

Just Vision Interview with Dan Bar-On, Tel Aviv, March 16, 2008

(Interviewer is Nahanni Rous, Filmed by Julia Bacha)

Nahanni: Let's start from the beginning. How and when did you start your work on the subject of the Holocaust?

Dan: In essence, when I began to work as a psychologist in 1974—until then, I was a kibbutznik, a farmer—and when I began to work as a psychologist, quickly enough, I encountered in therapy people who were Holocaust survivors and the children of survivors, at the clinic where I worked in the Negev. At that time, not much was known about caring for Holocaust survivors; that wasn't yet an issue in Israel, only a few people focused on this—Hillel Klein and Shamai Davidson were the first. This interested me a great deal, because I suddenly began to understand that by trying all these years to be a Sabra [native Israeli], there was something from my own past that I was trying to erase. I saw the connection between the problems they were talking about and some of my own personal problems. This erasure was not healthy, from a psychological or emotional perspective.

Nahanni: What is your personal connection to the Holocaust?

Dan: My family came from Germany; they left after the Nazis rose to power, but before the Holocaust. Part of the family left, and part of the family died in the Holocaust. It took me many years to understand our connection to the Holocaust, because they never spoke of the Holocaust at home, not as a family subject. They spoke about how this happened in Germany, and why they left Germany, but not in the sense of how this affected us. It took me until the 1980s, perhaps, to understand how this also affected us. But I saw how this affected the people who experienced the Holocaust, and it became clear to me that other people in Israel didn't understand this. They think that they're just like them, the Sabras who were living here. In those years, this interested me, this concerned me, and this became the focus of my research and my work as a psychologist.

Then in the 1980s, first in 1983 but then beginning in earnest in 1985, I asked myself a strange question: What happened on the other side? What happened with the Germans? Were there no impacts on the families of people who committed the murders? Were there no effects there, in their families? If there are impacts on the families of survivors, how could there be no impact there? I searched in the psychology literature, and I couldn't find anything. There was not a single study in the 1970s and 1980s about what happened, in Germany, with the families of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. I began to ask this in 1983, and in 1985 I decided to travel to Germany, to try and search for people like this, interview them and ask the children of Holocaust perpetrators what they know about what their parents did during the Nazi era, and how that has affected their own lives. During three years, between 1985-1988, I found approximately 90 people like this. Half of them were children of people who had participated in acts of mass murder, in death camps, in the *Einsatzgruppen*, in *Kristallnacht*, in the euthanasia program; in any of the different places in which the Holocaust was perpetrated. Finding them was a very

interesting process, because in these years, this was not a subject in Germany, no one knew anyone on the basis of what their parents had done.

So I simply searched for them. Some, at the beginning, through advertisements in the newspapers, and afterwards, I explained who I was, and that I was seeking people who had family memories from the Third Reich period, whose parents lived at that time in Germany, who would be willing to be interviewed.

Nahanni: How did they react?

Dan: To my great surprise, the majority of them agreed to be interviewed. I had been sure that the majority would not want to meet with me, but only nine out of 100 people refused to be interviewed. And sometimes I had the strange feeling that... that they wanted someone to speak to about this, because at that time in Germany, no one wanted to talk about it. So during these years I interviewed them. Some of them I interviewed two and three times, because it began to interest me how their meetings with me might be generating certain responses for them. For example, a father, who had already died, had left a suitcase of documents in the attic. So I would ask the son, do you know what is written on the documents? He would say no, I've never looked. So I became interested if, in response to my questions, the son would decide to open the suitcase. Sometimes the son did open the suitcase, sometimes not.

Of course, this period was central in my life, because I understood that I had come upon a store of knowledge that no one else had touched, that understanding the Holocaust not only from the side of the survivors, but also from the side of the families of perpetrators, would create an entirely new angle for understanding the process of what happened there. So this became a central subject in my life. In 1988, I finished my interviews. I just ended them, I couldn't meet any more people, I didn't have the strength to meet more people—90 is already a lot. At that time, I suggested to some of my interviewees that they meet together. They met, only 12 out of the 90, and it was very compelling to them, because suddenly it became clear to them that they had things they had never had the chance to talk about with people who faced a similar fate. They continued to meet; I was not involved in the rest of their meetings, but they continued for four years, from 1988 to 1992. And again, this was something very interesting—no one in Germany had tried to organize meetings like this.

Then I asked them in 1992, after they'd been meeting for four years: are you ready to meet now with the children of Holocaust survivors, from Israel and the United States? And they said yes. Then I invited my students from the University of Beer Sheva, and colleagues from Boston and New York, who were members of a group called "One Generation After," children of Holocaust survivors, and a group of them agreed to come. We met for the first time in Wuppertal, Germany, for a week in June 1992. The meeting was amazing. They were all terribly afraid of the meeting, everyone feared what would happen, but it became clear, during the meeting—what they did, essentially, was share their personal stories with each other. From this, I developed my approach to confronting

subjects like this—you have to start simply, at the human level, from everyone's personal, human story.

It all started at this meeting in June 1992. It took three and a half days for everyone to tell their personal stories. That is, there was a very intensive process of sharing the stories, and then the group decided to continue meeting on a yearly basis. They met in a different place every year—once in Germany, once in Israel, once in the US—the places they came from. We continued to meet from 1992 until 2007. The group's final meeting was at my retirement party in 2007, in Beer Sheva.

In 1998, a German foundation approached us and asked if we would include in our meetings a group of practitioners from contemporary conflicts—not conflicts that happened 60 years ago, but things happening now—from South Africa, Northern Ireland, Palestinians and Israelis.

We agreed to this proposal, and we invited six people from each of these places; we were eighteen [participants], and we invited another eighteen people. The question was, is what we were doing regarding problems of the past relevant to people who have both problems from the past, but also contemporary problems. Afterwards, we had a series of meetings like this, with these same people, and we continued to meet. In 2000, we met once in Germany, then we met in the US, then in Northern Ireland, and what became clear through these meetings was that, yes, the people found that something from this technique of sharing personal stories is relevant to the problems they have in the present.

Nahanni: What was the relevant part? Are we talking about reconciliation?

Dan: I don't know if we were talking about reconciliation; we were trying to clarify the connection between the personal story and the collective story. It became clear that it's difficult for people to speak about this connection, and first of all, you have to allow people to clarify this connection for themselves. Afterwards, to clarify the subjective meaning that everyone has for the concept of reconciliation, if there is such a meaning—it doesn't exist everywhere. In South Africa, for example, that developed generally through the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission]. But in Northern Ireland, in Bosnia, and for us here, the concept of reconciliation is a foreign concept. There is a religious component to this—in South Africa, the two sides belonged to one church. In other places, there are different churches, such as in Northern Ireland, or with us, we're Jews and Muslims for the most part, or in Bosnia, it's different religions. In other words, the religious component is a powerful determining factor in people's understanding of the concept of reconciliation. The concept of reconciliation in Judaism is very different from Christianity. In Judaism, the victim and the perpetrator must reconcile directly, personally; no one can do it for them. In Christianity, each individual can reconcile on behalf of another.

Nahanni: What were the things that translated from your work on the Holocaust to your work with Israelis and Palestinians?

Dan: I began my work in the Israeli/Palestinian context in the mid-1990s. Among other things, at the meeting that we had in 1998, there were people who worked together with me afterwards in PRIME [Peace Research Institute of the Middle East]. Sami [Adwan] was there, and Elia Awad, they came to the meeting in Hamburg, of the TRT group. The German/Jewish group was called TRT, "To Reflect and Trust." But Sami and I had already met in 1996, and we developed a very close personal connection. Today I describe Sami as someone who is like a brother to me. We understood that we have a great deal in common, more than our collectives are ready to accept. What we have in common is the understanding that the only future of this region is a future of peace between us [the Israelis] and the Palestinians, and that this peace is possible only on a basis of equality in the way we relate to each other.

There wasn't equality in our relations [then]. There was a situation, we had an approach of domination toward the Palestinians, an approach of inequality of power, first of all, but at the same time, we had fears of the Palestinians, that they represent the continuation of those who tried to persecute us in Europe, such that there were two opposite inequalities here: The physical inequality on the ground, our control of them; and the second inequality, of our fear of them. If you don't understand these two inequalities, you can't understand why this conflict continues.

I tried to bring this psychological understanding to the problem, and Sami brought his educational approach, because he had worked at Bethlehem University as an educator of educators. He researched the subject of Palestinian and Israeli textbooks, together with numerous other researchers. So I proposed to him, let's try to develop a common textbook that will have two narratives: there will be a Palestinian narrative, and a Jewish Israeli narrative, right next to each other, with a space between them. From these two narratives, it will be possible to see how we explain the conflict, each one to his own people, and each one excluding the other side. Perhaps, by placing the two narratives next to each other, it will allow us to open up something new.

We decided to implement this idea, and from 2002, we took a group of teachers, Palestinian and Israeli, and we worked with them to develop this kind of material. We started with the Balfour Declaration, and we made it to the 1990s. We covered nine historical periods. For every period, there are two narratives. The goal was that the teachers will work with their students to try out the material in their classrooms, and afterwards perhaps we would succeed in convincing the Ministries of Education to adopt the project. We would take upon ourselves only the role of training the teachers, because here the teacher has to work in an entirely different way. It's not easy for the teacher to leap from teaching history as a factual matter to teaching two narratives, which is something entirely different. And we also wanted to move forward, and to do an evaluation of the project. In essence, that is the stage we are at now.

This process takes a very long time, because we are working in terribly difficult circumstances. These are not the conditions of a post-conflict project; we are working while the violence continues, while the public atmosphere, in Israel and among the Palestinians, is moving in precisely the opposite direction, and constantly getting worse

in certain senses. Therefore, to continue such a project at all, to make it sustainable, is almost impossible. It was miraculous, in our eyes, that the teachers agreed to be with us throughout this entire period, and new teachers agreed to join. The positive part for us was that the project has this continuity.

Nahanni: So you see this as a success?

Dan: I see this as a success. I think it is a success not to give up, not to let the difficult reality defeat you, because this difficult reality is an illusion. It creates the feeling that there is no solution, but it is only reflecting how difficult it is to reach the solution, without presenting any proposal what to do. Therefore, we have to believe that there are other possibilities, and as you know also from other projects, these projects generate, in essence, the hope that there are other possibilities.

Nahanni: What did you not succeed in doing with the project?

Dan: We did not succeed in broadening [the scope of] it as we desired, to reach many students, to reach more teachers, because of our limited capabilities. We are only a few people, a small group, perhaps a bit exclusive in this sense, and we would have wanted to reach more teachers, to reach parts of the nation that have not participated in this process. We also wanted to move on to other projects. Sami and I decided to work on a project connected to refugees, because we saw in the refugee problem a central topic that does not have a solution within the framework of the Palestinian- Israeli conflict, and we must confront it. If we do not confront it, we will not understand the heart of the conflict.

We decided to approach this problem from a local, rather than a global, perspective. We chose two places, Haifa, and the Beit Jibrin area, two places where Jews and Arabs once lived alongside each other, before 1948. We tried to interview people who remember that period, from 1948, from both sides, to hear how they speak about that time, and to introduce them to each other. In the case of Beit Jibrin, we brought together two families, three generations of each family, to hear how they tell each other their personal stories. Once again, you see the element of the personal story, and what is passed down from generation to generation, what the refugee passes on to his son and grandson, what a [female] refugee passes on to her daughter and granddaughter. And what in a Jewish family—they met with two Jewish families as well, who live in the same area today, again three generations of each family.

This was a very interesting meeting. It gave me the feeling that—again, this type of meeting has not been attempted, and it is essential that such meetings take place. The possibility to focus the meeting on a place creates a connection between the families, not just about what happened then, but it symbolizes something today as well, for these families. Of course, this doesn't mean that they agree on everything; they still have very different perspectives. But at least to explain these perspectives to each other, to share—they can speak with each other. Right away there was a connection between the older men, and between the young girls. You saw that beyond the conflict, there are other elements that are no less important.

Nahanni: In the meeting in Beit Jibrin, and in the teachers' group, did they discuss the subject of the Holocaust?

Dan: Among the teachers, the subject came up, of course. Also on the Palestinian side. The Palestinians were surprised that our teachers, in the text on the 1940s, spoke about the Holocaust in a relatively brief manner. They wanted to understand why. So then, our teachers added more information about the Holocaust period. I had a feeling that perhaps because this was a Palestinian/Israeli meeting, our teachers did not want to introduce the Holocaust in a comprehensive way, and it was the Palestinians who asked, who wanted to know in greater detail what the Holocaust symbolizes for us. I saw this in part as a product of our work. I think that our project is one of the only cases in which students are learning about the Holocaust in a Palestinian school. The Palestinian teacher teaching the Holocaust from the Israeli perspective—where [else] have you heard of such a thing?

Nahanni: Do you think they did this?

Dan: They did this. In the teachers' classes, they did this. Some of our teachers observed their classes, in which the Palestinian teacher taught the history of the 1940s from a Palestinian point of view, and then from an Israeli, Jewish point of view. It was done under the heading of "the Israeli point of view," but still, that was an achievement, that it was permitted.

In the Beit Jibrin project, the subject of the Holocaust also came up, because when the Palestinian grandfather spoke about what he experienced in the Nakba, one of the Israelis related that his parents came from Europe—they came before the Holocaust, but it doesn't matter. You understand how much each one is still preoccupied with the traumas that his family experienced in the past. You can't erase that.

This doesn't mean that it's necessary to compare. One of the things we learn in our type of work is that suffering cannot be compared. There's no way to know who suffers more or less. Everyone measures suffering in a subjective manner; there's no objective way to measure suffering. And therefore, there's no point to engaging in comparison. There is a point to speaking about what troubles me from the past, and how this connects to things happening in the present—that's the relevance.

Nahanni: How was the dialogue in Germany between children of Holocaust survivors and Germans different from this dialogue, in terms of what you said about the trauma being in the past and the difference with the current reality here.

Dan: There were many differences. First of all, regarding the Holocaust, there is no argument about who was the victim and who was the perpetrator. It's clear to everyone, Germans and Jews, that the victims were the Jews, and other minorities, and the perpetrators were the Nazis. On this subject there's mutual agreement. In essence, on the subject of the Holocaust, a common Jewish/German narrative has developed over the years. This took many years, but today there is a shared narrative. On the

Israeli/Palestinian issue, there is no such agreement. They think we're the perpetrators and we think they're the perpetrators; they think they're the victims and we think we're the victims. And therefore there's no shared narrative for us; there are two different narratives. Our textbook project represents something that we don't think will change, even when a Palestinian state is established. There will still be two different narratives. We have to understand how the other narrative is different from ours; sometimes it is different in a painful way, and it is hard to accept how different it is, but this is our mission. This is one of the most important differences between these two processes.

There are other parameters as well. Here, we are preoccupied with existential, everyday issues; we are fighting over land, over territory, over what was ours, what was theirs, where the border will be. We have here many contemporary issues that don't exist anymore in the German/Jewish instance. We [Germans and Jews] don't live together anymore, almost; there are hardly any Jews living in Germany anymore. In this sense it's clear that for any comparison like this, you have to think of all the parameters, what's different, etc.

What you can learn, however, is the importance of the personal story—the personal life-story. The personal life-story weaves together the past and the present. I think that a Jew living in Israel, perhaps differently from a Jew in America, exists between those two things. A Jew who lives in Israel still lives, in a way, the Holocaust, and he lives, whether he wants to or not, inside the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has to deal with both of them. Therefore, he is forced to think for himself how he will deal with both of these issues. He can't just decide that he will only deal with one and not the other. We don't have that privilege, in my opinion.

Nahanni: What is the difference between this and someone who lives in the United States?

Dan: In my eyes, a Jew in the US, if he wishes—he is still preoccupied with the Holocaust, as part of his family history or other Jews' family histories—but he is not obligated to deal with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. That's not part of his daily existence. If it is, I think sometimes it's because he makes it that way rather than dealing with his existential issues as a Jew in America, that's my feeling.

Nahanni: Do you see that as a problem?

Dan: What, that he concerns himself with [Israel] rather than his own existential problems?

Nahanni: That he doesn't need to deal with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict?

Dan: I don't see that as a problem. I see it as good that he concerns himself with things that are truly important to him, as a Jew, let's say a secular Jew in America. What is the positive meaning of being a secular Jew in the United States? I think that the Holocaust, that's a negative meaning, how they wanted to conspire against us. He must find

something positive for himself. I also think that we, here, must find something positive for ourselves. The conflict, sometimes, gets in the way of our finding a positive meaning for our presence here in this region. I hope that we will find a positive meaning, because if we don't, we won't be here in this region, because clearly, our life in this region is hard. If we find a positive role for ourselves, what we can do for ourselves and for others, what others can do for us, that will grant meaning to our presence in this region.

Nahanni: Do you think it's easier to think of yourself as a victim, rather than a perpetrator?

Dan: Yes, it's easier. It's tempting, but there is a danger that this way, you will create an illusion for yourself, an unrealistic bubble, in which you don't understand that you are also a perpetrator. We are also perpetrators toward the Palestinians. To deny the role of perpetrator, when you play that role in reality... listen to what soldiers say about their military service in the Territories. This week we saw a film in which eight female soldiers who served in the Territories told about the terrible things they were required to do. That's part of their existence. Young people, our children, our grandchildren—we cannot ignore what this is doing to them.

Nahanni: As both a psychologist and academic, you've studied this and understand what the problem looks like, but do you have a solution? Do you have a prescription?

Dan: No, I can't say I have a proposal how to resolve the conflict. At the political level, it is so difficult right now. But I can say what is necessary—you need two parallel processes. The top-down process, in which the political level needs to provide solutions, and the bottom-up process that has to come from the grassroots level. I can see much more what needs to happen at the grassroots level, in order for there to be a change. This was what was missing in Oslo. In Oslo, there was not enough of this process. I hope that next time we arrive at an attempt to deal with this at the political level, there will be more importance granted to the bottom-up process. An integration of these two processes, synchronization between them, can create a positive situation. That is what is needed. I can't say when this will happen and how this will happen, but I can say that it's clear to me that this is what needs to happen.

Nahanni: Is there also an internal process, for each person here?

Dan: Yes. Look, dialogue is always a dialogue with yourself, and a dialogue with others. I begin with the assumption that we are complex creatures. We are made from many different parts that don't necessarily fit together, and we have to understand that complexity. Our ability to have a dialogue between the different parts of ourselves, that's what creates the possibility and meaning of our identity. Only when there is such a dialogue is there a meaning to dialogue with others. If there is no internal dialogue, then dialogue with others is flat, because you can't understand their complexity. Dialogue, for me, is the combination of these two processes: dialogue with different parts of myself, that are hard for me to understand, for example, my role, as an Israeli, as a perpetrator—with different parts of the other, for example, the good parts of the other, which I tend to

ignore. Only when these two processes occur, do I see growth happening. That's my psychological framework for what human beings are.

Nahanni: There are people who say dialogue is just talk, and is actually harmful.

Dan: I think that dialogue is harmful when it is superficial. When it doesn't include the complexity that I just described. But if it includes the understanding of my own complexity, and the complexity of others, and a readiness for conversation between these multiple voices... Also within Israeli society, there must be dialogue. We are today composed of five different societies between which there are almost no connections: there are Ultra-Orthodox religious Jews, there are Russian immigrants, the veteran Israeli society, the periphery and the Mizrahi Jewish communities. We have between us this disconnect, instead of dialogue. In my eyes, disconnection is more dangerous than dialogue. But creating dialogue is not easy. In a situation of disconnections, it's especially difficult.

Nahanni: Would you like to speak about your health, and how it is to look at your career in retrospective?

Dan: I will perhaps say that I'm not currently in a good situation in terms of health. I have a growth in my brain, for the last year and a half. I cope with it, and it is not easy. But I have very much support from my family, and I benefit greatly from their help on a daily basis, and that helps me keep going in this situation. And also the belief that, in this situation, to continue doing what I believe in, even if it is more difficult to read or write right now due to the impairment of my vision. But as much as I can, in my relationship with Sami, in our work with the teachers, in the context of my limitations, I keep going. And that's my struggle for life, for the meaning of my life.