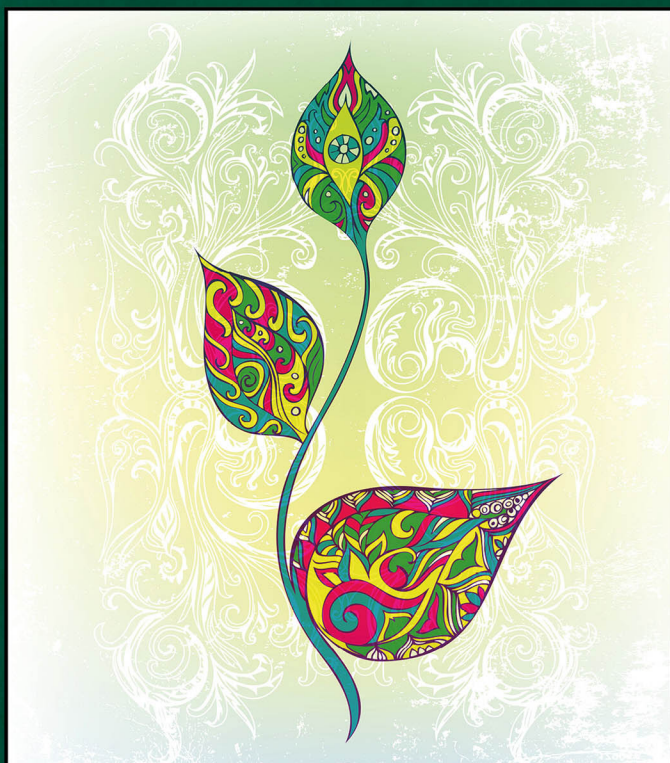


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# AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO HEALING COMPLEX AND TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND THE SOUL



ISAAC PIZER

‘Reflecting decades of experience as a psychotherapist, this book offers a moving approach to the understanding and treatment of trauma. Isaac Pizer emphasizes an intergenerational framework of understanding and the importance of the human relationship in effecting recovery. Drawing widely from the fields of psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy, analytical psychology and transpersonal psychology, the text is to be applauded for its scope of reference. With an outlook that is deeply personal without sacrificing its relevance to clinicians, Pizer offers a compelling mediation on Jewishness and the nature of collective trauma’.

**Robin S. Brown, PhD, psychoanalyst in private practice and author of**  
*Groundwork for a Transpersonal Psychoanalysis*

‘Isaac Pizer re-visions many of the core Gestalt concepts in order to integrate his ideas about trauma and the transpersonal in a way that is a genuine contribution to the Gestalt literature and method’.

**Professor Charlotte Sills, co-author of Skills in Gestalt Counselling &**  
*Psychotherapy, psychotherapist, supervisor and coach*

‘With *An Integrative Approach to Healing Complex and Transgenerational Trauma*, Isaac Pizer has written a wonderfully engaging and soulful account, generously supported with abundant case material and richly substantiated with references from his close acquaintance with the relevant literature, which is a call for us all, in our therapeutic work with psychological trauma, to follow his own journey – as a Gestalt therapist deeply imbued with the radical relationality of Martin Buber – to engage also with the depth of the realms of the transpersonal and the transgenerational. As an integration of theory and practice this book is a veritable tour de force which I found both moving and inspiring, and it will certainly encourage and enrich your own practice as it has mine’.

**Dr Gordon Barclay, MA, MPhil, MRCP, MRCPsych, retired NHS**  
*consultant psychiatrist, CAT therapist, founder/trainer of TDS*  
*(Towards a Dialectical Self)*



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# An Integrative Approach to Healing Complex and Transgenerational Trauma

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This book presents an integrative relational approach to treating trauma and psychological entanglements through autobiographical, philosophical and clinical reflections on the transgenerational dimension of the human experience and the self as an irreducible core of the person.

The book commences with the author's own journey growing up in a Jewish family deeply affected by transgenerational trauma from the Holocaust, providing an inspiring and reflective backdrop to this book's contents. Isaac Pizer then describes and explains his philosophy of therapy, which holds psychotherapy and the treatment of trauma as a relational process that requires an inclusive awareness of the following dimensions of human experiencing: the physical, intrapsychic, relational, transgenerational, transpersonal. Exploring a psychotherapy that holds and integrates transgenerational awareness in the treatment of complex trauma, this book is supplemented with case studies and the author's own experiences.

This compelling and thought-provoking book is intended for therapists, therapists in training and people seeking knowledge and encouragement in their journeys of personal and collective healing, self-realisation and personal growth.

**Isaac Pizer** is an accredited psychotherapist and a clinical supervisor. Pizer worked for many years as a social worker and commenced training in psychotherapy in 1992. He holds a BSc in Sociology, a Diploma in Gestalt Psychotherapy (2000), an MA in Humanistic Person-Centred Psychotherapy (2003) and a Diploma in Clinical Supervision (2015).



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# An Integrative Approach to Healing Complex and Transgenerational Trauma

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## Psychotherapy and the Soul

Isaac Pizer

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For my brother Bernard, with gratitude & love,  
And all seekers of healing and truth

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Antonia Salmon is the sculptor who created the candle burner, featured in a poignant moment in Chapter 9. The burnishing tool for the candle burner was created from an ivory-handled hairbrush that originally belonged to her great-grandmother, Ruzena Stutz, who died in Treblinka Concentration Camp. Thank you, Al Skiffington-Smith, for so kindly passing the candle burner into my care.

I want to express my gratitude to all the writers, thinkers and artists whose work has moved, nourished and inspired me. I am especially grateful to Bob Dylan for his indomitable expressions of soul, which sustained me through grim and lonely times.

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# Foreword

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I have just finished reading *An Integrative Approach to Healing Complex & Transgenerational Trauma: Psychotherapy and the Soul* for the second time. It is an understatement to say it is a life's work – it is a life's journey, a book that Isaac Pizer felt it was his duty to write. It contains two major elements: a description of the author's approach to psychotherapy – both in theory and in practice; and also a profound examination of spiritual unfolding. These two elements are inseparable, and this inseparability comes to life in the many rich case studies throughout this book.

This book starts with setting the context: an account of a deeply unhappy boy who carried the legacy of a painful childhood in the North of London, traumatised personally by his own experiences, transgenerationally by persecution of the Jewish people over centuries and intergenerationally through his own family's experience of persecution, dislocation and genocide. It tells of his gradual journey of healing, which he then put to good use in developing his own form of psychospiritual therapy – a transformative blend of Gestalt psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, philosophy, trauma therapies and transpersonal healing. In his own words, it is 'a soulful, relational process for healing and self-realisation'.

This book is indeed an honouring of the 'essential aspect of Self' – the words of A. H. Almaas whom Isaac quotes (among other spiritual teachers) in order to convey his profound understanding of and belief in the spiritual nature of humanity. However, he does not flinch from recognising what is most appalling about humanity – the cruelty, prejudice and oppression that abounds. He looks at it squarely in the face – and yet, he insists on locating it in context of the centrality of the True essential Self. Another quotation from Almaas:

Essence was there in the beginning, and it is still there. Although it was not seen, not recognized, and was even rejected and hurt in many ways, it is still there. In order to protect itself, it has gone underground, under cover.

(Almaas, 1987, p. 2)

I was intrigued to notice my own reaction as I read all this. Despite being one of the people who tend to focus more on historical and current relational impacts in

shaping the self (see *e.g.* Joyce & Sills, 2018), including transference layers of therapeutic relating (which figure minimally in this book), I found myself moved and persuaded. Isaac offers me a way to bring together what had seemed to be two incompatible parts of me and points to new ways of working therapeutically.

It is important also to stress that this is not only a philosophical and a spiritual work. It is packed with erudition. This book is full of references and quotations, which are not simply acknowledgements, they are treasures. There is a real sense of Isaac appreciatively and powerfully digesting these authors' work in order to learn from them and share their richness with the reader. I feel invited to a gathering, a conference – a confluence of ideas. An example is where Isaac describes the concept of 'self' as it is usually understood in Gestalt therapy theory and extends it thoughtfully and carefully into the spiritual realm. It is not an aggressive elaboration of Gestalt, but an invitation to 'move into the adjacent space', respectfully yet boldly deconstructing authorities such as Perls et al. and Philippson.

Isaac re-visions many of the core Gestalt concepts in order to integrate his ideas about trauma and the transpersonal in a way that is a genuine contribution to the Gestalt literature and method. There is also a wonderful overview of psychoanalytic thought through the lens of Judaic study; an exploration of such trauma concepts as 'Unusual Subjective Experiences' of derealisation and depersonalisation; a deep appreciation of Eastern spiritual knowledge blended with Western psychology; a description of how he uses the Jungian concept of the 'interactive field' as a framework for thinking relationally; an analysis and challenge to the politics of identity and conflict-based responses to trauma...and much more.

I was wondering how I could explain in a Foreword, just why this book is extraordinary. It is not simply that the author shares a moving personal story; nor is it his thoughtful description of his psychotherapeutic approach, nor even the meticulously documented accounts of his clients' lives and therapies. It is something about the love that shines out of every paragraph that makes this book arresting – a love that seems to transcend human frailties and 'entanglements', as he calls them. Rather than attempting to capture what I am trying to say, I invite the reader to start by reading Isaac's Concluding Thoughts at the end of this book. They say it all.

Charlotte Sills  
London 2024.

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# Introduction

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This book is for fellow therapists and all who are interested in psychotherapy for complex and transgenerational trauma. It is a personal and professional offering, which I hope will contribute to the compassionate treatment of this deeply debilitating suffering at a time when wars and horrific conflicts span our world, causing traumas which will follow humanity through several generations into the future.

The focus and themes of this book are challenging, and I suggest you allow time to be with and explore the inner experience which arises from reading it. Such a practice can support our personal unfolding and, for those who are therapists, enhance understanding of and empathy with clients. If you are an established or trainee therapist, I hope you find much to draw upon and use in your work with clients. And where you disagree or differ from my perspective, I wish these to be experiences which aid the advancement of your own therapeutic thinking and approach. I consider psychotherapy to be a soulful, relational process for healing and self-realisation. In service to those of us who live with the effects of trauma, I believe in the holding of an inclusive awareness of all the dimensions of human experiencing: the physical, intrapsychic, relational, transpersonal and transgenerational.

With appreciation for Martin Buber's contribution to psychotherapy, I use his concept of relating to another from an 'I-Thou' (1958) attitude as one of reverence for our profound depths, qualities and potential for fulfilment. Trauma is a common aspect of human experience that needs trust, empathy and self-awareness in the quest for its amelioration.

My philosophy and approach contain an explicitly metaphysical, Platonic conception of the self as a fundamental aspect of the person, which psychotherapy can support towards realisation by working through traumas and entanglements that obscure, suppress and thwart it. I consider my perspective concerning the self as being in broad alignment with that of analytical psychology and psychosynthesis, and I value the contemporary contributions of:

- A.H. Almaas, the founder of the Diamond Approach, and his spiritual understanding of the self:

One needs to know the experience of the essential aspect of Self. Self or identity is a specific aspect of Being, a Platonic form, a pure and immutable ontological Presence. When one knows the true Self, the Self of Essence, it becomes possible to see and understand the behavior and attitudes that express it.

(1988, p. 265)

- Robin S. Brown, in his holding of the place and process of the reflective self in psychoanalysis, and in ‘Psychoanalysis Beyond the End of Metaphysics: Thinking towards the Post-Relational’, offers this important view:

If we set out with an assumption that the individual is merely an expression of the material conditions from which he or she arises, then the patient’s experience is inevitably demeaned as a mere epiphenomenon of genetics and/or social conditioning.

(2017, p. 94)

In the first chapter of this book, I share my transgenerational and personal story as a Jewish man born a dozen years after the Holocaust, through which my philosophy of therapy was formed. I commence Chapter 2 by sharing my perspective concerning the transpersonal in psychotherapy, with an outline of transpersonal theories that can complement the therapeutic process. Holding a transpersonal frame, I then look at collective trauma carried through Jewish history, to Sigmund Freud’s invention of psychoanalysis, and the remarkable contribution of Jewish men and women to the development of psychotherapy in the twentieth century. It is a story which is encouraging for the therapeutic journey through its exemplifying the fortitude and potential of the human soul (individually and collectively) to transcend suffering with a beneficent answer. This section is also my personal bow to psychotherapy’s rich Jewish heritage and a prelude to the philosophy of therapy which I offer in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, I explain my thinking and approach to working with trauma. It includes a revision of gestalt therapy for the integration of the transpersonal and transgenerational within the therapeutic frame. Chapter 5 contains three case studies from my work with clients.

I believe transgenerational awareness, the focus of Chapters 6 and 7, is essential for the treatment of complex trauma. Neglecting the transgenerational dimension can cause us to fail to attend to a client and the historical depth of their experience. Such a gap in one’s therapeutic consciousness can have the effect of reinforcing intrapsychic suppression and toxic shame experienced by a client. The transgenerational can be the focus or subtlety in the background of work with trauma. An engagement with history passed down *via* entangled relationships and transpersonally can enable an understanding of forms and effects of trauma which have been veiled and hidden. I provide several case studies and vignettes to illustrate my approach and work with trauma, which I hope you will find helpful and encouraging.

Christopher Bollas has written of Europe and America as having ‘turned away in significant numbers from introspective living’ (2018, pp. 41–42), and this being symptomatic of ‘a culture generally uninterested in examination of the internal world, enthralled with the technologies of apps and social networking’ (2018, p. xi). With this in mind, Chapter 8 concerns the interface between individual and collective trauma, the politics of identity and the therapeutic process. I argue that whilst awareness of the force and effects of the socio-political dimension upon our lives is important, it is not a substitute for ‘introspective living’, examining our internal worlds and processing complex and historic traumas. I share personal reflections, along with my analysis and approach as a psychotherapist. The intention behind my disclosures is to offer my personal experience with my thinking and, in this way, not place myself as separate from and above those flaws in the human condition, which recycle and perpetuate the traumas which dominate the human domain.

Now, in the latter stage of my career as a psychotherapist, I see my work has been, in large part, a commitment of service in answer to the horrors of the Holocaust in which people were subject to the most terrible defilement, abuse and murder. Whilst this took place before my birth, it has influenced the way of my soul and purpose in life. In my work with Carrie, there is the presence, connection and interaction of our respective histories. Her therapeutic journey, described in Chapter 9, holds this book’s key themes and message concerning the fundamentally irreducible nature and resilience of the self and our potential to heal from complex and transgenerational trauma.

Beneath necessary complexity, the treatment of trauma involves human meeting for the healing of history. In his book, *The Mystery of Human Relationship: Alchemy and the Transformation of the Self* (1998), Nathan Schwartz-Salant writes about the holding of an ‘alchemical attitude’ in the analytical process (p. 17). We need such trust and commitment, along with humility, knowing that ‘conceptual language is inadequate to encapsulate the language of the soul’ (‘Lament of the Dead: Psychology after Jung’s Red Book’, Shamdasani & Hillman, 2013, p. 193).

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# Walking Home

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My philosophy and perspective as a psychotherapist unfolded through the legacy of my family history and the course of the first three decades of my life. I will share this background with you as a prelude to the chapters which follow.

### **The Background**

As a consequence of the Spanish Inquisition of the late fifteenth century, Sephardic Jews settled in large numbers in the Greek city port of Salonika. Their language was Ladino, a hybrid of Hebrew and Spanish. At the beginning of the Second World War, the Jewish population of Salonika numbered more than 50,000 people, but ‘during the German occupation almost the entire community 96 per cent of the Jewish population [were]...deported and killed’ (Lewkowicz, 2006, p. xvii); with the result that in 1945 ‘The number of Jews who were registered in Salonika...was 1,950’ (Lewkowicz, 2006, p. 69).

My mother, her parents and her siblings, members of the Jewish community of Salonika, emigrated from there to the UK in the early 1930s. Only two of the family members who remained in Salonika survived. Benico Abastado, a first cousin to my mother, survived Auschwitz-Birkenau to settle and raise a family in Israel. The decimation of the family and the tragedy of the Holocaust deeply traumatised my mother, profoundly affecting her way of being as a person and a parent, which inescapably created what I experienced as a pervasive sense of anxiety and tension in our home. Bako and Zana have termed such phenomena as constituting a ‘Transgenerational Atmosphere’ (2020), and it is explored and discussed in Chapter 6.

I commenced therapy in 1979, but it wasn’t until I trained as a gestalt psychotherapist in the 1990s that the psychological significance of my family and community history fully entered my consciousness. With the support of my therapist, course teachers and peers, I became able to face this legacy and was powerfully drawn to visiting Salonika.

### **2001: A Visit to Salonika**

When planning my trip, I decided, despite my limited finances, to book a luxurious hotel in the centre of Salonika, the city that is now called Thessaloniki. I thought