TO COMMIT OR NOT COMMIT TO HUMAN LIFE: CHILDREN OF VICTIMS AND VICTIMIZERS—ALL

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ABSTRACT: The author discusses the impact of the Holocaust on both the children of victims and victimizers and reports on empirical researches conducted among Israeli student health professionals and others as to how ready they, the people of the victims, are to approve of and to participate in various programs and events which take the lives of helpless others, and reports disturbing results. He concludes that making a commitment to human life is the single most important task for all of us.

I do not know whether I have anything to say, I know that I am saying nothing; I do not know if what I might have to say is unsaid because it is unsayable (the unsayable is not buried inside writing, it is what prompted it in the first place); I know that what I say is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation . . . writing is the memory of death and assertion of life (Perec, 1988, p. 42).

How does one speak “correctly” on the subject of the Holocaust? There is no way. To speak about the Holocaust is to attempt to participate in an event in which we cannot possibly participate. It is to be drawn toward levels of experience that are beyond what any of us as individuals can possibly encompass, for to grasp the enormity and profundity of the utterly meaningless suffering and destruction of
the Holocaust remains beyond our capacity. Yet I deeply appreciate the fact that we family therapists, nonetheless, are attempting (in this Congress) to achieve some measure of encounter with the Holocaust. It is all too easy for us in family therapy to go on enjoying "hosting" and "directing" the wonderful theaters of couple and family relationships that we work with, day in and day out, and remain unknowing and indifferent to the immense issues of larger collective human evils of which the Holocaust was the apotheosis and archetypal event in human history.

The Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide in Jerusalem, which I direct, was created 10 years ago. At the time, my wife and I went to the Knesset (Parliament in Israel) to meet Member of Knesset Gideon Hausner, who had been Israel’s attorney general and prosecuting attorney at the Eichmann Trial years ago, to tell him of the plan for the new institute. Hausner became infuriated but struggled to remain polite and, in his words, not to have us thrown out of the Knesset. “How can you,” said he, “discuss the genocides of other peoples along with the Holocaust?” A little while later I was in Germany, where I spoke with a distinguished, internationally honored senior social scientist, and he said, “How wonderful that you are going to have an institute on genocide, but tell me, why do you have to keep the name ‘Holocaust’ in the title?” These are the two poles of resistance which we are forever encountering.

Our institute is devoted to bringing together all peoples of the world, including the many different peoples who have suffered genocide, and ultimately all of us—for we are all future potential victims. Our institute is also devoted to bringing together many scholarly disciplines in interdisciplinary studies, for there is obviously no single discipline that by itself can possibly begin to address more than a small segment of the events, patterns and meanings of genocides. Our purpose is not simply to record the history or to memorialize, but to seek to create a cutting edge of knowledge and research that will lead to new concepts of the possibilities of prevention of genocide to all human beings (see Charny & Davidson, 1983; Charny, 1984; and the newsletter of the institute, Internet on the Holocaust and Genocide).

We are children of victims and victimizers—all. I will first describe a forthcoming study of survivors and their children, i.e., the world of victims of the Holocaust (Davidson, 1990), then a study of children of actual victimizers in the Holocaust (Bar-On, 1989), and then my larger focus will be a report of several studies of Jewish/Israelis, all children of survivors in the metaphoric sense, and how