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Weizmann and Ben-Gurion, can now be meaningfully enhanced. What we promised ourselves and others when we painfully needed outside support, we can now further internalize; we can expand the promise and interweave it with the best of our civilization, to serve as a banner of Jewish solidarity and international fraternity. The aspects of bitterness and suspiciousness of the old Zionism can now be replaced by more optimistic and universal value-oriented Jewish nationalism.

Marred in different ways, both the Jewish life of Israel and the American diaspora can crucially benefit from this redefined Zionism. The modern, avowedly humanistic Zionism can bridge the gap and safeguard the shared Jewish future of our communities. †

## 🌿 Endthoughts 🌿

### The therapization of america

Naomi Rosenblatt

To be born and raised in Israel, as I was, means to have one's character forged in a country dealing with tough realities. You are taught to deal with life as it is and, hence, the expression *ein breira* (there is no choice).

It is not a pessimistic response—rather it is realistic and stoic. It is a mature acceptance of the realities of life. It is grown up. It translates into acceptance of the responsibility of serving in the army, concern for the security of the land and the people, and for absorbing waves of immigrants into the life of the community. It assumes that one's wants, needs and comfort will be set aside in favor of the welfare of others; higher priorities.

I was also brought up with the consciousness that there was such a thing as *tsav hash'a* (the demand of the hour). One is expected to respond to the crisis at hand, and the needs of others must be considered before one's own.

Hiking through the countryside in the rain or shine was another constant feature of my Israeli upbringing. Why does hiking, so simple an activity, contribute to

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character building? There is the mountain. You want to climb it. The mountain does not move, nor does it meet you halfway. It's up to you to prevail over it and scale its heights.

Having come to this country at a young age, it took me some time to identify those aspects of life in my adopted country that kept bothering me. More than that, they were mostly concerns that pertain to the young on whose shoulders the future rests.

I shall name a few of the "mantras" of our contemporary culture that will clarify what I mean, and then try to explain my responses to them:

#### a) "I feel comfortable" or "I don't feel comfortable."

"Go call your grandmother."

"I'm not comfortable calling her."

"Well, I don't care if you feel comfortable or not, go call your grandmother!"

It seems that the criterion by which we measure our actions has become the level of comfort we feel while making our choices. The fact that grandma has been alone all week and dying for a phone call is not the priority.

#### b) Feeling good.

If feeling comfortable at all times is my goal, it's derivative is "feeling good." I feel justified in buying, indulging, acting in a particular way, because if I don't "feel good, "I might—heaven forbid—feel deprived. I separate from close relationships, don't take the extra bit of effort, the extra step, because it all requires too much effort—and that does not lead to gratification.

The need to "feel comfortable," to "feel good," lest one not be gratified has produced the "me generation."

#### c) "It's his problem, it's not my problem."

Much of this attitude is designed to evade conflicts, concerns, or guilt that might lead us to feeling uncomfortable or feeling bad about ourselves. We consciously separate ourselves from the other person's concerns and conflicts. As I see it, emphasizing the problem as solely of concern to another results in our own isolation. At times, it can weaken our sense of commitment to a friend, a spouse, a child. What kind of closeness, of commitment, has one achieved if one does not extend one's concern to the other?

Much of the time nowadays, we are tired and afflicted with a contemporary disease called being "stressed out." We can't be bothered. Again and again, our responses

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start with us and end with us, all of which lead to a more and more isolated, self-absorbed self.

d) "Let it all hang out."

The goal here is to pour out what upsets me, bothers me, and angers me. Don't hold back any feelings, regardless of the wounds one inflicts on a parent or a spouse. Why? The rationale is that by pouring out the venom and the rage, one will feel better. At that point, one doesn't take the other person's feelings into consideration. After all, how he feels is their problem, not one's own.

Now, I am a psychotherapist, and what I have commented on sounds contrary to what I practice in my office. Not so. The patient comes to me bewildered, insecure, unsure about personal relationships. Feelings of guilt or rage have produced a kind of paralysis, and make it impossible to deal with life in a constructive manner.

My priority, in the context of the therapy room, is to build a therapeutic alliance with my patient that stresses total acceptance and a willingness to listen attentively and non-judgmentally. I encourage the patient to let all feelings and emotions pour out. The length of the session, the appointed day, and fee are all decided on in advance.

Unfortunately, however, it is this aspect of the therapy room that has been taken out of context and has seeped into the popular culture and talk shows. Political rhetoric is impacted, too, as in the case of Don Imus' unrestrained, undisciplined humor where he "lets it all hang out."

The talk show culture is the ultimate caricature of this aspect of our society which concerns me. All is confessed within a short time, including incest and adultery. Feelings are blurted out without self-restraint or moral responsibility. Quick touchy-feely confessions are followed by the requisite embrace, which in turn promises all concerned that they will live happily ever after.

What a shallow optimism!

The "me generation" is locked into the narrow confines of self-absorption and personal ambition. What is appropriate in the therapy room is, when taken out of context, harmful to the character of the individual and to that of society.

What can we do about it? One answer, and only one of many, is to go back to our biblical history, to respected leaders who are not merely celebrities, but true heroes and role models. Why? Because so many of their decisions were taken with the welfare of their communities and people foremost in their minds and hearts.

When all is said and done, Hillel summed it up elegantly and succinctly:

"If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am *only* for myself, what kind of person am I? And if not now, when?"

Little did he know how relevant his statement is for us today in 1996.

## L'chaim

Giti Bendheim

I have just returned from a wonderful *l'chaim* celebration—one of the most meaningful in my life. This toast marked the end of a dear friend's cycle of chemotherapy, and the celebrants were a group of women who had come together, week after week, to learn Torah as an adjunct to her cure.

When our beloved friend Rafaela\* was diagnosed with ovarian cancer this past spring, each of us experienced the shocking news as a body blow. Casting about for some way to deal with the reality, we hit upon an idea that would both express our solidarity with Rafaela at a time when many choose isolation, and that would allow Rafaela to feel that her illness could be a positive force for spirituality and growth. A group of us, all acquaintances of Rafaela, decided to learn together. We chose *Pirkei Avot*, a book with which we were all somewhat familiar, because it offered philosophical formulations that might help us to grapple, in a new and deeper way, with the serious questions that were on our collective mind.

We were interested in learning together as one of the many ways in which, we reasoned, committed Jewish people ought to deal with illness. Of course, there were doctors and medicine, there were prayers, there was charity, there was chicken soup. We believed in all of that. But there had to be some way that we could express our devotion through the text that defined us, by presenting each letter, each word, as testimony to God of the strength of our shared commitment, the steeliness of our joint resolve. We were determined to find in our learning a way to help make Rafaela better—a way so strong and sure that it would stop her disease in its tracks, shrink it and blow it away.

And so we began to learn with earnestness and passion. Each week we would meet at someone else's home, sometimes even without Rafaela on the days when

(continued, p. 8)

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\*Rafaela is not her real name.