



## International Connections

By Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

**W**hat a delight and an honor to be contributing to this new, fresh, and innovative magazine about somatic psychotherapy. It is a real privilege to practice as a body-psychotherapist today, as the psychoanalytic world is becoming increasingly curious and open to hear about and possibly integrate the somatic practices. Perhaps the time for wider acceptance of (some of) Reich's ideas has come, the same ideas which once instigated such resistance and fears, to the extent of burning tons of his books not that long ago, in 1956.

**In its intricate political and sociocultural matrix,** Israel, where I now live, is a unique place to practice body psychotherapy. On the one hand you can find the Muslim and Jewish orthodoxy for which attention to body in general and touch in particular is a definite taboo. On the other, Tel Aviv is considered one of the most open cities in the world for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community.

**Most Israeli Jewish men and women** who come to therapy have served two or three years in the army, having developed particular muscular and emotional armour. Whether the security threats are real or not, most people in Israel live in a state of hyper-arousal, hypervigilance, and defensiveness characteristic of trauma clients.

**At the same time,** many of my clients grew in a Kibbutz, and, as was customary, were separated from their parents only few days after birth, their attachment system is confused, disorganised yet normalised by society. Imagine working with someone who was parented by a collective community with no personal attachments and is therefore struggling to establish and maintain self-regulatory capacities? Or in a post-traumatic country, where dissociation is frequently the defence of choice (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2009). Can you fathom the complexities of therapeutic trust and encouragement of openness when the more common societal messages involve being-on-guard, conflict and mistrust?

**In this regular column,** I hope to share with you some of my experiences and challenges as an Israeli relational body-psychotherapist (and as a person). But perhaps, before moving on I should introduce myself.

**My name is Asaf.** I am a father to two lovely girls (Zohar and Shuy) and a husband to Tom (a unisex name in Hebrew). I love music and dancing. I also love wildlife and am slightly obsessed with tattoos. If it wasn't for Tom, I'd probably sport a full body-suit by now. After living and practicing in the UK for eleven years, my family and I returned to Israel about three years ago and are still trying to integrate both worlds (sometimes more successfully than others).

**I am also a psychotherapist, writer, and trainer** for about sixteen years. As a psychotherapist, my work is relational body-psychotherapy, integrating trancework and Reichian body-psychotherapy within a relational framework. I enjoy writing and have written dozens of professional papers on psychotherapy, body-psychotherapy, hypnosis, and their integration. I am an international board member for *Body-Psychotherapy Publications* and an associate editor for *Body, Dance and Movement in Psychotherapy*. My book about relational body psychotherapy will be published in the next few months (in Hebrew, in Israel) and will hopefully be translated into English at some point. My PhD dissertation (*Surrender to Flow*), focused on the moments of surrender in three different fields: relational psychoanalysis, body-psychotherapy and hypnosis, and these three form the axes of my theoretical and clinical curiosity.

**As a trainer,** I have been teaching and training in Israel and Europe, in both academic and clinical settings, and am still coming to Europe regularly to teach. The Israeli scene of body-psychotherapy is very exciting, and I am privileged to bring some of the European developments into the training. One of the greater challenges in moving from the UK to Israel concerns the status of body-psychotherapy. In the UK (and many other countries in Europe), body-psychotherapy is considered a relatively known and respectful psychotherapy modality, well acknowledged as a legitimate system of theory and clinic for providing psychological service, and accepted within all major umbrella organizations. Moreover, such acceptance assisted an integration within modern analytic ideas and establishments such as Chiron (Hartley, 2009), as well as individuals like Nick Totton (1998, 2002, 2003, 2005) have contributed to the British growth of relational body-psychotherapy in its on-going fertile dialogue with other therapeutic modalities.

**In Israel, on the other hand,** the Israeli Psychological Association is a very powerful institution, which for years monopolized the psychological arena. Body-psychotherapy in Israel has indeed been taught for some years, but is still considered esoteric, bordering on

complementary and alternative therapies and less a psychological profession. And so, from working as an established professional, alongside psychologists and psychiatrists, within National Health Services and publishing in professional journals, I have become a practitioner of pseudo-psychological esoteric bodymind alternative medicine.

**This complex situation** is one of the primary motivators for me in writing and creating a comprehensive training programme and attempting to reclaim the professional place that body-psychotherapy deserves: within the ranks of psychotherapeutic practice and not at its margins, touching on alternative medicine or new-age religion. Together with three wonderful colleagues, we have created, structured and are planning to launch this year a three-year post-graduate programme (for practicing clinicians) in contemporary body-psychotherapy, which will focus on psychodynamic and relational body-psychotherapy.

**This training aims** to help mental health clinicians integrate embodied philosophies, principles and indeed techniques in their practice. Alongside the core course, there will be modular courses in philosophy, diagnosis and interventions.

### **Relational Body-Psychotherapy Occurs in Moments of Presence and Knowing**

**One day, Sharon**, a woman who grew up in a Kibbutz, arrived to the therapy room beaming with pleasure. Our previous session was a very challenging session, where I had disappointed her as well as got upset with her response. She explained her delight: "I was waiting to receive a text message or an email from you telling me that therapy was over, but you are here." Even though it was clear to me that therapy should continue, her sentence was nonetheless resonant, the thought had indeed crossed my mind, and at the time I pondered about it. *How come a difficult session made me want to call the whole thing off?* I knew that working through our difficulty was the right thing but I felt practically ashamed for having her in my room.

**Sharon is a sixty-year old woman** who left the kibbutz at twenty. Her earliest memories concern the dreaded journey from her parents' room in the Kibbutz back to the children's quarter, where she was to spend the night. Only one girl from her class-year spent the night with her own parents, and their family was criticized for being individualist and spoiled; Sharon yearned for her mother to insist that she, too, stay the night with them. Her mother did not. Even though she has been seeing me for nearly three years, and our connection is solid, every tiny rupture is immediately conceived as the end of therapy. She is familiar neither with repair nor with dyadic-regulation. Instead, Sharon knows how to survive, and she does it extremely well.

**As Sharon learns to engage** with me more fully, relationally and bodily, her survival skills are challenged. Suddenly, it is not as easy to function in the world. Should I support her in maintaining a defensive and numb yet functioning stance? Should I acknowledge her need to fall apart? Need I give provision for that? Allow the girl to "spend the night" when knowing she would pay a price for that in a society still bound in deep shaming of the needy, the interdependent, the vulnerable? While these questions would probably engage clinicians anywhere, I feel that the Israeli socio-political attachment system presents an even more complex set of questions, since the very therapeutic endeavour of opening to tenderness and authenticity as well as the softening of body-mind defences might threaten to weaken the individual in their social environment.

**Body psychotherapist Julianne Appel-Opper** (Appel-Opper, 2010) would probably call it *the culture in the body & the body in the culture*. As a relational body-psychotherapist, cultural, racial, gender, sexual and generational con-

texts are central to my curious engagement in therapy. In this column, I hope, together, we can grow greater curiosity to the manner in which these aspects find their way into embodiment.

**I hope that we can share** some interests and dialogue, and I welcome your feedback, comments, questions and challenges. You can email me at [asaf@imt.co.il](mailto:asaf@imt.co.il)

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