From Demonization to Identification: How Parents Who Lost Children in Terrorist Attacks Perceive the Attacker

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The aim of this article is to examine how bereaved parents who lost children in terrorist attacks in Israel perceive the terrorist attack perpetrators. Forty bereaved parents were interviewed using a semi-structured in-depth interview. The content analysis revealed a typology of reactions to the Arab attackers that included perceiving them as objects of anger, hate, and revenge; as demons; as negligible; and as people with whom they could identify. The way bereaved parents perceive the Arab attackers serves as a coping resource. Follow-up research to examine the efficacy of the different types of reactions towards attackers would contribute to gaining a deeper understanding of the coping process that bereaved parents experience.

KEYWORDS: bereavement, terrorism, loss of a child, perception of the attacker, coping

The loss of a child is one of the most traumatic life experiences (Malkinson & Bar-Tur, 1999). There are numerous factors that affect the parents’ grief level, such as the age of the child and the circumstances and characteristics of the death (Murphy et al., 1998). Terror attacks including abruptness and cruelty may strengthen the pathogenic nature of bereavement (Baron, 2004). Loss and exposure to terror attacks are both traumatic events that shatter life assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) and cause depression, anger, and pain,
leading to a need to regain emotional equilibrium (Malkinson, Rubin, & Witztum, 2005).

Theoretical and empirical lacunas exist with regard to the way trauma victims, including bereaved parents, perceive the attackers. Perception of attackers has been studied from several viewpoints, such as among victims of captivity, battered women, and incest victims. Yet, in the field of terrorism it seems that most of the literature deals either with terrorist attackers or with the implications of terrorism on the victims’ lives (Berko, 2004; Cohen-Louck, 2008; Saka, 2008). Just a few studies have examined the way bereaved parents who lost a child in a terrorist attack perceive the Arab attackers. Examination of this issue in the state of Israel is particularly important, due to the continuous historical conflict between the two sides: Jews and Arabs.

The coping process offers bereaved parents an opportunity to recognize the new reality of their lives by helping them to construct new frames of reference for the self, the other, and the world (Neimeyer, 2000). The reconstruction process enables grieving individuals to express pain, come to terms with their loss, and even to experience personal growth. The ordeal of struggling is vital for coping, as it strengthens the individual (Fischer, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 2006). Coping with trauma, including bereavement, utilizes both internal and external resources, such as beliefs and basic worldviews, defense mechanisms, personal strengths, and social support, which mediate between the traumatic event and the development of psychopathology (Avitzur, 1987).

There are several main victim reactions towards the attackers: demonization, vengeance, forgiveness, compensation, and identification. “Demonization” means to perceive the other as evil by nature, inferior, and inhuman—someone who aims to destroy you (Alon & Omer, 2005). Such portrayals of the attacker turn him into a target for persecution (Ayalon, 1998). Demonization legitimizes feelings of hatred and the will to eliminate others, especially with regard to groups viewed as being different (Flashman, 2003).

In situations of conflict between people or nations, there is a tendency to perceive the enemy as alienated, since it is difficult to directly identify with his suffering and self-justifications. The more severe the conflict, the more people tend to divide the universe into groups of “them” and “us,” until ultimately the opposing side seems so different that there is little chance of understanding it or sharing its views. Demonization entails the collapse of empathy, the onset of hostility, and the desire for revenge (Alon & Omer, 2005).

Herman (1992) introduced three types of phantasmagoric reactions that characterize victims’ attitudes towards their attackers. First, the fantasy of revenge constitutes a mirror image of the traumatic memory in which the roles of victim and attacker are reversed. The inability to forgive includes feelings of bitterness and hate alongside the need for retaliation against the
attacker (Worthington & Wade, 1999). The victims envision revenge as the only way to minimize the asymmetry between the attacker and themselves (Fitness, 2001). Still, repeated fantasies of revenge increase their mental torment (Laufer, Brett, & Gallops, 1985).

Some victims are repulsed by fantasies of revenge and attempt to circumvent their rage through the fantasy of forgiveness—the second reaction type according to Herman (1992). Victims envision that it is within their power to eliminate the anger through defiant acts of love. Yet the forgiveness fantasy may increase their suffering to the point of torture, since in most cases it proves to be beyond people's ability. The attacker needs to request and deserve it, usually through remorse and compensation to the victim. Forgiveness is considered a highly significant factor in emotional relief (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001).

The third reaction type is the compensation fantasy. As the victim has suffered harm, he or she feels entitled to compensation, which often constitutes a significant part of the psychological healing process. The compensation fantasy represents acknowledgment of the harm done and an apology from or even humiliation of the attacker, aimed at rectifying the wrong done. Interventions such as restorative justice play an important role in the healing process. Restorative justice is a process that involves both victim and attacker for the purpose of defining the extent of the damage caused by the attacker and addressing the victim's needs (Zehr, 2002).

The victim may soften the dichotomy between the attacker and her- or himself and lessen demonization by displaying identification and empathy towards him (Bar-Zohar, 2008). This process is labeled “identification with the aggressor,” a well-known defense mechanism whereby the victim has an emotional need to bond with the aggressor, understand his attributes, and even imitate his aggressive behavior (Freud, 1966). Although identification with the aggressor is a healthy defense mechanism, since it empowers victims by allowing them to adjust to threatening situations and helps them to regain control, it may lead to aggressive behavior (Melsky, 2004).

The “Stockholm syndrome” is another form of victim identification with the aggressor, which appears in unique situations such as captivity. Similar to identification with the aggressor, the victim is sensitive to the attacker's needs. This psychological process serves as a survival strategy (Graham, Rawlings, & Rigsby, 1994).

Israeli society is in a complex security and political situation with regard to Arabs, who are considered the enemy that must be contained (Bar-On, 2005). This perception emerged from the historical memory of the Holocaust (Gluzman, 1998), which serves as a psychological mechanism manifested in the transference of violent feelings towards the Nazis onto the Arabs. However, in the past few years a change has occurred in the Jewish-Israeli identity with regard to the way they perceive the Arabs. In the 1970s, the monolithic perception of Jews and Arabs began to crumble. It was replaced
by a more complex perception of the Arabs as potential partners for dialogue and coexistence (Bar-On, 2000).

The changed attitudes toward Arabs were reflected in a study conducted on bereaved parents who lost children in the military or in a terror attack. Some of the participants emphasized the need for a reconciliation process that was not based on hatred or conflict (Shayan, 2004). However, another Israeli study showed an opposite response: Anger and rage among bereaved parents toward the enemy, the government, and the army was a central motif in coping (Ronel & Lebel, 2006). This response renders the forgiveness option irrelevant.

Loss of a child and the grieving process may also lead to a sense of guilt among bereaved parents who lost their child in a terror attack. Perhaps projecting guilt feelings by blaming society for the child's death provides a meaning construction that can bring some relief to the bereaved parent (Possick, Sadeh, & Shamai, 2008).

The present study focuses on how bereaved parents who lost children in a terrorist attack perceive the Arab attackers and maps the set of reactions in relation to this issue.

METHOD

Participants

This article is part of a larger study examining the traumatic experience of bereaved parents who lost children in terrorist attacks in Israel, and its purpose is to examine how Israeli bereaved parents perceive Arab attackers. A total of 40 bereaved parents (28 mothers, 12 fathers) were located and interviewed in 2006–2007. Three couples from the sample were married and interviewed separately; 10 others declined to participate (due to emotional burden and difficulty in talking about the loss). The parents ranged in age from 29 to 59, 12 had an academic education, 23 had a post–high school vocational education, and five had a high school education. Religious orientation was as follows: religious-Orthodox (10), traditional religious (9), and secular (21). The average age of the child at the time of death was 17.7, and the average time since the loss was 5 years. Most of the children were civilians. Ten of the participants were immigrants from the former Soviet Union. All terror attacks took place during the second Intifada. The deceased children were killed by shooting attacks, suicide bombings, and intrusions into their homes.

Data Collection

The study is based on the qualitative paradigm and used semistructured in-depth interviews. The qualitative approach emphasizes subjectivity and the
way people understand, construct, analyze, and interpret their emotional world. (Denzin, 1995).

The participants were told that the purpose of the study was to examine the parental bereavement experience, including the way they perceive the Arab attacker. In order to gain information, the interviewer asked specific questions such as “How do you perceive the attacker?” “What are his motives?” “Do you understand them?” and “What characteristics do you attribute to him?” During the interviews, the participants constructed the narrative, which emphasized the way they perceived the attacker.

A content analysis of the parents’ interviews was conducted according to the principles of grounded theory. This research method aims to construct theory from analytical categories that emerge from data gathered in the field. The research categories are created during the study while taking into account the participant’s sociocultural context (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Data Analysis
The researchers located 17 of the 40 bereaved parents through reports in the written and electronic media and 23 by snowball sampling. Due to the high sensitivity of the topic, a snowball technique was used in order to have mediation between the interviewer and the participants. Before consenting, participants were told that the purpose of the study was to examine the parental bereavement experience, including the way they perceived the Arab attacker. Most interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes; a few were conducted in coffee shops. Parents consented to recording the interview. There was no past acquaintance between the interviewers and the interviewees.

Data were collected in 2006–2007 over a period of 18 months. At the start of each interview, the participants were asked to introduce themselves in any way they saw fit. Most of them began by describing personal details such as name, age, and number of children. This was followed by a description of their experience of dealing with the loss of their child and of how they perceive the attacker.

Data collection, analysis, and transcription were conducted by the researchers. Quotes were written as they were phrased by the participants. Categories were created after the recorded interviews were transcribed. Each category was given a title that described its content. An attempt was also made to reduce the number of categories and to unify them as far as possible. Examples of the subcategories are demonization, anger, empathy, and similarities between Jews and Arabs. The main categories were formalized in the next phase—for example, perception of the Arab attacker, constructing his profile, and understanding his motives.

To ensure the reliability of the categories and subcategories, they were reviewed by two qualitative researchers who specialize in the fields of trauma, loss, and qualitative research.
Ethical Issues

Qualitative research requires developing trust with the participants, especially when the research deals with traumatic and painful issues. Therefore, a few ethical issues were taken into consideration. Before the parents consented to participate in the study, the purpose of the study was explained to them and both confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. In order to guaranty their anonymity, the parents were given pseudonyms. Prior to the interview, the parents gave their consent to the conversation being recorded. This allowed the researchers to pay more attention to the content of the interviews. Before and during interviews, the respondents were given the opportunity to raise disturbing thoughts or to stop the interview at any point if and when the emotional burden became unbearable. At the end of every interview, the researchers stayed to ensure that the participant’s emotional state was stable.

RESULTS

The main theme focused on participants’ perception of the Arab attacker as the entity responsible for their personal victimization. Researchers paid attention to the terminology used and linguistic choices made by the bereaved parents to describe attitudes towards the attacker. This theme was divided into subcategories emphasizing a range of perceptions: the attacker as a subject of hate and anger, the attacker as a demon, the attacker as deserving revenge, and the attacker as negligible, as well as the encounter between victim and attacker and identification.

The Attacker as a Subject of Hate and Anger

Most of the parents expressed feelings of pure hatred toward Arab attackers. Varda generalized her negative feeling towards the attacker to include all Arabs:

I hate all the Arabs. ... I was at a gathering with other bereaved parents and one of the mothers said: “I only hate the terrorists. I do not hate the Arabs.” Her son was murdered only 5 months ago, in my opinion she did not yet understand. I hate all Arabs. ... When we renovated our house, the foreman came and my husband asked him “Do you work with Jewish or Arab ... no Arab would enter my home.”

Zeev, likewise, responded with hate and the inability to forgive the Arab nation in general and the attacker in particular:

I hate them. We need to throw them all out of here to one of the Arab countries. Before the murder I was friendly with them, and after the
murder they asked for my forgiveness and said they were embarrassed; even so today I am more extreme right-wing in my views. We need to remain in our place and prove to them … that the harder they strike the more they’ll lose.

Shulamit described the close personal and professional relationships she had with Arabs. However, the loss of her son led to a range of negative feelings towards them, such as anger, hate, distrust, and detachment. Their empathy for Shulamit and her family did not reduce the intensity of those negative emotions:

My husband had many Arab workers … we had very good relations. After the incident, my husband could not speak with them. … They knew our child, and they said they felt hurt, one of them told my husband … I hurt for you, I am constantly thinking about you, we are not to blame. My husband does not want to hear from them, under no circumstances.

Maggy is one of the dozens of parents who lost a child in a Tel Aviv dance club. The vicious nature of the attack on teenagers who “just wanted to have some fun” intensified her feelings of animosity towards the attacker:

There is no forgiveness for what they did. I am a loving, tolerant person and I always thought we could find a solution. There is enough for both Jews and Arabs, but after what they did we cannot forgive. They cold-bloodedly murdered. What did the children do to them? If I could I would have eliminated not only the terrorist but also all the Arabs.

Contrary to the bereaved parents who expressed hatred and resentment towards the attackers, some parents specifically blamed government and army policies. The policy of restraint and the demonstration of “weakness” towards the destructive acts of the Arab enemy did not match the expectations that led Marina to immigrate to Israel from Russia. In her view, the sense of belief in Israel’s strength was shattered:

When I was in Russia and read the newspaper, Israel was always portrayed as the aggressor … I thought it was a strong country, but after our children were murdered there was not even a strong military retaliation. I am very angry about that.

The Attacker as a Demon

Some parents mapped negative and demonic characteristics of the Arabs, creating a clear dichotomy between the Jewish victim and the Arab attacker. This dichotomy emphasizes the moral differences between the two. These
bereaved parents tended to refer not only to the individual attacker but to Arabs as a whole, whom they generally portrayed in negative terms. For example, Shira presented a one-dimensional profile that described the attacker in negative terms only. By regarding him as “an animal,” she dismisses the possibility of having any type of dialogue or reconciliation with him.

They are animals, they are animals [all Arabs]. There will never be peace with them. I don’t trust them at all.

Miriam is a religious woman and therefore uses a biblical source in her meaning construction of the attacker. She also gives the Arab attacker demonic traits. She espouses the biblical commandment to “wipe out the memory of Amalek” (Deuteronomy 25:17–18). The Arabs are the “contemporary Amalek,” and she describes them as bloodthirsty, ruthless, and evil plunderers and murderers:

They are a bloodthirsty nation, “it is clean above, filthy below” … never believe an Arab … as is written, “do not give them the degree of the good.” Our Sages of Blessed Memory say that when God wanted to give the Torah to the Arabs he said “Do not steal.” Why did God specifically say to Ishmael “Do not steal”? But he could not stop himself, [and] so was not worthy of receiving the Torah. There is an obligation to “wipe out the memory of Amalek.”

Katy compared the victim’s agony to the joy of the attacker who ruthlessly hunted him down, leaving him no chance of survival. She described the attacker as “a heartless animal” taking the lives of innocent people:

They are fanatics [the attackers], their mothers celebrate. They are like animals, heartless. We cry over our children while they are happy. Our soldiers fight to stop the terrorists, but they murder innocent people; I have no words to describe the depth of the hatred I feel towards them.

Due to the evil image of the Arabs, Yocheved did not want to resemble them in any way:

Yesterday my son told me that for Purim [a Jewish festival where everyone dresses up] he wants to dress up as an Arab and I refused. The Arabs turned our lives upside down, do you even feel like getting closer to them? To resemble them? No way!

All of the parents mentioned the fact that the attacker had a choice of either going down the path of evil or not. When God seeks a “messenger,”
they explained, Arabs choose to “volunteer” for the role of “hired assassin.” Tamar demonstrates this view:

The Arab has a choice. He can choose not to get on the bus, he can refuse to do the job. There is a choice to harm or not to harm.

One factor that allows construction of a negative profile for Arabs is perceived moral differences between Jews and Arab. Yaron, as well as other participants, created a complete dichotomy between Jews and Arabs, perceiving Arabs as having Thanatos energy that drives them to death and destruction. This approach is in total contradiction to the Jewish approach to the sanctity of life:

Their message is that it is good to die. … They publish posters of the dead in the streets, it is sanctity of death pure and simple. On our side it is the exact opposite, the sanctity of life … for the life of one person they [the Israelis] will release hundreds of bodies … you also see how in our army they do the best they can... So innocents are not killed.

Valery thought that blame for Arab behavior lies in the family predisposition, which inhibits the development of the superego and contributes to imbibing ideals of hatred, destruction, and aggression towards the Jewish people. Sanctity of death and the joy derived from the carnage of terror attacks creates an unbridgeable moral distance between Jews and Arabs:

A Jewish mother does not send her son to blow up, a Jewish mother loves her son, she would die in his place. The Arab mother is happy when it happens. If the Arab mothers paid attention to educating their children they would not grow up to become murderers. … They have no future with this attitude.

The Attacker as Deserving Revenge

Parents indicated an obligation to restore justice by inflicting punishment and vengeance on the attacker who murdered their children. In contrast to feelings of intense anger and even hatred toward all Arabs, the desire for revenge is concentrated on and limited to the actual attackers.

Adva described the attacker as a bloodthirsty animal, his eyes blazing with anger as he sows the seeds of hatred:

You know the terrorist is imprisoned in Ashkelon jail, sometimes I pass through there and envision … how I murder him. … The biggest revenge from my perspective would be if someone murdered his children. When there was an agreement to free Arab prisoners I felt I was going crazy.
They are animals. They seek blood, they sow hate, you can see the hatred in their eyes, as they hate me I hate them.

It seems as though the murder of her daughter has transformed Adva into a fantasizer of murder. She herself acknowledges the cause and effect in her concluding statement—“as they hate me I hate them.”

Ron expressed his intense desire for revenge and for putting it into practice in order to inflict pain on the attacker in very vivid terms:

I want revenge ... I want to press a button and destroy them.... They took me to Barghouti trial ... I thought I would sharpen a plastic knife and stab him in the throat. I wish I could pluck his eyes out ... he is the head of the Tanzim—the organization responsible for the attack that murdered my daughter.... They are animals that murder ... I ache for revenge.

Tova also described in graphic and gory detail the types of punishment she feels the attackers deserve:

If someone tells me today that Arabs are being executed I would tell them not to do it with a bullet. Personally I would mutilate them....I would cut their flesh, apply acid, and wait for a while and then do it again....maybe this way they'll learn. Maybe if there were death sentences there would not be so many orphans and widows.

Natalia added and emphasized the feeling that retaliation can be cathartic:

When I heard that they finally assassinated the person involved in organizing the attacks, I felt great satisfaction. With each terrorist executed I feel more content. We must kill them all, like they murdered our children, innocent children with their entire futures ahead of them. I'll never forgive those who murdered my precious daughter.

The Attacker as Negligible

This subtheme mainly characterized the perception of the religious Orthodox parents. These parents delegitimized the Arab attacker, dismissed his human identity, and created a negative profile of him as negligible and insignificant. He was perceived as a vessel through which God executes his will. For example, Rachel referred to him as a “schnitzel hammer,” a metaphor that annuls feelings of anger towards him since he is only a tool, an empty vessel in the hands of a more powerful force:

The Arab is merely a vessel, he is simply like a schnitzel hammer that strikes—sorry for the food metaphor but it's the same thing: The hammer is
used for aligning the schnitzel, no more. It’s not meant to hurt it, just like the Arab. We believe he was chosen by God. I have no anger towards that Arab.

Tamar added:

There is no anger towards anyone. Towards whom?! The Arabs? It has no significance in my life at all. The Arab is just a messenger. … It’s like a child who goes for a walk and hits his head, so he should be angry with the iron pole? … It’s only because the Arab is flesh and blood you believe he is a messenger, but the iron pole is not a messenger?

When asked about the attributes of Arabs as human beings, Tamar replied: “They are animals incarnated as humans, they are nothing!” Further attempts by the researchers to focus on this issue were met with a categorical refusal to discuss an entity considered to be “animalistic” and “thoughtless.” It is evident that, compared to Rachel, Tamar takes her attitude toward Arabs one step further by adding content to the meaningless vessel and describing the attacker as an animal.

Understanding and Identification

Despite the negative feelings described above, some of the parents also expressed a need to understand the attacker, to identify with him and give his acts some meaning, thus narrowing the differences between them. This approach involves recognizing the human aspects of the attacker, finding similarities to him and understanding his motives. The bereaved parents recognize the complexity of their relationship with the attacker. Parents perceived Arab attackers as warriors waging their battle and as people capable of empathy and human emotions towards the Jews.

Alon spoke about the Arabs in general as humans with a vulnerable side. He described an Arab’s reaction to his son’s death, a reaction that moderated his view of the Arabs as demons:

When my son was murdered it was very hard for them. When I entered the greenhouses after being absent for a month, with a beard [a Jewish sign of mourning], they said “It’s from God, forgive us” and they cried … it was very hard for them.

Lea noted the similarities between Jews and Arabs and tried to put herself in their place in an attempt to find something in common with the attacker. From her point of view, because Jews also fight for national aspirations, sometimes even with unjust means, the Arabs’ fight for their national aspirations is also legitimate:

I have no anger towards the Arabs. We also fought and spilled a lot of blood for this country. It is legitimate to want what they want. They are
learning from us how to fight … I am not justifying it … but I do say that their ideological fight is justified.

The bereaved parents also needed to understand the attackers’ motives. For example, Avishag attempted to understand the Arabs’ suffering and victimization. She makes an effort to apprehend the incomprehensible existential and social conditions under which they live and that pave the way from frustration and hatred to murder:

They have nothing to lose in life … they have a very crappy life, that is the reason they turn out as terrorists. … What do they care about losing? If they are caught, they are sent to prison. They will have [a] place to live and they will have food. So I also understand them. When a person is discontented … all the evil comes out of him … and from hatred comes murder.

Although Avyatar did not accept the use of illegitimate means to achieve legitimate ideological goals, he recognized and understood the Arab suffering:

The Arabs are not to blame, they are a nation under occupation. We can understand them, they are angry. I can understand them, and I do understand them, but I cannot accept their methods.

The Dual Reaction: From Demonization to Identification

This reaction type is unique due to its multidimensional nature. Unlike other reactions, it does not rule out demonization of the Arab attackers, but those who espoused it also tried to understand and identify with them. On the one hand, they perceived the attacker as demonic and to be hated; on the other, they identified with him and attempted to understand his motivations.

Alex describes Arab attackers as lacking in humanity and driven by homicidal motives. Yet at the same time he doesn’t portray the Arabs purely in terms of evil instincts. Alongside his feelings of hostility, he can still find some common denominator—the similarity between the Arab and Jewish struggle for independence:

On the one hand I cannot stand looking at them. They are not human … they should not fight in this manner. On [the] other hand … before the establishment of Israel the Jews did similar things, but without murdering children. There will be no end to this situation as long as we occupy them.

Dina’s view emphasizes the dialectical tension between the need to avenge and retaliate, on one hand, and to acknowledge Jewish aggression
on the other. She describes Israel’s position as one of conquerors and occupiers, and as therefore accountable for the Arab aggression:

They are immoral and insane … clearly I do not like the Arabs and they are to blame for my daughter’s death. Each time they … kill a terrorist I feel good. But on the other hand, I always said as a human being, let’s try and put ourselves on the other side. Imagine if the Arabs came and settled among us, how would we feel? We would act like them. We are also to blame.

Another parent expressing these views also exhibited the same confusion. Sergey constantly struggles between his view of the attacker as evil and destructive and his effort to understand the root cause of his motives and actions. He also sees the problematic conduct of the Jews as a reason for the Arabs’ hostile acts:

I’m anti-Arab … I don’t trust them. I feel that this conflict with them will never end. They are taught to hate the Jews. We need to disengage from them. … On the other hand, I also understand their war. I have a friend who was a paratrooper and served in Nablus. … He told me the other side of the story, and all about what is being done to them at the roadblocks, all the humiliation they go through.

DISCUSSION

The parents who participated in this study had a wide range of reactions towards the Arab attackers. The range of reactions shows that the parents operate in both the emotional and the cognitive domains. In the emotional domain, the parents vented their negative emotions by expressing feelings of anger, hate, and vengeance and describing the attackers as demonic. In the cognitive domain, their reactions revealed a multidimensional, dual thinking process that included demonization of the attackers as well as identification with them in an attempt to minimize the gaps between the victims and the attackers. Parents had a shared emotional response but differed in their cognitive meaning construction.

The first reaction—the attacker as an object of anger, hate, and revenge—was the most common reaction among the bereaved parents. The death of a child, as noted before, is considered the most difficult of any loss (Vries, Lana, & Falck, 1994). Therefore, it is no wonder that the parents experience negative feelings and the desire to retaliate. The attacker is perceived as inhuman and the embodiment of evil. Studies show that the loss of a child leads to feelings of injustice (Rando, 1983; Vries et al., 1994), anger, hate, helplessness, loss of life’s meaning (Stuckless, 1996), anxiety, and posttraumatic symptoms (Spungen, 1998). Feelings of hate and anger towards the
attackers were manifested by denunciation and a refusal to understand their motives. These negative feelings were also directed towards the Arabs as a whole, the Israeli army, and the policies of the Israeli government. This indicates the bereaved parents' state of mind, which is fed mainly by anger and underlying pain (Ronel & Lebel, 2006).

The second reaction related to the perception of the attacker as demonic. The act of demonization portrays the attacker as totally evil and amoral, thus reducing him to a barbaric level. This reaction emphasizes the tendency of the parents to dehumanize the Arab people in general and the attacker in particular. It represents the monolithic approach that distinguishes between the pain of the victims and the cruelty of the attackers. There is a desire to be as dissimilar as possible from the attackers. Demonization divides the world into us—the good—and them—the bad (Alon & Omer, 2005).

A derivative of demonization, anger, and hatred is the desire to retaliate (“an eye for an eye”) as a mean of relief from anger and the sense of personal victimization. Fantasies of revenge may be an attempt to change the asymmetry that exists between the victim and the attacker and to restore a sense of justice and control. Victims wish to adopt some of the attacker's strength and aggression in order to inflict pain on him. The parents expressed a different kind of revenge that included a mental visualization of the act itself, which assisted them in the coping process. All aspirations to retaliate and avenge the death of their children remained on a theoretical plane, and none of them were actually realized and probably were not intended to be realized. Nevertheless, the revenge fantasy plays an important role by allowing the victim to cope with his or her pain. The effectiveness of this reaction may be questionable since, although it helps to relieve the burden of anger, it may also intensify the emotional torment (Herman, 1992).

The fourth reaction—attacker as negligible—was mostly evident among religious Orthodox parents. This reaction reflects their need to dismiss the attacker as an insignificant entity. This need is derived from a preexisting meaning framework that is at their disposal as a means of coping. In their view, the attacker did not deserve any meaningful consideration. He is described as an empty vessel and as such it is inappropriate to express any emotions towards him, including anger. This reaction cannot be discussed without relating it to the context of the parents’ religious beliefs, such as the belief that personal suffering is not a direct consequence of the attacker's actions. He is merely a messenger of God and therefore unimportant. Although this study did not explore the effectiveness of each reaction, a study by Saka (2008) shows that, compared to other groups of bereaved parents, religious Orthodox parents cope with bereavement more adaptively, probably due to their faith, and this may also be indicative of the effectiveness of such a reaction. It is reasonable to assume that faith in a higher force may reduce the attacker's power.
Another reaction was the need to relate to the attacker in an attempt to understand his motives in the context of current regional, social, economic, and ideological complexities. It indicates a minimization of the monolithic approach and a narrowing of the gulf between the victim and the attacker. In order to understand the attackers, and even to identify with them, some of the bereaved parents search for similarities between them, focus on their humanity, and acknowledge the attackers’ victimization. This reaction indicates the parents’ need to understand how such cruel and inhumane acts can occur. This behavior resembles a phenomenon known as ‘identification with the aggressor’ and also plays a critical role in sustaining hope and restoring the victim’s faith in human good (Graham et al., 1994).

The dialectic reaction represents a transition between two opposite reactions, from demonization to identification. On the one hand the attacker is hated, while on the other hand the parent identifies with him and attempts to understand his motivations and his cultural context. When examined logically, it seems impossible for the two opposite reactions to exist simultaneously, yet they apparently do coexist in a single synthesized reaction. Even though the loss of a child does not permit the parent to view the child’s killer as a human entity, this reaction shows that victims require a complex multidimensional perception in order to process the trauma. It indicates the application of conceptual and emotional flexibility in the search for meaning in the suffering. This reaction may also reflect the parent’s incoherent world caused by the loss. The fact that the parents’ dialectic reaction indicates elements of confusion may serve as corroboration of this assumption. Nevertheless, the experience of identification may lead to possible coexistence and dialogue with the attacker, at least as a fantasy; like revenge, dialogue and reconciliation remained statements only and were not reflected in any practical action. It can be assumed that this kind of trauma does not permit parents to reconcile with those Arabs who promote and perpetrate terrorism.

The present study contributes on two levels: From a theoretical perspective, it expands the body of knowledge on how bereaved parents perceive the attackers who caused the loss of their children, and it also has practical-therapeutic implications. The knowledge that bereaved parents need to relate to the attackers may assist in the rehabilitation process. The fact that all of the bereaved parents in this study related in some way to the attackers indicates the important role it plays in the coping process. It is evident that it serves as a coping resource that allows the parents to direct their emotions to a specific cause and, by doing so, to vent negative feelings. Moreover, distinguishing between reaction types may lead to a better understanding of the coping process that a grieving parent undergoes. The treatment should be appropriate and compatible with the reaction type that characterizes the parent’s perception.
This study did not explore the effectiveness of the different reactions. Therefore, follow-up research is recommended to examine the functions and effectiveness of the various reaction types, not only among bereaved parents but also among other types of victims. Moreover, the current study did not focus on how demographic variables affect the experience of bereavement in general and perceptions of the Arab attacker in particular. Further studies might examine, for example, how political attitudes affect reactions to the Arab attacker and whether perceptions of the attacker will be subject to change over time. Also worth examining is whether there are differences in meaning construction between bereaved parents who lost children in terrorist attacks and bereaved parents who lost children in military service.

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