



# Grandparents are a very important resource

In gesprek met Haim Omer

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## Would you like to introduce yourself?

I am Haim Omer from Tel Aviv University. I have developed two concepts: *Non-Violent Resistance* and the *New Authority*. The book on *Non-Violent Resistance* has already been published in Dutch. The book on the *New Authority* is in the process of being translated and published in The Netherlands and Belgium. In the last five years I visited The Netherlands almost every year.

## Do you think there is a difference in your workfield between The Netherlands and Israel?

There is a difference. The major difference has to do with the structure and the support for the individual therapist. To organize a sit-in and a telephone round demands a certain courage. Parents will be afraid to do so and they will need support, but the therapist can be afraid as well. The main difference is the possibility of giving support to the therapist when he does these courageous things. For instance in Germany, it is very decentralized and people all over Germany are working in teams of Non-Violent Resistance. There are less therapists who will try sit-ins, telephone rounds, reporters meetings and other things which demand a certain security for the therapists. At the Schneider Centre in

Israel, therapists feel secure because they know it is a shared responsibility. This is the major difference. The significance I did discover in terms of getting support for families is not that different. For instance immigrant families, who live in immigrant communities, are very amenable to ideas of natural support, as we did find for Turkish families. In Germany it is even easier to get community support for them as it is for German citizens.

## You mean that for Turkish families it is easier to get support from their community system because they have a closer community?

Yes, they live close together.

## As family therapists we work a lot with intergenerational issues. Do these issues get attention in your program New Authority?

Yes, first of all the grandparents. Grandparents are a very important resource. Uncles and extended family also, but grandparents! It is a major issue in the literature, when grandparents are involved there are considerably less behavioral problems. So it is a good idea to invest in the relationships with them. The Milano School, for instance, was very suspicious about involving grandparents. Somebody of the Milano School told me this changed when a

team member became grandfather himself.

## I think the idea was: people in therapy have problems because of their parents, and that's why it was not seen as a resource. In our training the accent is on resources which are all over.

That's right. It is a big change, because in psychotherapy it was a common vision for many years that parents were perceived as responsible. This has changed over the years. Unless they are abusive parents. The parents part is they were not able to prevent what took place in their family. That does not mean they are horrible parents. Parent blaming was the common view.

## The adults of today were once children themselves. And some children were brought up by parents who possibly did not have a lot to give or did lack the means to support their children.

Can you explain further?

## I give you an example from my own life. My parents suffered in the war and they became traumatized parents. So I was brought up by parents who did their best but had their flaws.

Yes. Parents did have their own troubles when they were children: migration, traumatization and social problems. This is a fact. Parents do have their problems.

## What you try to touch with the parents is their power?

Yes, their power.

## Some parents don't have the means to support their children.

Well, you know, our assumption is that when parents are helpless or unable to deal with the problems, the question is what support these parents do need in order to become able. I won't judge them as not able, I try to do my best to give them my support. Let's say we try to teach parents to do a sit-in. But the parents are very afraid of the idea for the possible escalation during the sit-in. This is not the end of the world. We will ask ourselves what support these parents need. The focus will not be on: are they having what it takes to take the steps to be good parents, or not. Then we would only have to say: 'They do or don't have it and when they don't, we take the children away. That is a hopeless, fatalistic approach. All parents that come to us did already win a few steps by showing up. And the question what they are willing to undertake depends a great measure on the kind of alliance that we build with them. If we build a better alliance, they will try more things. And if they try, they will already have some reservoir of good will. And if we give them support, they will be able to translate this good will into better parenting. So that is our approach. We always think that with support they will be doing better and what they are doing today is not helping, because they don't have this support. The question is always: what support, what training or what means of actions can we give them so that they escalate less and they feel more courageous to undertake things that they

were afraid of before.

We can talk with parents who seem completely unable to take responsibility at a certain moment. Let's see who will be able to support them. When were they able to do something previously? Those questions will allow us to start a positive process and we can see how they get along. Some will progress more quickly, others more slowly, but we will always ask these questions.

## This way there will be a better future for their children. So their children, when they are parents, do have more skills.

I think that when we strengthen the parents in a positive way, they become more present in the life of the child and they learn to deal with escalations positively. They become more efficient in exercising a watchful care over their children. Which is a way of supervising in a caring way. When parents do these things better, not perfectly but better, I think this leads to an internalization of these positions by the child, so that it will grow up with better interpersonal schemes in its mind. We are providing not only techniques, but actually a better way of attachment.

## The start for the intergenerational circle?

That's right.

## You created this philosophy because of things that happened in your own life?

I have children from my first marriage and I was challenged by them very much when we divorced. They underwent very difficult

Van 16 tot 20 februari werd in Tel Aviv een basistraining *Geweldloos verzet en Nieuwe autoriteit* georganiseerd door het internationale instituut voor Non-Violent Resistance (NVR). De grondlegger van dit gedachtegoed, Haim Omer, schreef eerder het boek *Geweldloos verzet in gezinnen*. Zijn aanpak om in gezinnen agressief en gewelddadig gedrag aan te pakken door ouders hun 'ouderlijke aanwezigheid' en daarmee de verantwoordelijkheid terug te geven, krijgt steeds meer aandacht. Met het begrip 'geweldloos' moedigt hij ouders aan om in actie te komen in navolging van Gandhi en M.L. King. Deze uitgangspunten sluiten aan bij de contextuele benadering. Nadat we in de afgelopen jaren een aantal workshops bij Omer volgden, waren we enthousiast genoeg om naar Israël af te reizen om ons samen met andere Europeanen te verdiepen in deze aanpak. Gelukkig was Omer bereid om een gesprek met ons te hebben.



periods of self-risk behaviour. And I felt very helpless and started borrowing solutions. Most of the things I borrowed I put together. Of course I didn't know non-violent resistance, but I translated it and I adapted it to the family setting and then to the school setting. That I definitely did.

**Did it help you, did it cause changes in your own life?**

I have five children. I think that it made me less helpless when it came to challenges with the younger children. And even today, the way I deal with the children from my previous marriage – we talk about those times when there were crises – I experimented. Primitive experiments. I started learning from them. But actually I don't think that's the way things developed. I think things developed because I was very active for many years in giving supervision to psychotherapists. I had groups, I was very much on demand as a supervisor for psychotherapists. I wrote two books based on these supervision-groups: *Critical Interventions on Psychotherapy* and *Therapeutic Narratives*, which I wrote with Nahi Alon. Over the years I found out that psychotherapists were particularly helpless with parents. It is as if the whole ideology made it difficult for them to work with parents.

They did not know how to start a good dialogue. It was the reason for this problem coming back again and again.

**You mean the parents of the children?**

Yes, when you're talking to the child so you're treating a child as a symptom. Parents bring the problem to the clinic. They intend to enclose themselves with the child by being like an umbrella. Which in cases of behavioural problems is the worst thing to do, because it reduces the parents legitimate in exercising watchful care over the children. I found that again and again this was an enormous loophole in the formation of therapists. And I myself had also these kind of problems as a parent. Both things came together. This was the main factor of development.

**So you started training those psychotherapists first?**

Yes, I think that therefore I perceived that when something is yelling for an answer, you seek an answer. Their only practical approach for a behaviour of disturbance twenty years ago was the Behavioural Approach. This has never been very popular among therapists nor among parents. That's very interesting. Parents didn't like it either. So this was not an answer, because you can-

not build a good alliance with an approach in which the parents say: 'We don't want to do this'. It was really screaming for another kind of answer, just like the view on family therapy. Putting the parents and the child together saying: 'This is a problem of the family'. It is like blaming the parents. In all therapeutic approaches something was lacking.

**I think it makes a big difference that you only work with the parents. You are really trying to empower the parents, and we are trying to empower the parents but also to work with the children.**

So it is very important to develop a language which is helpful in use if you consider the importance of the alliance with the parents. Of course when you work with the parents and the child, the language is changeable. And there are many people who do things like I do with the child. My wife always works with the child and the parents together, but she can do things that I cannot do. I don't do this, because it is too complicated for me. I like to simplify things. Our work is complicated enough. But there are many advantages including the child in the therapy. If you are able to do multi-family therapy, as for instance Eia Asen from the Marlborough Institute in London. He is very good in putting parents and child together, or he works with parents in groups. It is parent coaching what I am doing and I think that is legitimated, particularly in cases where the child is not interested, of course. Sometimes the child comes along, but he is not interested in cooperation. And sometimes the child is interested in the results of important things

that we can hear from the child. So all of these things are legitimated.

**Do you think when you work with the multi-family, the parents and the children as we do, your concept of working with the parents can fit in?**

It has to be adapted. Any implementation of a concept demands implementation. Use a concept in a different situation. For instance, we now have a project in Belgium for using these ideas with foster parents. We had to change it for some other patients, because the challenges are specific. In Holland I was involved in doing non-violent resistance in the psychiatric hospital De Bascule in Amsterdam. We needed enormous adaptations. These ideas cannot be simply taken as they are from one context to another. For instance, you work in a clinic or institute that works with family therapy and you are interested in adding some of our tools to your usual practice. This approach is for all patients. If necessary Idan Amiel is coming to your institute and will sit with you to find out what the best approach will be. Some interesting solutions might develop, how we can use these ideas, or gain from these ideas, but without dismantling the kind of work that we feel we do well. So that demands a process of adaptation. ◀

*Mirjam Diatlowicki, Leen Hermkens en Jan Hoet zijn allen staflid bij Leren over Leven en hebben Haim Omer geïnterviewd tijdens hun studiereis.*