

Testimonies

“He Hoped for Justice, and, Behold, There Was Injustice; for Righteousness, and Behold, an Outcry” (*Isaiah 5:7*)—State Crimes Against Children and Parents: The Ambash Women and Their Children

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ABSTRACT: Based on a long experience of cases of “placement in foster homes” of children in Israel, the author argues that this process often includes violence, injustice, and even crimes. The case of the Ambash children is then discussed as a typical case of State violence carried out by separating children from their mothers on the basis of faulty arguments.

KEYWORDS: Social Welfare in Israel, Placement in Foster Homes, Daniel Ambash, Ambash Children, “Cults” in Israel.

As the women of Daniel Ambash who sought to bring their story to my attention approached me, I willingly responded to meet them. This way, I was exposed to a shocking incident, one of many I am hearing of, and have been involved in for about 25 years. I did not agree with the lifestyles of the women—within the framework of a polygamous family. But even though their way of life contradicts my feminist worldview I cannot accept the State’s criminal acts against these women—these mothers and their children. The serious harm that has been done to the children and the serious crime against all fundamental human rights of motherhood is incomprehensible to me, and I see it as my duty to express my deep shock, revulsion and anger about all of these major offences. For the benefit of society as a whole, we have to delve deeper into this case and severely punish all those responsible for the atrocities.

Since the early nineties, I have been involved in cases of children being taken from their parents and being placed into institutions or foster families. “Placement of children outside of the family home” is the euphemistic name for the deprivation of parents of custody and the transfer of their children to functional families, to “therapeutic” institutions, and to foster families, sponsored by the Welfare system. As the number of cases in which I was involved increased, I was horrified by the opacity of the hearts of the systems which were supposed to “take care” of the issue and even more by the “caretakers,” social workers, psychologists and others that were deciding the fate of children to be cut off from their families, especially judges.

More and more I was exposed to the meaning of the cutting off of these children: punishing them for being born and growing in needy families, especially of single mothers, immigrants from Ethiopia or Russia, and “simply” poor mothers. The willingness of officials to cut off children from their families, their friends, their neighborhood, their school and their authority to tear apart poor families whose love for their children is very deep was, and still is, a major shock for me. In every case I had been involved in, I felt deeper disgust toward the process of placing children outside the family home.

My academic and practical background in Social Work even intensified the shock. I could not and still cannot understand how people whose main objective of training and profession is “helping others,” “compassion,” etc., are able to act in a way that radically contradicts the ideals of their profession and their commitment to human love and helping the weak. The fact that most of the child protection officers (CPOs) deciding about the procedures of depriving women of custody of their children are women intensified, as a feminist, my disgust and anger.

The main explanation for the “confiscation” of custody of children from their parents, and their transfer to the State authorities, I had to hear every time, was “the best interests of the child.” This magic password is used to justify all kinds of evil and crimes against parents and children. In the process of depriving parents of the custody of their children, parents are presented as criminals, harming or neglecting their children, whereas the CPO’s intervention is represented like a rescue. But in all cases that came to my attention, the lives of children in institutions and foster families were filled with constant physical and mental traumas. In almost all cases, the parents were not allowed to have any real

connection to their children, on the grounds that the relationship was harmful to the children and preventing their “recovery.” Sometimes, they would even lie to the children that their parents refused to associate with them. Far from the public eye, without any supervision and inspection of what is happening in these places, by keeping media criticism from knowing about what is happening there, the Welfare system with the assistance of the Courts and the Police manages to deprive children and parents of their fundamental rights and to harm them in countless ways.

In the many cases that I have seen and have been involved in over the years, I have deeply experienced the pain of parents and children. I will bring here some examples, in an abstract way that can only hint at the variety of harm that has been done to vulnerable children and the destruction of families and parents. The four children of a couple of poor parents in Tel Aviv were taken to Welfare institutions, claiming they had been abandoned. All the sufferings of the children in the course of daily confrontations with other children and even physical harm by the instructors of the institutions and their longing for their parent’s home and friends were ignored. The intervention of a lawyer, who volunteered to help the parents, led to the return of the children to their parents after two years.

A 14-year-old girl was sent to the institution Tzofia claiming that she was endangering herself because she “would sleep with Arabs,” a claim that turned out to be false. The girl suffered a long series of physical and mental abuse in the institution. When she tried to commit suicide, she was hospitalized in a mental hospital. Psychiatric drugs hurt her irreversibly. She came out broken and with no life force.

An 11-year-old boy was taken from a mother who was poor and blind, but who was devoted to him with her heart and her soul. Claiming that she was not able to raise him, he was placed in various institutions. Many times, he escaped and returned to his mother and was taken back to the institutions by policemen who hit him. Being placed in a foster family could not erase the effect of the institutions and the “professional training” for delinquency suffered there, and he fell into drugs and severe hardship throughout his life.

Two girls, twins aged 7, were taken from their large family, which experienced financial problems, alleging that they had functional difficulties. Despite the love given to the girls and the devotion of the family from which they had been taken, after a long saga of harassment and bullying on the part of the Welfare system in

the city, they were transferred to a social institution. One of the girls had probably experienced sexual assault by one of the counselors, while staying at the “Emergency Center,” before being transferred to the social institution. The ongoing legal struggle has failed so far (the girls today are aged 11) and the sufferings of the mother and of the family are unbearable.

These few examples do not even come close to the beginning of the real story: the lies used by the System in order to prove that the children had been harmed; the mental harm done to them and their deprivation of their fundamental rights; physical attacks from other children and often from counselors of the institutions; methods of cruel punishment in institutions, named innocent nicknames like “grip”—which supposedly means “containing” and refers in practice to violent physical obstruction; “relaxation room,” allegedly a room for releasing tensions, which is in fact a sealed dungeon for discipline refusers; draconian laws which intensify the power of CPOs are multiplying, enabling them to deprive parents of custody of their children anytime and anywhere, in the middle of the night or in kindergarten in front of all the stunned children, all that without a Court order or Court proceeding (for 7 days); laws that force workers in education and health institutions to report on the possibility of harm to children, which makes all of us informers for our neighbors and exposes every parent to the threat of “being reported” to the authorities at any time. Time is too short to describe all the horrors involved in what is called euphemistically “placement of children outside of the family home.”

The affair of the Ambash women and their children is another example of all this, in particular of the misuse of legal power by State officials, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, judges, police officers. This is a typical example of cooperation between the governmental systems that enables and nurtures mutually supported atrocities against civilians, in ways of abuse, especially of the poorest: mothers and children. This affair demonstrates the depth of cynicism in the use of the upper social value of “the child’s best interest” to justify the incomprehensible harm done to them. The Ambash affair sends a threatening message to each and everyone of us: this will be our fate if we deviate from social conventions.

The explanation of what is happening regarding the issue of “placement of children outside of the family home” can be related to the fact that people working in these organizations have to show complete adherence to the

expectations and requirements of the organization which provides them livelihood. In order to “get in line” with the organization’s goals and ways of behavior they have to internalize the “organization’s welfare” and prefer it to the universal sense of justice. Assimilation within the organization kills humanity and encourages them to adopt the ideology of violence, to identify with it and to implement the guidelines and rules permitting its use.

In light of the above, the obvious question of morality arises: is a person working in the organization able to exercise discretion and choose the universal good or is he/she only a bolt in the machine and lacking personal responsibility, as claimed by Max Weber (1864–1929):

The dignity of a civil servant is vested by virtue of his ability to perform faithfully the provisions of the higher authorities—just as if it was consistent with his own beliefs... The significance of this kind of behavior for the civil servant is “moral discipline and self-denial in the most supreme sense” (Weber 1970, 95).

The exaggeration of this argument is mentioned in various works that deal with mass extermination by the Nazis. Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), for example, argued that the most important principle in the process of the social production of moral indifference, which is the base of the violent behavior of people in organizations, is

the principle of organizational discipline, or rather, a demand of compliance to orders of superiors for which they have to reject any other motive for action... The ideal of discipline demands absolute identification with the organization, which does not mean anything other than a willingness to erase the identity... In an organization’s ideology, the readiness of such extreme type of self-sacrifice is reflected as a high measure of morality, a measure which commits to eliminating all other moral demands (Bauman 1989, 130).

The rationality of evil is the terrifying meaning which stands behind the conduct of the State authorities with regard to the “placement of children outside of the family home.” The Ambash affair is an extreme example for this. All civil servants filled the role of what was expected of them: they investigated in order to prove the crime which the State sought to bring forth; they “proved” guilt using all means at their disposal, including violence; they judged appropriately on the basis of the evidence obtained through violent means; they punished as required the alleged offender and his accomplices.

In view of the intensity of the government and its numerous means to mute, hurt, distort, lie, abuse, I admire the Ambash Ladies for their endless devotion to

their children and their brave and strong readiness to fight against the lies, the wickedness and the cruelty of the legal authorities and the government.

References

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