“Chosen Trauma”
and a Widely Shared Sense of Jewish Identity and History

You are not obliged to complete the work,
but neither are you free to evade it. (Avoth 2: 17)
—Rabbi Tarfon of Lydda and Yavneh

INTRODUCTION: THE DIALECTIC OF THEORY AND CASE STUDY

The history of science—including psychohistory as a science—consists of the dialectic and constant tension between (1) comprehensive explanatory theories and taxonomies, on the one hand, and (2) intensive case studies, comparison of cases, and (where appropriate) experiment, on the other hand. In his celebrated essay, “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” Isaiah Berlin (1957), following Archilochus, distinguished between thinkers who are great generalizers (the hedgehog, “who knows one big thing”) and the particularizers (the fox, “who knows many little things”). Science—indeed all thought—flourishes in the interplay between these two modes of thought.

This paper explores certain aspects of Jewish identity by focusing on a widely shared (though certainly not universal) perception and experience of time and history among Jews. It builds on my earlier studies of Judaism, Jewish history, and Jewish identity (Stein 1975, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1983, 1984, 1994, 1995, 2006, 2009), which I shall not repeat here. The present essay presents the pioneering model of “chosen trauma,” “chosen glory,” and related concepts, formulated over the past two decades by Vamik Volkan, and explores Jewish history and identity as a kind of historical “test case” for this model. Volkan’s concepts are used to help explain the role of the memory of calamity, and the specific narra-
tive forms that memory takes, in Jewish identity. I shall first present Volkan’s model in detail, mostly in Volkan’s own words, and then explore its dovetailing or “fit” with a widely held Jewish sense of history.

I emphasize from the outset that the account that follows does not apply to all Jews, living and deceased, but rather to the continuity of a pattern that has long been widely shared among Jews (Gonen 1975, 2005; Falk 1996, 2004; Rappoport 1999). It is a cultural “master narrative,” but not an exclusive one. Even in our time of tribal and religious retrenchment and regression, moments of transcendence are still possible.

Here, I explore a widely shared sense of Jewish identity and history as refracted through the “lens” of Vamik Volkan's concept of “chosen trauma” and related concepts. After delineating Volkan’s model, I then describe, with the help of Avner Falk and Jay Gonen, some of the core dimensions of Jewish identity and experience of time, including the perception, and for many the experience, of time in Jewish history as an unbroken line of cataclysms, and the condensation of all Jewish enemies since the Exodus from Egypt, into the unbroken lineage of Amalek. I shall argue that for many Jews, national-ethnic-religious historical traumas, in addition to being individually memorialized, some into “chosen traumas,” are also fused or condensed into a unitary vision of all Jewish history. I then turn to speculate on links between widespread experiences in Jewish childhoods and the belief in the continuity of catastrophe, through the intertwining of (1) the intergenerational transmission of trauma and (2) long-standing family violence in patriarchal Jewish families over the centuries.

The data sources for this essay are two-fold: (1) scholarly writings and published work from the public domain, both print and Internet; and (2) my own experiences and recollections as an American Jew born in western Pennsylvania in 1946. In the latter case, the paper is autoethnography.

On this autobiographical note I must add that I have been trying to “get it right” with respect to Jewish identity and history for forty years. At best I have been understanding more of the puzzle, piece by piece. I also know that a large part of the slow process has been my own resistance. Throughout this time, I have also learned much from others—despite myself. In the present paper I have come to understandings of which I was emotionally incapable forty years ago.

**THE MODEL OF VAMIK VOLKAN**

I begin by quoting Volkan (2005) at length to establish the concepts: first “chosen glory” and then “chosen trauma” and related ideas. Then I apply and examine them with respect to Jewish identity.
[All] large groups have ritualistic recollections of events and heroes whose mental representations include a shared feeling of success and triumph among large group members. Such events and persons appearing in them are heavily mythologized over time, and these mental representations become large-group markers called chosen glories. Chosen glories are passed on to succeeding generations through transgenerational transmissions made in parent/teacher-child interactions and through participation in ritualistic ceremonies recalling past successful events.

Understanding chosen trauma—the mental representation of an event that has caused a large group to face drastic losses, feel helpless and victimized by another group, and share a humiliating injury—is key to discerning the process of transgenerational transmission of past historical events (Volkan, 1999; Volkan and Itzkowitz, 1994). .... [L]ike an individual, a large group can be said to make unconscious “choices.” Thus the term “chosen trauma” accurately reflects a large group’s unconscious “choice” to add a past generation’s mental representation of a shared event to its own identity. While large groups may have experienced any number of traumas in their history, only certain ones remain alive over many years—indeed, often over a period of centuries. The chosen trauma makes thousands and millions of people designated—“chosen”—to be linked together through their shared mental representation of that trauma. A chosen trauma reflects the traumatized past generation’s incapacity for or difficulty with mourning losses connected to the shared traumatic event as well as its failure to reverse the injury to the group’s self-esteem (“narcissistic injury”) and humiliation inflicted by another large group, usually a geographical neighbor.

...These individuals’ injured self- and internalized object-images connected to the mental representations of the shared massive traumatic event will be “deposited” into the developing self-representations of their children as if these children will be able to mourn the loss or reverse the humiliation and repair the injured images.

...[Transgenerational transmission of chosen trauma] is the end result of mostly unconscious psychological processes by which children’s core identities are flooded with and therefore influenced by the injured self- and internalized object-images and associated affects that rightfully belong to the original victims, caregivers or parents. Representation of the drastic event is an integral part of all such deposited images, “piggybacking,” so to speak, on the traumatized self- and object-images of the first-generation victim. No transmission of the event’s representation can take place unless it is associated with deposited self- and object-images, because these are the only elements by which representations can be passed from a person of one generation to a person of another by assigning duties—specific tasks of
reparation, reversal of helplessness, etc.—to the next generation, mostly unconsciously. Thus people do not transmit to their progeny their “memories” of historical experience, for memory can belong only to the survivor of trauma and cannot be transmitted; survivors can only transmit aspects of themselves that contain a representation of history. It is for this reason that the effects of chosen trauma are so profound; the representation of history in the chosen trauma is intimately bound up with the very foundations of each group member’s identity as an individual human being. ...

Chosen traumas are much stronger ethnic or large-group markers than chosen glories—the mental representations of past shared successful events that lift up the large group’s self-esteem—because the psychological processes they initiate are much more profound. Whereas chosen glories merely raise the self-esteem of group members, transgenerational transmission of chosen traumas provoke complicated tasks of mourning and/or reversing humiliation; since all are carriers of the unconscious psychological processes of past generations, chosen traumas bind group members together more powerfully. Chosen traumas, like chosen glories, are often ritualistically recalled at the anniversary of the original event, when the members of the large group share a strong sense of group cohesion and belongingness. (2005)

Finally, in defining the concept of “chosen trauma,” Volkan writes that

As injured self- and internalized object-images pass from generation to generation, the chosen trauma they carry assumes new functions, new tasks. The historical truth about the event is no longer of psychological moment for the large group; what is important is the sense of being linked together by the shared chosen trauma, which usually becomes highly mythologized. (2005)

Implicitly, Volkan here makes a crucial distinction between what Donald Spence (1982) called “historical truth” and “narrative truth,” that is, between what actually happened and the subsequent elaborations, amplifications, omissions, distortions, condensations, and the like. That is, the “chosen trauma” narrative consists of the way the group remembered and needed history to have happened (see Stein 1983). The process is less a matter of retrospective falsification, as it is a matter of retrospective mythologization. As such, I would add, at least theoretically, the “chosen trauma” need not in fact have happened at all: Myth becomes, even replaces (“rewrites”), history. At the collective level there is a “change of function” (Hartmann 1958), and the representation takes on a life of its own.

Of course, most likely “something” happened. There is in all likelihood a historical grain of truth in the “narrative truth” of “chosen trauma,” but the perception, experience, and recollection of historical
reality undergoes what Heinz Hartmann (1958) called a "change of function." That is, a "behavior form which originated in a certain realm of life may, in the course of development, appear in an entirely different realm and role" (1958: 26). The way history is used differs from the way history happened. Likewise, via what Volkan calls "time collapse," the past event (or series of emotionally similar events) fuses with the present; the past is experienced as if it were occurring now. Contemporary traumatic events and leaders reactivate ancient "chosen traumas" and attempt to make reparation for the past in the present.

Ever since introducing the paired concepts of "chosen glory" and "chosen trauma" in 1991 (Volkan 1991), Vamik Volkan has widely used them with considerable descriptive, evocative, interpretive, and explanatory power (1997, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006a &b, 2010; Volkan, Ast, and Greer, 2002). He has applied them to a wide array of historical and cross-cultural situations and events. Over and again Volkan makes the essential point that whatever "chosen glory" and "chosen trauma" may possess as "historical truth" (Spence 1982)—that is, that events really happened exactly that way—, they are mythologized, elaborated, amplified and appended into "narrative truth" (Spence 1982), that is, representations, which in turn come to be experienced as if they were "historical truth," that is, real.

According to Volkan, "chosen glory" and "chosen trauma" are both properties of group psychology. "Chosen glory" and "chosen trauma" have opposing emotional valencies. "Chosen glory" feels "good," while "chosen trauma" feels "bad." "Chosen glory" is linked to libidinal drive derivatives, while "chosen trauma" is linked to aggressive drive derivatives. Both are transgenerationally transmitted and are often experienced through "time collapse," that is, as fusing past with present, as if a remote event were occurring now.

"CHosen Trauma," Eternal Recurrence, and the Inability to Mourn

Avner Falk (2004) locates the Jewish sense of historical continuity in the inability to mourn. He argues about "how difficult it has been for the Jews to mourn their historical losses and how their inability to mourn has complicated their history and has caused additional historical tragedy" (2004: 133). Specifically,

The Jews have been unable to mourn their great historical losses: the losses of land, independence, holy city, temple, their exiles, expulsions, humiliations and persecutions, and the millions of their people massacred and murdered.
The collective mourning process has been too painful. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., the Jews unknowingly closed themselves up inside a kind of ahistorical bubble and refused to write their chronological history. Instead, they produced a vast body of historical legends and religious fantasies (Ginzburg 1909-1938). ...

To my mind, the inability to mourn is a key psychological factor in the [current] Arab-Israeli conflict [emphasis in original]. The two parties to our tragic conflict have not been able to resign themselves to their historical losses. Some Israeli Jews [and many in the Diaspora as well] still wish to rebuild the Third Temple of Yahweh on the site of the mosque of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and restore the glories of the Kingdom of Solomon. (2004: 134-135).

Falk links Jewish/Israeli patterns with those of other groups.

While on the individual level, partial or incomplete mourning is common, on the collective level it is almost universal. Most nations, rather than mourn their collective losses, immortalize them through memorial days, monuments, national cemeteries, sacred battlefields, and other instruments of commemoration. The national past is idealized and glorified. In the case of the Jews, this is obvious in the perennial longing to resettle the Land of Israel and to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem, last destroyed in 70 C.E. In Israel, it comes through in the Holocaust memorial projects, fallen soldiers' remembrance days, and the so-called mifaley hantsakhah (eternalization projects)—the Israeli monuments, physical, archival, and literary, commemorating those who were killed in the Shoah [Holocaust] or in Israeli wars. (2004: 131)

The symbolism of the Temple can be seen and felt both in what all it meant and what all was lost when it was destroyed for a second time. In the following passage, Jessica Stern (2003) sheds much light on the confluence of symbolism of the Hebrew Temples:

The Jews' despair upon losing their Temple a second time was recorded by contemporary observers. The third century Midrash Tanhumah, a collection of rabbinical interpretations of the Torah, described the Temple Mount as the world's foundation. "Just as the navel is found at the center of a human being, so the land of Israel is found at the center of the world. Jerusalem is at the center of the land of Israel, and the Temple is at the center of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies is at the center of the Temple, the Ark [of the Covenant] is at the center of the Holy of Holies, and the Foundation Stone is in front of the Ark, which is the point of the Foundation of the world. (2003: 88-89).

Clearly, the world itself, together with one's life-giving attachment to it, was at stake in the Temple. To lose the Temple was to lose one's world,
and with it, one's very life. In the ancient history of the Jewish people, the Exodus under Moses from centuries of slavery in Egypt, the conquest of Canaan by Joshua, and the building of the two Holy Temples, constitute fundamental "chosen glories," that is those representations of historical events of which Jews are most proud. The three Zionides span ancient and modern times: from Egypt, from Babylon, and the phoenix of the State of Israel from the ashes of the Holocaust. With respect to the two temples, they are likewise at the center of the most abiding "chosen trauma," what is often spoken of as "the saddest day in Jewish history": the destruction took place in 586 B.C.E./B.C. at the hands of the Babylonians, and in 70 C.E./A.D. at the hands of the Romans.

Throughout the Jewish liturgy and the liturgical year there are countless references to the yearning for the rebuilding and restoration of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. This wish forms part of daily prayers. The affirmation, "Next Year in Jerusalem," is the closing hope in the Passover Seder—the meal commemorating slavery in and triumphant Exodus from Egypt.

**TISHA B’AV**

If Tisha B’Av, the 9th day of the month of Av, the date of the destruction of both temples, is the central "chosen trauma" of the Jewish people, it is also far more than that. For Tisha B’Av is not only the confluence of two events widely separated in time, but of many more. A long series of tragedies throughout Jewish history through the present is said to have occurred precisely on Tisha B’Av or around it.

For example, the date marks the return of the twelve scouts sent by Moses to assess the condition of the land of Canaan, and the (false) report by ten of them that it would be impossible to take. For this G-d punished them by forbidding that generation from entering Canaan. G-d decreed that this would be a day of woe. The date also marks the defeat of the futile Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans in 135 C.E./A.D. Associated with Tisha B’Av or near it is the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290 C.E./A.D.; the Alhambra Decree of 1492, expelling Jews from Spain; the beginning of the mass deportation of Jews to the Treblinka death camp from the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust; and the Second Lebanon War occurred in the three weeks prior to Tisha B’Av in 2006 (Tisha B’Av 2012a&b).

Tisha B’Av, while centering around the specific "chosen traumas" of the destruction of the two Temples, condenses (as in a dream) Jewish tragic history into a continuum through the present. What is more, in
the ritual observance of the Ninth of Av, one is admonished to read the Book of Lamentations (in the Hebrew Bible) as if he or she had personally been exiled from Jerusalem, and is not merely remembering it through liturgy, exemplifying two different “time collapses” into a single horrific collage. The sense of exile (Galut) remains ever-present.

Just as during the ritual of the Passover Seder in the reading of the Haggadah, Jews are admonished to live as if they themselves had been redeemed and participated in the Exodus from Egypt ([a “chosen glory”], and thus are not merely remembering that this was experienced by their remote ancestors), likewise during the recitation of the Book of Lamentations on the night of Tisha B’Av, Jews are commanded to live as if they themselves had been expelled from Jerusalem by the Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar, and were captive in Babylonia, longing return to Zion (and [as a “chosen trauma”] thus are not remembering what their ancestors experienced).

Just as the Ninth of Av condenses a long stream of cataclysms, likewise does the destruction of the two Holy Temples condense with many succeeding disasters that befell the Jewish people. Thus, for many Jews “time collapse,” and the potential for future reversal (undoing) of historic trauma and loss, includes not only specific, individual events, but also virtually the entire Jewish experience of loss (see Falk 1996). For example, the expulsion of Jews from many European countries during the Medieval period flows into this stream. Likewise, the Ruthenian-Ukrainian-Cossack uprising in 1648 led by Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, included the slaughter of thousands of Jews, many of who had managed the large estates of Polish nobility. German National Socialism (1933-1945), Hitler, and the Holocaust, continue the endless stream in the mid-20th century. Most recently, the charismatic Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat became an embodiment of persecutory history.

**AMALEK**

There is more. There is yet another tributary to the great river of calamities that has befallen the Jews. It goes by the name Amalek, the archenemy and personification of persecution (Wieseltier 2003; Amelek 2010; “The Modern Amalek” 1948, “Amalek, Amalekites” 2012). Amalek is the putative founder/ancestor of the Amalekites, a nomadic tribe that attacked the Hebrews from the rear in the Sinai Desert on their journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. The Amalekites appear in the Biblical books of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel, and
Chronicles. Even after Samuel executed the Amalekite king Agag, the Amalekites did not entirely disappear. Even King David's sacred war of extermination against Amalek did not erase them. G-d's vow to blot out Amalek's memory proved an impossible task. G-d admonishes Jews to never forget what Amalek did to His people, and to destroy not only the Amalekites, but their oxen, sheep, camels, and donkeys—everything associated with them. Those who, by ruthlessness and cunning, attempted to annihilate the Hebrews were themselves to be annihilated.

Amalek appears and reappears throughout Jewish history. The Romans and then the Christian Crusades were Amalek. He appears as Haman, the wicked advisor to King Ahashuerus in the Book of Esther. He plotts to kill the Jew Mordechai and kill all the Jews of Persia. Amalek returns in 1648 as the ruthless Ruthene-Ukrainian-Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who led the successful revolt against Polish landed aristocracy and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in the process slaughtering thousands of Jews, many of who ran the estates for the Polish nobles. Later again, Amalek appears as Hitler, German National Socialism, the Holocaust, the British, in blocking Jews from entering Palestine, and most recently as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Note the linguistic change from Amalekites, who are a tribe, a people, to Amalek, an abstract principle, a personification, an It, a reification of all bad that has befallen the Jews since the Exodus from Egypt. Once again we encounter Volkan's principle of "time collapse." The Amalek principle and spectre is one of eternal recurrence, embodying the ineradicability of evil visited upon the Jewish people.

MASADA

Finally, let me place in the context of this discussion of "chosen trauma" and "time collapse," the mass suicide at the fortress Masada of Jewish rebels against the Roman army in 73 C.E./A.D. The tragic saga of Masada joins the confluence of streams of individual "chosen traumas" but is more emotionally complicated than others. Robert Alter long ago argued that the mass suicide of Jews at Masada has become mythologized into a glorification of martyrdom and death (Alter, "The Masada Complex," 1973). Likewise, Jay Gonen wrote of the "Masada Complex" that

In 73 A.D., Masada, the last stronghold of the great Jewish revolt against the Romans, fell. About 960 of its remaining defenders committed suicide rather than be captured alive by the Romans. The example of Masada has been glorified in Jewish history especially in modern Israel. After the Six Day War [1967] the national preoccupation with the Masada Complex
intensified considerably and by 1973 (prior to the Yom Kippur War) it reached a crescendo on the anniversary of the fall of Masada. . . . [I]n this shared fantasy, which involves a deterioration of the worship of heroics into the worship of death, reality becomes distorted by the works of such intra-psychic mechanisms as ego corruption as well as superego corruption. [Further,] the preoccupation with the Masada Complex led to the mingling of myth with realpolitik to the detriment of the latter. . . . the preoccupation with Masada is a defensive group-fantasy which attempts a denial of the trauma. Somehow in the Masada myth, defeat is turned into victory while self inflicted death represents an assertion of will to be enjoyed in eternal life after death. (1978: 254-255)

Mass suicide is turned into a defiant “last stand” that becomes associated with the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of April 1943. Put in Volkan’s framework, here “chosen trauma” is magically reversed into “chosen glory.”

Consider the following example of fairly recent Israeli symbol and ritual of Masada. I have a videotape of a concert of Gustav Mahler’s “Resurrection” Symphony, No. 2, performed by Zubin Mehta conducting the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra at night. The scene is an immense gathering out-of-doors. The year is 1988; the occasion is the gala concert celebration of the 40th anniversary of the birth of the State of Israel. The location is the foot of the fortress Masada, bathed in brilliant lights. Illumination of the mountain was synchronized with the music. Through the performance at Masada of Mahler’s symphony, Masada becomes a symbol of triumph over death, and immortality. Death is reversed into (re-)birth. (1989 Tel-Ad-Jerusalem Studios, #1227 Music Series. Kultur).

In sum, I have shown thus far that much of the widespread experience of Jewish history and identity dovetails well with Volkan’s model of “chosen trauma,” “chosen glory,” and “time collapse.” I have also shown how other dimensions of Jewish history and identity have a nightmarish quality akin to a “Dreamtime” in which there exists a continuous line of trauma, loss, and irreparable grief.

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE “WHY” OF JEWISH IDENTITY AND HISTORY: SOME POSSIBLE CHILDHOOD INFLUENCES ON HISTORIC REPRESENTATION AND MEMORY

I now turn from description to an attempt at explanation. In this section I explore somewhat speculatively, why so much of Jewish history and identity has taken the shape of time, memory, and traumatic reliving (Binion 1997, 2003 a&b) that I have just described. In this section I will attempt to link the experiences of many Jews in their families and communities of
origin with the widespread sense of time as a continuous line of persecution, not of an individual "chosen trauma," but of all historic time as cataclysmic. Here I explore the possibility that childhood and family experiences of many Jews feed into both investment in specific "chosen traumas" and in the sense of continuity of cataclysmic Jewish history.

Specifically, I seek to expand the important work of Jay Gonen (1975, 1978, 2005) and Avner Falk (1996, 2004). Gonen has argued that traumatic history, mythology, folklore, and the expectation of punishment from Yahweh are transmitted from generation to generation without the need to invoke childhood family experiences. Likewise, Falk has stressed the cumulative traumatic effect of repeated cataclysms (exclusion, persecutions, pogroms, exiles, genocide) on the Jews, and the concomitant inability to leave this history in the past, due to the inability to mourn. In this framework universal unconscious issues over separation, loss, oedipal conquest of the mother(land = Israel), and the like do not require the experience of specific mothers and fathers and other early caretakers. In what follows, I think that my approach complements theirs, adding, perhaps, an additional layer of significance and causality.

Permit me a theoretical aside. One must wonder about the psychological plausibility or fit of any religious, folklore, art, and other cultural symbolic-ritual forms. Children are not mechanically "stamped" with religion that they somehow internalize. And to say that culture causes culture is a tautology and reification (Spiro 1992). In a pioneering work, psychoanalytic anthropologist and psychoanalyst L. Bryce Boyer (1979) traced a causal link between childhood experiences of Mescalero and Chiricahua Apache, and their investment in Apache folklore.

If culture does not come from culture, where does it come from (cf. La Barre 1954, 1972)? I think that, from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the questions become: why would people emotionally invest in folklore and religious beings and practices if they did not at least in part echo or resonate with early experience with caregivers? Where does the emotional "valency" (if I may borrow from Wilfred Bion) come from? What early experiences, interacting with universal unconscious and developmental processes, potentiate emotional investment in specific cultural beliefs and practices (cf. La Barre 1972; deMause 1974)? To be sure, these experiences are transformed by unconscious affects, fantasies, wishes, and defenses into internalized object relations, Oedipal conflicts, and psychic structure. Culture (symbol and ritual systems of meaning and act) does not spring forth complete from itself (Spiro 1992), as in Botticelli's painting, "The Birth of Venus."
"Chosen Trauma"...Jewish Identity and History

With respect to Judaism, one might inquire of the early childhood family relationships that could have led to the duality of Yahweh (alternately compassionate and wrathful; Gonen 2005); the split between the violently destructive primordial female deity Lilith and the tender, comforting presence of the Shechinah (Stein 1978); and the centrality in Jewish theology and practice of the near-sacrifice of Isaac at the hand of his father Abraham obeying the test of faith from G-d (Stein 1977).

Consider that during the classical Biblical age, Hebrew prophets repeatedly inveighed against the sacrifice of children in the cults of Baal and Moloch. Despite G-d’s prohibition of human sacrifice after the trial of Abraham and Isaac, and despite the impassioned words of the great Hebrew prophets, child sacrifice persisted—presumably because parents wanted and needed to sacrifice their children, especially their firstborn, ostensibly to assure the fertility of the family. Moreover, the slaughter of the firstborn is displaced onto the Egyptians in the account of the ten plagues and the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt. Fast forward to the present: frequent rabbinic injunction against contemporary child abuse and spouse abuse has not been enough to prevent it. Until very recently, it has been a taboo subject.

BREAKING THE TABOO ON ACKNOWLEDGING FAMILY VIOLENCE

Since the 1990s there has emerged a burgeoning literature on physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial abuse, mostly by fathers/husbands in American Jewish families (Cassie 2008; Dehan and Levi 2009; Enger & Gardsbane 2005; Graetz 1998; Horsburgh 1995; Kaurman 2010; Rathner 2008; Spiegel 1999; Spitzer 1995; Twerski 1996). The journal Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility has published many articles addressing abuse in Jewish families. Those people who are writing and speaking out have courageously broken through the taboo of silence and the false insistence that ideal and value of shalom bayit/bayis, “peace of the home” (Reiss 2012), was always reality. The long-standing sacred virtue of family harmony was largely the wife’s/mother’s responsibility, and it was a source of shame (shanda) if she failed to achieve it. For centuries in the shtetl (Jewish village in eastern Europe) and ghetto, and even American Jewish communities, speaking out, or going to the rabbi or the police, mostly resulted in shunning of the entire family by the community. Family violence was a secret most people knew of but could not be spoken about (Rathner 2008).

Hitting children was common enough for there to be a widespread Yiddish-English aphorism and threat: “If you don’t behave, I’ll give you a
potch (a not necessarily gentle swat, hit) in the tuchas (buttocks)." Originally, of course, the saying was entirely in Yiddish. My own life is no exception. From my own childhood memory of cheder (Hebrew school) and stories other fellow students related to me in the 1950's, it was not unusual for a rabbi or teacher to hit or strike a student for misbehaving.

My childhood family experience attests to the hitting (far more than a single swat), mostly from my father, as well. He would often threaten—and carry out—the "potch in the tuchas," and not just one slight swat. He would occasionally threaten to use his waist belt to "give you a lickin'" (multiple strikes on the buttocks) if I were bad. There would be violent scenes at the lunch or dinner table, where my father would explode emotionally and throw dishes across the room toward the sink, where there they would shatter with a crash. On one terrifying occasion he literally "kicked my ass" with his feet with his shoes on, down the alley of my hometown, for failing to stand up to a bully schoolmate and fight. On another occasion he struck me backhand across the face, saying at the same time, "You're useless." When he was not explosive (or scathingly critical in words), we lived in fear that he might erupt.

On kinder occasions, he would tell me about his father, an observant, deeply religious, poor Rumanian Orthodox Jewish immigrant to Chicago. His father—a grandfather whom I never met, who died two years before I was born—was a city worker for Chicago. He would often come home drunk, having spent much of his paycheck on alcohol and gambling, and beat up his wife and children. My father said that this scenario was not uncommon in other immigrant Jewish families in the early 20th century. In short, the scholarly articles, books, and stories I was reading resonated with my own childhood experience. For all practical purposes, it was regarded as "normal," in the sense of "ordinary."

To physical brutality must be added open and subtle psychological and spiritual violence from parents, assaulting the worth and self-respect of the child or wife. Yiddish is full of sayings that attest to verbal scathing criticism, both of oneself and others. There is a widespread—and instantly recognized—story to the effect that a young boy comes home from school with a grade of 98 points out of 100 on his test paper. He gleefully shows it to his mother. She sullenly replies, "Who got the other two points?" The themes of guilt and shame induction, discrediting, degradation, and of never being good enough is patent.

In the 1950s and 1960s, rabbis' sermons from the pulpit in synagogue and temple were often filled with vivid, terrifying accounts of Nazi death camp scenes of SS men killing Jews—especially children and infants.
before their parents’ and siblings’ horrified eyes. I will never forget a Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur sermon in my childhood from a Conservative rabbi I greatly admired and who later Bar Mitzvahed me. In a booming, threatening voice he described how a concentration camp soldier would rip infants from their mothers’ arms and dash their skulls and brains against the cement walls. I can “remember”—better, relive—this sermon as if it were today.

VIOLENCE IN TRANSGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA

Today, is there a language to understand and attempt to explain what happened in this sermon: traumatized people, unable to contain, process, and mourn the trauma, are condemned to transmit it to the next generations, with an implicit or explicit mission to never forget or to avenge these unspeakable wrongs (Fromm 2012). Family violence becomes a casualty of “traumatic reliving” (Binion 2003) on a mass scale. In a cautionary note, M. Gerard Fromm writes that “The truly traumatic [consists of] that which cannot be contained by one generation, and necessarily, and largely unconsciously, plays itself out through the next generation. We are, therefore, not talking about ‘blaming the parents.’” (Fromm 2012: xx-xxi)

Undoubtedly at least some of the family violence can be seen as rooted in the intergenerational transmission of trauma (Volkan 1997; Brenner 2001; Fromm 2012) on the part of parents, grandparents, and community leaders who actually experienced the Holocaust, and wave upon wave, and generation upon generation, of earlier pogroms in Eastern Europe. All too familiar processes as identification with the aggressor, survivor syndrome, and the inability to mourn contribute to our understanding of why domestic abuse occurs in Jewish families today. In addition to there being individual “chosen traumas” in Jewish life, such as the destruction of the two Temples, there is the experience of wholesale “time collapse” in which centuries of traumas are condensed into a single unbroken line of catastrophe—e.g., from the destruction of the temples through and beyond the 20th century Holocaust.

AUTHORITARIAN PATRIARCHY AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

But this is not all. There is, I believe, a historically deeper, or at least parallel, “layer” of explanation of violence in Jewish families. To begin with the violence is symbolized and ritualized by the foundational Oedipal and counter-Oedipal paradigm of the Abraham-Isaac-G-d-ram story in
Genesis. Abraham was willing to kill and sacrifice his beloved son Isaac to obey the commandment from G-d. Only when he showed his willingness to do this, did G-d intervene and provide an animal to sacrifice in place of Abraham’s son. Animal sacrifice and male circumcision are the two core Jewish substitutes for human sacrifice. If we see the drama of the Akedah or Covenant between Abraham, Isaac, and G-d as psychodynamics projectively played out and symbolized in the foundational Jewish myth, then it becomes clear that although conscience prevailed on that day, it nonetheless had to contend with wish in the future. I would add that if the Abraham-Isaac drama is not a paradigm of domestic violence and abuse, I don’t know what is.

Jews rightly claim that the Akedah was psychologically and historically a great advance over infant, child, and male offspring sacrifice. What Jews understandably fail to acknowledge is that the desire for sacrifice remains. Further, the conscious Jewish Oedipal solution is strictly counter-oedipal: the triumph of the father and the submission if not capitulation of the son (La Barre 1972). I believe that here is where the great potential for paternal violence in Jewish families is at least in part generated: the undisputable authority of the father and of his communal extension, the rabbi.

Only in recent years are Jewish women speaking out against the male violence (and men’s sense of entitlement to violence) and giving it a name. From Jewish antiquity, Jewish families have been patrilineal, patriarchal, and authoritarian. From the patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible forward, paternal, and by extension, rabbinical, authority was uncontestable. While many rabbis officially forbad violence against wives and children, they and others also turned a blind eye to it when it occurred in their Schul (synagogue) or community. The exclusion, segregation, and persecution of Jews throughout Europe only served to help seal off Jews from the wider Christian world into what Eric Wolf (1957) called “closed corporate” communities (a term he originally applied to peasants) in which there was no appeal beyond their borders. Today, many rabbis “discourage people from going to the police” to report child and wife abuse (Vicki Polin quoted in Cassie 2008). Some rabbis who speak out against child sexual abuse face physical threats (Cassie 2008) from their Jewish communities.

To these family, community, and external persecutory influences on abuse must be added supernatural and “religious” characters: Yahweh, the singular, jealously exclusive god of the Jews, was alternately compassionate and merciful, and wrathful and vengeful. The deity both pro-
tected and smote His people (Gonen 2005; La Barre 1972). Put anthropo-
morphically, this deity was highly abusive to the people He cherished
and claimed as His own. If, as we have learned from a century of anthrop-
ology, the supernatural is largely the displacement and projection of the
unconscious and in turn of early childhood-based relationships, then in
Yahweh we can expect to see family resemblances and relationships from
antiquity. To these must be added the widespread belief among Jews,
fueled by the prophets, that persecution from Gentiles was punishment
for their own sins, and that Gentiles were sometimes the agents of Yah-
weh. It thus was perilously difficult for Jews to maintain a splitting
between G-d = good, and Gentile = bad, though much effort was made to
do so.

Family violence, and the seal of secrecy and denial—in the name of
the sacred virtue of shalom bayit/bayis—in which it took place, and was
placed and projected onto the Goyim, the vile non-Jews who segre-
gated, exiled, and persecuted them. Parents routinely directed their chil-
dren to direct all aggressive and other “bad” feelings and fantasies onto
the Goyim, who because, in Volkan’s felicitous term, “suitable targets for
externalization” (1988). Thus, the image of parents and spouse as potential
enemy became transformed into Gentile so that the image of the par-
ent/spouse could be maintained as good, if not saintly.

The mythos of shalom bayit/bayis became idealized and romanticized,
as did the overall self-image of the traditional shtetl and ghetto. In short,
at least some portion of the memory-history of continuous persecution
derived from the repressed ongoing experience of persecution in one’s
own family and religious-based community. This, in turn, condensed (as in
a dream) with the historically actual experiences of repeated cycles of
exclusion, expulsion, and murder, and its transformation into intergen-
erational transmission of historical trauma. All told, if this analysis is
even partially plausible, a widely held view by Jews of their own history
is better understood.

This brings me to a broader theoretical point about just what is to be
included in Jewish religion, history, and identity. Here I turn to the work
of psychoanalytic anthropologist Melford Spiro (1982, 1992) in his study
of Burmese religion. Spiro has written that religion is not to be measured or
understood exclusively in terms of its formal doctrine and official liturgy.
Important as these are, religions must also be understood in terms of
members’ actual practices and beliefs. As a result, when doctrinal, practi-
cal, conscious, and unconscious levels are taken as a whole, religions in
the broad sense have much in common. People are more “brother” than
“other” (1992). With respect to Jewish history, this I believe would imply that ancient parental sacrifice to “heathen” Baal and Moloch, harsh paternal discipline in the European shtetl and ghetto, and its modern appearance as child and spouse abuse in some Jewish families, are not to be construed as alien to the religion as a whole—that is, as unJewish.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARGUMENT
The preceding argument has, I believe, some important practical—economic, potential, policy—implications. Consider the long-standing controversy between American Jewish intellectuals Alan Dershowitz (2004) and Norman Finkelstein (2003). Here I wish to analyze and not take sides. I would argue that what Finkelstein calls “the Holocaust industry” in the United States, is able so successfully to summon vast sums of money from American Jews for Israel precisely because of the sense of history and identity in which so many American Jews are immersed. If Jews are an always menaced, “ever-dying people” (Wiesel 2002), on the verge of extinction, then the State of Israel, the last hope of the Jews, must be defended, rescued, and preserved at all costs.

While many American Jews have become “White” (Brodkin 1998), it is anxiously, insecurely, and tenuously so. There is the widespread feeling that the “achieved” status of having “made it” as Americans, can quickly be reversed into “ascribed,” outcast, pariah status. Simply put, American Jews can be “made” into Jews again by others who claim that Whiteness does not apply to Jews.

Here some vestige of the “survivor syndrome” from having survived the Holocaust and earlier pogroms safely an ocean and continent away, blurs into the sense and expectation of recurrent and future disasters (Gonen 1978; 2005). This Jewish history is never over—all the more the reason to protect Israel at all costs. The specific “chosen trauma” of the Holocaust merges into the continuum of Jewish history that the world is always beset with Amalek. Israel becomes the fantasized “last chance” and ultimate refuge for the Jews, and American Jewish organizations’ appeal for money in support of Israel follows swiftly from this wager. This same dread fuels “Israel’s Siege Mentality” (The Economist 2010: 13). “Israel is caught in a vicious circle. The more its hawks think the outside world will always hate it, the more it tends to shoot opponents first and ask questions later, and the more it finds the world is indeed full of enemies” (The Economist 2010: 13). Psychological vulnerability, embedded in a sense of eternal recurrence, becomes economically and politically exploitable and mobilizable.
By extension, any sign of disloyalty to Israel is a betrayal of the catastrophic sense of history—and ultimately, is a sign of disloyalty to those who died and to one's own family. Idealization of Israel is heir to idealization of one's own family, including one's mother—and to a splitting off of and projective identification of both one's own aggression and that of one's family into the enemy. I believe that this subtext or substratum of anxiety over belonging, separation, and catastrophe lies at the heart of the controversy and acrimony over the writing of Norman Finkelstein.

**SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

In this paper I have explored dimensions of a widely held view and experience of Jewish identity, history, memory, and time. I have used the Jewish experience as a kind of “test case” for Vamik Volkan’s highly useful account of “chosen trauma” and its later reactivation by leaders in an attempt to undo historic hurts. I have argued that (1) Volkan’s model holds up well in light of specific calamities that befell the Jewish people such as the destruction of the temples, which reversed a “chosen glory” into a “chosen trauma.” I have also argued that (2) there are facets of Jewish identity, history, memory, and the experience of time that fuse or condense (as in a dream) numerous individual tragedies into the construct of a single unbroken stream of calamitous histories, fed by numerous tributaries.

Finally, I have speculated on the cumulative roles of (1) the inability to mourn, (2) the intergenerational transmission of trauma, and (3) the experience of many Jews growing up in Jewish families, to make plausible and “real” a specific sense of identity, history, memory, and time. There are, of course, countless other dimensions—conscious and unconscious—of being Jewish in ways outside the orbit of calamity. The question remains open as to the role of this long-standing Jewish identity in helping generate the future.

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