

# COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND HEALING:

## Remembering the Holocaust and the Babyn Yar Massacre

By Gina Ross, MFCT

The 80th anniversary of the Babyn Yar massacre is bringing forth the issue of the Holocaust in the East European countries. There has been a strong rejection of responsibility and participation for the masses of Jews killed during World War II on several of these countries' soil. Furthermore, despite major international efforts for Holocaust education, we are experiencing a considerable backlash through the resurgence of anti-Semitism. Do we need a new approach?

The topic of collective trauma and its devastating impact may shed some light on the explosions of anti-Semitic waves worldwide. Let us first address what trauma is in general and collective trauma in particular.

Trauma is the sense of overwhelm and loss of control in the face of traumatizing events that leave people feeling helpless and in despair. Collective trauma is the helplessness resulting from traumatic events shared by a substantial number of people in groups organized around a community, tribe, clan, ethnicity, culture, race, religion, national or vast geographical areas.

Collective trauma changes the groups'/nations' narratives and values and makes them decide on collective actions that change their direction. These events are later stored as painful traumatic memories experienced over time, passed epigenetically across the generations, and expressed in unending re-enactments and recurrent collective patterns of fight, flight, or freeze responses.

In addition to distorting collective narratives, values and traditions, unresolved collective trauma also creates fissures in national cohesiveness and affects general good functioning. The ability to maximize resources, their riches and connections can be diminished or, at times, paralyzed, shattering the youth's hope for a better future. Collective trauma's debilitating emotions – fear, helplessness and anger – trigger a general malaise in the culture. This malaise manifests in epidemic alcohol and drug abuse and family dysfunction, political polarization, a rise of fascist, extremist impulses, an ideological media, and the justification for breaking the law and curtailing freedoms.

People use defense mechanisms to reduce trauma's pain, including projecting unto others the cause of their pain and their bad feelings. This is the function of anti-Semitism. We see it raising its head again in reaction to the despair and anger in the face of trauma and the unfulfilled universal basic needs of safety, positive self-image, and sense of

competence it engenders. It seems easier to alleviate the pain by blaming it on those with different culture, nationality, religion, or race.

We now see resurgent anti-Semitism as a reliable indicator of malaise and trouble in the general culture exhibiting it. In addition, Anti-Semitism has become **THE** easy go-to scapegoat, a meme of hatred and violence par excellence woven in the tissue of cultures for 2000 years, used even by nations with little contact with Jews.

Anti-Semitism is very adaptable; it keeps mutating; it is the perfect target for projecting collective malaise unto others. It goes viral more than other forms of bigotry – in part because of the worldwide spread of the exiled Jewish people and their unique identity made of culture, nation, and religion. Yet, once anti-Semitism resurges, it also spells trouble for other weaker parts of society, and then metastasizes in the general culture.

Understanding the viral impact of collective trauma on bigotry, conflict and violence made it imperative to turn our efforts towards healing it. Trauma's magnetism helped me coin the term '*collective trauma vortex*,' to describe its contagion and see the need to mobilize "the *collective healing vortex*" to undue trauma's destructive seductiveness. I looked at how we could learn to read the '*collective unconscious*' of a group or nation and to '*positively seed the collective consciousness*."

Commemorations of the Holocaust in recently liberated East European countries have confronted those nations to their past while they are working on developing their sense of identity and nationalism and processing their own traumas. Confronting their role in traumatizing others is not easy during this stage. They need help to process. They may also need time to develop their national identity first. People can more easily look at their faults from a position of strength.

These nations need to understand that when they deny, do not take full responsibility or even keep secret the traumatic atrocities on their soil to safeguard their national self-image and sense of patriotism, they unleash anti-Semitism and weaken their cultural strength and sense of well-being. This lack of authenticity ultimately impacts the vibrancy of the culture, stymies its creativity and leads to unhappiness, cynicism and mistrust. When the truth is uncovered, a great sense of betrayal, loss of trust and of safety take over.

But why do even countries who "do their work" about the Holocaust still not resolve the problem of anti-Semitism in their countries?

Perhaps outlining a clear path to redemption after the perpetrators' violent collective trauma vortex is stopped, can eventually help them come to terms with their past. This path goes through the collective healing vortex, humanity's inherent capacity to heal.

Healing collective trauma requires guilt to be processed and not be perpetual; for the actions that caused it to be repaired and the people who committed it to be transformed. Healing demands awareness and truth-telling.

In addition, the path will include facing the tragedy, taking responsibility for their part, recognizing their guilt, acknowledging the deep suffering caused, prosecuting crimes and committing to reparations, etc.

Addressing the emotional layer, using the available healing tools to release the difficult feelings of humiliation, guilt, shame, and anger for having caused the pain and suffering, is most helpful.

Emotional re-education facilitates people taking responsibility for the tragedies and moving beyond their terrible past. It makes it easier to face the historical events without resorting to distorted and one-sided narratives.

In addition to healing the emotional layers, apologizing and making reparations, they must research and address the historical and circumstantial roots of genocide and anti-Semitism– the foundational cultural worldviews, characteristics, and values that support it (ways of dealing with conflicts, assertions of religious, racial, ethnic, or political supremacy). An essential addition is to work towards prevention; to fight against racism and anti-Semitism by confronting their own people, and groups and nations as soon as they show signs of anti-Semitism and calls for genocide (threats and demonization by the media); by dissuading people from their genocidal intentions, and by alerting the international community to the very first rumblings and asking them to not be silent in the face of genocidal threats.

These efforts on the path to redemption will not only assure recidivism but position the perpetrator group or nation at a higher level of consciousness and the forefront of enlightened nations. Those nations, who 'have done the work' and confront initial signs of anti-Semitism and genocidal intentions or actions they see in others, will be and must be publicly greeted by the international community. They move into the ranks of the righteous and contribute to the betterment of humanity and global healing. Ideally, the UN and other international organizations could champion these programs.

Models for nation-building exist. In addition to including rituals and healing structures at the collective level, they also approach collective healing from the individual level. Work is already being done at the grassroots level. It would be even more potent if efforts addressed individuals with the most influence: reporters, politicians, Congressmen and parliaments members, and heads of international organizations. When he first became foreign minister, Shimon Perez was interested in the concept of training people at the top in the concepts of collective trauma, collective healing and conflict resolution. He was planning to introduce this work in the Knesset. However, soon after our meeting, the Intifada broke out and derailed our efforts.

Another avenue to help is to make sure that our Jewish identity is not limited to be defined by our history of persecution and our trauma of the Holocaust. We need to desensitize ourselves to the false or tenuous triggers of fear of anti-Semitism and make sure that we do not politicize this fear. We are stronger than ever in the world, and there are enough real dangers surrounding us that we do not need to react to every word. Let us look at people's actions and overall intentions to see if they are moved by real anti-Semitism or self-protection. Let us remember that attempts to approach and educate those who insult us have often worked. Let us make sure to honor the memory of the Holocaust victims and never use derogatory allusions to the Holocaust ourselves.



**Gina Ross, MFCC**, is founder/president of the International Trauma-Healing Institutes in the United States and Israel and co-founder of a Trauma Center in Jerusalem. She is an international senior faculty trainer in Somatic Experiencing (SE®), and a trainer of her Free from Conflict Protocol. Gina is certified in several trauma healing techniques. To help heal trauma at global levels, she developed EmotionAid®, an SE-based stress release tool for the lay public and a Stress Release Toolkit. She designed The Ross Model to address 10 different social sectors interfacing with trauma and healing to create a collective emotional foundation for peace through her 7 book-series entitled Beyond the Trauma Vortex into the Healing Vortex, and her numerous published articles, including some on the Holocaust. Her latest book was launched at the Jerusalem Press Club: Breaking News! The Media and the Trauma Vortex: Understanding News Reporting, Journalists and Audiences. An expert on trauma's impact on conflict between groups or nations, Gina was first to coin "the collective trauma vortex," "the collective healing vortex" and the "collective nervous system." Her book on collective trauma and conflict resolution will come out in 2021. Having lived on four continents and speaking seven languages, Gina has integrated her cross-cultural understanding to her work with collective trauma-related conflicts. Her "Free from Conflict Protocol" for effective conflict resolution and communication uniquely integrates mediation skills with emotional self-regulation. Gina ran the first control research study on SE® effectiveness for healing PTSD.