Fear and anxiety are emotions that have evolved to ensure the survival and procreation of many species of animals.

Humans have been able to manipulate fears and anxieties as weapons of population control that involve and promote violence and apartheid. These societal conditions are familiar to many historically and presently oppressed groups, including Jewish and Palestinian, respectively.

In order to understand how fear and anxiety are manipulated to sustain oppression, it is useful to review their neuroscientific underpinnings and associated pathologies.

**Fear**

Fear entails a set of physiological and behavioral responses that serve to remove an organism from a source of threat, such as a high place or the presence of a predator. For this purpose, the central and peripheral nervous systems initiate and support defensive behaviors such as fight, flight and avoidance by sharpening the senses, elevating heart rate and increasing circulation to the muscles, among other actions. In addition, neural processes of learning and memory are primed. This makes sense – as it is adaptive to remember dangers so that they are best dealt with in the future.

The fear response ceases once the threat is gone.

**Anxiety**

Anxiety is a pervasive apprehension with respect to future
and/or ambiguous unpleasant events and can persist regardless of the removal of a threat.

Anxiety is expressed as a chronic, prolonged or otherwise abnormal fear reaction. As such, fear is regarded as adaptive, and anxiety is typically viewed as potentially maladaptive and linked to a range of psychopathologies, including generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and others. Accordingly, these disorders involve detrimental changes in the stress response, mood, learning and memory and other components that are affected by fear reactivity.

The causes of anxiety-related psychopathologies involve an interaction of genetic and experiential factors, or in other words: nature and nurture. Remarkably, breakthroughs in the field of behavioral genetics have shown that experiences can be transferred between generations via alterations in epigenetic expression of particular genes.

Of particular interest, PTSD is a disorder that entails severe trauma and deleteriously affects memory, mood and behavior. In order to understand the abnormal formation of fear memories associated with PTSD, their generalization and potential manipulation by others, it is useful to examine how fear memories are naturally formed.

**Fear conditioning**

In a laboratory setting, an animal can be taught to fear a particular cue using a method termed “fear conditioning”, which entails the presentation of an aversive stimulus, such as an electric shock along with a neutral cue, such as a light. As a result of conditioning, the animal forms an association between the shock and the light. Consequently, a cue that was once neutral evokes fear in the trained animal when presented alone. The amygdala is the key brain structure wherein a synaptic connection is created between neurons of
the light and those of the shock.

In order to extinguish the association between cues and fear, the stimuli are decoupled; i.e. repeated re-exposure of the trained animal to the light without the presence of the shock, a process termed “extinction of fear”. Research has shown that in extinction, neural projections from the prefrontal cortex inhibit fear-related activity in the amygdala. Thus, even after inhibiting a fearful association via extinction, if the animal is re-exposed to the shock, it will again exhibit fear toward the light. This process is termed “reinstatement”.

These principles of fear conditioning apply to humans as well. In fact, studies in war veterans suffering from PTSD demonstrate changes in the brain where the amygdala becomes primed and the prefrontal cortex is compromised, rendering them prone to find fear in everything.

**Collective PTSD and its manipulation**

Many global collectives that have been engaged in traumatic conflicts for extended periods have developed symptoms resembling PTSD. As such, they are prone to behavior and physiology associated with pathological anxiety, such as abnormal defensive, aggressive and impulsive behaviors.

Political, religious, military and economic elites easily manipulate these behavioral manifestations in a populace to gain support for their policies, distract from their own inadequacies and suppress dissent.

It is easy; fear can be reinstated in traumatized collectives using several methods: focusing on an act of violence or resistance; reminding the public of some atrocity in the past (memorial days); shifting attention to perceived threats and; physically segregating communities in conflict (apartheid), which renders re-exposure and reconciliation (i.e. extinction of fear) virtually impossible.
Fear then manifests in displays of aggression that promote the interests of those in power. It is precisely these actions, which are rewarded and therefore become more prevalent. The results of this snowball effect are tragic.

**Collective fear is integral to the Jewish narrative**

The Jewish people have a centuries-long history of trauma, persecution, and exile as both victims and perpetrators.

Dating back to the Old Testament, war and revenge repeatedly served as the ultimate holy redemption. In fact, many Jewish holidays revolve around celebrations of sagas in which existential threats (e.g. Egyptian, Greek, Persian) were overcome by righteous Jews (aided by God) against all odds, often by extremely vicious means. Further, there is a well-documented history of discrimination and oppression against Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East. More recently, the Jewish Holocaust has had profound effects on the Jewish collective psyche.

The Zionist project in Israel has further led to an endless series of violent conflicts. Consequently, war and trauma have further reinforced a state of collective PTSD within Israeli Jewish communities, which manifests in a persistent fear of annihilation even when threat sources are absent (a paramount symptom of pathological anxiety), abnormal defensive and aggressive reactivity and a susceptibility to fear reinstatement, i.e. persistent fear mongering and propaganda by Israeli politicians.

The results of this collective PTSD is the victimization of other groups, most notably the Palestinian people. Further, Israeli practices of apartheid, ethnic cleansing and notions of a ‘Jewish state’, render extinction of fear and consequent reconciliation virtually impossible.

**Breaking free from the cycle of fear and trauma**
In order to heal from this pathological cycle of fear and its consequent violence, which detrimentally affects both victims and victimizers, Jews in Israel and elsewhere need to overcome fear conditioning that has been reinstated for ages and transferred from one generation to the next. Furthermore, instead of educating children to fear and hate Palestinians, Israelis must integrate Palestinian children into the education system.

Healing from collective PTSD would include a painful deconstruction and reconstruction of personal and collective Jewish narratives that strongly rely on fictitious propaganda and a persistent rejection of fear- and warmongering that perpetuate eternal victimization. Additionally, Jews must abandon notions of segregation and reach out to neighboring communities throughout the world and in the Middle East, with the goal of extinguishing fear of the other by creating solidarity and collaborative relationships. Only then can Jews embrace Judaism as one of many equal human collectives that strive for freedom, justice and a global community free of trauma.

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