



29.11.24

What is healing about Healing Space?

This past year has been one of great darkness, deep shattering and grief but also one of hope and bonding – we have witnessed the faith and unconditional connections between us that are the strength of who we are as a nation connecting us all through unseen but vivid threads of life.

As a researcher, and therapist It has been my life mission to create systems that support life and thriving through connecting individuals to their unique gifts, to nature and to others as a way to live a life of meaning in service to others. From a wide perspective I can see that my whole life prepared me for these times, instigating the creation of Merchav Marpe/ Healing Space as an unplanned but only natural response to 7/10.

For weeks we were treading on unknown but sacred terrain, trying to find our way amid circumstances and people that we met for the first time with reverence as in touching the fragility of life itself. As I write I am overcome by the greatness of the opportunity that we had to show up so fully and lovingly for our survivors when all else seemed to fail them.

The days, weeks and months following the 7th of October were a whirlwind of good intention, chaos, unconditional support and lots of learning. My initial vision became a mutual creation shared by hundreds of volunteers, professionals and people who together created an innovative life supporting system that provided healing for the survivors while supporting the care givers in a web of relationships that created mutual support and healing in community.

Merchav Marpe/ Healing Space became an example of how healthy healing may be experienced in the natural environment supported by community. In retrospective this innovative life sustaining system holds wisdom and teachings that may help us in the long process ahead of healing while supporting new structures and systems that empower individuals and communities to thrive.

In the following pages I will share the wisdom extracted from my experience that is also based on the daily staff meetings I managed, data derived from the preliminary research and conversations with all involved.

The Six basic principles characterizing Merhav Marpe:

1. First Principle: the human network
2. Second Principle: integrative perspective and interventions



3. Third Principle: personal responsibility and agency
4. Forth Principle: Not knowing as a way of knowing
5. Fifth Principle: the unique setting active in healing
6. Sixth Principle – spirituality and meaning

The First Principle: the human network

The success of Healing Space is due foremost to the hundreds of people who showed up day after day, each taking on a task in what became an interconnected human network bound by acts of kindness. These volunteers showed up every day coming from far and close, doctors and therapists, drivers, artists, herbalists and organizers... each doing what he or she knows to do best. By sharing a common goal – to do all we can to support the emotional, physical, social and spiritual healing of the survivors, we created an interconnected human network that became an example of a life supporting system. Within this network the volunteers were also supported, working as a community of care givers – not having to go through this alone minimized secondary trauma. We tended to the caregivers who started each day with a professional workshop and ended each shift with a staff meeting as a way to make sure that everyone's needs and understandings were taken into consideration. In this way, the survivors and the care givers were both giving and receiving by mutual acts of grace and gratitude by which strong ties were made and each one was appreciated, seen as meaningful in the combined effort toward health and healing that was not a personal venture but a communal effort empowering the people.

The Second Principle: integrative perspective and interventions

For the past century science on trauma has pointed to the fact that traumatic events effect the mind body and psyche, as such healing trauma must address ones psychological, emotional, somatic, neurological, and physical needs. This was very apparent in the initial days when the survivors' who came were so deeply fragmented, had lost trust in themselves and others, could not sleep or eat and held experiences that were beyond utterable. We had to create a haven that would help them feel safe enough to trust and make basic contact. This compelled us to create a safe setting where they would feel comfortable enough to start the healing process through the various routs offered which entailed- **psychological support** through speech therapy **physical support** through massage therapy, acro balance, walking barefoot connecting to stability of earth and yoga therapy, **emotional support** by expressing emotions through



music and art workshops, and after a few weeks even trance therapy, **spiritual support** through prayers, gratitude wall, ceremony and creation and **social support** that was very central to their healing involving sitting and sharing in small groups, eating together, music jams and more. In this way we offered numerous ways to heal the fragmentation of trauma by experiencing with connections to body, emotion, spirit and others – in a safe, nonjudgmental, healthy and healing environment.

The Third Principle: personal responsibility and agency

We believe that every person has the natural intelligence to heal when provided the sufficient conditions. This idea was apparent by the way we welcomed each person inviting them to be curious and research the different routes offered to healing. By giving them agency we were we were empowering them while inviting them to be active and responsible for their healing process. To be precise with the help we could offer under the conditions and as not to fail expectations, the caregivers were named “supporters” and the survivors were related to as “guests”. In many ways this was also our way of working in a constant flow between the caregivers and the those receiving so relationships were not characterized by hierarchy but more as ‘figuring this out together’. In this way we as therapists did a lot of reaching out rather than waiting for them to approach us, searching for the right relationship to support healing.

The message relayed was that you may not have had control over what happened to you, but you have the freedom to choose how you response to what happened. From this perspective instead of falling into victim mode we kept on believing and supporting their resilience, strengths and responsibility emphasizing the control they do have by making the right choices for their future.

The Forth Principle: Not knowing as a way of knowing

Merchav Marpe brings an innovative mind set to mental health, we were never in a situation like this and as such felt the need to create an approach and setting that could tend to the specific needs arising. To create something that did not exist before requires the ability to go beyond the known and traditional ways. For me this consisted of **Not Knowing** as a way to learn what was needed while practicing the ability to stay with the unpredictable. How did we create this new modality? By being very present and attentive to the survivors needs (that changed by the day) and to the needs of the staff. By staying very involved and present – the specific mode of intervention presented itself again and again. This was not an easy task and many professionals criticized this path but this to was important and the professional team spent hours discussing the pros and



cons of each aspect in Healing Space - led by the ethical principle held by practitioners “striving to benefit the person while taking care to do no harm”. From this perspective our interventions were “bottom up” instead of imposing our ideas and knowledge we asked what is coming up now? What do they need? And how can we best serve that need?

This called for a very flexible and ever-changing work flow that combined using all the expertise and experience we had, and consulting with the best mental health professionals in Israel while always staying open to new ways of doing things. This is what enabled us to create the training for “supporters of life” when nobody showed up for group therapy or the need to have mutual staff meetings to gain a better understanding on what the body is telling us as well as the psyche. Or the appearance of family members of the deceased requiring us to close Fridays and build a special design centering on grief. This mindset guided us in creating the unique physical setting.

The Fifth Principle: the unique setting active in healing

Just as the modality was a work in process so was the physical setting. We are affected by our physical and social environment therefore a main part of the healing process is to provide an environment that is healthy, uplifting and safe.

Nature: With over 30 years of experience as a nature based experiential therapist, I knew the benefits of working outside where the setting is less formal, beautiful, resonating what is alive and changing and open to the natural course of life. These attributes were welcoming for this population who at large would not receive help from a trauma center or hot line and had reservation around treatment as well as feeling flawed.

Flexible setting: Nature is an important part in the healing process but we also found the need to change the setting in accordance to where the survivors were in their process. An example would be the setting in the initial days that was soft and holding consisting of soft quiet music and lots of bean bags. Within a week we saw that people were slouching in the bean bags needing to be more active we changed the setting switching sitting areas to workshop areas. Within a few weeks we felt the need to connect them to what they love most and began offering trance music by earphones.

Beauty: a big part of grief and loss is the ability to hold the pain while being aware of the beauty in life. Surrounded by beauty also elicits a message that healing is a sacred path and instead of feeling ashamed, damaged or alone this is a regenerative process that is holy and wholling.



In sum, the setting is active and changing while holding clear boundaries and contract ensuring **the physical, emotional and social safety of all involved.**

Sixth Principle – spirituality and meaning

The importance of a spiritual connection is rated in scientific literature as one of the most significant aspects of healing and resilience. From our perspective this entails making meaning of the traumatic experience, deriving aspects of strength, friendship and hope from the most horrific stories and being able to see the bigger picture. For many of the survivors their traumatic experience was understood as a punishment. By bringing in rabbis who talked to them, and asking them why their life was spared and what they were called to do, we were able to help them begin their personal journey in search of meaning.

The natural environment portraying the non-personal and natural course of life and death as part of the whole is important in these lessons.

Gratitude, acts of kindness, believing in the beauty and goodness of life were integrated daily in many ways including lighting candles and saying prayer, writing what we are thankful for on the gratitude wall, ceremonies for the deceased and for life, and Friday Kabbalat shabbat.

Conclusions: In sum, the principles and characteristics of healing space uncover a unique healing process by which one is placed in a setting and experience that contradicts the traumatic experience and as such may be healing in several ways, for example:

Characteristics of Traumatic Experience	Characteristics of Healing Space
Helplessness and victim	agent of change and taking control
Cruelty	Kind eyes and actions
Ineffable experience	Non verbal and creative ways to heal
Disassociation	Making healing connections
Feeling damaged	You are a hero worthy of a good life
Loneliness	Belonging to community
Amnesia, anesthesia and avoidance	safe space to feel and share
Loss of trust in people	Good eyes and authentic generosity
Experience of desecration and death	experiencing life: aesthetics, beauty, and holiness
Intrusive thoughts	mindful activities
Imbalance – over stimulated or disconnected	connecting to breath, body and earth



Unable to imagine the future	helping create a new identity
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Last words and future projects:

The miracle of Merchav Marpe is embedded in the hundreds of people who were willing to take action in service to our people, this nation and humanity. Our belief in healing, our deep love and responsibility for our people underlined our actions supporting life. Most of the time this called for letting go of ideas, positions, frameworks, offering the gift of kind presence, the privilege to look in the eyes of the broken and offer a bowl of soup, to bring softness to shattered hearts. The challenges and at times chaos were great – the absence of structure, roles, and finances while at war was hard, but the common goal was greater.

I have witnessed the strength of this nation in our darkest times showing up through endless acts of humanity, grace and kindness, this is our greatest asset bringing hope and future prospect.

I want to thank each and every one of you for bringing light to the dark and especially to Rani and Healing farm Rishpon for providing this project with the ground for growth. After three months of total dedication to Merchav Marpe/ Healing Space, following the move to Rishpon, my experience and knowledge was called for in other contexts among populations in need. Today my team and I are dedicated to researching and creating healing spaces toward the creation of a network of nature-based healing spaces rooted in community to support the long path of healing ahead.

A glimpse at the projects we in Merchav Marpe/Healing Space are involved in now:

- Creating and facilitating a unique training course on creating and holding healing spaces for grief. For an interview with Francis Weller <https://www.leanaor.com/healing-space>
- Professional guidance in creating healing retreats for our soldiers in Playa Venó Panama offering 7 days of integrative intervention including therapeutic surfing. For a look at the retreat <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-Dmn0GOoGf/>
- Healing days for our care givers offering them a space to grieve and heal while nurturing their needs and connecting them to the simplicity and beauty in life.
- Courses on integrating nature in therapy for practitioners with “mashabim” and in education with the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI)
- Creating and leading nature-based journeys for survivors and soldiers
- Healing retreats (3 days at a nature-based venue) for the spouses of the soldiers in dire need of support



- Providing professional support and guidance to “David’s circle” in Thailand
<https://www.algemeiner.com/2024/09/23/israeli-nonprofit-started-friends-nova-massacre-victim-opens-healing-center-thailand-oct-7-survivors/>

With prayers for our hostages to come home today, for the wounded to find healing, for the uprooted to come home, and for us as a people to unite in building a safe home for growth and thriving,

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