

Is It Safe Here?

Category: Traumatized

written by Pamela Adelstein | November 25, 2023

I have always been aware that I am Jewish. In the antisemitic neighborhood where I was raised, my unique religious identity was central to all interactions. I was perpetually othered. Supposedly I was smart because I was Jewish. My (ugly) appearance was Jewish. My (weird) last name was Jewish. I was different. Undesirable.

My neighbors and schoolmates attacked my sense of safety. They vandalized our house repeatedly, blocked the street to prevent me from riding my bicycle, called me names, and threw money at me. My best friend, my original righteous Gentile, was forbidden by her parents to have dinner or sleepover at my house because I am Jewish.

These core experiences inform my experience of the Israel-Hamas war today. By no coincidence, I reside in a city with a substantial Jewish population, and so, perhaps naively, I feel somewhat safe. But when I venture to work, I pause to re-evaluate.

My patients, many of whom identify as LGBTQIA+, immigrants or BIPOC, describe their lack of safety. Their parents rejected them for being trans. They changed schools after peers teased them for being queer. Governments rendered them invisible because of their girlhood. Physicians fat shamed them or centered every interaction on their HIV+ status. Patients cautiously share, waiting to see how I respond. I work hard to create a trauma-informed space. I wish I could track down the perpetrators of these offenses and create a do-over. I offer hugs and validation, hoping to mitigate their hurt.

At work I sublimate and compartmentalize my past traumas. But after the Hamas invasion of Israel, the personal feels more political. If a patient has a Jewish or Arabic name, I tiptoe forward... "Have current events been affecting you?" My Jewish patients spill out their fears and ask about my own experiences. When I gently commiserate, they exhale, feeling seen. When my Arabic patients reveal their worries, I try to hold space for the terror and helplessness of being far from loved ones trapped in a war.

Even after years spent processing my past, I am woefully unprepared for the existential crisis I face today as a Jewish person. My primal childhood fears resurface. Fear of erasure. Fear of having no place of belonging. Fear of being blamed for distorted notions outside my control. Despite this, I push through my emotions daily to show up, choose kindness, do good work and care for others.

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