on the individual and national level, mobilizing institutions trained to deal with crises. COVID-19 pushed these individual and national buttons.

**Israeli-ness:** Togetherness has a special place and role in Israeli collective mentality. It is both an ideal and a core value, deriving from survival mechanisms fashioned by centuries of Jewish victimization, culminating in the Holocaust. It is further enhanced by the comradeship developed during the (mandatory) army service. The result is both a heightened need and a potential for affiliation, for "closing the ranks" in times of tension.

**Holocaust and the pandemic:** Holocaust associations are near the surface of Israeli collective mentality. The prospect of doctors having to select who should be left to die is terrifying everywhere but has an unbearable resonance here. 'Selection' immediately echoes the "there and then" of the Holocaust and becomes still more unbearable when some of the "disposable" older generation are Holocaust survivors.

**The IPS:** The Israel Psychanalytic Society is a thriving fast-growing society. It has 301 members and 100 candidates. The IPS is characterized on one hand by cooperation and shared goals, and on the other by tensions, competition, rivalries, envy, and residues of past injuries. Like many (all?) psychoanalytic societies, many IPS members are ambivalent about their "groupishness". Like all analysts, they are at their best in one-to-one situations. They fit Bion's description's above of a *"group animal at war both with the group and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his groupishness"* (Bion, 1961). Hence what developed in the last two months in the IPS was surprising. As far as I have inquired in other psychoanalytic societies it was also unique. I want to address this unique development, describe it, and wonder what made it possible.

## **The 'case' of the IPS in times of COVID-19**

Forming the coalition government coincided with the increasing threat of COVID-19. We were exposed to a daily barrage of fear/panic broadcasts on TV by Prime Minister Netanyahu and the CEO of the Health Ministry, both forecasting catastrophic scenarios like: "The end of humanity!"; "The worst pandemic since the Black Plague!"; "Tens of thousands will die"; "Look at what happens in Italy, we will be like them!". It created and fed an epidemic of anxiety and fear.

In the next two weeks the country saw both denial and anxiety in action: A rush to prepare ourselves for an imagined, terrible yet unknown, situation. Toilet paper and eggs became the symbol of the foreseen shortage, marked by empty shelves in the supermarkets.

Because of the deep political divide, half the country did not trust the government and its officers, perceiving it as using COVID-19 to consolidate power. Yet, despite the mistrust, panic was high enough to lead to submission to the authorities.

What ensued was a collective regression to dependency, paranoia, and abdication of personal authority. The line between trust and dependency, blurred even at 'normal' times, became even harder to define.

By the third week of March, 'social distancing' and working from home were at first suggested, then under emergency laws became regulations, transgressing of which would result in costly fines. We had to shelter-in and keep distance from family. As millions of people stayed at home, streets became empty and the eerie sights further enhanced the panic.

The Israel psychoanalytic community switched from one day to the next to working "remotely", until then a rare practice.

At this time, a member initiated a WhatsApp group of IPS members under the title: "*Politically Concerned Psychoanalysts*". The aim of the group was to create a platform for those concerned with the fast-moving post-election political developments. The group was energized by a sense of urgency, and an attempt to stop dangerous political moves before it was too late. This WhatsApp group was focused on political ideas and concerns, considering political action and sharing information about demonstrations, fund-raising and other political activities that were taking place as the country moved step by step to a shutdown.

Within a few hours of the initiation of this group, two distinct topics emerged: political concerns and professional and personal concerns, each deserving its own space.

The next day (22.3.20), the IPS President and Board sent a mail to all IPS members, inviting them to take part in a new WhatsApp group, "*Space for Thinking*". A reduced version of the invitation read:

*"We realized that many members are interested in a shared space to connect and reflect together on the new professional questions arising now. The WhatsApp platform allows for a lively and easy communication. While the other group is dedicated to political issues, this group can be a space for questions about the psychoanalytic setting, the psychoanalytic stance, the third position today, etc. The questions may be clear, the answers not at all. As this is a Large Group, along with the ease of communication we can also envision obstacles and anxieties, and along the ease of coming together, a feeling of being lost."*

On the day the group was set up 141 members registered, and after 8 weeks there were 151 members, which are half the society (301). A few left the group, some others joined. All in all, participation in the group was stable.

Three days after the group was launched a formal state of emergency was declared in the country.

Within a few hours, this WhatsApp group became a lively meeting place, evidence of the well-timed response to an existing need. Intensive participation lasted for 8 weeks and faded out gradually as restrictions were lifted, the pandemic seemed to be contained, members started to resume in-person work, and the level of anxiety was markedly reduced. To give an idea of the group's intensity: at its most intensive phase there would be 300 posts per day, starting in early morning and till past midnight, with more than 50 members actively participating in the interchange; on later days there were 20-30 posts. Many members reported an addictive quality, checking for posts as often as possible; others would visit at the end of the day, some not at all.

It was surprising to realize how fast this WhatsApp group became a place of comfort and consolation for so many IPS members, a 'couch' for ourselves at a time when our couches remained deserted. Beside the comfort, it was also a place for creativity and liveliness, sharing pieces of music and dance, of pictures painted by colleagues, or photos taken by others. Snapshots of deserted chairs found on strolls 100 meters from home expressed both longings for the deserted couch and the creativity in finding them.

From the beginning, it seemed that both the **content** and the **process** are as unique as the times we are living in, and it seemed important to document the group process so that it does not fade away, which is the nature of the medium. Seven members volunteered to produce daily summaries of what transpired in the group. These summaries were posted in the group on the next day. A compilation of these daily summaries was sent once a week. These summaries had a major containing function. They became the 'group memory' and were heard and reacted to as interpretations in an otherwise leader-less group.

## **The What and the How**

Two topics dominated the group's exchanges from its onset till its fade-out: Thoughts about what is happening to us at this time as individuals and as professionals, and reflections on the group process: what is happening in this group, what is this group for us, and what is it to be part of it.

The month of March saw the shock of the pandemic setting in. As Albert Camus writes: *"There have been as many plagues in the world as there have been wars, yet plagues and wars always find people equally unprepared..... They did not believe in pestilence. A pestilence does not have human dimensions, so people tell themselves that it is unreal, that it is a bad dream which will end"* (1948, p. 37).

Being unprepared and treating what is happening as 'unreal and a bad dream which will end' characterize what transpired in the group, especially in the first days. Here is what I wrote in the group in the first few hours: "What a surreal situation! Until a week ago I was identified with resistance to distance analysis and supervision, and today I am thankful that we live in times when technology enables the

continuation of work by different means, maybe a different work. Reality has provided us with a mega national and international 'natural laboratory' that enables us to distil again and anew – what is the essence of analysis when you change the setting (room, couch, chair, entering and leaving). After the 'sigh of relief' of the first sessions following the before/after divide, other sessions came, more complex, more dysphoric more related to anxiety and loss. Each hour had a different quality. I am negotiating with patients my/our way for the feasible. Analysis in the shadow of collective trauma, in the shadow of anxiety and losses. Still thankful that I can continue working, for myself, for my patients. It is not a one-size-fits-all, but a different means for each one: Zoom, WhatsApp, telephone, and even "let's meet when it is over. Thoughts for this morning".

The group dealt with concrete questions, starting from "how-to-do-it" to more emotional and reflective questions, like: "What is going on, what does all this mean?" At the concrete level were questions like: Where to place the camera? Who calls whom? What do I see? What does the patient see, if at all? Who is intruding on whom? Do I open my video or not? Who do we protect by switching to "remote"? Ourselves, our patients, our families? Omnipotent phantasies of both patients and analysts wishing to meet in-person were confronted with the reality of the danger of death. To protect and be protected we had to 'abandon' our patients and were in turn orphaned by their physical loss. The couch was empty as Zoom rooms or telephone numbers became our new addresses.

Giving up on in-the-room work with patients was painful. People described phantom pains, longing for their office, longing for the physical closeness, for the 'dance' and ritual of each analytic couple at the opening and closing of the session. There were questions if a state of mind enabling reverie was possible while being alert, looking at the Zoom screen that includes our own image. On the other hand, some colleagues reported with surprise meaningful and intensive sessions, in which the distance enabled material not accessible until now in the regular setting. 'Distance' was elusive: while some patients lamented the loss of physical meetings and felt the distance as abandonment, others denied the distance: "We were never so close," referring to the enlarged picture of the analyst on the screen.

Many clinical experiences and thoughts were shared in the group. For some patients the abrupt change of the setting reactivated traumas and characteristic defenses. For others it felt as an abandonment, for still others it felt as holding and not giving up on them. For some patients, the pain of the change was such that they had to give up the meetings and empathy and interpretations could not mitigate the resistance to meet on new terms. In brief, the reactions were as diverse as people are.

There were rapid mood swings in the group as well, from potency to impotence to omnipotence and back, with humor, pictures and music to help in these shifts.

April in the Israeli calendar includes in quick succession some of the most important holidays and memorial days of the year. Passover, the most important family

gathering, focuses on transgenerational identity transmission: "And you should tell your children..." is the motto. Shortly thereafter is the Holocaust Memorial Day, followed by the Memorial Day for dead soldiers and terror victims, immediately followed by Independence Day. These special days are emotionally charged and evoke aspects of the Israeli/Jewish identity. During the pandemic emotions ran high as these anniversaries gave shape to intense feelings aroused by the formless threat of the invisible virus.

As these dates approached, immense sadness and longings colored the group exchanges. The 'Zoom-Passover' was the focus of these feelings. Family pictures were shared, followed by stories and old pictures of parents and grandparents. The history of parents and grandparents became the main preoccupation and language-of-pain during the Holocaust Memorial Day.

The intensive emotional exchanges through sharing feelings, dreams, music, pictures, and poetry transformed the group into not only a space for thinking but a place for listening, witnessing, a place of comfort and a retreat from the upsetting present of fear and distancing.

By now, IPS members had two WhatsApp groups for self-expression and action: the '*politically concerned analysts*' and '*space for thinking*'. Membership in the two groups partially overlapped. Yet the two WhatsApp groups differed in character and dynamics, reflecting their different aims. The '*politically concerned analysts*' group continued its informative, combative 'fight' mode. It looked mainly outside, had a clear external enemy to fight, and actions to be taken, they dealt with the bad object outside. The "*space for thinking*" group became more and more a space for sharing thoughts and feelings. It held comforting and 'togetherness', and looked mainly inwardly, containing fear, anxiety, and loss. The agenda division (between the two groups) allowed for the greater cohesion in the latter group, holding the good object inside. Yet at many moments the division between the groups was not so clear, and divisive reality events attacked the harmony of both groups.

As trust grew in the "*space for thinking*", dreams were offered to the group and aroused great interest. Members would add associations to the dreams and contribute their own dreams. But the nature of the WhatsApp group caused the flow of the group to be diverted rapidly to dealing with other topics. As some of us have expertise in a method called 'Social Dreaming Matrix', we thought that it would be worthwhile to make better use of the dreams in the context of COVID-19, and we offered a series of Zoom meetings dedicated to working intensively on dreams.

### **Dreaming the reality - the Social Dreaming Matrix**

*"A pestilence does not have human dimensions, so people tell themselves that it is unreal, that it is a bad dream which will end"* (A. Camus)

Social Dreaming Matrix (Erich-Ginor, 2003, 2013) is a methodology developed in the 'Group Relations' tradition. This tradition and practice are informed by

psychoanalytic and systemic thinking. The working assumption of the Social Dreaming Matrix is that a dream dreamt in the context of the matrix holds a social meaning besides the personal one. Participants share their dreams, enabling everyone to offer their associations, which may relate to the current socio-political environment, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic.

A series of three consecutive weekly sessions was offered and signed up by 40 IPS members. The matrix developed by echoing the group unconscious from one dream to the next, one association to the next. Associations were also carried from one session to the next, a week later. Former dreams figured in later dreams. Those who took part in it found it a fascinating and very meaningful experience. Many participants took part in the WhatsApp group, others were members of the Society who chose not to participate in the WhatsApp group.

I will sum up some of the themes that emerged in the Matrix. Participants reported an unusual pattern of dreams: more than their usual frequency, and unusually intensive and well-remembered dreams, a similar observation made by Charlotte Beradt in her collection of dreams by Germans before WWII: "The Third Reich of Dreams: The nightmares of a nation, 1933-1939" (Beradt, 1985). The dreams presented to the Matrix were catastrophic, troubling, full of dangers, suffused with images of distress and death, ghosts, and Holocaust imagery. In several dreams the dreamers were children in distress, in other dreams they were the providing-protecting-worrying parents, but in whatever role, they were endangered. The catastrophic dreams accelerated from one session to the next. There were also dreams of rescue: a tall wall that was successfully crossed after a hard climb; a car going to crash into a wall avoiding collision in the last minute. Some dreams contained the fear that the known world will be forgotten and disappear, that love will be possible only through plastic sheets, that it is only possible to move forward by leaving the 'extra luggage' of warmth and closeness behind.

COVID-19 figured in overt dreams: a big ship (Corona-ship, the Titanic, Ship of Fools) in which each has an office in one tiny room. Dreams of getting lost in familiar places, of the senses being flooded, of the boundaries between inside and outside, between reality and dream being blurred. The known becomes strange and uncanny. Closeness to the other is both the solution and the danger. There is no one to trust. Distress because of lack and shortage. What one has to offer is spoiled and dangerous. The movement between life and death is represented by the image of a "black wedding," a wedding in a cemetery ("black wedding" was a custom in Eastern Europe Jewish communities of marrying two orphans in a cemetery at a time of plague). Generational struggle and death wishes: the young killing the old, the old killing the young. The presence of parents, alive or long deceased: parents appeared in many of the dreams. Wish for a beneficial force that while risking itself will free us from the dangers. Superman-super-savior will appear. Longings for mamas, for actual parents and psychoanalytic parents. The wish that the crown (Corona) will provide a better place in its wake.

## A group of psychoanalysts?!

If the **contents** in a group of personal and professional encounter with COVID-19 was to be expected, the dynamics that developed in the "*space for thinking*" WhatsApp group were surprising and atypical for a group of psychoanalysts that deserve the description of "being at war with their groupishness." This raises the questions: what enabled this happening? Was there a specificity to this group of analysts that differentiated it from other WhatsApp groups?

As anxiety around COVID-19 mounted, the need for affiliation and social closeness grew, providing an antidote to 'social distancing'. Inclusion and intimacy became a source of solace. It seemed that there was a quick unconscious realization/phantasy that this group would be a safe place, that one can trust the group and share intimate parts of oneself with it.

Is this a feature of a group of analysts that have internalized a benevolent and helpful analyst, and can therefore treat the group as a good object and attribute this trustworthiness to the group-space? From the outside it might have been seen as a regressive move, a manifestation of Bion's *Basic Assumption Dependency*. This may indeed have been part of the dynamics of this group, but it was also a 'Work Group' which made good use of an existing resource at a time of distress, in the service of overcoming anxieties, loneliness, and personal and professional insecurities. It probably required a group of analysts to take up the double task of being both participants and observers of the group process and one's own participation. There was a group rhythm of moving between experiencing and reflecting. Beside the trust and openness a restrictive caution was probably also present: as with other groups of psychoanalysts, this group contained past and present analysands and supervisees, so that openness and privacy needed to be carefully balanced.

But even psychoanalysts are people, and a group has embedded dynamics regardless of who are the participants. This group too acted at times in Basic Assumption mentality, creating its heroes, its leaders and its villains, acting at other times as a 'Work Group' and doing what it has set up to do.

Reality intruded in these groups, upsetting their togetherness and oneness. The '*Politically concerned*' group discovered that 'concern' is nuanced, and members differed on important issues, even if they shared common interests. Tensions and uneasy feelings came to the fore, related to important divides in the country, such as between Ashkenazy and Eastern Jews; secular and ultra-religious; or acknowledging Palestinian victims as parallel with Israeli killed soldiers. The '*space for thinking*' group had to deal with an issue in the IPS that created ill feelings, tensions, and fear of a possible split. The group was not the proper space and did not have the tools to deal with this real event in our midst. For some time (perhaps from then on) the group lost its balance, the phantasy of oneness was shattered.

## **"Space for Thinking" as a Large Group**

As already foreseen in the initial invitation, "*space for thinking*" was a Large Group (Erich, Erlich-Ginor, Beland, 2009). As such, familiar dynamics in Large Groups were at work: feelings of getting lost in the group, of not being heard, of being offended, dynamics of idealization and the wish for "One-ness": 'We are all together, doing, feeling and experiencing the same, in this idealized group'. On the other hand, the dynamics of Me-ness: 'Whatever is going on does not involving me, I am a separate, autonomous individual'.

The Large Group is often experienced as a 'Faceless Mother'. In this case, it seems that the group felt the gaze of a benevolent-holding-Mother. Yet there were many voices that were not heard in the group. Most of the participants were silent participants, many others contributed only from time to time. A small group participated very actively all along. We do not know if the silent participants did not find their way in or if they did not have the need to come in. Some non-participants said later (in a questionnaire) that it did not suit them to participate but they are glad and proud that this development took place for those for whom it suited. Others were critical of the pseudo-intimacy and regression that manifested itself in the group. Yet for those who made good use of it, the group was valuable, no matter what others had to say. The division between some very active members and many silent ones mirrors members' general participation in IPS meetings and activities.

## **The end is a beginning**

If we look back after three months on this experience (experiment), it seems that we learned a lot from it. We learned about the flexibility of the setting as well as its limits. For some it was a visit to a foreign country, frightening at first but interesting. The 'remote experiment' did not yield clear answers as to its value and sustainability since it was held in times of pandemic, anxiety and fear, a time of loneliness and longing for our families as "social distancing" was imposed. We certainly learned about a possible survival mode and the resilience of analysts and analysis, and this is a valuable piece of learning.

The two groups are still going on. The "*politically concerned analysts*" will last as long as the political tensions continue, rallies and demonstrations are planned, crucial decisions are taken, and attacks on institutions of the law persist.

The "*space for thinking*" is now low-g geared and in 'stand-by' mode, ready for the COVID-19 'second wave'. The group has lost its urgency and its intimacy. These are kept for time of distress that may yet come.

Did what transpired in the group, its availability in a time of need, the intimacy that developed, getting to know IPS members from new perspectives through their contributions, through talents discovered, through bits of life stories, through 'meeting' their parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren - will this deeper

personal touch contribute to the cohesiveness of the IPS in the long run, or was it just a shared trip in time of pandemic, that, as we move to the 'new normal', the old patterns, politics and dynamics will return? Time will tell.

Many IPS members mobilized themselves and were helped by what they created, employing today's means of communication in the service of overcoming an unprecedented frightening situation for us as individuals and as professionals, in a remarkable way. It may be our Israeli-ness, or perhaps the prevailing socio-political processes that mobilized creative spaces which despite 'social distancing' allowed us to be close and together.

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