

Interview with Eti Ben-Ziv, October 31, 2000, on Cape Cod

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- E.B-Z: You mentioned earlier that your children are concerned about the struggle in my country and the Middle East.
- B.R.: The recent explosion of violence after Ariel Sharon arrived with soldiers in Jerusalem was very upsetting to them and to me. My children, like many Jewish people in this country, find it hard to understand why the Israelis are not more empathic with the Palestinians' claim to their homeland.
- E.B-Z: It is not so simple. I was very happy to accept the peace process which included returning more than 90 percent of the occupied land to the Palestinians. In my point of view, the latest crisis was not because of Israel's offer or Sharon's action. Sharon presented an opportunity for the eruption, but the fight is not because of Sharon. It is because of many other reasons and among them the very strong feelings about the future of Jerusalem. The Palestinians were ready for an explosion, a confrontation (as they acknowledged). Sharon's presence was the match that lit the fire. To see Sharon as the reason gives him too much power and deflects from the real causes for the tension and animosity.
- B.-R.: Why is this struggle so unending?
- E.B-Z: The intifada began with an accident between a Jewish driver and a Palestinian driver. The Jew was accused of doing the offensive action intentionally. The territorial issue, how this piece of land will be shored, how it will be divided, not divided, is

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the pragmatic issue. I think that the true war is the war between the West and the East. Israel is (and always was) a perfect place for this war to take place. Israel is the most Western country in the East where the majority of the people don't like America or Europe, where there is a lot of hatred for America. To look at what is happening in the Middle East as a conflict between Israel and Palestine is not a full context. The conflict is bigger than that.

It is also a religious war, the Islamic world against the world of Jews and Christians. Yes, it is a war going on between Eastern and Western religions. And, like in a family, it is easy to see the problems among the "children," the Israelis and the Palestinians, but it is crucial to the process of resolution to see that the "parents" are involved. The "parents" are the world's superpowers. In the Middle East, the family of mankind is involved.

B.R.: What hope then do you see for resolution?

E.B-Z: I have little hope for a resolution now. Sometimes, I fear that this tension could become a world war. When the United States and England attacked Iraq, missiles landed here in Israel. One has to connect actions of war that are happening all over the world. The view of the world must be more holistic. If you see what's happening only in Israel, it is too narrow a view. The East and West are fighting all over the world. The American boat in Yemen was attacked; the American embassy was bombed. These are signs of hatred for the West. The more there are moves toward peace, the more there are acts of violence against peace. One force brings out the energy of the other polarity.

B.R.: Do you think that the next generation will be able to create new and different alliances?

E.B-Z: No, they will inherit hatred from the past generations like in the Balkans. When you look at what is written in the textbooks schoolchildren are reading and then accepting as truth, you know the tension will continue in the next generation. There are children who have lost their parents or other relatives. It becomes more difficult to forget and accept. There is more and more unfinished business.

When I was in La Guardia airport, every 5 minutes I heard security announcements, warnings constantly on the loudspeakers. War is now present at the La Guardia airport. I remember 15 years ago hearing a political expert say that if the terror in the Middle East was not resolved then, it would become a world

issue. And it has become a world issue. Just look at the security checks in airports in cities all over the world. No, I am not very hopeful.

I think that what we Gestaltists know about field theory absolutely applies. You cannot work with one force without working with the other. There are experimental groups in Israel of people from the religious right and people from the secular left who are talking to each other to work out their differences. One of them is called "Besod Siach." These words are taken from a prayer about the quiet dialogue of angels. Dialogue is a must. I don't know if in our Gestalt world we have enough expertise to work with these kinds of groups, people who want peace and people who will lose from peace. The some principles in this kind of dialogue are in Gestalt theory.

These conflicts must be worked out on different levels: with the right and left political groups within Israel, with groups of Israelis and Palestinians, and with groups made up of people strongly attached to their different religions. There is this kind of dialogue work being done, but it is not happening enough. The East/West dialogue is the one most denied and neglected.

B.R.: Fanatical religious beliefs do not lend themselves to coexistence; there is not room for another way of being, even in dialogue.

E.B-Z: I don't experience this rigidity with the Israelis I know, Jews and Arabs. This is not how the majority of the people I meet feel. The fact that the fanatics get such a large place in this story—the Arabs that say the Israelis should go back to where they came from (in my case Poland or maybe Italy) and the Israelis who do not believe that the Palestinians have rights to their land—these groups could be seen as two groups of crazy, ill people, but instead, they have a lot of power. Their acting out is used by the sides wanting non-peace. I really can't understand what Arafat is gaining from the situation, unless he wants a Palestine built in fire. What Israel can gain is that Jerusalem will not be divided yet, but we all know that it will be divided in the future.

I'm thinking about Gestalt principles. Everything we know about dialogue, how to get people to talk with each other, can be applied. At the same time, it is difficult to do this, letting each group be very much itself. I don't see an effort of Gestalt people in Israel to conduct dialogues.

B.R.: Why is that?

E.B-Z: In the Middle East, we don't have many Gestalt-trained people who work in the political or organizational arena. And I haven't

seen an institute from anywhere else in the world attempt the mission of helping in the Middle East, not the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, not the Los Angeles Gestalt Institute.

Because you and I are talking now and you are asking me about Gestalt principles, I can tell you that this conflict could be a goal of the future of Gestalt people from all over the world. Maybe what is learned in Israel can then be applied to other countries in conflict.

Another problem in the Middle East is that there are no Arabic people that I know that work within Gestalt. People from America and Europe cannot succeed without local people.

I tried to do teaching several times with Arabic groups (teachers who asked me to teach them about Gestalt), but the values of Gestalt are very strange to them. In their culture there are lots of hierarchy. Most of the teachers in the groups were Muslim men. They stopped me and told me that I was trying to impose a Western philosophy on them.

B.R.: What were you saying they couldn't agree with?

E.B-Z: They couldn't agree with the notion of personal responsibility. In their culture, the community is more important than the individual. They don't say "I"; they say "we." There just is not the sense of "I" that you have in America or we have in Israel. At another time, I tried to get Arabic people to participate in a Gestalt program, but I didn't succeed. I hope that Arabic people will participate in the future. I would love it.

B.R.: Gestalt training has become more global. Do you know of Gestalt groups in non-Western countries?

E.B-Z: I know there is a group in Singapore, and I wonder how Gestalt will be applied there because Singapore is also very hierarchical. There is a group in Ghana and South Africa, and there is a Gestalt organization growing in Turkey. Many of the Turkish people in this group came to study in Israel in a group called Isragic. Isragic was built by people from the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (GIC) and Israelis who graduated from GIC. One of the faculty of Isragic is Turkish.

B.R.: The development of Gestalt centers in non-Western countries is a good issue for the Gestalt International Study Center.¹

E.B-Z: Yes, I agree. I think Gestalt theory is Western thinking. No doubt about it. So the question is how can a Western philosophy help

¹ Gestalt International Study Center is an International Organization designed to further the theory and application of Gestalt therapy worldwide. For more information, contact their website at www.gisc.org.

in the Middle East and other parts of the world? What can we offer? What could other cultures bring into the Gestalt world to make it more international and applicable to more people?

I would like very much to see a study center in the Middle East, but I am aware it will start with Israeli people or Israelis and people from Turkey. If it does begin, how will it develop? I would like to see Jordanian psychologists or sociologists in such a group. Maybe Egyptians. It will take a long time before Iraqis or Iranians participate. It would be wonderful to have men and women. I am thinking, imagining. It is very interesting and encouraging to dream about.

B.R.: I am thinking about Arabic people in this country. Do they participate in Gestalt training? Do we go and get them? Were you recruited by us?

E.B-Z: No, I came to Gestalt. I was working in the Navy, and I was very interested in Gestalt. I knew there was a program at Tel Aviv University. I went to study there. The training was focused on Gestalt therapy, and I'm not interested in therapy. I'm not a therapist, but there was no other way to study Gestalt. When I finished, I was looking for organizational Gestaltists. I met a friend who had just come back from a training program at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. She brought me a catalog about the program in organizational development. I joined the first group of the International OSD program in 1992. Since then I've taken many programs at GIC. I have joined the Isragic program, which has already graduated 100 students.

B.R.: What cultural conflicts have surfaced in this venture?

E.B-Z: Not just cultural differences, but different philosophies about what it means to work internationally. Americans bring the theory, and we bring the people. This issue was raised at the recent meeting of the Gestalt International Study Center. How can the work be truly international? An international program cannot truly be international if the Americans do the teaching and the non-American people are the students. The answer is not easy. It is a big challenge for multicultural groups.

B.R.: What have you already learned about cultural differences?

E.B-Z: I was working in Intel in Israel. Israelis went to America to study what Intel is and how the company works. The Israeli company had both Intel values and Israeli values. I remember how important it was for the Israelis working there to keep the company open during the Gulf War and to come to work and live as usual no matter what was happening.

The International Study Center will have to think multiculturally. If a site is in Belgium, it will be a group of Belgium

people who know the principles, working with Americans—not one culture ruling the other. A lot of voices must be heard in a respectful and meaningful way. For the majority of Americans it is not easy to think internationally. Americans don't need to think internationally; everything can be done in America. But in order to work internationally, they will need to be equal partners. Americans need to think about what fits in the various cultures and what doesn't fit.

B.R.: What fits and doesn't fit about Gestalt in Israeli culture?

E.B-Z: Gestalt is a very positive orientation. As a practitioner, you try to emphasize what is positive. Israelis are very critical people. They look at everything critically. To Israelis, Gestalt is naive. Israelis don't understand why you would want to talk about the good things when so many bad things are going on. That doesn't fit. Yet I would like to put more positiveness into my work. Life tastes better with some honey. Through my Gestalt training I became aware of my own criticalness and my culture's criticalness. When I became more aware, I could make others aware.

Israelis interrupt each other a lot. We listen in a different way (many times we don't listen at all). I have to work in groups to get people not to interrupt each other, to take time to listen. This is very difficult. American manners can help the process to move. Something, however, does get lost in the carefulness: some energy, some liveliness.

Gestalt creates a sense of community, and that fits very well into Israeli culture. We are a more collective society than American society.

B.R.: How do you convince Israelis to let go of their criticalness? When people have suffered in their lifetimes, seen violence, atrocity, is it too much to expect of them? There has not been any real experience of war taking place in the United States. Maybe it is easier for Americans to be positive about the capacity of people working together than it is for Israelis.

E.B-Z: Well, it is difficult for the society as a whole, but easier for smaller groups. Israelis built something beautiful in 50 years. I work a lot in the kibbutzim and constantly see positive ways of thinking and believing.

B.R.: In spite of being worn down, the hope remains strong.

E.B-Z: My father could have come to the States, but he came to Israel because he believed in the people who were there already and that he could build something with them. He died hoping that there would be an end to the wars, that his grandchildren would

not have to fight. Now I hope that my grandchildren will not fight.

B.R.: I share your hope. Tell me more about your work.

E.B-Z: Sometimes I work alone; other times I work with friends. If I want to work in a Gestalt way, I have few options for colleagues. Now eight people have finished the IOSD program. These are potential colleagues for building a center together. This is one of my dreams. We've met for several months now; we talk about our work and do peer supervision. Maybe out of our meetings something else will emerge.

Half of my work is done in the factories of kibbutzim. In two of three kibbutzim I have to pass through the fish ponds and cow sheds in order to get to the factory. It slows me down immediately. I love to work in the kibbutz. It really makes me excited. I'll tell you why. First of all, it is a group of people that believe in equality. Hierarchy is not important. There is some hierarchy because it is a factory and as in many factories on kibbutzim, now they hire people from the outside if they need skills or knowledge they don't have. So the mixtures of the cultures that come together is a wonderful meeting. So in one kibbutz, I have Arabs and Jews born in Israel, newcomers coming from Russia (which in itself is a variety of subcultures). In another kibbutz there are so many mixtures of cultures. Only one kibbutz is traditional; residents own their factory without outside people.

I am working a lot on developing team work and coaching; I've been working with them for years. I work with whole systems and also individuals. They want to give each other feedback but want me to be there so they won't be too critical of each other. Sometimes, there is conflict between two sections. I help them manage the conflict better. The factory is part of a bigger kibbutz system that is in continuous change. I know few communities that have to face so much constant change.

Another wonderful joy for me is that I eat my meals in the dining rooms of the kibbutzim. I meet the parents, the spouses, and the children of the people I work with. To work in a community is very special and dear work for me.

B.R.: How many people in Israel live on kibbutzim?

E.B-Z: Less than 3 percent of the population. The kibbutz phenomenon is changing constantly. One kibbutz I work in is the best and strongest one. It keeps the kibbutz tradition. Another kibbutz will disappear like probably most of the kibbutzim. Another one will become something else, an evolution. People will

own their own houses; kibbutz living will not be communal anymore. People will become formal shareholders of their factories. They will probably sell some of their land. Laundry, food, health care, and education will be paid for. The kibbutz will be less socialistic and more capitalistic.

For me, it is wonderful to assist people in clarifying changes in their values and then to work with them to carry out resulting changes. In the factory, people who stay in their job will get a salary. Until today, the worker didn't get a salary. This will be a big change. Suddenly, two friends who had the same rights and privileges know that their salaries are different. One gets much more because he is the manager and the other one gets less because he works on the machines or works in the field.

The Gestalt framework helps very much to understand change and the losses people experience with change. This is good work for me. I like managing change.

The second half of my work is done in organizations in the city (Haifa and Tel Aviv). I work with a chain of coffee shops like Starbucks. This is a company of young people. They are very ambitious and create their special place in the coffee market. I also work in one of the hospitals, with a bank and with the University of Haifa where I coach and teach students in the Organization Sociology second degree program.

B.R.: What do you help these organizations to do?

E.B-Z: To grow, to make changes. Sometimes, I work with two partners. They are like a couple with differences and similarities.

B.R. How do you translate Gestalt into your work?

E.B-Z: This is not difficult. Gestalt language is understood in both kibbutzim and other organizations. They value both the community and the individual. How do we keep this community alive? How can I/we make me satisfied? How do we manage the differences in order to maintain the whole? How do I/we live with the polarities that exist in our group? What are my/our values? How do I/we change? These are questions embedded in Gestalt theory. These are the questions on the agenda of these organizations.

I think this interview helps me to shape my understanding because you are asking questions and I am talking fully and loudly and being able to compare what there is in the organizations I know and the country and culture I know. Thank you so very much for this opportunity.

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