

Reactions of Adult Survivors of Child Abuse to the Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin

by Eli Somer, PhD

My heart burnt within me with indignation and grief;
we could think of nothing else.

All night long we had only snatches of sleep,
waking up perpetually to the sense of a great shock and grief.
Every one is feeling the same. I never knew so universal a feeling.

—Elizabeth Gaskell, on Abraham Lincoln's assassination

Because a national leader often embodies a strong patriarchal symbol (Freud, 1939), the death of a head of state typically evokes intense emotions, certainly among the citizens of the state and quite often among peoples around the world. Given the intense emotional climate immediately following political assassinations, we would expect such events to affect psychotherapy clients in profound ways. As early as 1936, W. R. D Fairbairn reported on the reactions of his analysands to the death of King George of England. Fairbairn interpreted their dreams following the death of the monarch as representing intense unresolved conflicts with their father figures, in some cases a consummation of their oral-sadistic designs against their fathers, whose incorporation brought about what Fairbairn saw as a sense of a destructive force within them. S. de Grazia (1945) and Louis Sterba (1946) later offered similar theses, pointing out that a number of their analysands reacted to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death in a way suggesting that they had symbolically equated the president with their own fathers.

Following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Thomas Banta (1964) interviewed clinical psychologists and psychoanalysts regarding client reactions to the event. They reported that their clients described their emotional responses as based on very personal associations; clinical hours following the assassination were filled with references to the event viewed within a frame of feelings about family associations, particu-

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Remarks by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin On Receiving the Nobel Prize for Peace Oslo, Norway December 1994

Your Majesties, Esteemed Chairman and Members of the Norwegian Nobel Prize Committee, the Honorable Prime Minister of Norway, my Fellow Laureates, Chairman Arafat and the Foreign Minister of Israel Shimon Peres, Distinguished Guests,

Since I don't believe that there was any precedent that one person got the Nobel Prize twice, allow me on this opportunity to attach to this prestigious award, a personal touch. At an age when most youngsters are struggling to unravel the secrets of mathematics and the mysteries of the Bible; at an age when first love blooms; at the tender age of sixteen, I was handed a rifle so that I could defend myself. That was not my dream. I wanted to be a water engineer. I studied in an agricultural school, and I thought being a water engineer was an important profession in the parched Middle East. I still think so today.

However, I was compelled to resort to the gun. I served in the military for decades. Under my responsibility, young men and women who wanted to live, wanted to love, went to their deaths instead. They fell in the defense of our lives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my current position, I have ample opportunity to fly over the State of Israel, and lately over other parts of the Middle East as well. The view from the plane is breathtaking: deep-blue seas and lakes, dark-green fields, dune-colored deserts, stone-gray mountains, and the entire countryside peppered with white-washed, red-roofed houses.

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lary the death of close relatives. In a similar study, Joseph Katz (1965) found that analysts with "homosexual problems" reported the most disturbing dreams following Kennedy's assassination. He speculated that these clients more fully identified with both assassin and victim because of their alleged impulses to kill the hated father and their fears of being themselves killed as a consequence. Studying the same issue, David Kirschner (1965) noted that many clients with unresolved ambivalence about their deceased parents found it possible to express more grief and tears for Kennedy than they did for their own parents. He concluded that many of his "neurotic" clients had displaced onto the president those feelings that they were unable to express toward their own ambivalently loved, and incompletely mourned, deceased parents.

On November 4, 1996, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was shot and killed as he left a peace rally in Tel Aviv. Yigal Amir, a 25-year-old Jewish militant law student, committed this first political assassination in Israel's history. Israelis had always assumed that they were safe among one another, so Rabin's murder by a fellow Jew stunned the nation. Thousands of mourners spontaneously gathered on the street corners of Israel's cities, weeping and lighting white candles. Associated Press articles quoted some of them as follows: "Rabin was looking out for the future. He was looking out for the young, and they killed him" (an 18-year-old boy); "It is like we lost our father. No one can keep us together anymore. I am ashamed the killer came from within us. It is like brother killing brother" (a 37-year-old homemaker).

Following Rabin's assassination, I undertook (with my colleague, Meir Saadon, PhD) a study of the reactions of psychotherapy clients with a history of paternal child abuse. We found that such clients tended not to identify

themselves with the slain leader during the first sessions after the assassination, and that they were not likely to display grief reactions typical of most other clients in psychotherapy, and indeed of the general public. The following case illustrations, with analyses, will shed light on the complex and often ambiva-

lent reactions of adult survivors of child abuse to the assassination of Rabin.

ANGER

Nathan: Not a part of this people
Nathan, a 21-year-old male student living with his parents and two sisters

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And also cemeteries. Graves as far as the eye can see.

Hundreds of cemeteries in our part of the world, in the Middle East, in our home in Israel, but also in Egypt, in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon. From the plane's window, from the thousands of feet above them, the countless tombstones are silent. But the sound of their outcry has carried from the Middle East throughout the world for decades.

Standing here today, I wish to salute our loved ones, and past foes. I wish to salute all of them: the fallen of all the countries in all the wars; the members of their families who bear the enduring burden of bereavement; the disabled whose scars will never heal. Tonight, I wish to pay tribute to each and every one of them, for this important prize is theirs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was a young man who has now grown fully in years. In Hebrew, we say, *Na'ar hayiti, ve-gam zakanti* [I was a young man, who has grown fully in years]. And of all the memories I have stored up in my seventy-two years, what I shall remember most, to my last day, are the silences: the heavy silence of the moment after, and the terrifying silence of the moment before.

As a military man, as a commander, as a minister of defense, I ordered to carry out many military operations. And together with the joy of victory and the grief of bereavement, I shall always remember the moment just after taking such decisions: the hush as senior officers or cabinet ministers slowly rise from their seats; the sight of their receding backs; the sound of the closing door; and then the silence in which I remain alone.

That is the moment you grasp that—as a result of the decision just made—people might go to their deaths, people from my nation, people from other nations. And they still don't know it. At that hour, they are still laughing and weeping; still weaving plans and dreaming about love; still musing about planting a garden or building a house. And they have no idea these are their last hours on earth. Which of them is fated to die? Whose picture will appear in the black frame in tomorrow's newspaper? Whose mother will soon be in mourning? Whose world will crumble under the weight of the loss?

As a former military man, I will also forever remember the silence of the moment before: the hush when the hands of the clock seem to be spinning forward, when time is running out and in another hour, another minute, the inferno will erupt. In that moment of great tension just before the finger pulls the trigger, just before the fuse begins to burn; in the terrible quiet of the moment, there is still time to wonder, to wonder alone: Is it really imperative to act? Is there no other choice? No other way?

"God takes pity on kindergartners," wrote the poet Yehudah Amichai, who is here with us this evening, and I quote his:

*God takes pity on kindergartners,
Less so on the schoolchildren,
And will no longer pity their elders,
Leaving them to their own,
And sometimes they will have to crawl on all fours,
Through the burning sand,
To reach the casualty station,
Bleeding.*

*I collected these comments from an Associated Press website at:
<http://www.nando.net/newsroom/nt/1105edall.html>.

in a blue-collar neighborhood, sought psychological treatment because he suffered intense anxiety any time that he believed he was under scrutiny. Nathan harbored a bitter hatred for his father, a tough laborer who often criticized Nathan's decisions, behaviors, and physical features. Nathan's ex-

changes with his father typically resulted in violent explosions of anger that sometimes ended in a police arrest. The oppressed women of the family could offer the client neither protection nor solidarity, so Nathan devoted most of his free time to weight-lifting, studying, and day-dreaming, while trying to

avoid any contact with people. He was diagnosed as suffering from an intermittent explosive disorder and an avoidant personality disorder.

On the first session after Rabin's assassination, Nathan said:

Rabin's murder gives me joy. I look at everybody around me, and they seem sad. That gives me satisfaction. I'm not a part of this people, I'm not a part of any collective. People in power should comprehend that the oppressed can strike back, that power corrupts and that corrupt power should be punished. My heart goes out for Amir [the assassin]. He sacrificed himself to do the job.

Aaron: Weapons and war

A 14-year-old boy (Aaron) came to the clinic with his parents and his 12-year-old brother. The presenting problems included unrelenting bickering, harassment, and quarrels between the siblings. Further exploration into the dynamics of this family revealed the following behavioral pattern. The mother would often interrogate the boys about their activities, she required their immediate compliance with her demands for tidiness, and she would quickly ground them for minor violations of her expectations. When either of the boys reacted to her unrealistic demands with disrespect or insubordination, the father would be called in to administer discipline. The blame typically fell on Aaron (perhaps because he was the oldest), who was often beaten with the father's leather belt. The boy reported feeling no pain on such occasions. He would just quietly say, "You can't hurt me, Dad, I feel nothing." Aaron met DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for oppositional defiant disorder.

Two days after Rabin was gunned down, Aaron met with his therapist, and he made these statements:

I hate my parents, I despise my father, but after the murder I feel I don't have the right to hate them as much as I do. I feel I could have easily killed someone myself. Sometimes I feel I'm about to explode. I feel I might lose control. I'm very interested in weapons and

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For decades, God has not taken pity on the kindergartners in the Middle East, or the schoolchildren, or their elders. There has been no pity in the Middle East for generations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was a young man who has now grown fully in years. And of all the memories I have stored up in my seventy-two years, I now recall the hopes. Our people have chosen us to give them life. Terrible as it is to say, their lives are in our hands. Tonight, their eyes are upon us and their hearts are asking: How is the power vested in these men and women being used? What will they decide? Into what kind of morning will we rise tomorrow? A day of peace? Of war? Of laughter? Of tears?

A child is born in an utterly undemocratic way. He cannot choose his father and mother. He cannot pick his sex or color, his religion, nationality or homeland. Whether he is born in a manor or a manger, whether he lives under a despotic or democratic regime is not his choice. From the moment he comes, close-fisted, into the world, his fate to a large extent is decided by his nation's leaders. It is they who will decide whether he lives in comfort or in despair, in security or in fear. His fate is given to us to resolve, to the governments of countries, democratic or otherwise.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Just as no two fingerprints are identical, so no two people are alike, and every country has its own laws and culture, traditions and leaders. But there is one universal message which can embrace the entire world, one precept which can be common to different regimes, to races which bear no resemblance, to cultures that are alien to each other.

It is a message which the Jewish people have carried for thousands of years, the message found in the Book of Books: *Ve'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoteichem*: "Therefore take good heed of yourselves," or, in contemporary terms, the message of the sanctity of life.

The leaders of nations must provide their peoples with the conditions—the infrastructure, if you will—which enables them to enjoy life: freedom of speech and movement; food and shelter; and most important of all, life itself. A man cannot enjoy his rights if he is not alive. And so every country must protect and preserve the key element in its national ethos: the lives of its citizens.

Only to defend those lives, we can call upon our citizens to enlist in the army. And to defend the lives of our citizens serving in the army, we invest huge sums in planes and tanks, and other means. Yet despite it all, we fail to protect the lives of our citizens and soldiers. Military cemeteries in every corner of the world are silent testimony to the failure of national leaders to sanctify human life.

There is only one radical means for sanctifying human life. The one radical solution is a real peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The profession of soldiering embraces a certain paradox. We take the best and the bravest of our young men into the army. We supply them with equipment which costs a virtual fortune. We rigorously train them for the day when they must do their duty, and we expect them to do it well. Yet we fervently pray that that day will never come, that the planes will never take off, the tanks will never move forward, the soldiers will never mount the attacks for which they have been trained so well.

We pray that it will never happen, because of the sanctity of life.

History as a whole, and modern history in particular, has known harrowing

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wars and I think that there isn't much difference between Yigal Amir and me. I wish my parents were dead but I'm not sure I really, deep in my heart, want them to die.

These two cases present an angry reaction that we observed only in our male survivor sample. Both Nathan and Aaron identified with the assassin while showing little sympathy for the slain leader or his survivors. Neither could join with the solidarity in grief that swept the nation. Although both could point to the source of their anger (overbearing and abusive fathers), Nathan showed unalloyed pleasure in the murder of a father figure while Aaron worried that his reaction might indicate a weakness in his ability to resist his aggressive drives.

Through their reactions to Rabin's assassination, Nathan and Aaron showed that they (as with many other male abuse survivors) had already begun the process of converting their childhood victimization into adult perpetration. Nathan—farther along in this process than Aaron—responded with more apparent pleasure than the younger boy to Rabin's murder. The literature on the long-term effects of child abuse on aggressive behavior implicates physical abuse as a causative factor in later physically aggressive behavior (see, for instance, Briere and Runtz, 1990); in effect, childhood experiences of victimization by a caretaker teach some survivors to equate aggression with might. Trying to escape their own state of fear and helplessness, these survivors tend to engage in behaviors that they've learned to consider "powerful."

DISSOCIATION

Sara: Cruelty and violence

Sara, a 42-year-old mother of three, held a graduate degree in education but had worked only briefly in her vocation. She first sought treatment because she was distressed by her emotional detachment, especially by the affective distance in her emotional relations with her children. At the time of

the assassination she was struggling with fragmented memories of paternal incest. During therapy sessions, Sara typically asked that time to be allocated for what she termed "internal work." Without any therapist induction she would put herself into a trance and allow various ego-states and compart-

mentalized memory fragments to surface, the only occasions during the week when she paid any attention to her inner world. Frequently, she would be completely amnesic to anything that had transpired in the previous therapy hour. Sara was diagnosed as suffering from dissociative disorder not other-

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times when national leaders turned their citizens into cannon fodder in the name of wicked doctrines: vicious Fascism, terrible Nazism. Pictures of children marching to slaughter, photos of terrified women at the gates of the crematoria must loom before the eyes of every leader in our generation, and the generations to come. They must serve as a warning to all who wield power.

Almost all regimes which did not place the sanctity of life at the heart of their worldview, all those regimes have collapsed and are no more. You can see it for yourselves in our own time.

Yet this is not the whole picture. To preserve the sanctity of life, we must sometimes risk it. Sometimes there is no other way to defend our citizens than to fight for their lives, for their safety and freedom. This is the creed of every democratic state.

In the State of Israel, from which I come today; in the Israel Defense Forces, which I have had the privilege to serve, we have always viewed the sanctity of life as a supreme value. We have never gone to war unless a war was forced on us. The history of the State of Israel, the annals of the Israel Defense Forces, are filled with thousands of stories of soldiers who sacrificed themselves, who died while trying to save wounded comrades, who gave their lives to avoid causing harm to innocent people on their enemy's side.

In the coming days, a special commission of the Israel Defense Forces will finish drafting a Code of Conduct for our soldiers. The formulation regarding human life will read as follows, and I quote:

In recognition of its supreme importance, the soldier will preserve human life in every way possible and endanger himself, or others, only to the extent deemed necessary to fulfill this mission. The sanctity of life, in the point of view of the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, will find expression in all their actions.

For many years ahead—even if wars come to an end, after peace comes to our land—these words will remain a pillar of fire which goes before our camp, a guiding light for our people. And we take pride in that.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are in the midst of building the peace. The architects and the engineers of this enterprise are engaged in their work even as we gather here tonight, building the peace, layer by layer, brick by brick. The job is difficult, complex, trying. Mistakes could topple the whole structure and bring disaster down upon us. And so we are determined to do the job well, despite the toll of murderous terrorism, despite the fanatic and cruel enemies of peace.

We will pursue the course of peace with determination and fortitude. We will not let up. We will not give in. Peace will triumph over all its enemies, because the alternative is grimmer for us all. And we will prevail.

We will prevail because we regard the building of peace as a great blessing for us, for our children after us. We regard it as a blessing for our neighbors on all sides, and for our partners in this enterprise—the United States, Russia, Norway, which did so much to bring the agreement that was signed here, later on in Washington, later on in Cairo—that wrote a beginning of the solution to the longest and most difficult part of the Arab-Israeli conflict: the Palestinian-Israeli one. We thank others who have contributed to it, too.

We wake up every morning, now, as different people. Peace is possible. We see

wise specified.

During her first session after Rabin's murder, Sara said:

I felt very distant from my family this week. In fact, I couldn't feel anything about the assassination, unless I watched TV. Only through identifying

myself with people on the screen can I sense anything move within me. [tears rolling down her cheeks] No, I don't know why I'm sobbing. I guess it's because I feel sad like everyone else in Israel. I never mourned for my mother, and it's funny that it's easier for me to cry for Rabin than to feel anything

the hope in our children's eyes. We see the light in our soldiers' faces, in the streets, in the buses, in the fields. We must not let them down. We will not let them down.

I stand here not alone today, on this small rostrum in Oslo. I am here to speak in the name of generations of Israelis and Jews, of the shepherds of Israel—and you know that King David was a shepherd; he started to build Jerusalem about 3,000 years ago—the herdsmen and dressers of sycamore trees, as the Prophet Amos was; of the rebels against the establishment, as the Prophet Jeremiah was; and of men who went down to the sea, like the Prophet Jonah.

I am here to speak in the name of the poets and of those who dreamed of an end to war, like the Prophet Isaiah. I am also here to speak in the names of sons of the Jewish people like Albert Einstein and Baruch Spinoza, like Maimonides, Sigmund Freud and Franz Kafka.

And I am the emissary of millions who perished in the Holocaust, among whom were surely many Einsteins and Freuds who were lost to us, and to humanity, in the flames of the crematoria. I am here as the emissary of Jerusalem, at whose gates I fought in the days of siege; Jerusalem which has always been, and is today, the people who pray toward Jerusalem three times a day. And I am also the emissary of the children who drew their visions of peace; and of the immigrants from St. Petersburg and Addis Ababa.

I stand here mainly for the generations to come, so that we may all be deemed worthy of the medal which you have bestowed on me and my colleagues today.

I stand here as the emissary today—if they will allow me—of our neighbors who were our enemies. I stand here as the emissary of the soaring hopes of a people which has endured the worst that history has to offer and nevertheless made its mark, not just on the chronicles of the Jewish people but on all mankind.

With me here are five million citizens of Israel—Jews, Arabs, Druze and Circassians—five million hearts beating for peace, and five million pairs of eyes which look at us with such great expectations for peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to thank, first and foremost, those citizens of the State of Israel, of all the generations, of all the political persuasions, whose sacrifices and relentless struggle for peace bring us steadily closer to our goal.

I wish to thank our partners—the Egyptians, the Jordanians, and the Palestinians, that are led by the Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Mr. Yasser Arafat, with whom we share this Nobel Prize—who have chosen the path of peace and are writing a new page in the annals of the Middle East.

I wish to thank the members of the Israeli government, but above all my partner the Foreign Minister, Mr. Shimon Peres, whose energy and devotion to the cause of peace are an example to us all.

I wish to thank my family that supported me all the long way that I have passed.

And, of course, I wish to thank the Chairman, the members of the Nobel Prize Committee and the courageous Norwegian people for bestowing this illustrious honor on my colleagues and myself.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to close by sharing with you a traditional Jewish blessing which has been recited by my people, in good times and bad ones, as a token of their deepest longing: "The Lord will give strength to his people, the Lord will bless his people—and all of us—in peace."

—Yitzhak Rabin

about Mom's death. I don't understand why should I be so sad now. I think all of this does something to me. I feel I know about cruelty and violence but I don't know what is my knowledge.

Tanya: Something's shrinking inside

Tanya, a 29-year-old single woman, worked as a professional modern dance artist. While rehearsing a new dance, she experienced several flashes of somatic, emotional, and auditory memory fragments that led her to the profound realization that her father had sexually abused her. When she sought therapy, Tanya presented with amnesia for her childhood, wild mood swings, sexual aversion, and severe concentration problems. She was diagnosed as suffering from dissociative disorder not otherwise specified.

Four days after Rabin's assassination, Tanya offered these comments:

Everything's so confusing. I need to focus. I feel I'm so weird, so different from everybody. I feel numb and empty but I think something good must come out of Rabin's death. I don't understand why everyone's scared and crying. Look at me, I can handle this. Why can't they? I dance these days, but I feel I'm walking on air, I'm less grounded than I usually am. I feel a pent-up anger inside me that can't come out and has no meaning. I feel withdrawn. Something's shrinking inside, I think it's fear. Why should I be afraid?

These cases illustrate the difficulties of clients who experience inadequate affective intensity. Though Sara and Tanya responded to the intense external drama, they invoked dissociative defenses to reduce their psychological distress which, in turn, became compartmentalized and inaccessible for normal grieving. Both women found themselves perplexed by their unsynchronized, disjointed, and pallid emotional reactions, clearly displaying disengagement and detachment, two common forms of dissociation. At a time of stress they disengaged themselves from their environments; deepening their dissociation, they also reported a sense

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of detachment from their distress, reactivated by the intense external trigger. For Sara and Tanya, dissociation served as a defensive disruption in the normally occurring integration of their thoughts, feelings, behavior, and memories.

LOST SENSE OF SAFETY AND PATERNAL PROTECTION

Ruth: Home place

Ruth, a 39-year-old mother of one, was in her fourth year of psychotherapy for dissociative identity disorder. As a child, she'd been subjected to organized sadistic abuse while living with her unmarried parents in an isolated utopian commune in New Zealand. The client had 28 personality alters, ten of which were children of various ages. On the day following Rabin's assassination, Ruth delivered to me a hand-written letter signed by one of her feisty adolescent alters. Following are brief excerpts:

Rabin getting assassinated made a lot of upset in me. It ain't just about

guards not being there. This is our safe "home place" and somebody who only tried to do good wasn't even safe. I went to the synagogue for a memorial prayer but it made me more sad, and scared and don't know if there's any "safe" for anybody.

Rebecca: Something dear and precious

Rebecca was a single 30-year-old social worker. When she was three years old her father abandoned the family, and a year later her mother (working as a prostitute) gave up her daughter to foster care. While growing up, Rebecca had been molested by two of her three foster-care fathers; in time, she developed a serious conduct disorder and ended up in a boarding school for juvenile delinquents. In therapy, she presented a complex and atypical cluster of symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder and borderline personality disorder.

At the time of Rabin's assassination, Rebecca kept a personal diary in which she recorded her feelings as well as events. Following are quotations from entries that she made the day after Rabin's murder:

I don't get it. Is he really gone? An innocent person paid with his life because he cared for the children of Israel. I feel I have lost something dear and precious. Why is this happening to me? Wake up! Get up! Tell me he's not dead! Tell me he's going to come again, that he will hug me, hold me, take care of me. Tell me he's not dead. Please, tell me he's not dead.

Several of our clients (as in these two cases) were literally refugees. They'd left their families of origin, their "fatherlands," their former cultural and social reference groups, and come to live in Israel, identifying with the country's saga of suffering and heroic struggles. Because they regarded Israel as their "safe place," the fatal violence coming from within the ranks of the "Jewish family of Israel" brought with it an unsettling disruption of their sense of safety, as Ruth's case clearly shows. Similarly, Rabin's murder caused some clients extreme anguish as they faced the abrupt loss of a strong and loving paternal figure. In Rebecca's case, she began to realize her profound longing for a benevolent paternal object, a realization that in turn