

Can Psychedelics Play a Role in Making Peace and Healing Cycles of Trauma?

Early Reflections on Interviews with Palestinians and Israelis Drinking Ayahuasca Together

BY NATALIE LYLA GINSBERG, M.S.W.

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I’m a spiritual light-being, don’t you know?”*



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THIS YOM KIPPUR, the Jewish day of atonement and reflection, Rabbi Sharon Brous spoke to her Los Angeles-based Ikar congregation about the global consequences of the hardening of hearts occurring in Israeli and American politics, as well as around our world. Psychedelics, and MDMA in particular, are known for softening and opening the heart in appropriate settings. For millennia, indigenous communities around the world have

used ceremonies and traditions involving plant medicines in the service and protection of intergenerational peace, and some communities continue to use traditional medicine practices for active conflict resolution. For example, in Colombia, councils of indigenous communities are joining together to hold yagé (ayahuasca) ceremonies to bring together those fighting on opposing sides of the civil war.

I was first drawn to psychedelic research with the hope that we could more intentionally leverage psychedelics’ many gifts to heal our global wounds, and create new communities

built on trust instead of fear. Gratefully, I am now working with a team to learn from psychedelic traditions how to improve our current modes of reconciliation, restorative justice, conflict resolution, and community healing. We are hopeful and curious: How can psychedelics help heal our broken politics and planet?

In 2015, I had the honor of helping the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) organize an Israeli speaking tour for pioneering LSD researcher and transpersonal psychiatrist, Dr. Stanislav Grof. I enlisted the help of my Israeli friend Dr. Leor Roseman, a then-doctoral researcher with Dr. Robin Carhart-Harris at the Centre for Psychedelic Research (CPR) at Imperial College London. Touring with an inspiring group of psychonauts, therapists and researchers, including Dr. Rick Doblin (MAPS Founder and Executive Director) and MAPS therapist Dr. Keren Tzafarty, over lunches and bus rides, we would paint visions of what psychedelic peace-making might entail in the region.

In 2016, Leor was introduced to Antwan Saca, a peace and nonviolence activist and interfaith group facilitator who was formerly Director of Programs at Holy Land Trust in Bethlehem. Antwan leads groups of Israelis, Palestinians, and Germans in retreats focused on understanding how trauma impacts policy.

Leor, Antwan and I drove around the region, speaking to Israelis and Palestinians about their experiences using psychedel-

ics in shared spaces, ranging from night clubs to ayahuasca ceremonies to raves and “nature parties.” Present throughout our brainstorming and conversations was the foregrounding that this conflict, like most, is in fact asymmetrical, and the power differential between Israelis and Palestinians is vast.

Leor, Antwan, and I began to develop collaborative research between MAPS and CPR to understand if and how psychedelics could play a role in moving towards a more peaceful and equitable society for Palestinians and Israelis. We are lucky to be joined by a multidisciplinary team of supervisors— Dr. Rick Doblin, Sami Awad, Executive Director and Founder of Holy Land Trust, and Dr. Robin Carhart-Harris— and advisors, includ-



Walking in Bethlehem

ing those at the University of Haifa and Hebrew University in Jerusalem. We recognize our professional, religious, national and gender identities in particular shape our research: Antwan was born in Jerusalem to a Christian family and lives in Bethlehem, Palestine, considered by the Israeli government to be the West Bank. He studied politics, and is a long time peace activist. Leor and I are Jewish; he lives in London and grew up in Haifa, Israel, and studied psychology before becoming a neuroscientist; and I am an American living in Los Angeles, raised in New York City, who studied history and social work, and who works for social and political change.

Before beginning the development of a specific research protocol, we committed to learning more about indigenous ceremonial conflict resolution practices, and more about Palestinians and Israelis who were already participating (“sitting”) in ayahuasca ceremony together. We decided to formally interview a few dozen Palestinians and Israelis about their experiences drinking ayahuasca in joint ceremonies, thanks to the consistent guidance, support, and funding of Moshe Tov Kreps, founder of Maqamat Middle Eastern Music Academy in Tzfat.

Leor and Antwan conducted the majority of the interviews in Hebrew and Arabic, and I conducted five interviews in English. We interviewed 18 Jewish Israelis and 13 Palestinians about their experiences. Of the 13 Palestinian participants, six were Muslim and seven were Christian. Nine Palestinians we interviewed live in Israel with Israeli citizenship, and four Palestinians live in Palestine (West Bank) and do not have Israeli citizenship. Though less than 2% of Palestinians are Christian, Christian Palestinians are overrepresented in our interviews possibly because of their relative privilege and access compared to Muslim Palestinians.

Members of these ayahuasca communities were clear that they were drinking for personal and psychospiritual reasons, not with political or peace-oriented intentions. Those we interviewed had drank ayahuasca more than ten times, and some had drank more than 100 times. The majority of ayahuasca circles in the region are organized by Israelis, or in joint community with Israelis, thus, Palestinians seeking ayahuasca would most easily find medicine in joint spaces. Conversely, there are so many Israeli ayahuasca circles that the Israelis who chose these shared ceremonies showed some intention in selecting their circle. As



Leor, Natalie, and Antwan after a long day of interviews in Tel Aviv.

a result of pervasive fear in the region, Israeli society is very divided. So, mixed social spaces of any kind are not very common, and an ayahuasca ceremony is a particularly vulnerable space.

The circles in which our interviewees participated took place in Israel, Palestine, Europe, Brazil, and Peru. Uniquely,

many ceremonies drew on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim spirituality, music and texts, which interviewees reported often played pivotal roles in their processes. Ceremonies ranged from traditional Amazonian ceremonies to those inspired by Western humanist spiritual philosophies, and most combined the two. These interviewees drank in groups mostly facilitated by men, though most of the time people of every gender also played important supportive roles. We interviewed 13 women, 17 men, and one person

whose gender was non-binary.

Similarly to other psychedelic contexts, one of the most commonly reported experiences was a strong sense of togetherness, oneness, and connectedness, and how that led to a transformation of anger into compassion, especially in the context of ongoing struggle. As one Palestinian woman describes, she experienced “moments of love and open-heartedness...there is no ‘you are Jewish, Arab, Muslim, Christian.’ Everything was stripped, all this nonsense was out, and only acceptance and love were present.” But, as another Palestinian man explained:



Presenting at the 2019 World Ayahuasca Conference in Girona, Spain.



Giving a presentation in Tel Aviv organized by Safe Shore, a leading Israeli psychedelic harm reduction organization.

I cannot go to a checkpoint and be like, “I’m a human being let me go through I’m a spiritual light being you know?” Even for me it was a big challenge which is how can you heal trauma if the trauma is ongoing. You can’t heal it, but you can bring a shovel and dig some shit out. Every once in awhile, more shit will come out, but the more you dig out, the more space you create where people are free to see things differently, to engage differently, to be creative.

This inconsistency between the “all-one” sentiment, and the divided, lethal political reality was most stark for the Palestinians we interviewed, which was unsurprising due to the power dynamics of Israeli and Palestinian society. However, most people we interviewed did report consuming significantly less news and media, after consistently drinking ayahuasca, as a means of retreating from the divided political reality.

Though many reported connecting beyond identity, many were also guided by the intergenerational beauty, wisdom, music, language, and spirit of the “other” side, prompting powerful visions of historical trauma, often experienced through an opposing lens. For example, one Palestinian man reported having a journey as an Israeli soldier, seeing through the lens of a rifle, and feeling a deep compassion for this 18-year-old. A Jewish

woman recalls:

[At] almost every retreat, there is a moment in which [a small group of Palestinians] are comfortable enough to sing in Arabic. This is always an amazing moment...suddenly you hear your most hated language, by far, maybe the only language in the world that you really didn’t like, and suddenly it sends you to light and love.

People commonly reported shifting their frameworks from hatred and fear and anger to love and compassion, often as a response to (or despite) the ongoing trauma of the political reality. One Palestinian man explained:

My activism has changed tremendously... a big part of what I realized was how much this activism, and even non-violent activism, was motivated by hatred towards the other.

And my activism as non-violence meant that I would expose them and I would amplify how terribly they are. So it was more of a demonizing non-violence motivated by hatred, not by love and compassion.

People consistently extolled the necessity of first healing on an individual level, to remove the generational layers of embedded fear, before we can ever shift on a societal and political level. As one Palestinian man said: “Focus on yourself, and make inner peace with yourself first, the peace starts within us. Each one will make the peace within himself. That is peace.” A Jewish Israeli gender non-conforming interviewee asked, “How do I heal the inner political map within me, to create change in the world? How [do we] heal the outer political map to create change within me? And how [do I] contain both?”

This last series of questions reflects our focus as we move forward in our research: How can we create the container and intention for the necessary act of internal and relational work, in order to maximize its impact on political and social change on a wider community scale? Does focusing on internal work reduce our capacity for external social change, or can we learn from ceremonial plant medicine work how psychedelic traditions can enhance our abilities to live in alignment with the planet and one another? We look forward to learning the beginnings of the answers to these questions. We plan to publish a paper about our interviews in 2020.

Natalie Lyla Ginsberg, M.S.W. received her B.A. in history from Yale, and her master’s of social work (MSW) from Columbia. Before joining MAPS in 2014, Natalie worked as a Policy Fellow at the Drug Policy Alliance, where she helped legalize medical cannabis in her home state of New York, and worked to end New York’s race-based marijuana arrests. Natalie has also worked as a therapist at an alternative-sentencing court for prostitution and drug-related offenses, and as a middle school guidance counselor. At MAPS, Natalie works to disentangle science from political partisanship on Capitol Hill, at the United Nations, and beyond. She is also co-developing a psychedelic peace-building study with Imperial College, working with Palestinians and Israelis. Natalie is particularly inspired by the potential of psychedelics for healing systemic, intergenerational trauma, for building empathy and community, and for inspiring creative and innovative solutions.