



FTA Newsletter



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I am an Israeli systemic therapist. I felt called to reflect on my own position and the position of international colleagues who are part of my reference group following Maurizio Andolfi's call on us to act as systemic therapists to condemn atrocities and to promote social justice and peace, with a particular reference to Gaza. I am sharing my personal and professional reflections, hoping that they may constitute a small step in our thinking about real-world implementation in Gaza and elsewhere of The Systemic Manifesto's generic call for peace, justice, and responsibility. The Manifesto challenges us to refuse silence in the face of violence and to do so while rejecting binary narratives of good versus evil. Furthermore, to recognize that both sides may be involved in cycles of traumatic loss and disconnection that require understanding and transformation. How can we implement these lofty statements in complex situations that require resolute, nuanced, and responsible action by systemic professionals who are experiencing distressing emotions. Not an easy task for outside professionals who are empathically pained by the suffering of innocent children and experience moral indignation vis-à-vis violence and social injustice. A highly difficult task for me as an Israeli who is experiencing shame and guilt during a dark period in my country's history.

It would help me to organize my reflection by following Maurizio Andolfi's referral to Jochen Schweitzer's outline for acting politically as therapists, as explicated by Valeria Pomini. Hence, I start with a brief summary of the outline's major guidelines. The first is to protest the situation by naming and blaming unjustifiable conduct. The second is to understand the situation by (a) a contextual analysis of how unjustifiable developments are maintained, and (b) a systemic self-reflection on whether or how the observers are a part of the problem that they complain about. The third is to act on the situation by (a) formulating a desired solution and preferred strategies, (b) joining forces to create a coalition for change, and (c) engaging in change activities such as civil disobedience and campaigning.

With respect to the first point, I agree with Maurizio Andolfi's condemnation of violence by my country. I join him in protesting my government's policy. A policy that transformed self-defense into vengeance, leading to the destruction of Gaza, the mass killing of children and civilians, and the starvation of a population. This is a morally justified protest against an inexcusable conduct that needs to be voiced by both Israelis and people of other countries. I am not an isolated voice in my country, but a member of an extensive and reputable group of citizens, including a former prime minister and a former minister of defense, who have persistently opposed our government's hateful and dehumanizing rhetoric during the last two years, and have been outspoken about the perpetration of war crimes in Gaza. A great many of us feel that our nation has been misled and our social fabric morally injured by a government whose primary motivation was keeping alive the coalition and Netanyahu.

With respect to the second point, I disagree with Maurizio Andolfi's unbalanced narrative of the situation. A contextual analysis, particularly when it is coupled with a protest against an unjustifiable conduct by one of the sides, should not be one-sided. Systemic therapists are accountable for providing a non-binary narrative that understands both sides and demonizes neither. It is a complex operation. We need to condemn and take action to stop the abuse of power and concurrently to join empathically with both sides. The joining enables us to promote peaceful ways of negotiating the conflict. Should we fail to join, we need to engage in self-reflection and consider the possibility that the seemingly objective observer who is judging one of the sides may have become part of the problem. In highly emotional situations, even the most experienced and well-meaning systemic therapists need to consider the possibility of being inducted into the victim-perpetrator-rescuer triangle.

A non-binary contextual examination of the conflict needs to consider that the current victim has been a perpetrator and the current perpetrator has been a victim. As for the rescuers who are currently joining forces to end the violence, be they the US, the European or Arab nations, let us be aware that their feet have also been mired in this quagmire. A broad systemic view of the brutal dynamics in the Middle-East and their multigenerational roots reveals that cruelty has been perpetrated and supported by all parties who are currently involved in the triangle. There are no vegetarians in this story.

As an Israeli Jew, I view the current situation as a historical tragedy not only for the Palestinians but also for the Jewish people. We, who have been exiled and persecuted, who have called out to the world not to stand by while Jews are slaughtered, have perpetrated genocidal acts that will haunt us in generations to come. As for the Palestinians, when they reach a safe ground that enables self-reflection, let them consider their own contribution to this tragic escalation. The cruel and genocidal acts that instigated the current war, the persistent intent on destroying the Jewish state in coalition with other Arab nations, and lately with *Hizballah* and Iran. The divisive rhetoric of hatred, incitement, demonization and dehumanization, have legitimized violence on both sides. Violence led to pervasive traumatic losses, which are used by ultra-right extremists and religious zealots to fuel vindictiveness. The supporters of each side provided the munition, the funds, and the moral backing to carry out atrocities. In the words of Hannah Arendt, “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.”

We need a broad contextual understanding of the different vectors that have led to the escalation of conflict and that have maintained the bloodshed. It is necessary in order to join and engage both sides in order to rouse them to take cautious preliminary steps on the path that takes them away from escalation towards collaboration. But it is not sufficient. In order to implement the third point in Jochen Schweitzer’s outline, i.e. acting on the situation, there needs to be a joining of forces who are willing to form a coalition that works toward commonly agreed goals. A coalition that promotes de-escalation, a stable ending of hostilities, and carefully graded conciliatory moves. In an ideal world, such a coalition will be composed of people who are willing to step beyond their current role in the triangle and to expand their perspective, thereby creating narratives that validate the other’s experience. Nevertheless, history shows that positive change can also occur in real world conditions, where leaders and states are guided by disparate interests. There are fortuitous times, periods of opportunity, when the different vectors may become aligned to cut through the Gordian knot and to promote peace.

Let me conclude this essay, which has been mostly focused on humanity's dark side, by drawing on my Jewish roots and inviting the reader to reflect on the interplay between self and other. The Jewish contemplative prayer of *Hineni* (Here I am), which is recited during the High Holy Days of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, calls on us to rise up to our moral standards. Unlike most other prayers that are focused on our standing before God, *Hineni* focuses on personal accountability in human relationships. Martin Buber's complementary saying that "I become through my relation to the *Thou*", a *Thou* that is fully human and deserving of respect rather than an object, an *It*, inspires us to be aware that we are shaped and realized in relational encounters. When we understand, honor, appreciate, and embrace the other, we come into being with our nobility and generosity of spirit. It is my belief that we, the common people, both systemic therapists and laypersons, who conscientiously persist with small acts of kindness and compassion, may be facilitating access to opportunity. In our limited way, we may contribute to create "a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in" (Anthem, Leonard Cohen).

- FTA Newsletter - A return to humanity: hope or utopia? By Maurizio Andolfi
- FTA Newsletter - Systemic Voices for Peace. By Cinthe Lemmens for The Systemic Voices for Peace group
- FTA Newsletter - Reflections on the political role of systemic therapists. By Valeria Pomini
- FTA Newsletter - "When You Leave Israel and Enter Gaza, You Are God". Inside the Minds of IDF Soldiers Who Commit War Crimes. By Yoel Elizur
- Hannah Arendt (1972). Essay "On Violence", in "Crises of the Republic".
- Martin Buber, "I and Thou"



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