

Keren Friedman-Peleg, *Ha-‘am ‘al-ha-sapah: ha-politiqah shel ha-traumah be-Israel* [A Nation on the Couch: The Politics of Trauma in Israel] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2014), pp. 183.

by *Tamar Katriel*

The notion of trauma has become increasingly naturalized in Western professional and vernacular therapeutic discourses. As a pivotal term in a discursive formation that has originated in American post-Vietnam War discussions of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it has travelled to different parts of the world and figures prominently in discourses regarding psychological responses to social and political victimization and abuses of human rights. Anthropological studies have explored both the institutional and discursive processes that are involved in the globalization of the culture of trauma and the social and cultural negotiations that attend its appropriation in particular socio-cultural settings. Keren Friedman-Peleg’s book on the cultural politics of trauma in Israel makes a valuable contribution to this line of anthropological research concerning the spread and deployment of the Western therapeutic ethos in local cultures. It does so through an in-depth study of the discursive and organizational practices of professional organizations devoted to the alleviation of trauma in Israeli society.

By exploring local deployments and interpretations of the medicalized and de-politicized global discourse of trauma among mental health professionals, their patrons and the donors on whose financial support they depend, Friedman-Peleg provides a nuanced analysis of the Israeli version of the discourse of trauma as a highly politicized cultural site in which competing notions of subjectivity (liberal-individual vs. communal) and different conceptions of trauma (as generated by unsettling events or structurally induced injustices) are articulated and negotiated by various stakeholders.

As the book’s title suggests, while the notion of trauma was originally grounded in individual psychology, the particular focus of this study is on its migration to the Israeli public sphere through the emergence of the notion of “national trauma.” This term denotes trauma that is in one way or another associated with the psychological torments emanating from the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the hostilities associated with it, including shell-shocked soldiers, civilians suffering deep anxieties in response to missile assaults or recurrent suicide bombings, and more. The expanded scope of the discourse of trauma

from the enclosed clinical context to the public domain has given rise to a range of therapeutic practices designed to help the Israeli population to cope with traumas associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as both a personal and collective predicament. Two organizations involving clinically-oriented caretakers, *Natal* - Israeli Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War and *ICT*, Israel Trauma Coalition, whose mission is to develop interventions designed to enhance the resilience of individuals and groups of people vulnerable to security-related tensions, provide the empirical sites for the multi-sited ethnographic investigation that makes up this book.

Thus, based on wide-ranging fieldwork in these trauma-centered contexts, which consisted of participant observation in routine organizational activities and meetings, in-depth interviews and analyses of relevant documents, the book details the ways in which the culture of trauma has been constructed in the Israeli public sphere. Addressing the ongoing social negotiations over the professional authority and organizational arrangements responsible for ratifying and treating mental distress as involving a “national trauma” that deserves public recognition and support, the study highlights the multiple ways in which the trauma theme intersects with issues of power relations and social stratification.

These issues are explored in an introductory chapter that deals with the politics of trauma in global discourse and a chapter that traces its sedimentation in the Israeli scene through the discussion of the establishment of the two aforementioned trauma-centered organizations (chapter 1). The six chapters that follow offer richly-textured empirical accounts of a variety of contexts and practices in and through which the trauma frame finds its localized articulation. The first of these discuss relations between mental health professionals and potential donors who are members of the business elite. Encounters between professionals and donors mark organizational moments in which the dark weight of the victims’ traumatic experience needs to be ‘marketed’ to supporters, mobilizing the donors’ forward-looking perspective and their empathy (chapter 2). Chapter 3 addresses another organizational angle - relations between mental health professionals, donors and media specialists who find themselves negotiating the ‘branding of trauma’ as they collaborate in choosing a name for the organization or in producing a promotional film. The next four chapters go back to the original clinical setting associated with trauma and explore various ways in which its original mandate of alleviating psychological distress has evolved in different cultural arenas through new social practices.

Chapter 4 begins with the clinical core of soldiers' trauma by discussing the stories of two soldiers deeply shaken – emotionally and morally – by PTSD and the professionals who treated them. The rest of the chapter expands the scope of the clinical discussion of traumatic experiences from a classical therapeutic to other non-therapeutic practices. These include branching of trauma discourses in the form of a psycho-historical project involving video documentation of soldiers' retrospective accounts of their military experiences initiated by *Natal*; a *Natal*-generated research project based on focus groups whose members were identified as traumatized perpetrators through their complicity in the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories; and a *Natal* collaboration with a university-based service that involved a telephone survey about general well-being among students who had served in the second Lebanon War a year earlier (2006). The fifth chapter explores another branching of the discourse of trauma sponsored by *Natal* – the secondary trauma of the female spouses of men suffering from military-related PTSD, all of them mothers of young children, who participated in *ad hoc* group therapy sessions. Chapter 6 takes the discussion further afield with analyses of a range of *Natal* interventions. These include workshops designed for populations considered 'at risk' in terms of their vulnerability to trauma as well as their caretakers, including young adult *yeshivah* students from Bnei Brak, Jewish and Bedouin social workers from Beer-Sheva, bereaved Druze parents from Daliat al-Carmel, and *kibbutz* children from the rocket-threatened south. Through the juxtaposition of these diverse cases, the author's illuminating analysis brings out the localized inflections attending the reinterpretation of the trauma frame in these contexts. In a move that further expands the scope of the trauma notion from actual responses to emotionally destabilizing events to their potential emergence, the seventh chapter addresses preventive practices designed to enhance resilience in order to offset the prospect of traumatization.

The book concludes with a chapter that brings together the various strands of analysis presented throughout and discusses the network of social actors and practices that have shaped the emergence of a culture of trauma in the Israeli context. Most significantly, it argues that - contrary to other anthropological studies of the localization of global trauma discourses - in the Israeli case power relations and lines of division are not demarcated along national trajectories but along demographically marked internal lines of division within Israeli society itself - religious, ethnic and class-based. Illuminating as this finding is, the author also acknowledges in passing (p. 17) that trauma discourses have been applied to

the Palestinian responses to the conflict as well. The acknowledgment of Palestinian psychological distress is largely absent from Israeli trauma discourses concerned with the conflict, and is at times actively suppressed in the Israeli public discourse (as in the cancellation by the municipality of a scheduled screenings in Sderot and Beer-Sheva of an Amnesty International film entitled *Shivering in Gaza* that documents a post-trauma intervention project in Gaza in the wake of the summer 2014 Israeli bombings¹). This suggests that national lines, too, play a role in delineating the outer scope of Israeli trauma discourse.

The contact between a professionally-grounded, globalized trauma discourse and the local discourses of distress and resilience employed in various indigenous arenas in Israel foregrounds the very different cultural premises that animate the life-worlds of Western-liberal meaning frameworks grounded in the notion of the individual and a variety of local community-oriented frameworks. The evidence-based argument the author develops concerning the prevalence and pull of such communal frameworks in contemporary Israel, and the challenge they pose to mainstream neoliberal ideologies, is indeed an intriguing and important insight of this study. It puts into question commonly encountered commentaries in social science scholarship that describe Israeli society as relentlessly moving from a collectivist to an individualistic ethos.

This book is indeed a heartening example of critical ethnography at its best – an ethnography that recognizes and carefully traces the discursive construction of cultural categories in social interactions and seminal texts, is attentive to the multiple voices and cultural strands found in the particular social field it investigates, is open to both the official tonalities of formal organizations and the intimate tones of distressed individuals, and holds a promise for a better understanding of the society it studies by addressing fundamental cultural categories of personhood and sociality. It will be of great interest to anyone interested in Israel Studies, in the anthropology of trauma and resilience, and in the cross-cultural exploration of globalizing processes.

Tamar Katriel, University of Haifa

¹ As reported in *Ha-Aretz* 12 July 2015; see <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/1.2682090> (last accessed, 24 July 2015)

How to quote this article:

Tamar Katriel, Review of *Ha-‘am ‘al-ha-sapah: ha-politiqah shel traumah be-’Israel* [*A Nation on the Couch: The Politics of Trauma in Israel*], by Keren Friedman-Peleg in *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, n.9 October 2016
url: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/reviews.php?id=103