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Processing Trauma in the Hebrew Bible

Carol A. McMullen¹

Did Isaac suffer from elevated cortisol levels? Did Michal struggle with a chronic low-grade persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia)? And how can one explain Jonah's suicidal ideation? While these questions may raise some curiosity as well as some eyebrows, caution must be given in the use of current interpretations in this regard. The Hebrew Bible certainly provides a rich personal development profile for so many of its colourful characters. From a contemporary perspective, it is clear that many of these individuals may have experienced various levels of trauma which affected their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, as recorded in the text. The present study advances a scholarly tradition of applying modern diagnostic terminology to historical/biblical personalities (Goldman, 1986; Kaplan and Cantz, 2012; Kaplan and Schwartz, 1998; Lewin, 1983; Rabinowitz, 1997; Schwartz and Kaplan, 2012; Shulman, 2003; Zornberg, 1995).

The Neuroscience of Trauma

Current research in the neuroscience of trauma explains many of the physical and psychological changes that occur during and following trauma events. The experience of fear is the basis for many of the physical responses that can ultimately result in the phenomenon of PTSD (Le Doux, 2006; Schore, 2002). Increased stress hormones, cortisol in particular, elevate heart rate and blood pressure, arterial tension, blood glucose and fatty acid levels. Elevated cortisol can contribute to the suppression of the pre-frontal cortex activity, affecting judgement and the ability to regulate behaviour and plan for the future (van der Kolk, 2014). Cortisol can effect Hippocampus neurons, weakening short-term memory and preventing the person from distinguishing between real and imagined threat (Rothschild, 2015.) Serotonin levels are decreased which can heighten feelings of anger and pain; the world may be perceived with more negativity and suspicion. With stress and trauma, the amygdala (limbic system) can produce a heightened sense of danger and vigilance (Teicher, 2005). Chronic limbic irritability in trauma survivors can be related to the development of chronic low-level unhappiness or dysphoria – symptoms that can occur with depression (Hart and Rubia, 2012; van der Kolk and Streeck-Fischer, 2003).

PTSD and Survivor's Guilt

With that brief medical survey in mind, it is instructive to consider some of the biblical characters who may possibly have been affected. Several studies suggest that survivor's guilt is a common and distressing problem among survivors of various disasters (Murray, 2018; Raab, 2018; Roz, Shadach and Levy, 2017). Noah was engaged in a seemingly bizarre ark-building project, which attracted the negative attention and outright scorn of his community over a protracted period. He was burdened during that time with knowledge of the impending doom of the entire human race, like a parent knowing of a terminal diagnosis for a child but waiting decades for the ultimate tragedy to occur. Noah may have suffered from

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survivor's guilt and faced the uncertainty and fear of an unknown future after the immediate flood crisis was over (Sacks, 2015). The narrative explains that Noah was drunk to the point of falling naked into his tent in the aftermath. Research suggests that substance-abuse issues can be correlated with PTSD (Stewart, 1998).

Family Trauma

Abraham and his wife Sarah appear to have been deeply affected by several elements in their family story. This started with their mission of *Lech Lecha* in Genesis 12, traveling away from their known world of idol worship into a new land with a new vision and no one to welcome them (Perez Foster, 2010). Certainly, Sarah was showing signs of stress, perhaps from Abraham's betrayal of her *en route* in Egypt and Gerar where she was abducted, as well as her inability to produce a male heir. Their decision to involve Hagar as a surrogate for the birth of Ishmael would be painful for most women. And, finally, becoming parents at their advanced ages would not have been an easy matter. Sarah perceives a threat to her beloved Isaac from Ishmael, and Abraham requires God's directive to obey her request to have his first-born son and Hagar expelled, presumably to perish in the desert. Abraham would not have known that God had other plans for the patriarch of the Arab nations. When the Hebrew text provides such detail of this process, it is an indication of added significance for readers.

With Abraham likely traumatized by enacting this cruel banishment, Zornberg (1995) asks whose idea was the plan to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's almost-sacrifice of his son, Isaac, is called the *Akedah* in Hebrew (Genesis 22). One might question Abraham's state of mind and judgement in responding to what he *perceived* as God's instruction to sacrifice this son, so long-awaited and the focus of such promise. The attempt to reconcile Abraham's actions through both a psychological and theological lens has been an ongoing challenge for biblical scholars (Sherman, 2007; Zornberg, 1995).

Of course, most theologians do not question Abraham's call and hold him in high regard because of his obedience (Lippman, 1993). Interestingly, however, he argued and actively negotiated with God about saving a few righteous souls from the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 18), but not for the life of his son. In fact, after this incident, the text never records Abraham speaking to God again.

In *The Women's Torah Commentary*, Shapiro (2000) says that Sarah is the true catalyst here. Midrash Targum Jonathan tells us that it was Satan who told Sarah that Isaac had been sacrificed and this news literally kills her (Targum Jonathan on Genesis 22:20, in Maoz, 2012). Another possibility for this "satanic" message could have been a report from a servant or neighbour who overheard Abraham and Isaac talking about this mission as they left early in the morning, hoping that Sarah could possibly stop the event. The actual text version ends with Abraham returning to his young men (alone) and going to back to Beersheba. The next reference to Sarah is that of her death in the following chapter (Genesis 23:1). Annually, Sarah's agony resonates through a complex series of blasts of the shofar during the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (Leviticus Rabbah 20:2, in Maoz, 2012). In the final long blast of *techiya gadolah*, one is able to hear her wailing "No-o-o-o-o-o-o." And yet Sarah was prepared to sacrifice the life of her step-son; such troubled family dynamics and mental shifts are reminiscent of a borderline personality disorder, sometimes resulting from trauma (Teicher, 2000).

Elevated Cortisol Levels

Sapolsky (2015) refers to a “canonical body of knowledge” that links the elevated cortisol levels during early life stress to adverse neurobiological consequences long into adulthood. In this regard, Isaac may be the most traumatized individual in the entire Torah. The fear he would have experienced during the banishment of his half-brother Ishmael, and then the sacrifice scenario of the Akedah, might better be classified as “terror.” After he and Abraham return home from the sacrifice site separately, they never speak with each other again. Isaac comes back to encounter the sudden death of his doting mother. Subsequently, he marries Rebecca, the woman chosen for him by Abraham’s servant. Isaac seems to continue in a passive role, deferring to Rebecca’s leadership rather than developing leadership strengths of his own. Genesis 27 describes how Isaac was tragically blind to the deceptions of Rebecca and Jacob, where he is tricked into giving Esau’s blessing to Jacob instead. Van der Kolk (2014) further describes how trauma can affect cognitive perceptions and judgements. Perhaps this made Isaac emotionally blind to the realities and ongoing struggles of his sons, which changed the course of Jewish history. Jacob escapes for his life from Esau’s rage to Paddan-aram in Canaan and stays away for twenty years, with no mention in the text of him ever seeing his parents again. Isaac later becomes estranged from his son Esau as well, becoming ever more isolated in his pain. Although he reconnects with Ishmael for the burial of Abraham, the brothers are likewise separated by the complex agendas of their parents and their separate destinies are still being played out between Jews and Arabs to this day.

A Smaller Hippocampus

Jacob seems to have carried forward his father’s legacy; he was also unable to effectively parent his own twelve sons and he suffered deeply from the loss of his favourite son, Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers. When Jacob’s sons slaughtered the men of Shechem following the sexual assault of Dinah, his mild reproof is focused more on the family reputation than on the moral atrocity committed. Jacob does not actually reach out to his daughter. He appears to be psychologically damaged, not able to process emotions of fear and anger similar to those with PTSD. Could this possibly be related to a lower hippocampus volume, as documented by numerous researchers (Sapolsky, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014)? Some might relate his vision of the ladder and perceived struggle with the angel to this condition as well (see *Spiritual Transformation of Trauma*, below). Jacob appears to be blocking painful memories, both from his youthful deceit and terrifying escape from Esau and of his sons’ serial misdeeds, until the blessings he gives them upon his deathbed (Genesis 49). At that point, he seems able to pull together the legacies of these complex individuals who become patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel, all woven into the complex tapestry of that people, rooted in a history of trauma.

Dinah’s story finds a legacy of its own in the wonderfully elaborated modern midrash of Diamant in *The Red Tent* (1997). In reviewing this book during an extended study of David in the biblical books of Samuel, I became further fascinated by the story of David’s first wife, Michal.

Chronic Low-grade Dysthymia Depression

The DSM-5 describes persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia in the DSM-IV) as a persistent feeling of sadness that can include feelings of low self-esteem and hopelessness,

often resulting in low energy levels and social withdrawal (DSM-5, 2013). Michal's transformation from a young woman of much personal confidence and energy into a tragic and isolated figure by the close of her story invites some exploration. Michal's father, King Saul, regularly attempts to spear David to the wall during musical harp interludes meant to calm his spirit of melancholy. Then, following the slaying of Goliath, Saul sets a grizzly bride-price of one hundred Philistine foreskins, hoping for David's demise. Michal would have been devastated to watch her father's ongoing attempts to have her cherished husband killed, the man whom the text says she "loves" (1 Samuel 18:20). There may have been a genetic link to her father's stated condition of "melancholy." When David is forced into an extended period of hiding, Saul compels Michal to remarry a certain Paltiel of Gallim. Due to Michal's devotion to David and Paltiel's amazing respect for this, they do not engage in marital relations, his sword being placed on the bed to keep them apart. David's intense connection with Michal's brother, Jonathan, and his accumulation of more wives during this period, would have added to Michal's sense of isolation and betrayal. Even though polygamy was common in biblical times, none of those recorded families could be described as "content"; Rachel and Leah (Genesis 29-30) and Hannah and Peninnah (1 Samuel 1-2) being other examples. When David finally becomes established as king in Jerusalem, he orders Michal's return. The text paints the pathetic scene of Paltiel entreating David's soldiers for mercy and then following the entourage down the road as he weeps in despair. One can imagine a rather chilly reunion at David's palace.

Michal refuses to participate in the triumphant return of the Ark, watching from her window as David dances and leaps along, scantily clothed, leading the parade. She storms out to meet him with bitter sarcasm, publicly accusing him of undignified and indecent exposure to the adoring women lining the streets. David's angry retort in his defense sealed their ultimate disconnection and the text says that Michal's fate was to not bear a child until the day of her death (2 Samuel 6:23). It is equally likely that Michal did not have further cordial, let alone intimate, contact with David thereafter. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha tells us that Michal adopted the five sons of her sister, Merab, following Merab's death (Talmud, Sanhedrin 19b). David would surely have had mixed feelings about this as Michal had not given him a son during their marriage, and was now giving her affection to her sister's children rather than to him. Some of his disdain for Michal would likely have been transferred to these boys.

Some years later, David becomes embroiled in a terrible negotiation with the Gibeonites, following a three-year famine. God apparently tells David that the famine is the delayed result of Saul killing some unspecified Gibeonites; in retribution, these people want seven sons of Saul's family to be hung. Previously, David had vowed to Jonathan that he would protect Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, and next in line to the throne would have been the five sons of Merab and the two sons of Saul's concubine, Rizpah. In a horrific twist of fate, David turns over these seven young men for the hanging. It is Rizpah, not Michal, who keeps watch over their exposed corpses until David provides them with a proper burial in the tomb of Saul's father, bringing as well the bones of Saul and Jonathon from Gilboa. Did Michal watch from her window? Did David ultimately disown or banish her? Did she indeed suffer from depression? Did she die of a broken heart? One tradition says that she died in childbirth, finally giving David a son, Ithream, in fulfilment of the curse to not bear a child until the day of her death (Genesis Rabbah 82:7). Elsewhere, I have written a more detailed midrash on Michal's example of strength amidst a story of deep tragedy (McMullen, 2017).

Suicidal Ideation

The prophet Jonah is traumatized deeply enough by his being swallowed by a “whale” (a large fish, in Hebrew) and in completing a mission that he could not emotionally embrace to wish for death at the end of his saga. Trauma survivors susceptible to suicidal ideation seem also to have been swallowed by the enormity of their tragic scenarios, or by the perceptions of their intractable situations. They often feel to be drowning in their gloom. This level of overwhelm is profoundly captured by the imagery in this short biblical episode (Jonah 1-4). The entire book of Jonah is read annually during the Yom Kippur afternoon service as a prime example of repentance, the theme of this Jewish Day of Atonement. For me, the image of Jonah being willingly thrown overboard by the sailors on his boat of attempted escape brings to mind the opening lyrics of the song *Why Should I Cry for You?* by Gordon Sumner (Sting). In their personal sea of despair, current trauma survivors may feel this level of frozen numbing:

Under the dog star sail
 Over the reefs of moonshine
 Under the skies of fall,
 North, north west the stones of Faroe.
 Under the Arctic fire
 Over the seas of silence
 Hauling on frozen ropes
 For all my days remaining
 Would north be true?
 All colours bleed to red
 Sleep on the ocean's bed
 Drifting on empty seas
 For all my days remaining
 Would north be true?
 Why should I?
 Why should I cry for you?

Job, Elijah, and even Moses all wish for death and, while perhaps not by suicide, their despair provides insight into the feelings of hopelessness expressed by clients in this state. These are further intriguing examples of processing trauma in the Hebrew Bible. However, for the present focused study, it is of priority to examine what strategies of coping, healing, survival, and resilience can be gained from these stories that are of potential relevance to modern modes of psychotherapy, particularly in a university graduate-level setting.

Spiritual Transformation of Trauma

Recounting the painful narrative is a central part of much counselling and psychotherapy practice. The Hebrew Bible certainly provides a timeless example of this methodology, dating back to the various times that these texts were redacted before the Christian era (Friedman, 1997). The exquisite detail included in these stories and the portrayal of the complex personal and family dynamics, with all the flaws and dysfunction in full display, are nothing short of amazing. Clearly, there are no saints in these scriptures.

Approaching the narrative from different perspectives in order to try and understand the themes, motives, and machinations of the original context has always been a strong Jewish oral tradition. A multitude of oral commentaries and analyses was collected by the

rabbis of the second to fourth centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple to ensure their transmission through what is known as the Talmud or Oral Torah. It comprises about 2700 pages, each page containing many references and citations to other sources - totalling thirty to forty volumes, depending upon the publication. Maoz (2012) provides sample readings in his volume on Aggadic Midrash. Since the completion of the Talmud, a further throng of scholars has produced a vast ocean of substantial works, adding to these perspectives, often containing as many questions as answers. *Jews and Words* offers an enticing overview (Oz & Oz-Salzberger, 2014). This level of analysis would take several lifetimes to accomplish – the Jewish mandate is to study even a few, as possible for each individual.

Along with “analysis,” learning to face one’s fears and demons, or to distance one’s self from toxic influences when necessary, is another dual-goal of modern psychotherapy (Kosłowska, Walker, McLean, and Carrine, 2015). King David admits his guilt in arranging the death of Uriah in order to win Bathsheba; Jacob returns to face Esau; Joseph confronts and forgives his brothers; Jonah completes the mission he was trying to escape; and Job stands up to his friends and to God. Alternatively, Abraham distances himself from Lot (Genesis 13); Isaac and Rebecca from Esau and his undesirable wives (Genesis 24); and a frightened Yocheved allows her baby Moses to sail downstream in a basket. But then sister Miriam was on guard to bravely negotiate with Pharaoh’s daughter, Bitya, for subsequent care of the infant Moses to include his birth-mother (Exodus 2).

A rocking basket on the water, playing a harp, singing psalms, strolling in a field, meditating on a mountain – all these are various calming techniques that would be relevant today in psychotherapy, along with some of the newer modalities in current practice such as psychological acupressure (EFT) or calming the neuroception of the vagus pathway (Porges, 2011). Hannah (1 Samuel 1) and various prophets provide examples of individuals able to use a spiritual connection to God through prayer. This is, it should also be noted, not always guaranteed to be so calming.

In his book on the transformation of trauma, van der Kolk (2014) talks about restructuring inner maps and rescripting one’s life. Bathsheba provides a vivid example of this restructuring in her motherhood of Solomon after the death of her first child with David. She becomes the favourite wife and navigates her pivotal position with David’s advisor, Nathan the prophet, to ensure Solomon’s succession at David’s death (1 Kings 1). Visual imagery can be assistive in this restructuring process as seen in Joseph’s dreams (Genesis 37), Daniel’s visions (Daniel 2, 7, 8-12), and Jacob’s apparition of the ladder that included his struggle with an angel, as even his name is changed to Israel, meaning a “wrestler with God” (Genesis 28).

With the help of siblings Aaron and Miriam, his wife Tziporah, and father-in-law Yitro, Moses evolves from being a shy and reluctant leader with a speech impediment to a man of determination and action (Tanchuma, Tzav 13; Rashi, on Numbers 12). The Mayo Clinic and others strongly promote the importance of social support (Chapman, Lesch and Aitken, 2005). That might even include a necromancer such as the woman of Endor (1 Samuel 28) or the talking donkey of a supposed enemy such as Balaam who becomes an unexpected supporter (Numbers 22). Smiles aside, Moses models the Jewish way. Judaism is not so much a faith as an action plan: behave your way to change.

The ultimate image of resilience for me is that of Moses and Miriam leading the Israelites in rousing songs of joy with tambourines or drums (Exodus 15), celebrating their dramatic escape from slavery and years of fear and trauma in Egypt after crossing the Sea of

Reeds (often mistranslated as the Red Sea). From learning to process trauma as our ancestors did in these ancient legends and stories, this transformation can come today.

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