

Food and Fur: The Helping Professions

By Ephrat Huss

“We are all three, no four, generations, in the helping professions, my grandmother, was a nurse, my mother a social worker, and I am a developmental psychologist, no, actually four, as my daughter is a clinical psychologist.”

“Oh, how interesting” people say at dinner parties, smiling, hoping to move on to something more interesting, away from our older people’s obsession with our family trees - as if flinging ourselves into the history that we will soon become.

My grandmother as a child was separated from her parents in those terrible waves of Holocaust leavings, and she grew up in a dark, gloomy, Victorian-type orphanage in England; the type where the famous psychologist Bowlby measured attachment styles by giving the children a furry cuddly monkey with no food, or a wire monkey with food, what a choice. My grandmother got boiled cabbage (food) – and no fur (hugs). She grew up and became a nurse, as women did then, and she worked in another dark institution, a psychiatric hospital - turning the corners of sheets into pointed triangles, emptying bedpans, tying crazed people to beds, all the while smiling politely with her mouth, eyes like impenetrable mirrors in which the crazies could see only themselves.

She married my grandfather, a loud, furry, disoriented shlemiel, who ran a failing fish and chips shop in a poor area in London. Did you know that fish and chip shops are an immigrant — not British business? In his shop, you could smell the old oil contrasting with the smell of the phallic-looking pickled gherkins in their jars; he made jokes that my grandma didn’t like. She didn’t allow my mother to eat there, because he didn’t change the oil, so we had no food to eat, and the hugs got lost between her mother’s impenetrable eyes and her father’s fluffy jokes.

My mother escaped. She found a Zionist pioneer husband, and a new home, a land, a kibbutz in Israel, where food and fur were divided out meticulously. But she missed the calming drone of drunks and swerving traffic, her parent’s arguments, constant as the grey London fog, but most of all she missed the things she hated. It was so confusing, and she was only eighteen, and there was I, her toddler, looking up anxiously, with an endless need for food

and hugs. She escaped the limitations of nationalism, and of her husband, and leapt back over the rooftops away from her husband, to London, with me, her baby cub clinging desperately to her back. In London, she wanted to fix the universal poor (among them her mother) and so went to study social work while I slept at my Grandma's, where I (maybe because I had already lost a father, as well) could swim inside the pools of sadness in her eyes, that for my mother were impenetrable mirrors

"Let's get your tea ready and tap-tap now with our spoon on the egg!"

And when I slept by my grandma, I heard the red sirens of her night-terror screams, that she knew nothing about, as if the fur-less people of the orphanage and hospital were trying to climb out of her own body in the dark of the night.

So back to our subject, we already have two helping professions: Nurse and Social worker.

How did I become a developmental psychologist?

My mother's next husband was a radical (white) doctoral student from South Africa, who we met at the laundromat, where she showed him how to put the coins in the dryer (servants had done laundry for him at home). The machines whirled around with a clean optimistic smell, and I, the little girl, twirled around him. We moved into his bedsit with the African bright cotton print on the wall next to the low table clotted with wine and coffee cups, next to the brick bookcases with a well-leafed copy of Franz Fanon's *"The Wretched of the Earth"* lying open on the sofa, next to my mother's endlessly growing piles of yellow social work files, next to the political pamphlets, - stop the bomb pamphlets, next to the stray people sleeping on our sagging old sofa, next to the new crying baby. My step-father, the white South African, cooked huge saucepans of yellow dhal that his Indian friends had taught him to make. So, there was food for all. But he could not drink wine in love anymore, he had to ladle the yellow dhal over the rice to feed us, (nothing white -white was bad - I was white, but with a dusting of brown freckles, like dhal, so that was okay). And concerning hugs, there are so many people in the world who need them, said my mother, her eyes darting around the room, searching under all those piles on the sofa for the complicated breakdown of this, her second marriage.

They were not, like my grandmother, escaping hunger and pogroms and the Holocaust; they were ensnared in the tyrannical age of universal love and hugs, for everyone, but no one specific.

In short, we had two helping professions, a nurse and a social worker, but these hadn't helped, so I joined the fixing effort, and became a developmental psychologist, while also cleverly escaping the two broken temples of my grandmother and mother by going to study in Jerusalem, with its iconic, built-in broken temple wall.

In these studies, I learned about my inner child, my wounded therapist. I learned how my complicated family was still rattling around inside me like a babushka doll.

I squeezed into a small white child-sized plastic chair, next to a social worker, a nurse, and an occupational therapist, and we all observed, brows knitted, a child strewing brightly coloured plastic toys on the ornate arabesque Arab tiles of the Sheikh's former mansion, trying to understand what was broken. We asked him to draw a "house, tree, person" as a diagnostic test. I most liked Erikson's developmental theory, with its optimistic fixing of former stages, that was like the concept of "tikkun" I was learning in my Jewish mysticism class at the university, with the nice young lecturer who taught us about broken vessels, that were destined to let in the light, eventually.

I married him and he let in my light. We had three wriggly real, not inner, children and he got a job teaching Jewish Philosophy at Ben Gurion University in the south. We bought a small Jewish agency semi-detached fawn coloured house with an air conditioner, in a small village surrounded by the desert, over which wailed the Muezzin's high-pitched prayer from his green-eyed mosque in the Bedouin village nearby.

Each day, after settling my own three children in their white plastic chairs in their nursery schools, I rushed to help the new immigrant children of the Negev develop, and bloom, leaf by leaf, in the arid desert soil, as Ben Gurion had commanded. First the Ethiopian Immigration Center, where the mothers in biblical white cotton, upright and silent as a chorus in a Greek tragedy, waited for the yellow municipal bus to take them to learn the Hebrew words for jam and bread (not injera, but still food) and for feelings (not hugs, but words for emotions) while their babies cried in the day care.

"Maybe the crying ones could be carried in a backpack? Like they used to be carried by their mothers in Ethiopia?" I suggested.

"What? I have two workers with twenty babies!"

I escaped to the ultra-Orthodox child centre. to teach them developmental psychology,

“Conflict is a core learning experience in early childhood, when you assume that there is no absolute justice on either side, when kids fight for the sand pit.”

“Of course there is absolute justice, the one who had the bucket first!”

“Maybe the second one can have a hug?”

“Yes, but not the bucket.”

I next drove carefully, up the desert path over heaps of broken glass and bare-footed kids, to the Bedouin township.

“When my kids drive me crazy, I tie them to the tent pole, and I don’t give them food!”

The Bedouin women see my confusion - to believe them or not - and laugh quietly. *“Of course, we don’t do it now, only when we were nomadic so the child would not get lost in the desert.”* I sigh with relief that I won’t have to report violence, and they laugh under their hijabs.

I end the day at the kibbutz children’s house, *“This one’s parents never bring him to the dining room, and all day they hug him in their arms. Of course he’s spoiled!”*

They gossip, and I smile, having come back full circle, and fixed that broken circle of where my own life has started. I drive home through the desert that is blooming its three short weeks with its shiny red anemones. This weekend we will take our kids to see the red flowers, and we will hug them and teach them in their perfect rooting and growing, not to pick them, and we will feed them my coconut blue and white flag of Israel cake, as if the country is another child with a birthday in our shared family. It feels that intimate, this homeland, this family and national fixing, this tikkun. Soon it will be summer, and in the long boiling summers, we will visit my social work mother in London, who now has a few more adopted poor children on the sofa, along with the guitar of a new husband who plays in a bluegrass band. We will have days out, and I will buy food from Marks and Spencer’s - egg salad sandwiches and scones and Ribena juice - all the comforts not found in my mother’s house, then we will visit Grandma in her old age home.

“Shall we go and have our tea in the rose garden? It’s stopped raining!”

She balances the cup on her shaky knees and looks around at the leaves, at the roses, like a baby just born. My kids smile at her, and she smiles back, her eyes wide open now, remembering nothing.

So, if everything is fixed so well, why did my daughter, the 4th generation, join the helping professions?

Well, years passed, and the children become teenagers, and suppertime becomes a teenage battlefield. One eats only pasta, one is a vegetarian, one is always late, and they all refuse hugs.

The country becomes a constant battlefield, after Rabin is assassinated, and the word peace leaves the country. The kids join the army, so that I fold piles of olive-green army fatigues, just like I used to fold their piles of tiny baby clothes when they were small, and I make them lots of food, and give them lots of hugs on the weekend. Their friends come and sit in the garden, eating my Magen David cake. I hug them also, as if they are still in nursery school, but their eyes look blurred, unfocused, trying to forget what they have seen in battle.

And then our daughter's close friend, who was on our lawn just last week with his smiling nursery school face inside his new soldier face, dies in the current war, and this changes everything as if the wars in the children's history matriculation exams, with their raging prophecies, and caves and battles and blood, have come storming out of the textbooks into our day-to-day lives, turning the rebuilding a symbolic temple, into a real physical one, turning our friends into the orphans of their dead children.

My daughter at her friend's funeral, hugs his mother, telling her stories of her now dead son, to keep him alive a little longer.

“Remember when he led us the wrong way in the desert, but made us all the best chocolate mousse?”

She utilizes her good, free childhood, her unknowing youth, to comfort the parents, her officer's gun flowing like long hair from her ballet-trained, young shoulders. The broken parents gulp down her words, and she hugs them again, and encourages them to eat, just one small slice of cake, and they thank her with blind desperate eyes that cannot see anything, because they cannot hug their own child so how can they eat? And we are back to my grandmother's mirror eyes that let no one in, and nothing no temples have been fixed. My

daughter, understanding this, after the funeral, decided to study clinical psychology with a focus on trauma.

So now we have, just to remind you, a nurse, a social worker, a developmental psychologist, and a clinical psychologist specializing in war trauma.

But then I retire, making it three (I have passed on the fixing job to the next generation, and at last can I rest?)

My husband and I move to Tel Aviv, to a small apartment with a balcony, and we sit companionably side by side balancing omelettes on our knees and craning our necks for a glimpse of the sea. I have left motherhood, the kids are grown, I have left the desert, the south that refuses to bloom. I have left the helping professions, and I have left the wars that bloom so well. I wonder if I should go down to the sea before it's too hot tomorrow morning, or drink coffee slowly on the balcony in my white cotton nightie. These are now my concerns, I am finally in the land of me.

But the country has not finished with me, and (from my perspective) extreme politicians declared war on our judicial system and are dividing the country into two. Politicians blare out of our front room like borderline relatives come to stay, and we watch astounded as the country unravels like a dysfunctional family, so we take to the streets, brandishing our flags and whistles and sirens, and we charge up and down in rallies, and they charge, in counter rallies, as if the country is one of my multi-problem families from work, going through a horrible divorce, forgetting the children, who can get lost in such families.

And then, so many citizens, on the vulnerable southern border were indeed lost — kidnapped, raped, killed — on the terrible 7th of October, people from the south, who I worked with, going from nursery to nursery.

Now, the whole country joins the helping professions (except for the government – our most dysfunctional branch of the family, who only help themselves). All mothers cook endless batches of homemade cakes and hand out chocolates and hugs to the families of the kidnapped, fathers, high-tech managers. They stand and fold washing for the evacuated traumatized families whose relatives are starving or dead in tunnels. Husbands go to pick the vegetables in the kibbutzim, my husband goes to pick their vegetables.

My daughter the clinical psychologist goes with me to gather mothers into circles to talk about dissociation, fight or flight, freeze, panic attacks, de-briefing, mindfulness. We make lists of inner and outer resources, we move the children away from their crying parents, we make food together and give hugs, draw houses and trees and people and safe spaces, but there are none - we draw hope, but there is none.

The home cooked food and hugs and clean washing and therapy all help, but they can't bring the kidnapped back. In the corner of the kidnapped families by the museum, artists paint, but art can't bring them back, and our children - our soldiers - so many die, and so many Palestinians die. Mothers may be in the helping professions, but this is the father land "Eretz Avot," and the politicians rant and rave like third-rate actors... like abusive husbands, filling us with fear, and then claiming only they can save us... This country, that was supposed to be the solution, has become a problem child of us all.

I am in the supermarket when my mother calls, and I shift the heavy bags to answer her.

"How are you?"

"It's a hard time"

"Hard? How can you compare your hardships to the Palestinians?"

"And how is the weather in London?" I add quickly for distraction.

"Well, it was a little rainy in the 'Free Palestine' demonstration" she sneakily answers.

As I listen to her explaining how wrong we are, I see the photos of the kidnapped people, young and old, taped onto the supermarket wall - smiling kibbutz people who wanted peace, who demonstrated against the occupation, who drove Palestinians to hospitals on Saturdays. They are now underneath the crumbling bombed down Gaza in the terrorist tunnels, raped, starving, sick. I shift my shopping bag to the other hand. I, like my grandmother, have food, if not hugs from my mother.

That night, I can't fall asleep and at four in the morning, preparing for their next migration, the birds wake up and sing their songs of departure. Should we also leave? Migrate, somewhere Jewish, but not too Jewish. I toss and turn, North Finchley? What does *Lease Holding* mean? I fall asleep, and I dream that I am sitting in that white circle of plastic chairs, in Jerusalem in the special-ed nursery school in the Sheik's former villa where I trained.

But I am sitting opposite the multi-disciplinary team, and it is not clear if I am a therapist, or a mother, or a child. They smile at me, cloaked in professional empathy, small pens like swords above their notebooks and I smile my most charming mother-child smile, but they remain serious, weighing me up like judges, like priests, like the Shabak, the secret service.

I get nervous.

“So, tell us what the problem seems to be?”

“You know, my Grandmother from the Holocaust was an orphan and she ended up in Bowlby’s actual orphanage with the monkey experiment, you know, where the babies choose between food or furry hugs? (they look at me doubtfully, wondering if I am delusional.) It was my job, to fix the destructed temples of my grandmother’s Holocaust eyes, that created my mother’s wondering unfocused eyes, and so it was my job to focus my proud Israeli children in a sleek, clear identity, a secure attachment to a homeland that they couldn’t slip off, except that it has become so slippery.

I can hear that my voice is a little manic.

“Well, I wondered if ‘securely attached’ mothers are drawn hovering above children like bright yellow suns (I must try not to lecture them) while the insecurely attached ones manifest as rain or black clouds, or as omissions. But how do the ambivalently attached ones manifest? And can you have ambivalent attachment to a whole country?”

Then I stop talking, the way children sometimes stop playing when they hit on something difficult. They nod, waiting for the central point, looking discreetly at the clock on the wall. They can’t fool me - I am one of them - I know all of their tricks with our four generations of the helping professions.

“Maybe you could draw a house-tree-person for us?”

“Each man under his vine and under his fig tree...” I say, and they don’t smile, their eyes are glazing over because of my whiney, exhausting inner child that is just like theirs. One is enough.

“Do you know who’s house this was? Before it became a Jewish nursery school?” I ask them, and they look away, irritated, they look down at the intricate Arab tiles on the floor with their

intertwined patterns which can continue to infinity round and round, so that you don't know if history is lines, or circles.

"We must finish, they say in relief, how about mindfulness, self-compassion?" says the psychologist.

"Or maybe Prozac, or Ritalin?" says the psychiatrist.

"Thank you for your time, I will check out those options," I nod, getting up heavily from the white plastic chair.

The next day, I return to help the mothers of the burned down and kidnapped kibbutzim, who are still living in hotels, wondering around in their fluffy heart-patterned donated pyjamas like Bowlby's furry monkeys. They give me a huge soft furry hug. I love pyjamas, and so do these mothers, maybe all mothers do; it's hard work being a mother.

"So, what do you need?" I ask the mother, handing me a cup of coffee and an amazing cake she has just baked in the hotel kitchen.

"What kind of therapy?"

"I need someone to do my nails, look at them! That would be a real help! And maybe she can do yours as well; look at yours?"

We both burst out laughing.

When I get home, I phone my mother, and she calls me by the name of one of her adopted children, and she talks about things that never happened in my childhood.

"How's the weather?" I say.

"It's lovely not raining for a change, and I'm eating strawberries in the garden!"

"That's great, great!" I say, pairing my and my husband's white socks that are like small lost hands, or maybe doves of peace searching for each other, and the phone is perched on the laundry that is like a small intermediate island that is not disconnection. Maybe she is just trying to tell her version of her family history, and maybe, like the Arabs and Jews here, she just needs someone to listen to that story, to assume there are enough hugs and food and

temples, for everyone, so that we the old people, can hurl ourselves out of history and back into the future.