

**WOUNDS INTO WISDOM:  
HEALING INTERGENERATIONAL JEWISH TRAUMA**

**by  
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## Introduction

### New Light on a Dark History

In my 25<sup>th</sup> year, I dreamt of a slender Hungarian woman dressed in a fur coat. Beneath her lavish attire, I saw that she was, in fact, a naked skeleton, peering at me with both irony and affection. The woman could see that I was young and raw, paralyzed by an unnamed guilt, barely able to buy myself a teapot or secondhand sweater without being assailed by self-doubt.

*Dahlink*, she called to me, her thick accent comforting and somehow familiar: *Don't be a fool! Don't you think we would be enjoying our beautiful things if we could?* Her jaw clacked with boney laughter.

Suddenly the lights went on and the room filled with richly clad Hungarian ladies, skeletons all, enjoying a tea party. It was clear that they were all dead, yet they were also radiant and full of life. Turning toward me, their voices rose in unison: *Do you think it helps us that you suffer? Live the life we could not live!*

I sat up in bed and wept. Their words had penetrated me, touching the core of my malaise, an outsized case of survivor's guilt I did not know I had. *Live the life we could not live!* These words became a turning point, a mantra, a north star. I took them with me as I found my footing in the world, followed the call to become a psychotherapist, and ultimately, rejoined the religion that I had fled.

But it was not until fifteen years later that I learned the truth of my dream. I learned that my German grandmother and her entire family came from Austro-Hungary and had been murdered in Nazi Europe. Their elegant bearing had not helped them one wit to escape Hitler's roundups; their

assimilation into high society meant nothing in the end. Stripped of all their beautiful things, they died like paupers in the death camps.

Like many post-Holocaust families, my parents did not speak directly of these matters. The heavy legacy of loss remained muted. Yet for my five siblings and me it was like finding ourselves in deep waters without life vests or instruction. We responded as best we could, each of us fighting the undertow of history, swimming or sinking, not knowing how to help one another, divided by the trauma we had inherited, but never knowing why.

Scholars of intergenerational trauma tell us that the silence shrouding a family's untold stories paradoxically becomes the strongest form of transmission.<sup>1</sup> This was the case in my own family, and in myriad families with whom I have worked as rabbi and psychotherapist.

Yet, there is an inner compulsion to know. "One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life," writes Professor Dori Laub, himself a survivor.<sup>2</sup> Many of us struggle to bring to consciousness the hidden legacies that our families bequeath to us. For some it takes years to piece together the unspoken wounds that have shaped our lives. The residue of our ancestors' unresolved injury does not simply disappear. In fact, it often weighs most heavily on the introspective, sensitive members of the next generations.

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<sup>1</sup> Israeli traumatologist, Dan Bar-On wrote: "'Untold stories' often pass more powerfully from generation to generation than stories that can be recounted" (1995, 20). For more about the necessity of articulating ones memories, see also Van der Kolk,B.& Van der Hart, (1995, 158-182).

<sup>2</sup> Laub, D. (1995, 63). Laub is Professor of Psychiatry and Co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. He is Professor of Psychiatry and Co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University.

Beginning with the stories of my own family and the post-Holocaust community that shaped my young life, this book combines insights from recent scientific research with the voices of Jewish survivors and their descendants from around the world. Among others, we will hear from Avi who was sent out into the streets of Krakow as a four year old and lived to become an Israeli military hero; Esti whose entire family was haunted by a tragic secret left behind in Iran; Rami who lost his daughter in a suicide bombing and joined forces with a bereaved Palestinian to grieve and speak out; and from many others, from college students to octogenarians.

The search that became this book began inside a progressive American Jewish community, where for two decades I led a flourishing congregation and came into contact with people at every stage of living and dying. There I watched, studied, and counseled Jewish families as they resurrected life in the second, third, and now, fourth generations after the Holocaust. Brilliance, creativity, reactivity, agitation, and often a sense of profound urgency and unsafety in the world characterized many with whom I met.

Before becoming a rabbi, I had trained in counseling. Feeling compelled to learn more, I began doctoral studies in psychology. Eventually, my research brought me to Jewish Israel, where I interviewed trauma survivors of racial persecution and their descendants; those who had lost children to terror attacks and military incidents; and those who suffered the kind of trauma that is now being termed "moral injury"<sup>3</sup> in the context of war and occupation.

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<sup>3</sup> Moral injury is the damage done to a person's conscience or moral compass when that person has either perpetrated or witnessed acts that transgress their own moral/ethical value system. "Moral injury" and "moral injury in the context of war" are now formal categories in the care of

Although Israeli life overflows with color and the cultural richness born of the intermingling of Jewish populations from around the world, most Jewish Israelis harbor some trauma resulting from past racial or religious discrimination. This history is complicated by current wars and an ongoing existential threat created by Israel's precarious location and relationships with its neighbors.

As I saw again and again, the consequences of large-scale ethnic trauma correspond to those of individual post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD.) Symptoms such as emotional numbing, hyper-reactivity, shame and isolation, and the inadvertent compulsion to reenact traumatic injuries appear similarly in the aftermath of both individual and collective trauma.

Recent advances in neuroscience and psychology also gave me a new understanding of the intergenerational effects of trauma. For example, as I'll discuss in Chapter 2, the field of epigenetics offers growing evidence that traumatic events can create a kind of "biological memory" that emerges under stress. One landmark study carried out in Jerusalem found that the descendants of parents, grandparents, and even great grandparents who endured persecution, war, and other extreme stresses were prone to depression, anxiety, and other stress responses remarkably similar to those of their ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

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For Jews today who still live in the shadow of war, racial persecution, and terror attacks, the traits of resilience, resourcefulness, loyalty to tribe, and fierce determination—cultivated over generations of adversity—are unmistakable. But the harmful by-products of Jewish historical trauma must

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United States Veterans. See: [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/moral\\_injury\\_at\\_war.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/moral_injury_at_war.asp)

<sup>4</sup> Kellermann, N. P. F. (2013)

also be acknowledged. Left unexamined, they may jeopardize the ethical vision of a proud culture that has survived for thousands of years.

Although my research began with a study of damage, I became increasingly focused on healing. I asked: *Is it possible to transform the effects of historical trauma? To come through life's heavy blows with more wisdom and a sense of inner freedom?*

The answer is yes. The individuals whose journeys I recount here did the deep work, each in their own way, of facing their injuries and transforming them. We follow them across the world, into the bomb shelters of Sderot, on boats to Shanghai, subways of New York, and the battlefield of Hebron. All of these people remind us of our own human capacity to rise up after devastation with profound wisdom and inner freedom.

I owe them endless thanks for sharing their lives with me. In so many cases they were eager for their stories to be heard, with the hope that the telling of their lives might deepen an understanding of Jewish historical trauma and alleviate suffering for others. In some cases, at their request, I have changed names to protect their privacy. However, all words in quotation marks are the words that they spoke.

The seven principles in Part II emerged directly from their testimonies. They teach us that we can survive extreme trauma and be changed in radically positive ways. At the broadest level they are seven directives for staying morally awake in a world rife with terror.

The study of Jewish trauma has awakened me to the vastness of the problem of collective trauma. All over the world, cultures and groups are being dislocated by war, poverty, and climatic changes, and fresh wounds are being incurred daily—to refugees, religious groups, indigenous tribes, and entire ethnicities. The more we understand the ways in which trauma

works, and the deeper our compassion for the plight of those who suffer—including our ancestors and our own selves—the more we have to offer our world.

I have learned that we can recognize, choose, and redefine our own destinies, even in the aftermath of ruinous events. Humans are created with the capacity to heal from wreckage, transform fear into compassion, and tragedy into strength. The power to heal lives within each of us.