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Israel at the dawn of 2018
Report of a Listening Post held in Tel Aviv on 29 January 2018

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary or leisure organisations; or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2, the aim collectively was to identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

The evening was dominated by feelings and experiences relating to the government's decision to deport illegal migrants from Africa (Sudan and Eritrea). The dominant emotion was disgust, accompanied by feelings of guilt and impotence due to the complexity of the issues and the sense that the only perceived ways of relating to dissent are being attacked or being ignored.

From the varied and rich discussion in Part I, which yielded many possible topics, four major themes were chosen:

Obfuscation and confusion vs. binarism

One participant who is an Ofek member revealed that although she is not religious she belongs to a religious congregation whose values are diametrically opposed to those of Ofek the Israeli group relations association: The image of Janus, two faces looking to opposite sides.

During the Listening Post meeting we heard voices from a nearby room singing aloud "Happy birthday" and one of the participants related to it as noise that brings in reality.

Another participant related that she lives in Jerusalem, and works in a building populated by orthodox families (Haredi), secular Jews and foreign workers, all of them living peacefully.

She felt that she needed to bring in an alternative voice to the problem of the labour migrants and asylum seekers since it seemed as if the only possibility is to choose sides (for or against deportation) and that's unbearable. In her view, humanitarian organizations bluntly ignored the distress of the Israeli residents in South Tel Aviv (a poor area where most asylum seekers and labour migrants live). "How can we contain the whole picture? If it's not possible, I don't want to take part in it".

Another participant confessed that she keeps herself in a kind of bubble: "The news is a horror film. I detached myself emotionally from the situation. The solution is not belonging to here".

One participant, who identified herself as the mother of a soldier, wondered what she was allowed to ask her son: the fear of talking in her own family and not expressing herself.

Another shared the feeling that instead of seeing the complexity of the situation the discourse is polarized, "like when someone asks what will happen if no one will enlist to the army? Well, if no one will enlist, there will be no wars".

Differences were expressed between a participant who said that she doesn't experience the problems of Israel in her social circles and another who said that "our problems are the

problems of the country".

All this reinforced the image of the bubble, feelings that nothing can help despair beneath everything and the feeling that only binary solutions are offered: "Everything is violent and binary".

On the other hand, the same participant who shared her difficulties of talking to her soldier son said that despair is not the only way; she talked about her younger son, who, when he became Bar Mitsva (Jewish religious adulthood at age 13), took upon himself to volunteer every month in another project. At one point he met an old woman called Clara with sight problems and he began helping her copying her phonebook using big letters so she can read it. He became emotionally attached to her and did not want to move on to the next project. His mother talked about the possibility of having an influence and making a difference through the small things, and the pride she feels in talking about it.

Are we the bad ones now?

A participant shared feelings of shame for not doing enough to prevent the deportations. Another talked about the gap between her signing petitions and the lack of action in Ofek, the group relations association. A humanitarian issue became a political one (right-left), "when we were children we asked ourselves what we would have done if we had lived during the Holocaust? Now we have the possibility to check this with relatively little danger".

Another said that there is a feeling of not doing enough: "we sign petitions (against deportation) but will we open our homes (to hide the asylum seekers)?" She related that during the British Mandate her family and others opened their homes to Jewish refugees who reached the country illegally and helped smuggle them to other locations.

Another participant recalled that during group relations conferences of Germans and Israelis, "we asked the Germans where their parents were during the war (WWII), but (now) I don't do (enough). When I'll be judged, what will I say? Where were we when this kind of thing happened"?

Virtual Reality

A participant related how in a Whatsapp group of an educational psychological service people send messages with religious connotations every Friday (Shabbat), as if they are relevant for everyone in the group. She shared the anxiety she felt when she sent a link for a petition against the deportation of the African asylum seekers, and again when the flow of happy Shabbat messages stopped for a few seconds only to be renewed again without any allusion to her message – fact that shocked her: "People don't meet, everything is on Whatsapp. Facebook activism is pointless, we don't open our homes (to the asylum seekers), everything is as if."

Another participant told how in a leftist internet forum, a South Tel Aviv resident posted a message blaming those opposed to deportation for the residents misfortunes, and how no one in the forum responded and ignored him.

Insane leadership

A participant relates how the noise of the night drilling on the infrastructure of Tel Aviv light rail disturbed her family sleep, but when her husband called the municipal hotline the noise persisted. This coincided with the feeling that people complain but the authorities don't care, like the government ignoring the petitions opposing the asylum seekers deportation.

Someone commented on the recording of the PM Netanyahu's wife yelling madly at her PR consultant that made its way to the media. "The recording of Sarah Netanyahu looks more important than the asylum seekers. It's overwhelming". Someone (quoting a journalist) wondered what we are not talking about when we talk about Sarah Netanyahu.

An association was brought linking the works for Tel Aviv light rail with 'Blaumilch Canal' (an Israeli satirical film about a madman digging with a jackhammer in the busiest street of Tel Aviv - see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blaumilch_Canal) symbolizing the alleged chaos and madness of the PM wife.

The general feeling was of impotence given the extreme nature of the events.

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

*In Part 3, the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 &
2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and
unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to
why they might be occurring at that moment. Here, participants were working more
with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world: their collective ideas and
ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and
shape their actions towards them.*

Analysis of obfuscation and confusion vs. binarism

Binarism resembles adolescence, a stage characterized by polarization and split.
Is the State of Israel in a developmental stage in which it can only see black and
white?

The leadership is insane then we are OK.

Is there a real reason to the obfuscation and confusion? Is it the loss of values,
the lack of real leadership, the disinformation of the news networks and social
media that blur what is really going on? Those are the reasons that pose
difficulties in taking a stand, understanding the complexity of the situation and
taking responsibility.

On the other hand, the polarization and the obfuscation and confusion could be
a defence against dealing with impossible complex issues and guilt.

Analysis of virtual reality

The virtual reality of the internet and the social media offer a solution to the guilt
and the trivialization of terrible things.

There is a manic-narcissistic escape from reality.

Virtual reality also provides the potential to look for things that otherwise we
wouldn't notice (activist events, etc).

Analysis of insane leadership

Insane leadership is seen as a mask: the preoccupation with the madness of the
leader and his wife like a *folie a deux*.

The theme of the 'insane nation" is present in face of the guilt of the repetition of
the Holocaust trauma (through the deportation of the asylum seekers) or the
neglect of South Tel Aviv residents.

Manic madness symptoms, the feeling of being constantly overwhelmed, a
desire for more – all these reflected a discourse dominated by crazy and extreme
themes

The insane leaders and leadership – which are in fact a greedy leadership - were
as the mirror of an insane society.

It was difficult to formulate clear hypotheses during the evening. There was a feeling in the group that dealt with the obfuscation theme that it was almost impossible to articulate a clear hypothesis, giving rise to the idea that a parallel process was created. Two related hypotheses were eventually developed. The first was formulated by the conveners based on the evidence from the discussion of the group that dealt with binarism, obfuscation and guilt, and the second was formulated by the group which analysed the insane leadership or virtual reality.

Hypothesis 1:

The state of Israel at the dawn of 2018 is one of confusion and lack of clarity. It is not clear whether this state arises from a genuine confusion caused by the feeling that the leadership is insane, the inability to trust the media, the use the social networks to confirm one sided agendas, and the feeling of the loss of basic national and social values, or whether this state is actually a defence against voicing a clear position or taking a stand and responsible action.

Despair is a convenient option because it puts the blame into the "other" – the government, the ones that think differently, etc.

Hypothesis 2:

The proposed deportation of illegal migrants, including possible asylum seekers, highlights years of neglect of the social distress of Israelis and migrants alike. A leadership that is perceived as insane manipulates the situation with the help of the social networks to stir up primitive fears of annihilation or becoming victimizers; thus false conflicts are created that polarize Israeli society.

Conveners: Judy Levy and Marcelo Mauas.