Making Amends
Healing from Individual and Collective Trauma and Loss

BY WENDY ELISHEVA SOMERSON

When the photos of Tariq Abu Khdeir’s bloated face with blackened and swollen eyes first appeared on my Facebook feed in the summer of 2014, I quickly scrolled away from them. I had read his story: I knew he was a fifteen-year-old Palestinian American who was beaten and kicked unconscious by the police while protesting the murder and abduction of his cousin in East Jerusalem. I knew his story was not unusual, but that it had reached the mainstream media because he was an American citizen whose attack was caught on video.

When I finally watched the video of the police beating Tariq, I was snatched out of the present and into a particularly violent incident from my childhood.

Flashback to Childhood
It is 3 AM. My sixteen-year-old sister is lying on her side on the carpeted living room floor. The dark gold carpet is divided into puffy sections separated by flat lines, which look like little roads winding through golden fields.

My dad is standing over her, kicking her. A scar marks the northeast corner of my dad’s forehead, which turns a deeper red than the rest of his face when he is angry.

Driving back to our house after a late night, my sister had crashed our family car, a Dodge Dart, into a parked car. Metal collided with metal, crumpling the Dart until it was totaled. My sister was unharmed—that is, until my dad got to her.

My sister is now curling up into a ball to protect herself, while my dad kicks her in the side again and again. Blood soaks into the golden fields, but when I see the stains the next day, the blood looks as though it has seeped out of the land beneath it—evidence of violent crimes committed deep within the earth.

I am watching, curled up in a dark gold- and olive-striped chair, afraid he is going to kill my sister. I don’t know how to stop the violence, and for this, I feel ashamed. Gnawing at my cuticles until they bleed, I try to rip myself out of the scene unfolding before me. I transport myself through parted olive drapes, out the bay window, and into the front yard. Squinting into the freckled sun under the shade of the oak tree, I am touching the mossy hollows in the enormous tree roots where I often created dwellings for my Fisher Price play people.

Although I managed to drift away from the violence as it was occurring, this image of my dad kicking my sister tracks me down well into the future, insisting that I bear it fully. The most recent time I was jerked back to that gold carpet scene was when I saw the image of Tariq’s bloody face.

After being pulled back into this memory of family violence, I kept experiencing an intense feeling of dread connected to my dad’s violence but also to the current violence in Palestine. As I watched atrocities unfold in Gaza, I felt frozen in a helpless witness role, forced to watch violence that was out of my control but for which I felt responsible.

To take action around Gaza, I had to work through this memory of being unable to prevent the violence that I witnessed as a kid. I had to face the dread that was pulling me into a response from the past rather than allowing me to feel deeply connected to the current crisis in Gaza and to act from that place of feeling.

Healing from Childhood Violence
My healing process has been structured by my dad’s absence. How do you grieve the loss of someone who has hurt you deeply and violently? My dad has been dead for half my life now, but his violence lives in me, impacting how I inhabit my body, navigate intimacy, and even respond to the political world around me.

While we often think of personal healing as completely separate from social justice work, in truth the two are deeply intertwined. My efforts to heal from my father’s violence have deeply impacted my political activism.

When I was in my twenties, I refused to consciously acknowledge my dad’s impact, telling myself he had nothing to do with my chronic insomnia, nightmares, or pain. At some point on the day of his yahrzeit (the anniversary of his death), I would feel nauseated, remember what day it was, and quickly try to forget I had remembered.
Eventually in my thirties, as I began reclaiming my Jewish identity, I started to observe his yahrtzeit with a conscious remembrance. I began by sharing positive memories of him. Talking with friends over a Shabbat dinner, I would describe the good qualities that I inherited from my father—his work ethic, sense of humor, and love of cats. I thought this might help me “forgive” him, which is what we are often told that we must do in order to heal and move on. Yet as I dove deeper into my healing through somatic therapy (a type of therapy that addresses how we hold trauma in our whole selves—body, mind, and spirit), I realized that the idea of healing through forgiveness was a ruse: jumping to forgiveness was a way to bypass my feelings and rush to resolution without doing the hard work of confronting trauma and pain. I needed, instead, to truly mourn this double loss—the loss of an idealized father who would have protected instead of violated me, as well as the loss of my actual father.

By encouraging us to forgive and forget and by offering strategies to numb our feelings, our society reinforces our own survival mechanisms, which often encourage us to dissociate from traumatic experiences. But when we turn away from our pain, we end up practically dead ourselves—going through the motions of living without deeply feeling anything. As I began acknowledging how deeply affected I was by this relationship, I started using my dad’s yahrtzeit as a time to grapple with the raw and bewildering feeling of deeply missing someone who had caused me harm.

This past year, on my dad’s yahrtzeit, I came to the realization that my goal was not to forgive (or G-d forbid, forget) my dad’s violence, but to do enough healing to allow me to hold his full humanity, even as I recognized that he often treated me as less than human. Extending his humanity back to him through time is a gift I am working on giving him as I move into the next phase of my life, during which my dad will have been physically absent for longer than he was present.

A few years ago, during the High Holy Days, when I was reflecting about healing, I realized that there is a Jewish precedent for facing trauma as part of a spiritual process. One of the central concepts of the Days of Awe, teshuvah, which can be translated as a turn or return, asks that we turn to face our past. As we review our actions over the past year, we look into the gap that often exists between who we are and who we hope to be in the world. This return can be thought of as a turn away from denial and toward the painful places within and outside ourselves. When we ignore what exists in that gap, we end up being haunted and controlled by it. When we shine light on the painful places, we can begin to heal and make amends with others and within ourselves.

Until I turned and faced my father’s violence, I felt haunted by it, unable to shake it, but unable to fully feel it either. As a trauma survivor, I oscillated between suppressing all feeling and feeling like I was reliving the violence through a painful memory or flashback.

**Confronting Israeli State Violence**

My personal healing and political work collided during Israel’s devastating attacks on Gaza in the summer of 2014. As a non-Zionist Jewish activist who has spent the last decade organizing against the Occupation of Palestinian land, I was horrified to witness the killing of over 2,000 Palestinians in Gaza. Entire extended families were destroyed as Israeli forces attacked Gaza, which is effectively an open-air prison less than five miles wide with borders controlled by Israel. Gaza’s infrastructure was decimated, and nearly 500 children were killed.

During the summer of these attacks on Gaza, I oscillated between numbness and painful flashbacks as I deepened my somatic healing work. When the Israeli attacks began, I felt horrified but numb. I couldn’t connect to my feelings about the violence being done in my name as a Jew. At other times a particularly violent image from Palestine would spin me into an episode from my childhood.

And while there are clearly huge differences between the experience of violence in my Jewish family and Israeli state violence against Palestinians, these forms of violence are also interconnected.

When I was a kid, my grandmom used to advise me repeatedly that, while friends are nice, you can only count on your family. I didn’t understand until I was an adult that her distrust grew out of her experiences as a Jewish immigrant whose family had fled pogroms in Lithuania, where all of their “friends” and
“To break free of feeling numb and powerless around Gaza,” Somerson writes, “I needed to confront my memories of being unable to prevent the violence that I witnessed as a child.” Illustration by Travis Jaworski.
neighbors had turned against them. Being told as a child that I should never trust people outside the boundary of my family contributed to my isolation and reinforced the idea that it was normal and safe to live with an unpredictably violent father.

A parallel notion of safety is passed down in Jewish families and communities when we are told that the nation-state of Israel will keep us safe when anti-Jewish oppression arises. Jewish historical trauma has left many Jews so fearful that we cannot see that we are using Jewish identity as the grounds to oppress Palestinians. This does not make Jews safer. Instead, it encourages people everywhere to conflate Jews with oppressive behavior, and it inflicts incredible trauma on Palestinians. It damages our collective Jewish soul by making Israelis into occupiers and the Jewish State synonymous with ethnic cleansing.

In both instances, I am told that the boundaries of my family or the nation-state of Israel will keep me safe, and in both cases, the threat of violence is actually being created within these boundaries. This is the cycle of trauma; individuals or collectives of people who have not faced or healed from trauma end up lashing out at those who are not responsible for that trauma. Unable to escape the victim role, we believe we are still protecting ourselves, even when we end up in a dominant position of power and cause great harm. This is certainly the case with Israel, which was founded right after the trauma of the Nazi Holocaust. Forces such as European colonialism and racism contributed to the founding of the Israeli state, but Jewish leaders also channeled their outrage at Palestinians. It damages our collective Jewish soul by making Israelis into occupiers and the Jewish State synonymous with ethnic cleansing.

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Healing Through the Body

To break free of feeling numb and powerless around Gaza, I needed to confront my memories of being unable to prevent the violence that I witnessed as a child. My younger self needed to see that there was a way out—I was no longer stuck in that timeless place of trauma. Nathan, my somatic practitioner, helped me travel back to that memory. Our somatic session began with bodywork to help me feel my way into the story held in my muscles and bones. As I lay on the table, Nathan made contact with the band of dread across my diaphragm, which began squeezing painfully toward my center. Nathan moved us into the scene of trauma by describing that moment when my dad was kicking my sister. He yelled “Stop it” at my dad. But nothing happened; my dad wouldn’t stop. I watched once again as my dad kicked my sister over and over. I felt frozen, and I asked Nathan to intervene.

Nathan described running over to my dad, yelling, “Get off her,” and then pulling my dad away from my sister and throwing him against the wall. In response, I rose from the striped chair, ran across the room to my sister, and put my arms around her. My sister and I were both kneeling on the gold carpet, crying in the past, as I comforted her. I was also weeping in the present. I felt the band of dread begin to loosen.

Nathan asked me to send the powerful love I held in my heart for my sister down into my diaphragm. As I streamed energy from my heart into the constricted band, my diaphragm began humming, vibrating, and opening. I felt my shoulders drop on each side. I began to release some of the shame I had been holding about being unable to stop my dad from harming my sister.

It was a relief to experience my love and care for my sister without my dad between us. While I consciously knew that my dad’s violence wasn’t my fault, I got to actually experience what should have happened that day: an adult stepping in to stop the violence.

Bringing the present to bear on that scene from my past allowed me to move from feeling like a powerless, isolated witness to feeling deeply connected to my sister. Feeling less powerless helped me become an active participant in my present, so that I could show up to speak out against Israel’s violence and no longer feel frozen in shame and horror.

Activism and Ritual as Collective Healing

What is the collective equivalent of this healing process for Jews? We must turn to face and heal from Jewish historical trauma while simultaneously fighting Israel’s historical and ongoing oppression of Palestinians through education, ritual, and protests. Channeling our Jewish outrage into making teshuvah is not only politically crucial, it is also imperative for our healing. Although as Jews, we have been treated as less than human in the past, we must not let our trauma dictate how we treat other people. We are reasserting our full humanity by making amends to honor and fight for the full humanity of the Palestinian people.

During the summer of 2014, I helped organize and participate in acts of civil disobedience and acts of ritual, to protest the Israeli attacks on Gaza and commemorate the Palestinian victims. Our Seattle chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace staged a die-in at Boeing, a major supplier of weapons to the Israeli Defense Forces, to draw attention to the way that Boeing profited from the attacks on Gaza. Nine activists, locked to one another, lay down across the crosswalk to block the entrance to Boeing while fifty others lay down on the sidewalk.

Earlier that morning, we met up at a park to prepare for the protest. I led us in a somatic centering practice to feel our deep connections to one another and to our collective commitment to Palestinian liberation. As we blocked the entrance and watched the police gather in their riot gear, many
of us found it helpful to return to the place in our bodies where we could feel our collective center—our larger purpose for being there.

When I recited the names of over one thousand Palestinians who had been killed since the attacks on Gaza began, I looked down at the bodies lying on the ground and felt both the enormity of my grief and the power embodied in this small gesture of commemoration. Being present in our bodies and connected to each other was vital to our action.

Later in the fall, I had a chance to participate in a different kind of ritual with thirty-six artists in Connecticut for a weekend of remembrance and collaboration at the first-ever convening of the national Jewish Voice for Peace Artists and Cultural Workers Council. The theme of our gathering was facing the Nakba—the catastrophe of ethnic cleansing and displacement that began with the founding of the Israeli state in 1948 and continues with the ongoing displacement and destruction of Palestinian lives and homes. Being asked to face the Nakba before the High Holy Days was personally meaningful to me because we were being asked to make collective teshuvah—to turn to face the violence upon which the Israeli state was founded.

One day during the retreat, the facilitators took pictures and descriptions of Palestinians who died in the most recent attacks on Gaza and laid them out on the floor of the synagogue. I felt the contradiction of trying to mourn Palestinian lives in a Jewish religious space, which, at best, tends to ignore Palestinian deaths and, at worst, justifies them in the name of “self-defense.”

Looking at the face of a young Palestinian girl who had loved to sing, I was shocked by how hard it was for me stay present. I felt the urge to turn away, to leave the space, to numb out. It was hard to feel the weight of responsibility for these precious lives taken by a state that claims to speak for me and that is funded by a government that claims to represent me.

But I managed to stay present by noticing the people around me also struggling to make sense of these deaths. The facilitators helped make connection possible by inviting our emotions into this holy space. One of the facilitators cried upon introducing the display, and as I looked around the room of artists grappling with these deaths, I felt a kinship among us. I realized that what makes turning to face tragedy possible is that we do so together with feeling and hope in our hearts.

Healing Through Time

I have learned that taking responsibility and making amends is possible for me only when I have done enough personal and collective healing to no longer feel like I am moving through the world solely as a victim. As I face my past, grieve my losses, and come to terms with my own power, I am able to face the ways that I, too, am fully human with the capacity to prevent, fight, and even cause harm. This is as true for me as an individual as it is true for our Jewish people.

The powerful force of healing is not linear; it moves backward in time to heal my relationship with my dad by acknowledging his humanity. Healing enables me to experience myself more fully in the present, and it helps me envision a different future both for myself and for my people. It is only through finding compassion for my dad—and realizing that he must have endured some harm that stripped away his capacity for positive connection—that I am able to embrace the fullness of my own humanity, including the part of him that lives inside me.

On my dad’s yahrtzeit this year, I looked closely at a familiar photo of him and my mom smiling hopefully into the camera, about to depart for their honeymoon on Cape Cod. As I met my dad’s gaze, my heart filled with sadness because I recognized that he didn’t set out with an intention to hurt his family. He, too, longed for connection. And as I kept reaching back for him, attempting to feel his hopes and his dreams, I felt my chest cavity widen. Tears spilled down my face, and I felt his heart; it is still beating inside mine.