

Healing individual and collective trauma through Human-Animal dialogue

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The October 7th onslaught left the Israeli society bleeding and torn apart, while hundreds of citizens and soldiers brutally murdered, others kidnapped, hundreds of thousands evacuated from their homes, and numerous soldiers killed and injured amidst the war. Entire communities are still shattered as the situation unfolds, and the Israeli society as a whole anxiously awaits while the area continues to be on the verge of what might develop into a third world war.

During these difficult times, animals play a significant role in the healing process from this national *collective trauma*² that Israeli civil society is going through. With relation to human-animal bonds, initial anecdotal evidence shows that they too develop differently in contemporary wars fought in Western countries. This creates a reality of “shared trauma”³ for humans and other animals. While human-animal connection during conflicts and disasters highlight the interdependence between them - and may have profound psychological, practical, and ethical implications - when both humans and other

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² Collective trauma is both a psychological and a social phenomenon that impacts group memories, consciousness and identity (Alexander, 2012) following a catastrophic event. It transforms the ways people in society view the world and their relations with others (Alexander et al., 2004), as well as create meaning of the life around them (Park, 2013; Hirschberger, 2018): **Alexander, J. C. (2012).** *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Polity Press; **Alexander, J. Eyerman, R., Giesen, B., Smelser, N., & Sztompka, P. (eds). (2004).** *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity: Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; **Park, C. L. (2013).** Trauma and meaning making: Converging conceptualizations and emerging evidence. In: J. A. Hicks, and C. Routledge (Eds.). *The Experience of Meaning in Life*, (New York, NY: Springer), 61–76; **Hirschberger, G., Kende, A., & Weinstein, S. (2016).** Defensive representations of an uncomfortable history: the case of Hungary and the Holocaust. *International journal of intercultural Relation*, 55, 32–43. doi: 10.1016/j.ijintrel.2016.08.006

³ Following **Tosone, C. (2021).** Introduction. In: C. Tosone. (Ed.). Shared trauma, shared resilience during a pandemic. *Essential clinical social work series*. Springer.
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animals suffer from the hardships of war, these relations may become even more important.

Research demonstrates the effectiveness of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT), specifically in healing war related trauma, whether for combatants⁴ or civilians⁵. Sporadic research has also pointed to the healing qualities of animals in cases of collective trauma⁶, specifically programs of AAT aim to leverage the healing power of the human-animal bond to support individuals affected by war-related trauma⁷. More particularly, animals that were themselves traumatized were found to be more highly relevant to the healing process of traumatized humans. For example, Gorman & Cacciatore (2023)⁸ found that animals with histories of loss and trauma may provide distinct psychological benefits to humans who face similar circumstances. These studies exemplify the unique contributions AAT offers in times of shared distress.

⁴ **Chirico, F., Capitanelli, I., Nowrouzi-Kia, B., Howe, A., Batra, K., Sharma, M., ... & Acquadro-Maran, D. (2022).** Animal-assisted interventions and post-traumatic stress disorder of military workers and veterans: A systematic review. *Journal of Health and Social Sciences*, 7(2), 152-180; **French, M. T. (2023).** Animal-assisted interventions in the military: Historical perspective and future direction. *Medical journal, US army medical center of excellence (MEDCoE)*.

⁵ **Olmert, M. D. (2021).** The comfort dog project of Northern Uganda: An innovative canine-assisted psychosocial trauma recovery programme. *Intervention journal of mental health and psychosocial support in conflict affected areas*, 19(1), 21-25.

⁶ **Maoz, I., Zubedat, S., Dolev, T., Aga-Mizrachi, S., Bloch, B., Michaeli, Y., Eshed, Y., Grinstein, D., & Avital, A. (2021).** Dog training alleviates PTSD symptomatology by emotional and attentional regulation. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 12(1), 1995264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2021.1995264>; **Bennett, B. & Woodman, E. (2019).** The potential of equine-assisted psychotherapy for treating trauma in Australian Aboriginal peoples. *The British journal of social work*, 49(4), 1041-1058.

⁷ **Bachi K., Terkel J., & Teichman M. (2012).** Equine-facilitated psychotherapy for at-risk adolescents: The influence on self-image, self-control and trust. *Clinical child psychology and psychiatry*, 17, 298-312; **Guggenheim J. B. (2022).** Animal-assisted crisis response in Israel. Doctoral Dissertation. Yeshiva University, New York.

⁸ **Gorman, R. & Cacciatore, J. (2023).** Exploring the effects of the human-animal relationship on care-farms in the context of trauma histories. *Anthrozoös*, 36(2), 163-177. DOI: 10.1080/08927936.2022.2084995

Scholarly work has highlighted the role of animals in healing individual trauma among humans through AAT, both in Israel⁹ and worldwide¹⁰, with people coping with a variety of challenges, including at-risk youth¹¹, schizophrenia patients¹², child victims of abuse and neglect¹³, and substance abusers¹⁴. Animal-assisted therapy has been shown to be an effective approach in dealing with both children and adults suffering from trauma and PTSD symptoms¹⁵. Studies indicate that the very connection with animals increases people's

⁹ **Parish-Plass, N. & Bar-On, S. (2013).** Why Israel? A unique direction in the development of the definition and practice of animal-assisted psychotherapy. In: N. Parish-Plass (Ed.). *Animal-assisted psychotherapy: Theory, issues, and practice*. Purdue University Press. ProQuest Ebook Central. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tau/detail.action?docID=3120309>; **Rosing, T., Malka, M., Brafman, D., & Fisher, P. W. (2022).** A qualitative study of equine-assisted therapy for Israeli military and police veterans with PTSD—impact on self-regulation, bonding and hope. *Health & social care in the community*, 30(6), e5074-e5082; **Guggenheim Jaffe, B. (2022).** See above endnote no. 6.

¹⁰ **Tedeschi, P. & Jenkins, M. (2019).** *Transforming trauma: Resilience and healing through our connections with animals*. Purdue University Press; **Kruger, K. A., & Serpell, J. A. (2019).** Animal-assisted interventions mental health: definitions and theoretical foundations. In A. H. Fine (Ed.). *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (33-48). Elsevier; **Tosone, C. (Ed.). (2020).** *Shared trauma, shared resilience during a pandemic: Social work in the time of COVID-19*. Springer Nature.

¹¹ **Bachi K., Terkel J., Teichman M. (2012).** See above endnote no. 6.; **Lahav, S., Sarid, O., & Kantor, H. (2019).** Effects of a dog-training intervention on at-risk youth. *Anthrozoös*, 32(4), 533-540.

¹² **Barak, Y., Savorai, O., Mavashev, S., & Beni, A. (2001).** Animal-assisted therapy for elderly schizophrenic patients: A one-year controlled trial. *The American journal of geriatric psychiatry*, 9(4), 439-442.; **Nathans-Barel I., Feldman P., Berger B., Modai I., & Silver H. (2005).** Animal-assisted-therapy ameliorates anhedonia in schizophrenia patients: A controlled pilot study. *Psychotherapy and psychosomatics*, 74, 31–35.

¹³ **Parish-Plass N. (2008).** Animal-assisted therapy with children suffering from insecure attachment due to abuse and neglect: A method to lower the risk of intergenerational transmission of abuse? *Clinical child psychology and psychiatry*, 13, 7–30.

¹⁴ **Pirani A., Shani L. (2003).** Hatipul b'ezrat ba'alei chayim: Klee tipuli chadshani b'“merchav hapotentsiali” shel mechurim l'samim [Animal-assisted psychotherapy: An innovative therapy tool for the “potential space” of drug addicts.]. *Mikbatz—Ktav Et Yisraeli L'tipul Kvutsati* [Collection: Mikbatz: Israeli Journal for Group Therapy], 8, 9–24.

¹⁵ **Hediger K, Wagner J, Künzi P, Haefeli A, Theis F, Grob C, Pauli E, & Gerger H. (2021).** Effectiveness of animal-assisted interventions for children and adults with post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 12(1), 1879713. doi: 10.1080/20008198.2021.1879713. PMID: 34377357; PMCID: PMC8330800.; **Maoz et al. (2021).** See above endnote no. 5; **Mims, D. & Waddell, R. (2016).** Animal assisted therapy and trauma survivors. *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work*, 13(5), 452–57. doi:10.1080/23761407.2016.1166841; **O'Haire, M.E., Guérin, N.A. & Kirkham, A.C. (2015).** Animal-assisted intervention for trauma: A systematic literature review. *Frontiers of Psychology*, 6, 1121. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01121)

willingness to participate in therapy as well as their enjoyment from it¹⁶. Moreover, the involvement of animals in therapy reduces distress and depression, induces empathy and socialization, and generates feelings of acceptance¹⁷. In other words, animals contribute to humans' physical and mental wellbeing¹⁸, even if no conscious effort is being made towards healing.

A large portion of theoretical writing on AAT attempts to explain its effects through focusing on the attributes of animals as contributors to therapy, and situates them as instruments of cognitive, affective, and behavioral change¹⁹. At the same time, literature on human-animal interactions in general, and on AAT in particular, is undergoing a shift from an anthropocentric perspective- focused solely on human needs - to an eco-centric approach, recognizing the importance of human-animal bond to humans and animals alike, as well as to their broader environments²⁰. Such projects have observed other aspects of human-animal reciprocity in AAT²¹, and addressed AAT with veterans of war and armed conflict²².

Often associated with One Health and One Welfare approaches²³, reciprocal perspective in AAT adopts aspects of human-animal mutuality in

¹⁶ **Chandler, C. K. (2012).** *Animal assisted therapy in counseling*. Routledge.

¹⁷ **Harper, C. M., Dong, Y., Thornhill, T. S., Wright, J., Ready, J., Brick, G. W., & Dyer, G. (2015).** Can therapy dogs improve pain and satisfaction after total joint arthroplasty? A randomized controlled trial. *Clinical Orthopaedics and related research*[®], 473(1), 372-379; **O'Haire, M. (2010).** Companion animals and human health: Benefits, challenges, and the road ahead. *Journal of veterinary behavior*, 5(5), 226-234.

¹⁸ **Wells, D. L.(2009).** The effects of animals on human health and well-being. *Journal of social issues*, 65(3), 523-543.

¹⁹ **Kruger & Serpell (2019).** See above endnote no. 9

²⁰ **Menna, L.F., Santaniello, A., Todisco, M., Amato, A., Borrelli, L., Scandurra, C., & Fioretti, A. (2019).** The human–animal relationship as the focus of animal-assisted interventions: A One Health approach. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(19), 3660. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16193660>

²¹ For example: **Wanser, S. H., MacDonald, M., & Udell, M. A. (2021).** Dog–human behavioral synchronization: family dogs synchronize their behavior with child family members. *Animal cognition*, 24, 747-752., as well as **Wheeler, E. A., & Faulkner, M. E. (2015).** The “pet effect”: Physiological calming in the presence of canines. *Society & animals*, 23(5), 425-438.

²² **O'Haire et al. (2015).** See above endnote no. 14; and **O'Haire (2010).** See above endnote no. 16

²³ **Peralta, J. M., & Fine, A. H. (2021).** The welfarist and the psychologist: Finding common ground in our interactions with therapy animals. In: J. M. Peralta & A. H. Fine (Eds.). *The welfare of animals in animal assisted interventions* (pp. 265-284). Springer.; **Takashima, G. K., & Day, M.**

research and practice²⁴. Endorsing such a perspective reflects higher ethical and moral standards of the human-animal connection, and has the potential to promote better welfare for all members of the eco-system, thus a more healthy, resilient and sustainable life on planet earth²⁵. This worldview ensures an adequate and considerate interspecies encounter for both the human's and the animal's needs and well-being²⁶.

J. (2014). Setting the One Health agenda and the human-companion animal bond. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 11(11), 11110-11120.

²⁴ **McBride, E.A., & Baugh, S. (2022).** Animal welfare in context: Historical, scientific, ethical, moral and One Welfare perspectives. In: A. Vitale, & Pollo, S. (Eds.). *Human/animal relationships in transformation*. The Palgrave Macmillan Animal Ethics Series. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. 119–147

²⁵ **Pinillos, R. G. (2018).** *One welfare: a framework to improve animal welfare and human well-being*. CAB International.

²⁶ **Fine, A. H., & Griffin, T. C. (2022).** Protecting animal welfare in animal-assisted intervention: Our ethical obligation. *Seminars in speech and language*, 43(1), 8–23. <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0041-1742099>