

The Psychological Birth of Israel:

Political State Identity and Psychological Self-Identity in Relationship

“Every social order creates those character forms which it needs for its own preservation...”

(Wilhelm Reich, 1933/1970, p. 13)

“The character structure ... is the crystallization of the sociological process of a given epoch”.

(Wilhelm Reich, 1933/1970, p. 11)

Introduction

The ‘Palestine-Israel conflict’ dates back to the late 19th century and has been described as an intractable conflict (Daniel Bar-Tal, 1998); defined as a conflict that becomes a lasting, stable, and a continuous, part of everyday life. The ‘culture of conflict’ that develops, gives Israel the opportunity to strengthen its fundamental identity as a Jewish state – on which its very survival is dependent.

Geopolitical interests provide the indispensable framework for understanding the structural origins of the state of Israel’s conception as a settler-colonial apartheid state. This is what I refer to as the physical birth of Israel. This is what happened about seventy-eight years ago. That is a generation.

The phrase ‘from cradle to grave’ is evoked. A deeply traumatic and violent physical birth, it was certainly not born out of a loving union. How has it survived since then?

The same political context of dispossession, exile, ethnic cleansing and ongoing violence continues to play out to the present day and remains implicated in the state’s survival. Yet, this relentless drive to survive is not merely a political strategy; it has been formative in shaping the state’s collective psychology. This lived psychology is woven into the very fabric of the socio-political sphere. What I focus on in this article is the ‘lived psychology’ that has endured existence from its traumatic cradle to the present day. I refer to this as the *psychological birth* of Israel - a process in which the political and psychological can no longer be understood as two separate dimensions. A process which has emerged from, and is reinforced by, the ongoing Western settler colonial occupation. This is the story of how the Jewish Israeli collective came, and is still coming into being, as a psychological reality within those dynamics.

The psychological birth of Israel is what I envisage to be the psychic fall-out over the last seventy-eight years. It is the story of the emergence of a collective psyche preoccupied with survival, threat and identity. While the conflict has its roots in macro-level forces—geopolitical and socio-political—its dynamics are driven by more visceral and collective identity-forming factors – such as ethnicity, religion, history, and nationalism—that give meaning to and are mobilised within these broader contexts. These elements intersect to shape national narratives that are fundamental to the framing

and preservation of a collective identity. They not only influence how Jewish Israelis construct their identity, but also deeply influences how they perceive themselves in relation to the perceived threat posed by the Palestinians, setting the stage for complex power relations and identity struggles. Nowhere is this more evident than in the profound role reversal: Jewish Israelis, shaped by past persecution and genocide, now hold institutional power, while Palestinians endure displacement and subjugation under that power. Both sides remain locked in cycles of violence, repeating collective traumas from their histories. Historically identifying as the oppressed, the Jewish Israelis now appear to be embodying the role of oppressor. Although it is the colonial culture that provides the necessary historical, structural and narrative conditions that sustain the oppression, here I focus on how it's the psychological processes that gives form – eg. threat, survival, identity – and meaning to these structural conditions.

A developmental perspective

In situations of intractable conflict and existential threat, the literature reveals striking parallels between state identity and self-identity. It is the collective beliefs, values and practices adopted by the state that shape the identity of individuals, and reciprocally, individual experience becomes collective experience. What perhaps is less often appreciated and less written about is how it's our developmentally conditioned sense of self that underlies self-concept or self-identity.

In order to explore the underlying dynamics of the conflict I will be – perhaps controversially – using psychodynamic concepts which are normally applied to individuals, to the collective as a whole.

I argue that the development of the Jewish Israeli collective identity occurred under conditions of constant vigilance and consequently has experienced an arrest at an early developmental stage. I take the position that the process of *collective* self or identity formation (as in the state or society) has striking parallels with the process of *individual* self-formation, and is subject to equivalent developmental processes. If the developmental challenges faced by the infant – who relies on the working of primary relational capacities - also exist for the collective self, an enquiry into the underlying aspects of self-formation may yield important insights into the intractable dynamics described above.

I view state identity - like self-identity - to be an ongoing and dynamic developmental process rather than a completed achievement. The notion of healthy development in infancy requires a 'holding environment' (Winnicott 1960) that provides for both safety and security needs. We can assume that a collective has similar needs for a safe holding environment. I argue here that when the

collective holding environment fails (eg. due to ongoing threat, historical trauma, global or political instability), that this will be reflected psychologically in the developmental progress of the collective. And much like an individual, when the expected developmental process is arrested or compromised, a collective will tend to fall back on more primal survival strategies.

This developmental perspective aligns with Vamik Volkan's theory of 'large group identity' (1999), which extends psychoanalytic principles to collective psychology. Volkan posits that nations are vast emotional entities with shared psychologies. When a group or nation's core identity is threatened, it may regress to more primal defensive structures. These mechanisms, he suggests, protect the group's 'psychological borders' and preserve cohesion—a dynamic I believe is reflected in the Jewish Israeli collective's response to perceived existential threats.

The 'psychological birth' of Israel remains incomplete.

I explore the psychology of the Jewish Israel collective within the setting of the conflict environment – a conflict that by its nature, has to be relational. I draw on different modalities - phenomenological, psychoanalytic, developmental psychology and trauma theory. I note that some of these modalities are not without their inadequacies, due to their almost entirely Western orientation, with their potential limitations and contradictions in addressing the complexities of postcolonial experiences.

The 'physical' birth

"The horrors of the Nakba continue to refract across time, creating a history wherein the personal and the national are increasingly difficult to distinguish". (Kieran Andrieu, 2025).

For Palestinians, 15 May marks Nakba Day ("the Catastrophe"), commemorating the mass displacement and dispossession of the Palestinian population during the 1948 war following the declaration of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948. For many Palestinians, these events represent the culmination of a longer process that began with Zionist settlement in the late nineteenth century.

Political Zionism emerged at the end of the nineteenth century with the aim of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. But from the outset, political Zionism faced a fundamental contradiction: it sought to establish a Jewish homeland in a land already inhabited predominantly by an indigenous Arab population. Jews from around the world began moving to Palestine in large numbers with the hope of creating a Jewish state. But on the same land lived an Arab population with a Palestinian cultural identity, alongside long-established co-existing Jewish and Christian communities. As Zionist

settlement expanded under Ottoman and later British rule, conflict between the growing Jewish and the indigenous Arab population intensified, resulting in a process that many historians describe as a Zionist colonisation of Arab land. And so the physical state of Israel was born. Born out of the mass physical displacement as hundreds of Palestinian towns, villages and neighbourhoods were attacked and besieged. Born out of the ethnic cleansing of over 800,000 Palestinians fleeing or being forcibly expelled by the brutal dispossession of their land and homes by Zionist military forces.

The United Nations Partition Plan of 1947, advanced within an international order still dominated by Western colonial powers — carved out a Jewish-majority state that largely ignored the non-Jewish Arab majority. A dominant Israeli narrative presents the creation of Israel as a 'necessary refuge' from rising antisemitism around the globe. This serves to obscure its reality as a colonial ethnic partition whose very existence required the displacement of another people. Moreover, British involvement, that began with the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and continued during the British Mandate period (1922-1948) with its imperial interests and strategic alliances, contributed to the power imbalances and injustices that continue to underpin the conflict today. However, the majority of Jewish Israel's today remain united behind the idea that Israel is their homeland. Since then, the cycles of violence, the redrawing of geographical borders, and the continued segregation are not just geopolitical manifestations; they are the external reverberations of an unresolved psychological state.

The historical events of 1948, (and leading up to it), are well documented. My concern here is not to revisit that history in detail, but to consider how those events - the conditions surrounding Israel's physical creation - have shaped the collective psychological structures that became embedded within Israeli collective identity.

Jewish history is marked by repeated episodes of persecution, displacement and discrimination - again and again over time. That they have been attacked and subjected to atrocities again and again over time, tragically culminating in the horror of the Holocaust. Across centuries, these experiences left profound psychological and cultural scars.

This is the paradox. The legitimate, deep-seated trauma of Jewish history became a powerful psychological and political tool, used to justify the creation of a Jewish state by the people who saw themselves as victims of history. The Nakba came to be understood as a necessary price of Jewish self-determination. *Israel's physical birth requires a psychological birth.* The psychological birth is the story of a nation that has become defined by the continuing necessity to justify its own creation. The emergence of an Israeli collective subjectivity that had to 'forget' what it had done, and is still doing so - in order to exist. The shock waves of this traumatic physical birth continue to this day.

The personal

Don't breathe. Don't move. Don't speak.

I dare.

I breathe. I move. I speak.

Birth.

My instinctive response to the recent cycle of violence in the Palestine-Israel conflict was to write something. Why did I do this? At the time, I didn't ask why and I didn't know why. Should I be doing this? Probably not. I have been warned off. This is dangerous territory. With a background in psychotherapy, but no background in history, politics, religion or ethnicity of the Middle East. Am I entering a battlefield unarmed? What do I have to contribute?

I ask - what is my role in this conflict? How do my inner conflicts mirror the external political realities? It all began with the question; *"How well do I tolerate 'difference' – with interest and curiosity, or with anxiety and defensiveness?"* The answer? Well, it depends. It depends on my personal sense of safety. When I feel safe in myself, I can find a greater tolerance for risk, for ambiguity, for the differences of others that might otherwise seem threatening. No surprises here - I assume this applies to most of us. But it raises the question - if my tolerance of difference is at least partly dependent on my psychological security, does the same not apply to a collective? And what about communities in conflict, where there is already histories of trauma, loss, displacement and the ever-present fear of scarcity? How do they respond to difference? We can surmise it's the same as with the 'personal' - that these conditions must profoundly affect psychological security, activating collective defence mechanisms. Which then become externalized. Inner conflicts become outer conflicts as the personal becomes the political.

My writing began in outrage. I started writing in early 2024 because I believed that something catastrophic was unfolding in Gaza, and I wanted to understand how that had become possible. The writing gradually took on a life of its own. The object of my analysis—the Jewish Israelis—became increasingly complex to my understanding. It was only as I reached the end that I realised my encounter with the Jewish Israelis —and with myself—had shifted in a way I had not anticipated. The psychological journey I set out to describe became, in part, my own.

I want to acknowledge at the start, how my positionality has shaped my writing. Engaging in the process of writing has unfolded a psychological process in itself, and I say more on this in the final sections. Here, I state I am a privileged, white, cis-gendered, non-Jewish British woman. My perspective is undoubtedly filtered through the social and ideological frameworks I grew up in. I imagine that Lynne Layton (2006), a psychoanalyst, would go further by proposing that my

positionality is shaped by my *normative unconscious processes*. She builds on Frantz Fanon's (1961/2001) work, who is a psychiatrist, revolutionary writer and known for his influential contributions to anti-colonial thinking. Layton explains how dominant social hierarchies of Western ideology - race, sex, gender, class - are not merely external structures but are internalised and 'lived' within the psyche. This helps me understand how my white social privilege operates unconsciously. Western societal inequalities inevitably contribute to who I am - the person I experience as 'me' - outside of conscious awareness.

Thus, I don't see how I can be 'outside' of this. I have to accept I am part of the same oppressive system I am here critiquing, and the filter this imposes to any understanding of 'objective reality'. Particularly of relevance here is my internalised coloniser; my settler-colonial subjectivity. I want to acknowledge and 'own' this part. The uncomfortable question comes up - who do I think I am, as a white Western woman, to be analysing the Jewish Israelis? What I can do, and have done, is to take a reflexive approach, which I give space to in later sections.

This article asks a great deal of its readers. It is long and theoretically dense. Like all authors, I write from a particular position, shaped by my own experiences, assumptions and preconceptions. Likewise, every reader will bring their own personal and collective history, political ideology, ethnicity and religious background to the subject. The psychological concepts explored in this article may invite not only intellectual engagement but your emotional and somatic responses. My own engagement with these concepts proved challenging at times and illuminated aspects of myself that I had not previously seen, as will become evident as you read on. Just as my own psychological process became part of the inquiry, I invite you as reader to notice what emerges in your experience as you engage with the reading. You are invited not only to consider the arguments presented here but also to bring awareness to your responses and the ways in which they contribute to your encounter with the material. Hang on in there!

To state my position at the outset – I do not consider this to be a symmetrical conflict. What I refer to as the Palestine-Israel conflict is perhaps better described as the Israeli Occupation. What I refer to as Jewish Israelis are perhaps better identified as Jewish Settlers. Here lies a conflict within myself. In using these two phrases I have chosen to stick to the more 'neutral' terminology on the basis that my intention for writing this article does not come fundamentally from a political impetus.

What about a change in regime...

To set the context, I started out by asking - why are we where we are today? Why do the Israeli (as well as the U.S. and U.K. and some E.U.) governments, along with the state institutions and right-wing extremist groups that support them, keep repeating the mistakes of the past - with more and more disastrous consequences?

By the time I had finished writing this article, I had answered my own question for reasons which will become evident. I demonstrate that a change in regime is unlikely to solve the Palestine-Israeli conflict. For now, we can acknowledge there are unconscious processes at work that both arise from and give expression to, deep-seated group dynamics that exist beneath the surface of conscious political expression. This is particularly so where there is a history of collective trauma, as there is with the Jewish Israeli collective.

Taking sides

Things have got catastrophically worse since starting this writing in early 2024. The horror of the last few years. There has been violence and persecution on both sides of this conflict. A bad thing happens. The Hamas attacks of October 2023. At first reactions were *"But which side are you on?"* And *"If you're not with us, you're against us"*.

How tempting it is to reduce reality to a binary narrative. This is one way of how, as onlookers we try to protect ourselves from the overwhelming emotional turmoil. A defence mechanism where oversimplification and stereotyping become the norm. A polarity, where there is only room for 'victim' and 'perpetrator'.

Why do we take sides? Because it gives us an identity; we take a 'position' on something and that helps us know who we are. It helps take away from the underlying anxiety. It makes us feel better about ourselves. Rather than having to face the complexity and magnitude of the situation - or more importantly, to face our pain.

Yes, I mean my pain. And your pain. Michael Rothberg (2019) argues that the familiar categories of victim and perpetrator (as well as bystander), do not adequately account for our connection to injustices, past and present. He argues for a shift toward implicated subjectivity, moving beyond the binary of victim and perpetrator. An *implicated subject* is someone who exists within and benefits from histories of violence. An implicated subject is passive within the system of domination they inhabit - they did not create it and they do they control it. Yet they are active in their complicity. Their continued privilege rests on their refusal to acknowledge the suffering of others. I am an implicated subject. And most likely you too are an implicated subject.

The Jewish Israeli body

I aim to engage with collective phenomena from a psychoanalytic and developmental perspective, and apply these frameworks across various interconnected levels of social organisation—state, society, community, groups, and individuals—to illuminate shared conscious and unconscious processes.

As a body psychotherapist, I see development as being fundamentally an embodied process. I propose that we consider the psychodynamic field of the collective ‘body’ as a useful model for understanding the libidinal influences which continue to drive the conflict. From here on, I will often be referring to the Jewish Israeli collective psyche as a ‘body’. I use this metaphor in order to denote a complex interconnected system to explore individual and collective phenomena. Just as a psychobiological body is composed of interconnected sub-systems which in turn are composed of sub-systems, Jewish Israeli society encompasses diverse sectors—political, ethnic, cultural, and religious. As in a ‘body’, the groups and sub-groups themselves overlap and intersect, creating an intersectionality of societal identities and lived experiences. I consider this metaphor as particularly apt for what is essentially a psychoanalytic exploration, as it elucidates how unconscious processes circulate through a social system, manifesting as both shared cultural narratives and individual psychology. I choose the term to signify a complex dynamic system and does not at all imply uniformity of conscious thought or belief.

The Jewish Israeli body is more than a somatic metaphor. Resmaa Menakem in his book *‘My Grandmother’s Hands’* (2017), shows that the starting point for understanding inter-racial tensions must be the very real existential fears experienced by individually and collectively traumatised bodies.

I trust this methodology aligns with the endeavour of the article – to simultaneously explore what is collective in the personal, whilst recognising and honouring individual difference.

The psychological perspective of ontological security

The term, *ontological security* was originally defined by R.D. Laing (1960/1969). Laing’s focus was on the psychological experience of the self, particularly in the context of mental health. He was interested in the individual’s existential sense of being; and ontological security was the experiencing of oneself as a real, cohesive and continuous person in time. This “*I am who I am*” experience gives us a sense of who we are and is what gives us a sense of agency.

The sociological perspective of ontological security

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) more recently employed the term ontological security in the context of how we derive our self-identity from continuity in the external world. He defines it as “*a sense of confidence and trust that the world is what it appears to be*” (Giddens, 1991, as cited in Kinnvall, 2004, p. 746)

According to Giddens, it is social structures and routines - habitual and repetitive practices in our daily lives - that play a crucial role in maintaining ontological security in individuals and societies. Routine interactions with significant others allow individuals to build stability and trust in a world that can often be uncertain and unpredictable. Furthermore, this process of ‘routinisation’ is a meaning-making process that shapes beliefs, values, assumptions, and expectations. Through routine social interaction, individuals reproduce shared social meanings that enable them to develop a coherent sense of self and their place in the social world, which plays a vital role in shaping and reinforcing identity.

The international relations of ontological security

Jennifer Mitzen, a social constructivist, in her article on ‘*Social Construction in a Time of Crisis*’, takes ontological security-seeking a step further by bringing attention to the implications of international relations. She identifies two dimensions of ontological security – first, there is ‘*security-of-being*’ which is fundamental to the existence of self. Security-of-being aligns with Giddens's notion of ontological security and is an individual's or state's *emotional* need for stability and predictability in the world. She applies the concept of routines to a conflict-driven society, where routines can reduce uncertainty and unpredictability. Israel is routinising its relationship with Palestine. And the very notion of peace, which would paradoxically ‘disrupt’ all of this, could feel threatening on an existential level.

The second dimension – by expanding the concept of ‘security-of-being’ to state behaviour, she makes the assumption that a state also needs *physical* security; ‘*security-as-survival*’, which highlights the security needs that arise where conflict can threaten the very existence of a state or society.

Too ontologically secure? The existential perspective

In international relations, ‘security-of-being’ and ‘security-as-survival’ are both crucial not only for the existence of state or society, but for the existence of self. Let us enquire into a how a ‘security-of-being’ may existentially actually be a ‘security-of non-being’.

Existential anxiety can be defined as an internal conflict between 'being' and 'non-being' and is a kind of ontological *insecurity*. Interesting that the psychological state of existential anxiety begins its life as 'conflict'. But as internal conflict. The internal conflict is whether 'to be' and face the reality of the situation, or 'not to be' by suppressing or denying it in the interests of preserving the status quo.

"..... anxiety always involves inner conflict. Is not this conflict precisely between what we have called being and non-being? Anxiety occurs at the point where some emerging potentiality or possibility faces the individual, some possibility of fulfilling his existence; but this very possibility involves the destroying of present security, which thereupon gives rise to the tendency to deny the new potentiality." (Rollo May, 1958, p. 52)

What happens when there is unwillingness or inability to hold or contain the inner conflict? What happens when inner becomes outer, becomes external conflict? Can the Jewish Israeli body confront the reality of their existence? Can they confront the existential anxiety of change? Embracing the possibilities of change, of coexistence or even peace, would require significant shifts; not just in the political framework, but in societal attitudes, entrenched positions, long-held narratives, and ultimately in their individual and collective identity. It would mean giving up that which gives them their very sense of existence. Instead, they are 'managing' their existential anxiety and so preserving the status quo. On the surface, routines help to alleviate anxiety – they stabilise existing structures and normalise beliefs, practices and behaviours. But surely on a deeper level, what they are really doing is protecting themselves from their feelings. Feelings that are perhaps too much to bear - their vulnerability, their fear, their grief. And on a deeper level still, their shame. The question of shame is addressed later in this article.

Ontological security serves as a survival resource for state, society and self. But can a state become too rigidly ontologically secure? If the very notion of cooperation comes with the loss of the known self, this would represent a threat to their ontological security.

"Apparent" ontological security? The attachment relationship

At this point I explore further why relationships are fundamental to human life. Returning to Mitzen on ontological security - she says disturbingly: *"Even a harmful or self-defeating relationship can provide ontological security"*, (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). I am interested by the word 'relationship' and wonder, does ontological security function like an attachment bond developed in childhood - as in John Bowlby's (1958) theory of attachment?

On a psychobiological level, human beings have a primal need for relationship. Attachment theory, first described by John Bowlby in the 1950's, seeks to explain how human beings are neurologically wired to seek relationships for safety and stability. Attachment describes the emotional bond that develops between mother and baby over the first few years of life, and serves to regulate the infant, primarily through non-verbal mutual interaction. The attachment relationship can manifest as a secure or an insecure bond. A secure attachment bond is one where the caregiver is experienced as consistent, attuned and emotionally available and the bond is a source of reassurance, safety and comfort.

In Israel, ontological security offered by the routinisation of societal practices can be seen to fulfil a similar function to this early secure attachment bond – to reassure and offer state protection and security. This keeps individuals and society in a 'safe zone' – well away from their existential anxiety of being. However, if we probe deeper, we might question this. Is it truly 'secure' or built on 'apparently secure' foundations? Paradoxically, the ontological security afforded to the Jewish Israeli body might actually be masking a deeper underlying *insecurity*, driven by fears of existential threats of societal breakdown. This analogy raises the question - is the Jewish Israeli 'societal attachment bond' truly secure, or is it mirroring an insecure attachment? As the child may tend towards some form of security and control, even if it comes from a chaotic or unstable caregiving environment, so too the Jewish Israeli body may favour an existential state of non-being (denying or suppressing reality) over being. The known is better than the unknown.

Identity and relationship

Mitzen says that identity involves *"constructing a meaningful sense of self while simultaneously managing the underlying anxieties that arise with potential threats to that self"*, (Mitzen, 2006, p. 344). This is where it gets interesting, as the process of 'constructing a meaningful sense of self' is bound up with relational patterns and events in early childhood.

To unpack this further I turn to the developmental theory of the formation of self. Daniel Stern, a developmental psychologist, in his book *'The Interpersonal World of the Infant'* (1985), describes how the primary task of the infant is to develop a 'sense of core self'. This is not something the infant can do on their own, but happens *in relation* to others and to the wider environment. Multiple and repeated interactions between the primary caregiver and the infant become encoded as specific interactive episodes in the mind of the infant. This dance of mutuality marks the beginnings of the iterative process of being-in-relationship and formation of sense of self.

Identity begins here. And then continues to evolve through life's experiences; constantly being shaped and re-shaped by our beliefs, values, roles etc – which of course are all themselves created *in relationship*. This accords with Mitzen's intersubjective construction of 'identity' which relies on a dynamic interplay between 'self' and 'other'. She would agree with Stern, it is through interactions with the 'other' that 'self' is created, as individuals come to know and understand themselves through relationship. And as with self-identity, state identity is formed and sustained *through* relationship.

Can we be in relationship with conflict itself? Mitzen proposes that conflict itself can become a source of identity - at both individual and collective levels. If we accept that self, and to some extent identity, is formed through the dynamic interplay between self and other, the conflict can effectively step into the role of 'other'. Particularly when a sense of self is not deeply rooted in security, the structure of conflict provides that 'other', and will itself become identity-forming. So we do not only experience conflict; we enter into a relationship with it, relying on its presence to maintain our identity.

Having a common enemy unites people and gives them a sense of purpose, which feeds self and state identity needs. And when a state has a strongly, established identity, it informs consistent policies and practices aligned to that identity. This is how routinisation becomes anchored in identity.

So conflict shapes identity. Routinisation shapes identity. And identity shapes state behaviour. So life revolves around the conflict. As lines become blurred between self-identity and state identity.

There is Israel, strongly linked to the Western world. And the Muslim Arab world which is not part of the Western world. But Israel's neighbours are the Muslim Arab world. There already exists a template for 'us' and 'them'.

Where conflict revolves around race, ethnicity or religion, a collective identity imbued with beliefs, values and practices is created on both sides, and identity becomes fundamental to how each side perceives the other. Rothman and Alberstein (2013) take a social constructionist view of identity and posit that self-identity is not an innate construct, but is created by the social and cultural contexts of which the individual is part. An individual's identity will inevitably be intertwined with societal interactions and the meanings attributed to these. Within this context, they describe different levels of identity - individual, group, and intergroup – highlighting how the individualistic level is only one cultural possibility among others. They assert that identity taps in to the very essence of human existence and is "*a distinct category that underlies all conflicts*" (Rothman & Alberstein, 2013, p.

631). By which they mean that conflicts rooted in identity become not just about disputes over tangible resources or politics but hinge on more existential questions, such as dignity and recognition - who are we - and who belongs. And who doesn't belong. And with that there is the shame of not belonging.

The shame of not belonging... Patricia De Young (2022) speaks of the parallels between the processes of individual and collective (or societal) shame:

Of individual shame: *"Chronic shame generates unresolvable splits in the self between states of self-hate and states of compensatory, self-protective narcissism"*. And of the parallel of collective shame: *"the self-denigrating shame of those who are losers in the system and the self-aggrandizing narcissism of those who are winners"*.

In summary, identity-based conflicts become all the more emotional and intractable where this kind of 'us' versus 'them' mentality develops, with each side feeling threatened by the other's existence. The conflict then becomes more than a geopolitical struggle. It becomes part of the structure through which identity is maintained.

Collective and intergenerational trauma

The psychological birth of Israel tells a profound story of the opening of a psychic wound that has been and still is being passed on and carried across generations of the Jewish diaspora. In the same way as individual deficiencies in our developmental history have caused individual wounding and often chronic trauma, the Jewish diaspora are carrying intergenerational trauma from times of mass antisemitism.

Trauma operates within a collective psyche on multiple levels, often blurring the line between history and identity. Frameworks such as Volkan's concept of 'chosen trauma' explain how a massive historical tragedy becomes a core element of shared identity. The Holocaust provides one example of such a trauma. When collective grief from the past remains unresolved, it becomes psychically fused with the present, leaving the group's identity vulnerable to political mobilisation by leaders seeking to advance nationalist agendas. However, the political mobilisation of trauma does not necessarily account for the full psychological force that such collective experiences can retain across generations. Whilst acknowledging this socio-political perspective, I maintain that there remains an underlying, unprocessed collective trauma—particularly the regression to more primitive defences when collective identity is experienced as under existential threat.

As previously discussed, if there is a close identification of self with state, it follows that aspects of the individual psyche will be mirrored by the collective psyche. The quotes from Reich at the top of this article suggest that the development of individual character is strongly influenced by the character and dynamics of the family, which in turn is influenced by broader political, cultural and social environment.

Trauma theory reveals a reciprocal relationship between individual character formation and traumatic experience. It is widely understood that character is shaped by response to a wide range of environmental factors, which can include overwhelming threat. Character structure is often shaped by an intergenerational 'field' of trauma within the individual, the family or the society, acting as a historical template. This template in turn will shape responses to current events and how future threats are managed, filtering present realities through the blueprint of past survival. This creates a powerful, self-perpetuating cycle - the 'trauma-informed' character anticipates danger, provoking defensive reactions that reinforce the very structure created by the original wound. Resmaa Menakem (2017) writes from a Black American perspective:

"The answer to why so many of us have difficulties is because our ancestors spent centuries here under unrelentingly brutal conditions. Generation after generation, our bodies stored trauma and intense survival energy, and passed these on to our children and grandchildren. Most of us also passed down resilience and love, of course. But ... resilience and love aren't sufficient to completely heal all trauma. Often, at least some of the trauma continues." (Menakem, 2017, p. 89).

Here, Menakem makes a similar point to Reich, citing the prevailing economic and social conditions but extending the link to trauma. As with Reich, he shows how the individual psyche is shaped within the family structure, which is itself nested within the social structure, as evidenced in the following quote. Where a family and social structure are carrying the imprint of oppressive character (Reich) or intergenerational trauma (Menakem), individual development will be adversely affected.

"After months or years, unhealed trauma can appear to become part of someone's personality. Over even longer periods of time, as it is passed on and gets compounded through other bodies in a household, it can become a family norm. And if it gets transmitted and compounded through multiple families and generations, it can start to look like culture. But it isn't culture. It's a traumatic retention that has lost its context over time." (Menakem, 2017, p. 39).

I could add to this quote... *"and if it gets transmitted and compounded through aggressive political and military structures, it can start to look like legitimate self-defence. But it isn't legitimate self-defence. It's a traumatic retention that has lost its context over time"*.

The quote above is a call to listen to the body as an archive of ‘embodied memory’ of the past – but through this archive the body tells its story in the present. It is the body that carries the ‘defensive’ adaptations of the trauma – through posture, gestures, breathing patterns and affective states. As the infant takes on form, so too does the collective psyche take on form; the form of embodied memory from generations of collective trauma. It is this unresolved collective trauma that sustains the cycle of violence.

This dynamic, where trauma can become mistaken for culture resonates strongly with the findings of sociologist Irit Keynan from her large-scale sociological study in Israel, presented in her book *‘Psychological War Trauma and Society’* (2015). She explores the psychological trauma affecting both civilians and soldiers who have encountered the violence of war or terrorism. War trauma, she says, is rooted in culture, collective memory and social norms. It exposes the complex relationship between self and society. She explains that persistent societal trauma often leads to dysregulation in individuals, emphasising that these states are mutually reinforcing; societal trauma can also perpetuate these dysregulated states which run across generations. The result is a collective inability to process trauma effectively, leading to ongoing cycles of conflict and suffering.

Keynan describes collective trauma as the *shared psychological injury* resulting from prolonged exposure to ongoing conflict. When early phases of self-formation occur in an unstable environment scarred by historical and ever-present conflict, the child is likely to internalise a ‘threatened world’. In such a situation, the underlying aetiology might be complex, but for the purposes of this article, we can describe three overarching causes of disruption to self: attachment difficulties, early developmental trauma and intergenerational trauma – all of which as we shall see, intertwine and interlink.

Sharing of the psychological injury happens through a complex web of mechanisms that reverberates across generations. Firstly there is sharing through direct exposure to conflict – how children brought up amidst violence are ‘swimming in a sea’ of horror and fear. Secondly, trauma is perpetuated through society itself: cultural narratives, social norms, educational systems and political structures contribute to the sharing of trauma. Thirdly, trauma is passed down intergenerationally within families, becoming entrenched within family dynamics through insecure and disorganised attachment styles. And lastly, these different layers of trauma – personal, familial, societal, cultural – can become woven into collective memory and the collective psyche. It’s complex, as the latter in turn will influence family dynamics and attachment style. Suffice to say that at each of these levels, we see attachment patterns associated with insecurity, mistrust and

hypervigilance. Trauma does not exist in isolation but exists in a 'force field' that shapes individual and collective psychological development.

From developing self to intergenerational trauma

To understand this process fully, we now need to look further in to early disruptions to self-experience. In his book *'The Interpersonal World of the Infant'* (1985), Stern looks at the infant's *subjective* experience in terms of how they organise their inner world. He speaks of how the sense of self - in other words the sense of *me* - emerges at the beginning of an infant's life. How well this process is embodied depends to a large extent on the early attachment relationship. If there are disruptions with care-giving during this period, the child may internalise the 'threatened world' described above.

Stern identifies five overlapping senses of self that develop sequentially but remain dynamically intertwined: the emergent self (birth to 2 months), the core self (2 – 6 months), the subjective self (7 -15 months), the verbal self (15 – 18 months), and the narrative self (3 years onward). Each phase involves relational, sensorimotor and affective experiences which lay the grounds for the experience of continuity, agency, and coherence of self. For the purposes of this article, I want to highlight a key early developmental phase: the *core sense of self*. Stern describes how development at this phase happens in three domains: the sense of physical coherence, the sense of continuity in time, and the sense of being in touch with emotions.

By superimposing these domains on Israel's birth and early attachment process, we can imagine that any perceived threat to their legitimacy to the 'promised' land challenges their sense of physical coherence; we can imagine their Zionist narrative - the 'creation story' of Israel's right to exist - challenges their sense of continuity in time; and we can imagine that their apparent lack of empathy for the indigenous people they are intent on displacing. challenges their sense of being in touch with emotions.

Where there is early embodied disruption within these three domains, the child's sense of safety, attunement and affect regulation will be compromised. This can create dysregulating experiences of self in later in life. On the basis of increasing severity, these experiences can best be ranked as follows: (i) fragmentation - initial disturbances to somatic, emotional and temporal states; (ii) dissociation – attempts at adaptation, by splitting off experiences that threaten core self-integrity; and (iii) in severe cases - disorganisation and disintegration - loss of coherent self, narrative and agency. The latter can manifest in states of powerlessness, paranoia and lack of body boundaries.

As discussed, where there is trauma within a collective system, these dysregulating experiences of self can be transmitted from one generation to the next on a mass scale. In his book *'The Body keeps the Score'* (2014), Bessel van der Kolk, psychiatrist and researcher on traumatic stress and developmental trauma cites his own and others research studies on how children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors carry embodied trauma, even without conscious memory. As children become parents and they have their own children, this trauma gets passed on through the generations, through both behavioural patterns and biological mechanisms.

Parents who are dysregulated and/or dissociated from their own trauma are likely to have insecure or disorganised attachment patterns with their children. And so we see how the dysregulation of intergenerational trauma is passed down to the next generation through the attachment relationship, finding its way out through the disruption to self. This aligns with broader trauma theory and clinical research. For instance, Yehuda et al. (2002) conducted studies on the biological transmission of trauma, followed by further pioneering research (Yehuda et al., 2016) exploring intergenerational epigenetic changes associated with transmission of trauma. In summary, their research shows that second and third-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors have elevated risks of anxiety, PTSD-like symptoms, and altered cortisol levels.

And of course, this is happening on individual and collective levels on both sides. The Palestinian people are also carrying unresolved historical trauma from their own stories of war, displacement and dehumanisation, creating prime conditions for mutual re-traumatisation. This is the story of insecure and disorganised attachment at a collective level – as distrust, fear and emotional dysregulation become amplified across generations.

The origin of the oppressor

I explore here how the objectives of a political system that repeatedly requires domination, exclusion and violence are enacted and sustained.

The question I ask is, does the political project of Western settler colonialism mobilise psychological vulnerabilities? Or is it the other way round – do psychological vulnerabilities, such as collective trauma, help drive political projects? The distinction matters. If settler colonialism creates the mindset for perpetrating extreme violence; could trauma help explain how people become capable of participating in it? Some historians would dispute this, citing the wider geopolitical objectives of settler colonialism as the primary driver for what has been described by some as sadism.

But even if the political project explains the function of such violence, a further question remains. What makes human beings capable of repeatedly inflicting it? Here I am not proposing collective

trauma as an alternative explanation for settler colonialism, nor suggesting that psychological motives alone drive colonialism independently of history. Rather, I am posing the question - can political structures and shared psychological dynamics interact and be mutually reinforcing?

Martin Kemp's work is relevant to this question because it situates the Israeli experience within the historical and political conditions of settler colonialism while also considering its implications for Israeli society as a whole (Kemp, M. 2020). His work is a useful reminder that psychological processes need to be located within the historical and political structures in which they arise; they should not displace history, political agency or the physical realities of settler colonialism. It is in this sense that the psychology of the oppressor becomes relevant—not as an explanation for why settler colonialism exists, but as a way of understanding what participation in such a system may do to those who inhabit and sustain it.

I contend that we look at the whole system - the oppressor-oppressed dynamic within the conflict setting, as well as the settler-colonial project itself - as traumatising. It may sound odd to attribute traumatising to the oppressor as well as the oppressed, but they are linked. For a settler-colonial project to sustain itself, it must generate forms of brutalisation and objectification that make extreme violence psychologically tolerable to those who perpetrate, rationalise and reproduce it. Instances of this have been evidenced within the Israeli Government, the IDF, and the wider Israeli settler culture.

A political system that repeatedly requires domination, exclusion and violence must also generate forms of brutalisation, objectification and emotional numbing that make such violence psychologically tolerable to those who perpetrate it.

Frantz Fanon argued in *'The Wretched of the Earth'* (1961/2001) that colonialism dehumanises not only the colonised but also the coloniser. Fanon contends that the colonial system corrupts the humanity of those who perpetrate and sustain it, binding both parties into a profoundly destructive relationship.

Menakem offers a different but complementary way of understanding the psychological mechanisms involved in participation in systems of domination. In his account of racism in the United States, he argues that racialised systems of domination become embodied as trauma responses, and that trauma can be transmitted and decontextualised across generations, becoming embedded in bodies, relationships, institutions and cultures. Menakem argues that the 'white-body supremacy' is not simply an ideology but is itself a traumatising system and also a trauma response - an embodied pattern of survival that can become normalised and reproduced within a society. He

describes a system in which the white body has been established as the normative or 'supreme standard' of humanity.

In Menakem's account, participation in white-body supremacy can involve forms of bodily and psychological armouring that demand the suppression of vulnerability, empathy, and authentic connection, leading to emotional numbing and desensitisation. This is where his analysis becomes relevant to my argument. It raises the possibility that, within the Israeli settler-colonial context, analogous forms of psychological armouring could become available to those who participate in, defend or reproduce the system.

Menakem's analysis is specifically concerned with racialised trauma in the United States. I am not suggesting that Israeli and American histories of racialisation are equivalent. Rather, I am asking whether a related psychological mechanism might operate in another historical context. The Jewish Israeli body may not identify as 'white' but I wonder whether some aspects of the oppressive 'whiteness' described by Menakem could potentially be recruited into the mechanisms and ideology of a political system organised around domination and control.

The indigenous Palestinians may, in this context, become an unconscious reminder of a Jewish historical identity associated with vulnerability, displacement and persecution. A vulnerability that Zionism sought to overcome. Which may trigger their own repressed existential terror. And help to explain how extreme violence against the colonised could become a desperate attempt to annihilate the weak, fearful part of themselves by locating vulnerability exclusively in the other. This would enable the rationalisation of ongoing oppression. The threat posed by indigenous resistance is perceived not just as political challenge, but as an existential attack on the oppressor's defended, trauma-infused identity.

None of this excuses the violence. As already discussed, Jewish Israelis carry profound intergenerational trauma rooted in centuries of persecution. This makes them particularly susceptible to the brutalising and dehumanising culture required by the political project of settler colonialism. The trauma of the oppressor arises from historical experience and is reinforced through participation in a hegemonic system—a system that mobilises and exploits this trauma to create the conditions necessary for its execution. The trauma of the oppressed - the colonised Palestinian people - is different. It is trauma inflicted upon them. Where the oppressor's trauma is expressed as extreme violence or even sadism, the trauma of the oppressed is *the result* of it. The colonial system damages everyone trapped within it, but the power imbalance remains absolute. *I am not trying to equate the suffering.*

The 'other', 'othering' and differentiation

What do we mean by the 'other' and what is 'othering'? The term might be relatively new, but the concept is, and always has been, fundamental to social interaction and power dynamics. It is closely linked to the social constructionist view of identity, which — as already discussed — is how individuals and groups define themselves in relation to others, as well as the social and cultural context of which they are part. Fred Dervin, a social constructionist who focuses on intercultural communication, emphasises that understanding the dynamic nature of 'otherness' is key to understanding conflicts. Where there is a close relationship between personal and social identity, it is self-identity that defines and reinforces 'the other'. Society is created when a group of people defines itself, creates a shared identity and differentiates itself from other groups. When an individual or a group's identity does not align with the dominant or normative identities within that group, they are seen as different. This is the beginnings of an us-and-them mentality - the ones who share the dominant identity and belong to the group, versus those who do not. Often the out-group is marginalised, lacks legitimate identity and is subject to exclusion or discrimination by the dominant group (Dervin 2012).

The forming of in-groups and out-groups is a natural social and psychological process. But in protracted conflicts like the Palestine-Israel conflict, it's what keeps conflict alive, as collective identities continually shape and reinforce boundaries between groups.

Boundaries. Surely, both self and other need boundaries? I recognise you are different from me. Surely otherness simply emerges out of the recognition of difference and therefore from the natural and necessary psychological process involved in the development of self, as well as in social awareness?

While a group might define its identity in order to differentiate, for the infant, it's the other way round. The sense of self emerges *from* the process of differentiation and is the very process that forges identity. In 1959, Margaret Mahler, a psychoanalyst and developmental psychology researcher along with her colleagues Pine and Bergman, began studying infant development by direct observation and continued for a period of over a decade. In her book, *The Psychological Birth of the Infant* (Mahler et al., 1975), she terms this differentiation process as the *separation-individuation* phase, transitioning from the earlier *symbiotic phase*, which is characterised by the infant's experience of fusion with the mother — the baby experiences a dual unity with no real distinction between 'me' and 'not me'. The separation-individuation phase introduces the painful but necessary awareness of *otherness* — of an awareness that the mother (or caregiver) is a separate being. The infant begins to form *boundaries*. This phase broadly equates to Stern's sense of

a core self. It is during this period that the infant transitions from a state of dependence on their caregiver to a stage of more independence. From the perspective of 'othering', this is the first act of differentiation and is a healthy boundary-making process - the child finds their 'push' that is critical for healthy psychological development. There is recognition of difference, but also recognition of relationship. This is the bedrock that shapes sense of self and interpersonal relationships in later life. We need others in order to define self.

So how does this healthy differentiation process contrast with destructive othering? Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (1995), expands on the idea already introduced, that it is recognition of difference that defines oneself or a group in terms of the other. She describes how the process of *mutual recognition* plays a key developmental role in negotiating intersubjectivity which Benjamin defines as "*the interplay between two different subjective worlds*" (Benjamin, 1995, p. 34). In psychoanalytic terms, it addresses the experience in which the other "*is not merely the object... but one that has a separate and equivalent center of self*" (Benjamin, 1995, p. 35). This equates to Stern's sense of a subjective self, when the child becomes aware of their inner world - their feelings, motives and intentions - and can now share these subjective states with others. Paradoxically, recognition of real relationship (connection) involves a simultaneous recognition of difference (separateness). The child must confront reality by recognising the other (or mother) as an independent separate being – that is, a subjective being like themselves - for there to be real relationship. This is the experience of *experiencing* intersubjectivity. When we ask "*How can a person, or people, be so unimaginably brutal towards another person, or people?*" The inability to see the other as a subjective being, with their own struggles, fears and needs (individually and collectively) is a key factor.

To return to the above question, when 'othering' is rooted in trauma, the healthy process of differentiation flips into becoming a defensive response. Recognition is compromised or absent, empathy diminishes and the 'other' becomes not just different, but somehow dangerous or threatening. Various defence mechanisms come into play – including splitting, projection, projective identification, dissociation (of which more later) and denial, which I will now turn to.

Bekerman and Maoz (2005) draw on theories of identity formation and intergroup conflict to portray how both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians have constructed their national and cultural identities in opposition to one another. Where each other's identity is in the very negation of the other – of their very right to exist. Here there is no 'open dialogue' – only 'closed dialogue' that reinforces their own group's legitimacy. By expanding on Bekerman and Maoz's theory, I suggest that the Jewish Israeli body is in denial. They are reinforcing their own group's legitimacy, but denying the legitimacy of the other side, thereby, denying the harm and exclusion they are causing to the Palestinian people.

Denial is a defence mechanism that aims to protect the self (or society) from psychological distress. It works by pushing painful realities - such as thoughts, feelings and events - out of conscious awareness, in an attempt to reduce anxiety.

Denial and shame

Is the Jewish Israeli body in denial to avoid the otherwise unbearable feelings of collective chronic shame? According to Patricia DeYoung (2021), a system or society characterised by chronic shame *“survives by not knowing about the annihilation it tolerates and perpetrates”*. DeYoung is speaking of a collective ‘not knowing’ that could, if applied to Jewish Israeli body, suggest how a social system may preserve itself through forms of psychological ignorance.

This dynamic of 'not knowing' resonates strongly with what Lara and Stephen Sheehi (2022) term ‘psychoanalytic innocence’. While they use this to describe a clinical detachment from reality, we can apply it here to the Jewish Israeli collective psyche. Within this context, it can be understood as collectively denying—or actively refusing to acknowledge—the political realities of the Occupation. Such denial allows the Jewish Israeli body to maintain a self-image of 'traumatised victim'. By silencing the voices of 'humiliated exiles' (DeYoung 2021) – here embodied by the systemic oppression of the Palestinian people and denial of their self-determination - their 'psychoanalytic innocence' is acting as a buffer against chronic shame. If the collective can maintain its innocence, then responsibility for harm remains located outside the self. By denying the shame, moral culpability continues to be projected elsewhere. This is what upholds a dysfunctional equilibrium. And what resists, persists – the dysfunctional equilibrium persists precisely because the system resists change.

Whilst the Jewish Israeli body acknowledges, and possibly identifies with, its collective history of trauma and persecution, it is the chronic shame arising from that trauma that has been collectively silenced. This shame—profound and often painful—is tied to existential vulnerability and perceived moral failure. Fully experiencing and accepting this shame would require acknowledging not only their vulnerability but their moral self-image—including the possibility that the collective is no longer solely a victim but also causes or allows harm.

By maintaining the victim narrative, the Jewish Israeli body can justify its present actions as necessary responses to past trauma and ongoing threats while simultaneously denying the shame that would arise from recognizing its role in causing harm. Occupying this moral position enables the continued exercise of power to be understood as legitimate self-defence rather than as behaviour requiring moral reckoning and accountability. This defensive stance acts as a psychological and

political shield, perpetuating their position of power and control, without confronting the ethical implications of those actions. In doing so, the Jewish Israeli body can “maintain an illusion of escape from their fear of existential vulnerability” (DeYoung 2021).

The role reversal described, allows the previous experience of being 'done to' to become a justification for 'doing to' others. This is predicated on the narrative that whoever suffers most deserves to live—and may even harm to do so (Benjamin 2024) - a justification that according to Benjamin (2022), in a presentation to the European Association for Psychotherapy, serves to preserve moral legitimacy while defending against unbearable shame.

“It would appear that to admit responsibility for harming, or even that harm has been done, might invite the danger of being cast out... My colleague, Eyad el-Sarraj, the Gazan psychiatrist... argued that the Israelis guilt at having harmed in order to survive, further intensified their already massive fear of being abandoned by the world. If one has lived at the expense of injuring the other, one has forfeited the legitimacy of one’s right to live... So, in order to evade that consequence, it became necessary to argue that one’s own people had already suffered more - had already been so justified through suffering that one now could not be accused of doing harm.” (European Association for Psychotherapy, 2022, 32:34).

And so the cycle of harm and denial continues (DeYoung 2021). A system of binary thinking, where both groups perceive themselves as either powerful or disempowered. Here, there is no space for recognition. Here there is no space for intersubjectivity. There is *only difference*.

Arrested differentiation

Going back to Mahler and thinking about what happens when the child does not fully separate-individuate... They stay in a partially unified state with their mother. Could this be what is happening to the Jewish Israeli body? The process of separation is just too unbearable? Could the collective mother symbolically be represented by ‘the Mother’, as in the geographical land of Palestine-Israel? The ‘good’ mother who represents the nurturing, ideological homeland, who offers safety and continuity? The good mother that provides an ‘apparently’ secure attachment to the historically traumatised Jewish Israel people? There is undeniably a deep connection to ‘the Motherland’, but perhaps there is also a collective pathological dependency and over-identification with the Motherland, represented by Mahler’s symbiotic phase, (the earlier developmental phase to separation-individuation). Which might help explain, as Beckerman and Maoz imply, why there is negation of the other, because the Palestinian people cannot be seen as separate. There is no recognition of their physical territory - their land, their boundaries, their sovereignty. There is no

recognition of the people themselves - with their own religion, cultural or ethnic identity. They do not even exist, or not as subjective beings in their own right. So how can they be recognised?

For now, we can acknowledge that differentiation is a vital developmental process, and necessary for an appreciation of separateness and otherness. The child needs a secure base to separate (Mahler et al., 1975). If the land is experienced as the 'good mother', then the idea of sharing it may feel like psychic annihilation — a threat to an already fragile differentiated identity - and more than just a political loss.

Use of an Object

Donald Winnicott's theory on 'Use of an Object' (1969) is a precursor to object relations theory and offers an understanding of how early relational experiences are internalised by the child. This is of importance here as it describes how the process of differentiation is achieved and with it the capacity of being in relationship, specifically of being in relationship in the external world. Whereas Mahler, through the separation-individuation phase, explains the developmental origin of the failure to achieve a stable sense of separateness, Winnicott's use of an object explains why that developmental process remains incomplete.

Use of an object depends on the infant's ability to relate to external objects (others) as separate and real, distinct from oneself. It explains how the infant's early experiences with parents or caregivers gradually become 'internalised'. It is through the process of integrating their internal with their external worlds that shapes self and self-with-others — a process can be thwarted by early attachment difficulties or developmental trauma.

The infant initially relates to external objects (such as the mother) as an extension or projection of the self. This is the experience of subjective omnipotence—where the object is experienced as under the infant's control - a 'fantasy' they can destroy. As development progresses, the infant begins to confront the reality of the mother's separateness. This feels like a breakdown of the earlier fusion or dual unity. But the breakdown is necessary. What matters is whether the mother can withstand the mental act of the infant's 'attack', and psychologically 'survive' for her child. In that moment of survival, the object achieves a place and recognition beyond omnipotent control. The infant realises *"I did not create her, and I cannot destroy her. She is real and separate from me"*. The infant can now 'use the object' as it is something that exists distinct from the self, with its own independent existence and its own reality. The child has encountered otherness, and with it the beginnings of relationships with others as separate real individuals.

How use of an object 'goes wrong' in the Palestine-Israel conflict

What happens when the object does not survive the mental act of being destroyed? There is a horrific parallel here - the reality. The *physical act* of 'being 'destroyed' is in stark contrast to what is being described here – the *mental act*. In developmental terms, differentiation cannot be achieved. The object is never allowed to become external or real, but remains a subjective creation, a part of the self. The subject continues to relate to the other as a 'part-object' within a fantasy relationship, over which the subject can maintain omnipotent control.

I have previously suggested that during the psychological birth of Israel, there could be an early developmental failure, where differentiation was not fully achieved. I now turn to the question of why this would have happened. This goes back to the beginning of the article – I argue that the Israeli collective psyche has, (and still is) suffering from an compromised developmental process – ie. there was not a sufficiently stable sense of self (Stern). If identity formation cannot be rooted in a sense of internal stability, the collective psyche looks for proxy external structures to define itself.

Here I propose three different structures to this symbolic breakdown in object usage. Each represents a relational defence strategy that functions predominantly to stabilise identity under conditions of an insecure attachment relationship.

Firstly, as proposed earlier, the Jewish Israeli body is fused or merged with the *internalised* collective 'mother'. As an extension of the psyche, this symbolic Motherland becomes a fantasy object that can be possessed and controlled by the collective. It also defends against the existential threat posed by acknowledging the complexity of the of the physical land itself. As long as the Motherland is experienced as an extension of the collective self, it cannot be recognised as an independent other with a reality beyond the collective's projections and identifications.

Secondly, I propose the collective psyche remains fused with the conflict - or rather, conflict narrative - rather than it being encountered as an independent reality. The Jewish Israeli collective does not experience the conflict as an external dynamic process that can be engaged with, 'survived', and transformed. Why? Because transformation would require the object—the conflict—to become separate. In essence, the perpetuation of the conflict is a desperate act of self-preservation, protecting a fragile sense of self that never fully developed.

This brings us back to Mitzen and the sense of the psychological security that the conflict provides: "*Even a harmful or self-defeating relationship can provide ontological security*". The conflict represents a specific version of their collective identity – almost a symbiotic identity. "*We exist in*

opposition to them" becomes *"We are the opposition"*. There is investment in the continuation of this self-defeating relationship by warding off Jewish Israeli existential anxiety.

Thirdly, the Jewish Israeli collective has failed to 'use' the Palestinian other. They cannot recognise the Palestinian people as a separate object. They must not be allowed to 'survive' as a separate, real, and whole entity because again, such recognition would destabilise their fragile ontological security. The Palestinian people who have not already been physically destroyed, have been symbolically 'destroyed', in Winnicott's terms. How? By denying them subjectivity. By denying them agency. By denying them sovereignty. The Palestinian people remain a fantasy. An extension of their own collective psyche that must be controlled. To fully recognise their separateness would be to admit to the reality of the situation. A reality outside of their control.

These are all ways in which the sense of self defines itself through controlling or negating the other. These are all ways of preventing the psychic pain of separation and of relating to a real, external and separate other.

Splitting, introjection and projection – their role when use of an object 'goes wrong'

I will now briefly outline the function of the internalised mechanisms of splitting, introjection and projection which were first understood in the context of early object relations theory by Melanie Klein in 1946. According to Klein, these innate mechanisms represent normal healthy development in the young infant. While Winnicott explains how the environment facilitates psychological development, Klein explains what the psyche does when the environment fails the infant and psychological development is compromised.

As a way of managing the unbearable anxiety and terror of coming into the world, the infant actively constructs the world by splitting their experiences with caregivers into two absolute categories of good and all bad. These are *introjected* (taken in) as 'good objects' or 'bad objects' – the bad object creating an inner world dominated by the fear of the *internal persecutor*. When the internal feelings associated with the 'bad object' (terror, rage, shame) become too unbearable to contain, the infant uses *projection*—expelling their internalised bad objects outwards onto others. Now, the caregiver 'out there' becomes the *external persecutor*, as the embodiment of the infant's own internal aggression and threat.

These primitive mechanisms allow the infant to manage overwhelming experience. Whether they persist into adulthood depends on how well the later developmental milestone of Winnicott's use of an object is navigated. If the real-world caregiver 'survives' the infant's projections and aggression, the infant realises the 'bad object' they have projected onto them isn't the whole story. If the

caregiver is still there, they must be a real person, and with this realisation, split internal objects start to *integrate*.

Conversely, if this process is disrupted, reliance on primitive defences may persist. Lacking the capacity to integrate overwhelming experience, they continue to rely on early primitive defence mechanisms of splitting, introjection and projection. An undifferentiated world now prevails into adulthood, where the other is perceived as fused with, controlled by, and existing for the self. There is now psychological certainty. There is now the illusion of an 'all-good' self. Any negative or threatening reality is split off and projected outwards. The world remains starkly divided.

Projection in the Palestine-Israel conflict

The interpersonal dynamic of projection involves attributing unwanted or intolerable aspects of the self to another person or object, who serves as a passive container. This externalization functions as a psychological defence—an attempt to avoid confronting internal conflicts, undesirable traits, feelings, or impulses within oneself.

I now aim to apply projection at the collective level to help explain the origin of relationships and behaviours pervasive to this conflict – for instance the dynamics of victimisation and aggression. As already discussed, I believe that differentiation of the Jewish Israeli body remains incomplete. I argue here that, as a result, as a result of a lack of psychological integration, the mechanisms of splitting and projection step in to help them manage internal states of fragmentation. Splitting preserves an idealised collective identity by dividing experience into what belongs to the 'good' self and what must be disowned. Projection then relocates these disowned aspects into the other.

Within this framework, collective projection helps to explain how characteristics that threaten the group's idealised self-image become attributed to an external other who comes to embody everything the group believes itself not to be.

In this case, it is the Palestinian other that comes to embody what cannot be fully recognised within the Jewish Israeli self. They become the psychological container for unacceptable aspects of 'self' - collective fear, aggression, vulnerability and shame. The more completely aggression is attributed to the other the more easily the Jewish Israeli body can sustain an identity grounded in victimhood and righteousness. Having an external persecutor now helps by giving them a degree of control over their *internal persecutor*. Such as, "*I am the victim here*" and "*they are the terrorists*".

Projection thus serves the Israeli body as a stabilising function by preserving their 'moral' coherence and collective identity. However, it does not fully account for what is happening within the

relationship. We need to understand the mechanism of projective identification where there is an ongoing psychological participation.

The mechanism of projective identification

Whereas projection attributes unwanted aspects of the self to another, projective identification extends this process by maintaining a psychological relationship with what has been projected. Winnicott hints at this dynamic when he says of object-relating; *“the subject is depleted to the extent that something of the subject is found in the object”*.

Rather than simply locating unwanted aspects of the self in the other, the subject remains psychologically connected to what has been projected and may unconsciously try to control or shape the other (the object) into identifying with or enacting those projected parts. The object has now become not just a passive container, but their thoughts, feelings and behaviour have become influenced by the projected material. The object is no longer experienced as fully separate, but becomes drawn into a dynamic in which aspects of the subject's inner world are located and encountered in the object. The subject then relates to the object through the lens of these projections, often reinforcing the very perceptions that gave rise to them. Internal and external realities fly back and forth, becoming increasingly difficult to disentangle.

So, when, in Winnicott's object usage, the object does not survive being used, the relationship may become organised around projective identification, as a defence against the recognition of separateness and a shared, objective reality. In projective identification, the other is related to primarily through the subject's needs, fears and fantasies rather than as an independently existing other. Boundaries between self and other become blurred.

Projective identification in the Palestine-Israel conflict

The Palestinian other comes to occupy a psychologically significant position within the psychic life of the Jewish Israeli body. This is the tragedy. The tragedy that relations are conducted not only with Palestinians as they are, but with Palestinians as they exist within their collective internal world.

The argument here is not that Palestinians are merely projections, nor that they lack subjectivity, agency or independent reality. There is a very real world out there. The historical and political world. Perceptions of threat, violence and loss on both sides arise through real experiences – day in and day out. What I argue here is there is also a collective *internal representation* of the Palestinian other who come to function as the ‘bad object’ within the Jewish Israeli psyche. As external realities of the conflict become intertwined with their internal world.

Coming back to the Winnicott quote; *“the subject is depleted to the extent that something of the subject is found in the object”*. These painful, threatening and disowned aspects of Jewish Israeli body / identity are experienced as a ‘depletion’ or loss to their subjectivity. Meanwhile, the Palestinian other has become the container for them so cannot be related to as having their own external reality. This sets up a mutually reinforcing enactment as disowned aspects of Israeli collective self are experienced as part of the Palestinian other.

Relationships become mutually organised around these projections. Responses from the real external Palestinian other are encountered through the lens of projective identification, appearing to confirm the very qualities that have been projected onto them. External events therefore reinforce internal expectations, while those internal expectations shape the interpretation of subsequent events. This is how the conflict becomes self-perpetuating, now not only through political and historical realities, but through repeated unconscious enactments. As the two sides become increasingly psychologically entangled.

Here we see how projective identification is the collective expression of incomplete differentiation in the Jewish Israeli body.

Difference and Merged-ness

I want to highlight an interesting paradox. Within the Jewish Israeli collective, how can there be the coexistence of a conscious 'only difference' narrative with an unconscious state of 'merged-ness' (or incomplete differentiation), that has been a central theme here?

The explicit and conscious *‘only difference’* narrative is drawn from ‘Bekerman & Maoz who describe how Jewish Israeli identity is constructed through negation – *“we are not them”*. This is routinised on a daily level and perpetuated by unconscious processes of dissociation that split off the Palestinian ‘other’ into a dehumanised category of absolute otherness.

The unconscious state of *‘merged-ness’* can be understood through Winnicott's concept of ‘use of an object’. Beneath the conscious ‘only difference’ narrative lies a failure to recognise the symbolic ‘Motherland’, the Palestinian other and the conflict itself as existing independently, with a separate reality. Instead, the Palestinians are experienced as an extension of the Jewish Israeli collective psyche – a part-object onto which existential anxieties such as, *“they want to destroy us”* are projected.

Let us assume that the 'healthy' form of difference is achieved through the process of differentiation. True recognition requires both differentiation; acknowledging the other as a separate entity with their own subjectivity – and connection; acknowledging the mutual interdependence and the need for the other's recognition in return. What is important here, is that *only after* differentiation can a relationship based on mutual recognition be truly established. If differentiation fails, real connection based on mutual recognition also fails and can only exist in a more primitive or merged form of connection.

What we are talking about here is the *pathology of 'connection'*. Unresolved separation-individuation can trap both sides of the conflict in a dynamic where these two states can coexist within the collective psyche and reinforce each other - particularly where identity is bound up with trauma. The pathology of 'difference' is manifested through dissociation or denial of the other's subjectivity and the pathology of connection is manifested either as a symbiotic merged-ness or as an oppositional dependency – ie. projection and projective identification - where identity becomes fused with the struggle against the other: "*We exist because they oppose us*".

So, the coexistence of difference and merged-ness may not be contradictory but complementary, as they operate at different levels of psychological organisation. At the conscious level, identity is organised around narratives of 'only difference', masking their terrifying unconscious reality of unresolved merged-ness. Terrifying, because what lies beneath unresolved merged-ness is unresolved dependency upon the other. Their conscious insistence is, "*We are not them*", but unconsciously their identity is organised around, "*Our identity depends upon them*".

The more psychologically dependent a collective is upon an opposing group for its identity, the more insistently it may construct narratives of absolute difference, precisely because genuine differentiation—and with it, mutual recognition—has not been achieved.

What about recognition of external reality?

Before we leave the world of internal reality and object relations, what about the deeper question of the recognition of external reality? And what prevents this? As we have seen, the developmental achievement of use of an object is integration - when the object (the caregiver) can survive the subject's attacks without retaliating or collapsing. This creates a sense of shared reality where the subject's external world can now be distinguished from their inner world of objects under their control.

The theory of the intersubjective third resonates with, but moves beyond Winnicott's concept. It relies on there being a sense of a subjective self (Stern 1985) – a slightly later developmental

achievement where the other is no longer experienced solely as an object of the self, but as a subject in their own right. This capacity for recognising another mind makes intersubjective relatedness possible, allowing inner experiences, such as feelings and intentions, to be shared.

It is from this developmental capacity that Benjamin's concept of the intersubjective third emerges. Benjamin (2004), describes the '*intersubjective third*' as a shared psychological space – a 'third' that can move parties beyond complementary power dynamics. This shared space is not owned by either party but is co-constructed through mutual recognition and acknowledgment of each other's subjectivity. It allows for a dynamic process where both parties can see themselves reflected in the other.

What about the intersubjective third in the Palestine-Israel conflict? Could there be more to life than perpetual cycles of violence – beyond 'doer' and 'done-to', where the other's reality can be acknowledged? There are several reasons why this seems to me to be an impossibility: (i) Benjamin's intersubjective third requires mutual recognition; (ii) mutual recognition presupposes that both parties are subjects; and (iii) colonial domination systematically denies one party equal subjecthood. This is a conflict between a colonial settler state (Israel) with all its military, political and economic might and an indigenous occupied people (the Palestinians). This is a conflict that has stripped the Palestinian people of not only their land, their homes and their communities, but their humanity, their dignity and their freedom.

There can be no recognition of external reality by the two sides involved. This is a conflict of power, political rights and inequality. With such a massive power imbalance, how can there be a 'shared psychological space'? To reinforce the 'doer' / 'done-to' dynamic could actually do harm, by expecting the 'done-to' to participate in a fantasy of equality. The intersubjective field collapses under the weight of such brutal asymmetry. This is where we are. This is where I am. Of having to reject the liberal illusion of recognition so as to confront the truth.

The truth is that the so-called 'shared psychological space' is already occupied. It's already filled with the intrusions of colonialism, domination and the defences against it.

Edges and the Window of Tolerance

There is an ever-present push for order, inviting states and nations to 'edges' of diplomacy. How does this play out in Israel in relation to its occupation of Palestinian territories?

Let's return to where I started. I started out asking myself the question; "*How well do I tolerate 'difference'?*" I now ask myself a related question; "*How well do I tolerate life's uncertainties?*" As change approaches, I may welcome it in theory, but other parts of me may resist it, try to control it,

run away from it, or just shut down. As I am confronted with my limitations, my vulnerabilities, can I embrace the ripples of anguish as part of my being? Life's uncertainties and challenges present us with existential 'edges' - liminal spaces where the system approaches chaos. An edge can lead to new possibilities or opportunities, even in adversity. In fact, adversity might present a catalyst for change. An edge is like a see-saw – at its mid-point is a balance point where we are stable enough to be receptive to change without tipping into chaos, yet have the potential and capacity to be able to respond in a spontaneous way. But the see-saw can get stuck down one end or the other. Towards the lower end of the see-saw we may cling too tightly to stability, shy away from the edge, and limit exposure to risk or new-ness. Towards the upper end, the body perceives threat and and/or the fear of the unknown. Beyond the see-saw's regulatory boundaries or edges ('up' or 'down'), can take us in to a dysregulated state of overwhelm. In overwhelm we don't have capacity or the resilience for the integration of experience.

The metaphor of the see-saw describes what in the trauma world is known as the 'window of tolerance'. It refers to the optimal zone of arousal within which individuals can process experiences, respond to challenges and remain emotionally regulated. Within this window we are able to think clearly, manage emotions and respond adaptively. But the window becomes constricted when there is trauma in the system, narrowing the range within which a person—or a society—can operate without dysregulation. Outside it, we enter either hyperarousal (anxious vigilance, aggression) or hypo-arousal (numbness, withdrawal, shutdown). In either case, the system loses its capacity to tolerate uncertainty and maintain coherence.

Given that Israel's historical and ongoing trauma has fostered a need for ontological security, we can imagine that their habitual position or 'comfort zone', is one which offers predictability and a kind of rigid stability. However, this is a survival response to overwhelm; not necessarily a place of low arousal in a physiological sense (as discussed above) - but one where they can 'exist' in a state of equilibrium. But this apparent equilibrium is fragile; it can break down at any time. Especially, as is the case here, when the state and its people are steeped in intergenerational trauma and chronic insecurity. A threat to the status quo, perceived or otherwise, can tip the see-saw beyond its regulatory boundaries – 'up' in to hyper-vigilance (eg. heightened vigilance or 'fight/flight' states) - or further 'down' in to hypo-arousal (eg. submit, apathy, societal paralysis).

Either way it's dysregulation. Here there is no place for flexibility or adaptability This is where an 'edge' becomes uncharted territory. In the Palestine-Israel conflict, the process of mutual recognition of the 'other', the process of mutual negotiation and the ability to accommodate change are a few examples of uncharted territory, both at an individual and collective level. Rather than

confront these existential edges of uncertainty and change, the Jewish Israeli body operate within a 'narrow window of tolerance' and are unable to move flexibly outside of this constricted window of what is tolerable.

To return to the 'down' see-saw position of hypo-arousal. From Frankel's work, we know that authoritarian leaders exploit the 'submit' response that when there is a collective narcissistic wound, to defend the population against overwhelming feelings. These are feelings of shame, fear and vulnerability that arise from the psychic injury of collective trauma. The displaced psychic energy from this original narcissistic wound becomes emotionally fused with the authoritarian leader, creating a 'comfort zone' of rigid stability. Which explains why the Jewish Israeli body are stuck down the lower end of the see-saw in a place of apparent equilibrium. Where ontological security continues to protect them.

The cause of the stuckness? Could it be chronic collective shame? The system sustains itself not by addressing the systemic issues but by maintaining a fragile equilibrium on the see-saw. Any attempts to challenge or change this status quo will be met by a 'powerful pushback' (DeYoung 2021) because maintaining the current 'homeostasis' provides ontological security and a sense of control. But what if this control is just an illusion, preventing real progress? We return to the paradox of being too ontologically secure. What if this powerful pushback protects against confronting deeper issues?

Emotions. What's emotions got to do with it? These are the edges of uncertainty. The edges of emotional charge. Can they – and can I, or any of us - feel our feelings? Feelings that for understandable reasons most of us try to push away. Feelings of fear. Feelings of vulnerability. Feelings of fallibility. Staying on the edge with our feelings. But not above or below the see-saw's regulatory boundaries of overwhelm. This is where the real problem lies. The overwhelm. The system is in overwhelm. The escape from feelings. The escape from fragility of being human.

Does this conflict belong to Jewish Israelis as a collective?

...and what about a change in regime – coming back to my earlier introductory section on this question:

"Every social order creates those character forms which it needs for its own preservation..."
(Wilhelm Reich, 1933/1970, p. 13)

"The character structure ... is the crystallization of the sociological process of a given epoch".
(Wilhelm Reich, 1933/1970, p. 11)

The above quotes come from Reich's seminal book, *"The Mass Psychology of Fascism"* published in Germany in 1933, the year Hitler came to power. Reich, a psychoanalyst and Marxist, wrote it as an

immediate response to the question of why large segments of the German population had willingly embraced fascism. Reich argues that it is not *just* the social, economic or political nor is it *just* the psychological that explains a mass phenomenon like fascism. These factors inter-relate. In his view, there is a direct link between the macro-level of society and the micro-level of the collective psyche, through a feedback loop. Economic structures dictate political systems, which are then internalised by social institutions (such as the family) to 'mass-produce' a specific character style that props up the existing social order. In this way, an authoritarian patriarchal society will inevitably produce individuals with authoritarian, patriarchal character structures. In summary, the character structure of both the individual and society is shaped by the social, economic and ideological forces of that historical era.

While Reich primarily emphasises the top-down influence of society on individuals' psychology, I propose that state formation is not just a top-down process but an emergent one - a dynamic interaction between the collective psyche and the evolving character of the state itself. Or, to be provocative - leaders are unconsciously influenced to govern in the way we unconsciously want them to. The people shape the state and the state shapes the people. Clearly conscious forces - political, economic, social - are at work too. But the focus of this article is on the psychological and - specifically in this section - the unconscious processes at work that help to generate this bi-directional relationship. Writing about the Gulf War, the relational psychotherapist Michael Soth notes:

"A perspective which integrates personal and political... requires a change of attitude towards our leaders. Whether we have chosen them or not... they represent a collective tendency and national consciousness which we might not identify with, but which are part of our inner reality.... Both in the inner and outer development of the individual or global psyche our leaders can be seen as figures who... embody streams of collective consciousness (and unconsciousness!)" (Soth, 1992, p. 9).

Volkan's theory of large-group identity helps explain how unconscious dynamics operate within entire collectives. He argues that the relationship between charismatic leaders and their followers becomes reciprocal in times of threat or uncertainty. Under such conditions, shared traumas and historical memories become reactivated. Followers often look to leaders who can articulate emotions and anxieties that are difficult to express collectively. A leader may emerge who can express the group's underlying wishes, fears and identity, helping to restore coherence and contain collective anxiety.

Volkan's concept of chosen trauma has been briefly discussed earlier. This is a historical event, such as a catastrophe, that retains psychological significance across generations, and serves as a symbolic

lens through which present issues are understood. By organizing and symbolizing these psychological responses, the leader fulfils a function of bringing them into external reality by giving them social or political expression — often through its ideological framework. By creating such a framework, the leader transforms internal experience and unconscious processes into shared meanings and collective representation. This creates a psychic ‘fit’, between leaders and followers, reinforcing both the leader’s self-concept and the group’s evolving identity. This perspective demonstrates how leaders are manifestations of forces already active within the larger social group; symbolic figures who embody and express the collective psyche - giving form to both conscious values and unconscious dynamics within it.

I now look at the underlying workings of how the bi-directional nature of these relationships happen, to show how leaders function as objects for group identification and projection at a collective level.

I have already discussed how shared unconscious processes operate *between* the Israeli collective and the Palestinian collective. I now turn to look at how the collective relates psychologically to itself — by looking at how I believe some of these same processes also operate *within* the Israeli collective. One advantage to thinking about the Jewish Israeli collective as a ‘body’ is to help distinguish between conflicts experienced *within* the body-mind system, as opposed to those experienced *between* the body-mind and the ‘other’, (eg. between the Israelis and the Palestinians). Let us call the former, *intrapsychic conflicts* - to distinguish from the latter, *interpsychic conflicts*. We will now look at the *intrapsychic* conflicts in more detail - denoted by a constant feedback loop between the ‘body’ of people, and the ‘mind’ of its leaders - involving unconscious mechanisms of both projection and introjection. This framework further builds on Reich's analysis of individual-society dynamics.

My metaphor of the 'Jewish Israeli body' has been adopted to emphasise the inherent diversity and interconnectedness within the Jewish Israeli collective, akin to a biological organism composed of myriad systems and sub-systems, each with unique functions yet integral to the whole. Just as a psychobiological body must incorporate and manage aspects or parts that may be in conflict with each other, the Jewish Israeli body encompasses individuals and communities whose political ideologies and ethical values may be in stark opposition, both to each other and to those of the current leadership. However, I am suggesting that through a psychoanalytic lens, even conscious opposition remains part of, and aligned to, the same psychic system. By mechanisms like projection and identification, those resisting the system are still unconsciously participating in and reinforcing it. Thus, the 'Jewish Israeli body' does not function as a united body with uniform conscious intent,

but rather as a complex and conflicted mind-body system where conscious diversity coexists alongside powerful unconscious processes at the collective level.

First, let us look at the mechanism of projection. Within the Jewish Israeli body, the people (the 'body') may project unwanted (shadow) aspects of their collective experience – unconscious fears, desires, and unresolved conflicts - onto key figures in power (the 'mind'), who act as primary objects and embody those projections. Or the other way round – it is how their leaders deal with unwanted aspects of themselves, by projecting their own anxieties and ideologies onto the people (the 'body'), with the aim of perpetuating an identity that 'fits' and aligns with their role. If the people then 'manage' these projections by projecting them back into the leader or into third parties, it reinforces the original projection by creating a feedback loop between the Israeli leadership and the collective psyche.

Now, let us look at the similar mechanism of introjection. The state evolves not only through its leaders, but through the state itself – its structures, institutional power and symbols. So this time it is the state that functions as the primary object (the 'mind') for introjection by the people (the 'body'). Through this process, the people (the 'body') internalise the state's core values, ethos and norms, making them part of their own individual and collective psychic structure. In turn, this process shapes character, establishing a shared psychological framework that defines individual and group identity.

Both these unconscious mechanisms reveal a profound truth – that the Palestine-Israel conflict endures not only through political decisions at the top, but through a co-constructed psychology where the people take on the state's posture. The Jewish Israeli's collective trauma creates the necessary conditions for projection and introjection - it acts as a trauma-driven defence. The people are unconsciously identifying with their leader / state as a defence against past and present feelings of helplessness from trauma. The personal becomes the political and vice versa, as boundaries begin to blur.

A specific defensive form of introjection is described by Sándor Ferenczi's in his theory on '*Identification with the Aggressor*' (1932/1949) and often arises as a survival-oriented response to trauma and the sense of existential threat that accompanies it. It involves a deep psychic shift by the victim introjecting the aggressor's stance - their values, attitudes, beliefs, affects, behavioural modes etc – as a means of regaining a sense of power and control. In fact, it often reverses the power dynamics.

As victims of historical trauma and ongoing perceived threats, we can see why the Jewish Israeli collective may unconsciously identify with the 'aggressor' posture of the state. In Jay Frankel's work, *'Narcissistic dynamics of submission'* (2022), he extends Ferenczi's concept to the socio-political realm. In a similar psychoanalytic process to projective identification, his theory of large group identification explains why people identify with the state when it often means sacrificing their own autonomy and interests. Where there is an authoritarian leader, people will submit, not just out of fear but through a narcissistic identification and an 'emotional fusion', displaced from the original narcissistic wound, that binds them to their leader. Submission can be used by leaders to consolidate power. And it can be used by people to give them an illusion of control, and the escape from the fragility of being human.

"On the mass level, large groups of people can share fantasies of being superior: exempt from expectations to get along with others outside their special group or to treat them decently, and even invulnerable to dangers in the physical world". (Frankel, 2022, p. 389).

Whilst the above explains the unconscious psychic identifications through which the Jewish Israeli collective both reflects and is reflected by the state, Layton (2020), through her work on the *normative unconscious processes* offers an explanation for why those identifications become socially embedded and enduring. Layton argues that social norms become emotionally invested with desires for belonging, recognition, security and identity - binding individuals to the collective narratives through which those needs are met. As examples, within the Jewish Israeli society, narratives of survival, solidarity and self-defence may carry meanings that extend beyond their conscious political content. Under such conditions, questioning aspects of the conflict narrative may be experienced not simply as political disagreement, but as a threat to belonging itself. The resulting reluctance to challenge prevailing assumptions need not involve conscious denial - rather, it may reflect an unconscious attachment to the identities and forms of recognition those narratives hold.

So even where some members of the Jewish-Israeli collective may recognise and acknowledge their position as implicated subjects, an underlying attachment to collective identity makes it difficult to step outside of the dominant narrative. Over time, what cannot be thought becomes what cannot be acted against. This is how psychological conformity stabilises political reality.

In summary, I believe there are unconscious forces responsible for the continuation of the conflict. These unconscious forces - where the collective psyche has identified with the state ideology - interact with a wide range of conscious political narratives and actions. The legacy of historical collective trauma in Israel further intensifies these unconscious dynamics, which feed in to the existential realities of daily life.

The psychic character of the Jewish Israeli collective extends from the individual, to the family, and into society and the state. Thus, the individual, the family, society, the state, *as well as* the history, politics and religion belong to the psychological birth of Israel.

Am I guilty of ...?

“Psychically unbearable events call in to play powerful defences whose aim is to protect us from perceived danger. racist modes of thinking constitute the most readily available constellation of such defences”. (Fakhry Davids 2002, p. 361).

Indeed, for me, the last two years have been a psychically unbearable event. How to hold it awareness and what to do with the nagging pain of it? I want to acknowledge the inevitable trap of projecting my uncertainties and anxieties into the Jewish Israeli body. Am I guilty of trying to pathologize them – of turning what is an incredibly complex situation in Palestine-Israel, into an attack on the Jewish Israeli collective for the current apocalyptic crisis? As a partial defence against ‘feeling’?

Am I guilty of ethnocentrism? I am certainly guilty of applying Western ideology. Because Western psychology comes from Western ideology, with its biases, limitations and implicit ideological assumptions. What, then, am I failing to see because I am looking through a Western psychological lens?

Am I guilty of erasure of the Palestinian people, by focussing solely on one half of the conflict? I hope not. I can see them, hear them and feel their soul through my writing, I hope you can too.

Am I guilty of racism by applying a macro-lens of over-psychologising? I say in the introduction, *“A psychology that is woven into the fabric of the socio-political sphere...”* But what is left of ‘psychology’ when stripped away from the socio-political? Indeed, the socio-political is not simply something that psychology occasionally encounters. As Mindell (1996) argues, the relationship between the individual and the wider world is already present within individual psychological experience through the ‘world channel’. This raises the question - can there be a distinction between the inner/psychological and the outer/political? Can there be such a thing as a politically neutral psychological space? Sheehi & Sheehi (2022) would argue not—that there is no such thing as a neutral psyche devoid of the political. I would be failing to own my ideological position while retaining *“the power to name the psychology of another”* (Sheehi & Sheehi, 2022). This, they would argue, is ‘psychoanalytic innocence’: a denial of the socio-political conditions and power dynamics within which my analysis takes place.

Am I guilty of racism? I want to acknowledge my own uncertainty and ambiguity in referring to the Jewish Israeli collective as a collective body throughout this essay. Could my language be carrying implicit biases? Could I have done it differently? I am aware of the extreme sensitivity of the subject matter and of my ethical responsibility in this framing. Hard as it might be at times, I have to remind myself, *“these are real people”*. Am I running the risk of making generalisations and oversimplifications? And is this not one step towards the binary world of toxic ‘othering’ that I have been describing?

And now the chronic shame – my shame of being judged. For being racist. For being ethno-centric. For being a white supremacist. Is this section - and this dilemma - all about warding off a rupture with my ideal good self? Making myself the admirable one, the one who can do no wrong?

My positionality

The Jewish Israeli body is in overwhelm. The Palestinian body is in overwhelm. I am in overwhelm. Through the writing, I am increasingly experiencing overwhelm. As the situation continues to intensify, I have been feeling more and more out of my depth. Overwhelm is a survival resource. In its own way, it is trying to keep me safe, as it is trying to keep the people of Israel and Palestine safe. There may have been a time when life was not safe, when it was not safe to trust life. When the body took care of things, knowing what it needed to do. That was then and this is now. And now, as then, the body knows what it needs to do. As the body repeats itself, so history repeats itself. It’s an uncertain world out there. As Giddens says, can we trust that the world is what it appears to be? As a state wants certainty, as a society wants certainty, I too want certainty. I want to know how this conflict will end, or if it will end. I want to know how my article will be received, or if it will be received. At times I want to stop. And yet I keep going. In some ways, the writing gives me some daily structure and routine in my life amidst a chaotic and uncertain world. Some apparent ontological security. When I ask myself, *what am I doing here?* The answer that comes is *‘here I find myself’*. It has given me a sense of purpose; a ‘security-of being’.

Sometimes as I approach the field, I find myself standing on the edge, sensing only the intensity of polarisation – the extremeness. Yes, that is what I can feel - the intensity and the extremeness. This is all I can feel. Not the pain of those suffering and being destroyed by what is happening.

And then the see-saw once again lurches up and overwhelm floods my system. I lose my objectivity. I can’t think straight. Thoughts of *“I can’t do this...”*

At other times I find myself looking in with an external analytic gaze. Unnervingly, I wonder if this is the colonial gaze of security and detachment. Am I dissociating from my own chronic shame? The

shame of social privilege? Am I distancing myself emotionally? So as not to feel the ethical injustices evoked – here and elsewhere. My inner conflicts. Until now I had chosen not to see them. In an attempt to protect my complicit self, am I denying my own shame by off-loading it onto the Jewish Israeli collective?

I consider my position. I started off by assuming I was writing this from third person position. But am I? How can I be in 'third' when one minute I am in overwhelm, and the next, dissociated?

Then I realise. I think I'm 'outside' but I'm actually 'inside' – my internal chaos tells me this. I am mixing up being in 'third' with a neutral, rational witnessing position. But of course, objective neutrality is an impossibility, here. My positionality has to be suffused with my Western privileged mentality. It's hard to witness my own inherent bias.

What would it mean to enter the third differently – to hold the tension between subjectivity and objectivity? Can I orient more toward the 'Moral Third' (Benjamin)? Benjamin would not describe the intersubjective third as a neutral vantage point that brings the comfort of certainty, but as a relational space, of ethical uncertainty. Can I include myself, and my role in the dynamic whilst acknowledging my accountability for the society I belong to? Can I seek to create a psychic space where I can stay in third, and tolerate the discomfort of being implicated? Yes, *I am an implicated subject* (Rothberg) through my embeddedness within the 'dominant order'. I must acknowledge my position as a member of a society that has caused the harming and collective trauma of racial and colonial domination. My identity is enmeshed in the psychic matrix of whiteness (Benjamin 2024). This is not a position I can step outside of. I am shaped by the structural demands of my culture.

Final thoughts – the personal, the political, the psychological...

But no conclusion because there is no conclusion. When I tell people I am writing an article about the Palestine-Israel conflict, their first reaction is often to ask something like, "*Oh – so have you found a solution?*"

I have not found a solution - because there is no solution. But how tempting it is to try to find one. I begin the task of digging up the split-off parts on both sides of this conflict, only to find my own split-off parts.

Just as this conflict resists resolution, so too do I find myself being dragged into a kind of psychic vortex when I notice my own response to the idea of resolution. Veering between not-knowing and grasping on to some hard facts to conclude with, I notice the pull into binary thinking. I become aware of enacting the very psychological processes I have been describing.

By positioning myself within this intense relational field between two polarised subjectivities that fail to recognise the other's subjective experience, how can I find my own subjective experience? I move from third into fourth position. From this helicopter position, I attempt to witness what is happening to me when I try to hold and contain the third. This is what I witness... I witness my overwhelm. I witness how it takes me over. I witness the reactivation of my own past trauma. But is it my trauma? Or is it the force-field created by an unregulated polarity between the Israelis and the Palestinians? How can I make that distinction? As I stand outside it (in 'fourth'), I see how I am in relationship with it. The force-field is changing me as I encounter it.

Yes, my overwhelm makes sense now. Something is getting *inside* me. Like a psychic intrusion My unintegrated personal trauma reverberates with a far vaster field of collective trauma histories and disavowed colonial violence. Shattering everything. Shattering any chance of a shared third reality. The space for recognition has been actively destroyed.

The question comes again, "*what am I doing here?*", it all starts to make sense. I remind myself what happened on receiving some preliminary feedback from my first draft – that is, to bring in more of my positionality. My immediate, response was defensive: "*But I have!*" Surely my readers should already 'know' me. Surely my perspective is the unspoken default position from which the world is viewed with assumed neutrality? It was only then that I realised the unconscious assumption behind my reaction: "*I am the sort of person who has the 'right' to write about this conflict*". My Western privileged mentality has remained invisible to itself until confronted (in this case, by feedback). I begin to recognise this as a form of entitlement – an entitlement embedded within my very identity.

Of course. I have been enacting the very drama I am writing about – a claim to territory - predicated on an entitled sense of authority. Not physical territory, but narrative territory. I have assumed the authority to claim space in what could be seen as disputed territory. I did not question my right to do so. I am part of the same system.

As I re-read my words, "*... in attempting to analyse the Jewish Israeli body*", I become aware I have made them into an object of analysis. I guess this is not surprising. But perhaps the real question is, "*have I been relating to them as separate and real, distinct from myself?*" I assumed I could 'know them' without sufficiently encountering them as real people. Real people with their own subjectivity. Have I even asked myself, "*what is it like to be them?*"? Just as has the Jewish Israeli body even asked, "*what is it like to be them?*"? In both cases, subjectivity survives being understood; subjectivity survives the 'attacks'. Reality prevails.

I shift positions from analysing an object to participating as subject. I become part of the psychological field I am writing about.

The story of The Psychological Birth of Israel is an object of my creation. Can I exist independently of it? Can it exist independently of me? Can it resist me by 'surviving' outside me... out there in the shared world? Now it has to be encountered... in ways I cannot control. I have to let it go.

This is a story that can never fully capture the reality it seeks to understand. *There is a reality beyond the story.* I allow the trauma of a vast collective field to flow through me. I am both holding a third space and being held by it. This is not a space to seek answers, but a space for staying in relationship with that which I cannot fully know. A space for recognising complexity. The story of the psychological birth of Israel is complex. And incomplete. So too, perhaps, is my understanding of it. Something stirs within me. Perhaps it is the grief of something unborn, or yet to be born. I now leave the space and I leave it open.

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