

## Drawing analysis of adolescents after the helicopter disaster of 1997

**Dr. Avi Goren- Bar**

### Abstract

An innovative diagnostic point of view based on C. Bollas (1991) concepts of "Language versus Idiom" and C.G. Jung concepts "Ego versus Self" are discussed in a case study of post traumatic event in Israel back in 1997.

240 drawings of adolescents from the age of 13-16, living in the area of the crash, were collected after the helicopter disaster. In general, they could be divided into two main groups. About two-thirds of the paintings were 'concrete paintings' (helicopters, for example) and about a third of the paintings were 'symbolic' or 'abstract' (such as symbols or adaptations issuing from personal associations). The variance in the drawings is compatible with the findings of Itzkowitz, Zeidner and Klingman (1994) according to which the level of processing traumatic experience and its expression is associated with each person's personal data prior to exposure to the trauma. We called the concrete drawings 'Ego drawings' and the abstract 'Self drawings' . We assumed that those who expressed their traumatic experience through "Idiomatic abstract drawings" were more vulnerable and needed further therapeutic post trauma interventions.

On Tuesday February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1997 two Israeli Sikorsky helicopters loaded with soldiers on their way to operational activity in Lebanon collided. The consequence of the collision was the death of 73 soldiers. This event is considered the Air Force's greatest tragedy since its foundation, the large number of casualties in a single day was unprecedented.

This event was perceived as a national tragedy that shook the entire nation and could be defined as a sudden state of stress, influencing all of the nation's citizens. In a poll taken by the Gallop Institute, it was found that about 40% of the nation's population knew first or second hand (through family, friends, neighbors etc.) at least one of the 73 soldiers who were killed.

Schools were shaken by the trauma of the helicopter disaster, since the population of school pupils was exposed, along with the rest of the population, to immediate reports on television and other mass communication media. The immediacy of live reporting is known to expand the psychological space beyond the area or location of the accident. The live broadcast of the event transmitted by the media increases the general sense of danger and disseminates a sense of shock and anxiety.

Schools are organized for dealing with these situations and providing support for the pupils. There are three sources of support: informative, instrumental and emotional. Schools place a special emphasis on the emotional area. This includes activities that enable verbal as well as non-verbal expression of emotions, release of fear and a non-destructive channel for anger, and it is recommended to give children an opportunity to express themselves in free play, drawing and creating artworks (Ayalon, 1991, Klingman, 1991, Klingman, 1997) by those close to them (Elraz, 1994).

The procedure is that after a tragedy, the regular school activities are canceled, and every homeroom teacher enters the class while the school counselor moves between the classrooms and helps the homeroom teacher in the activities and picking out the children who show signs of being in a state of distress. The first lessons are devoted to class discourse in which the pupils speak about the details of the disaster, they read newspaper articles and the children are given an opportunity to express themselves non-verbally. Special memorial areas are created to which the children's artworks are later added.

This article will deal with the emotional reactions of children and adolescents following traumatic events. Important experience has accumulated in the last few years of therapeutic intervention through artistic means in times of emergency. Effective use of expressive therapy in conditions of threat have been reported by Klingman, Koenigsfeld, and Markman (1987). The place of art therapies in the area of diagnosis and treatment in situations of psychological trauma is conspicuous (Johnson, 1987). Golub (1985) did an analysis of symbolic-expressive manifestations in art therapy of survivors of the Vietnam War. Particularly fascinating is an analysis done by Gregorian, Azarian, DeMaria and McDonald (1996) who analyzed children's drawings age 5-10 after an earthquake in Armenia in December 1988. From a diagnostic point of view, the drawings of most of the children who went through the earthquake trauma were characterized by a very limited spectrum of colors. Most did not make use of shading, and mainly used colors surrounding the colors black, white and red. The drawings are characterized by repetitive compulsion explained as an effort to accumulate emotional and symbolic strength against the traumatic event, similar to skin membrane that is

renewed as a result of injury. In the researcher's view, the most conspicuous finding in the children's drawings who underwent trauma is the use of the colors black, white and red that comprises an inherent means of symbolic language that emerges in the post trauma time period in order to create effective emotional contact with the surroundings. The writers of the article point to art therapy and the use of color as easing traumatic situations in which the use of words is limited due to deep emotional shock.

The 'cathartic' element has great therapeutic importance in artistic activity. Robbins (1989) explains that catharsis is related to 'aesthetic distance', which, in his view, "is a state of consciousness with mediating and balancing importance: it 'puts distance' between the intellectual aspect of the event, and 'draws close' the emotional experience associated with it.

Emotional catharsis takes place at the moment of 'aesthetic distancing' when the stimulus is perceived as real as well as unreal. For example, the drawing has aesthetic power to the extent that the drawing seems real but is nonetheless a drawing. Therefore a Greek statue of a woman in the nude will activate an experience of 'aesthetic distance' not as a pornographic photograph would" (88). In the light of this distinction, the importance of the cathartic element can be understood in the assignment of drawing following a traumatic occurrence. Artistic activation allows bringing up difficult cognitive content that can be processed emotionally by means of 'aesthetic distancing'.

#### Analysis of adolescents' drawings after the helicopter disaster

The morning after the helicopter disaster, two school counselors went into each class from the seventh to the ninth grade in two junior high schools in the north of Israel and

as part of the intervention at the time of emergency, they asked the pupils to draw. The directive was open and every child could draw freely what he felt about the disaster. It was an opportunity for the adolescents to express concrete parts and authentic internal parts of themselves. The atmosphere in the classroom was characterized by a special quiet, unlike ordinary days. The students were very restrained, talking quietly, some of them seemed fixed to their chairs, withdrawn. The pain, anxiety and tension could be felt in the air. It seemed that students who tended to disturb, sat relaxed and waited for a message and comfort from the teachers. Due to the atmosphere, work could be done on internal personal processes.

We collected 240 drawings of adolescents from the age of 13-16. In general, they could be divided into two main groups. About two-thirds of the paintings were 'concrete paintings' (helicopters, for example) and about a third of the paintings were 'symbolic' or 'abstract' (such as symbols or adaptations issuing from personal associations). The variance in the drawings is compatible with the findings of Itzkowitz, Zeidner and Klingman (1994) according to which the level of processing traumatic experience and its expression is associated with each person's personal data prior to exposure to the trauma.

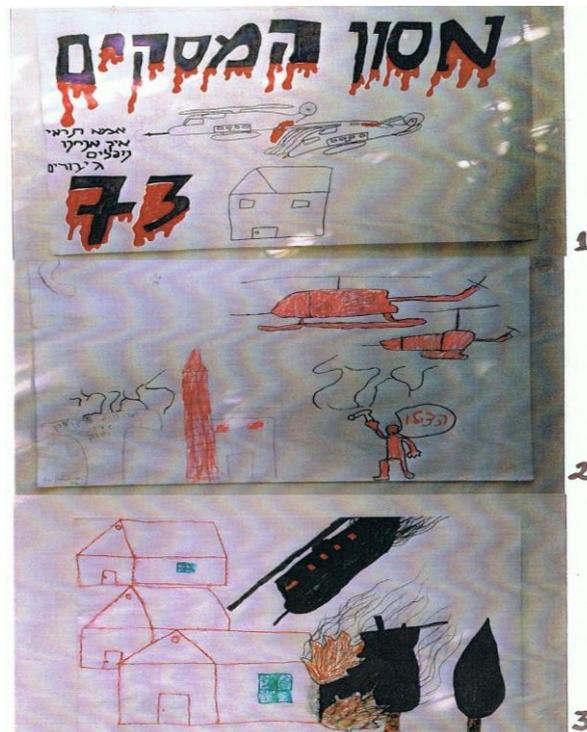
We called the concrete drawings 'ego drawings'. These drawings came mainly from a source of conscious inspiration, and dealt with a grasp of the disaster from the angle of the technical details of the event and testified to the drawer's coping with distress by means of dealing with the overt information. We surmised that the preoccupation with the helicopters during the phase of the accident in the drawing, showing the smallest details of the helicopter, removes the self from the subjective pain that emerges in a projective-associative manner in situations like these. It is interesting to note that the

pupils with the concrete drawings, when asked to discuss their artworks, dwelled on the details of the accident itself. They asked questions about the activities in Lebanon, argued whether it had been human error and remained in the class discussion on the concrete level of the incident.

Drawings number 1, 2, and 3 are examples of 'ego' drawings. The use of the colors black, white and red was evident, that was also reported for children's drawings following the earthquake in Armenia (Gregorian, 1996). The pain and anxiety are obvious, but it must be emphasized that the scenes described remain faithful to the disaster. According to the Jungian approach, it is customary to ascribe concrete-conscious thought and action to the ego functions. Abstract modes of thought and action are ascribed to the archetype of the 'self'; they issue from the unconscious and are represented by symbols. In the discussion by Yafa (1964) on the relationship between concrete art and abstract art as analogous to the relationship between the conscious (ego) and the unconscious (self), she distinguishes between two artistic styles and their psychological characteristics. She points out that Jung saw reciprocal interplay between sub-conscious artistic expressions and conscious artistic expressions as having supreme importance (p. 297). Differential diagnosis of the drawings 1,2, 3 shows that in the 'concrete' type of drawings there is an overinvestment in the central subject of the accident but there is still a personal, idiosyncratic representation, with a certain personal interpretation: in drawing number 1: the red shading of blood dripping from the letters of the sign: "The Helicopter Disaster". Drawing number 2: the red phallic tower as an aggressive unconscious expression, jutting out, that is likely to represent the crash that doesn't appear in the artwork. In drawing number 3: the fire breaks out from the houses and covers the horror of the crash of the helicopter hiding behind it and behind the green

stain. The crash is not actually represented. That is, the need to sublimate can be discerned, albeit limitedly, serving the defense mechanisms.

Drawing number 1, 2, 3



However, in an attempt to understand the interplay between the conscious and the unconscious, we sought to examine closely the abstract drawings, and those whose creators 'went farther' with their drawings, allowing themselves to bring forth a very personal interpretation of their emotions. We called these 'idiomatic drawings.'

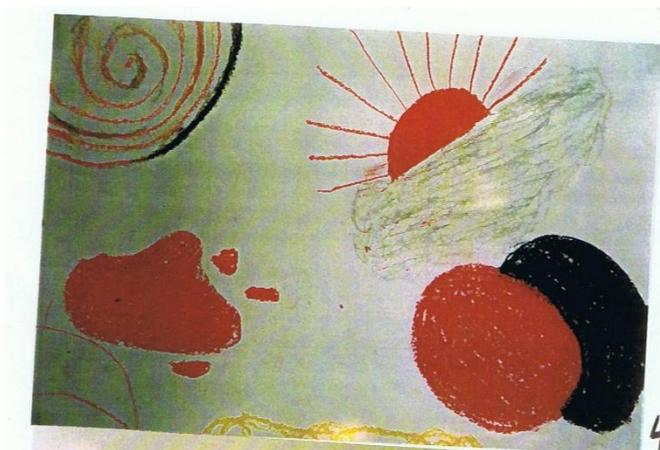
Analyzing the concept of the 'authentic self' (true self) Bollas (1991) presents the concept of 'idiom', defining it as a unique language core found in every person, a kind of inner being, which is similar to primal tissue, an authentic language that can arise and connect to certain experiences in specific situations . This authentic human language is the main human uniqueness in every person, it is mostly unconscious and is released in situations of associative thinking "(p. 212). Bollas (1995) encourages the therapist to

identify, to empower and allow room for the client's idiom during the course of therapy. In the area of creation and therapy by means of art, we will note as idiosyncratic elements of the artistic product the idiosyncratic nuances that are in the artwork, the gestures and movements, the musicality or the plasticity of the creator, that will become the characteristics of his unique artistic language, differentiating it from the mainstream of accepted language or the artistic style it belongs to. (We are able to listen to three different executions of the same opera, and the differences in execution and the personal interpretations will constitute the musical idiom and language of the conductor).

A personal interpretation was found in the idiosyncratic drawings more so than in the ego drawings, and the pupils' need for authentic processing of the event was recognizable. The experience appeared to be translated into each one's internal language. A minimal use of color could be seen in these drawings as well. We also discerned another element that was reported in the children's drawings from Armenia, the repetitiveness and the need for perseverance, continuing and repeating behavior, as a calming element in the work.

Now we will focus on the second group of drawings in an attempt to examine how the 'idiom' is expressed in them.

Drawing number 4 – "The Sun in the Clouds"



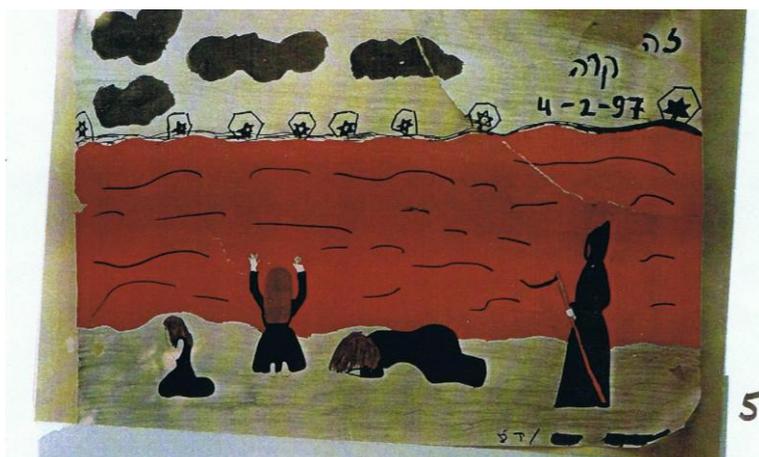
R. All Rights Reserved

4

The prototype that characterizes this drawing is repetitive, circular strokes and the repetition of nine and an earthiness of circles in various sizes. Within the nine, in the upper left hand corner of the drawing, a spiral is evident moving from the inside outward. It testifies both to the need for repetition, going over the circular form again and again, and the fact that outside the circle of self, a disaster is occurring (the exterior circle of the spiral is drawn with a black line). The circle, as a graphic archetypal form – primary and inherent, symbolizes the expression of the 'self', integrity, and characterizes the unification of opposites (Yafa, 1994).

It is probable that the drawer finds the organization and the dedication to drawing circles a way to balance upset emotions and put boundaries around them in a way that will calm them. Another element is the proximity of the round forms to each other. This nearness can possibly testify to the need to overcome the tragedy by closeness and support from others.

Drawing number 5 – "Mourning Women"



The multiple of the number four, as 'witness' to the date marked on the right hand side of the drawing, appear in the drawing in three ways: at the bottom-- four feminine figures, in the background – four clouds, on the horizon- eight graves with a star of David. The number four symbolizes the feminine foundation (Cirlot, 1962) that is characterized by nature: four seasons of the year, four mothers etc. in the present drawing, the personal idiomatic language of the pupil focuses unconsciously on her femininity. It is probable that the choice of lamenting women is not random (perhaps connecting her loss to a mother's pain). It is likely that in the process of feminine identity formation, in adolescence, the pupil identifies with the bereavement of the mothers and her language is the language of women.

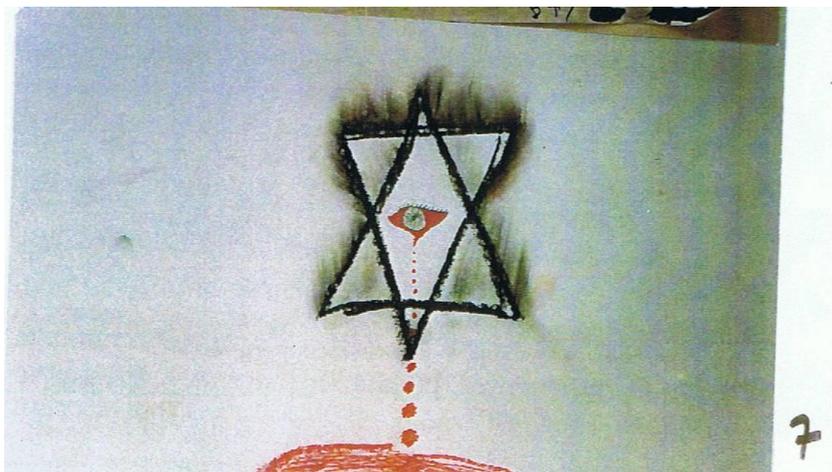
Emotional expression is characterized by the four figures coming from the 'ego level' of consciousness, but the rest of the drawing receives inspiration from deep unconscious language. The large river of blood represents perhaps the national plane and the public pain, and a slip of the pen, the angel of death's sickle blade constitutes one of many very fine wavy lines that flow in the river of blood. In summary, a deep, feminine and very personal figurative statement is conveyed.



Drawing number 6 – "The Flowers that Withered"

The artwork is composed of the written sentence "73 flowers that withered" and around it, many red flowers were drawn very close to each other. Here also there is the use of two colors, red and black. The central element is the 'repetitiveness' of the flowers over the whole drawing. The repetitive element soothes the pain and expresses a personal prototype that is enlisted by the self to alleviate suffering. A tragedy such as this one arouses anxiety and fear and the self is, accordingly, in need of calming activity. The almost obsessive repetitiveness of the flowers is the therapy dictated by the pupil's self. The addition of text comes from the conscious plane of the ego, balances the repetitive eruption of the pain expressed and clarifies that the flowers that were drawn do not symbolize the vitality of nature, rather of death.

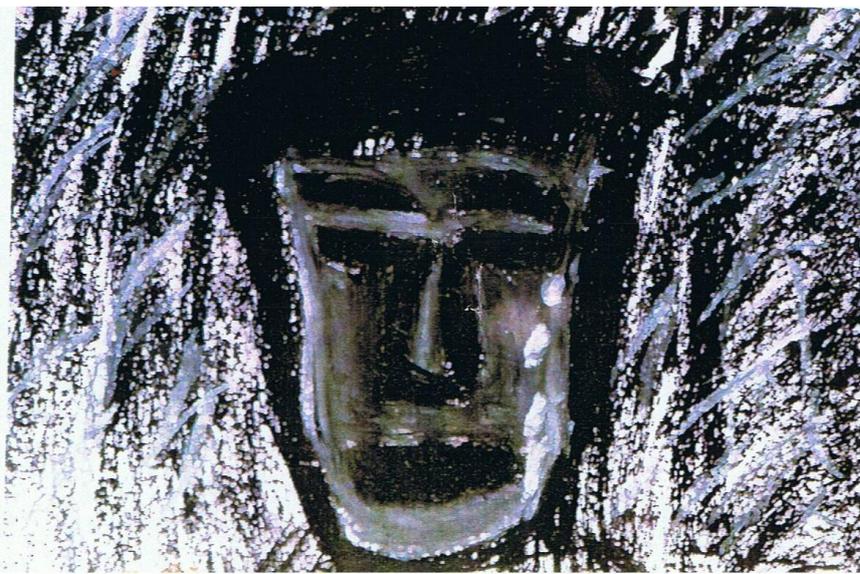
Drawing number 7 – "The Star of David Weeps"



In this drawing we witness the use of a collective symbol that is given personal idiomatic interpretation.

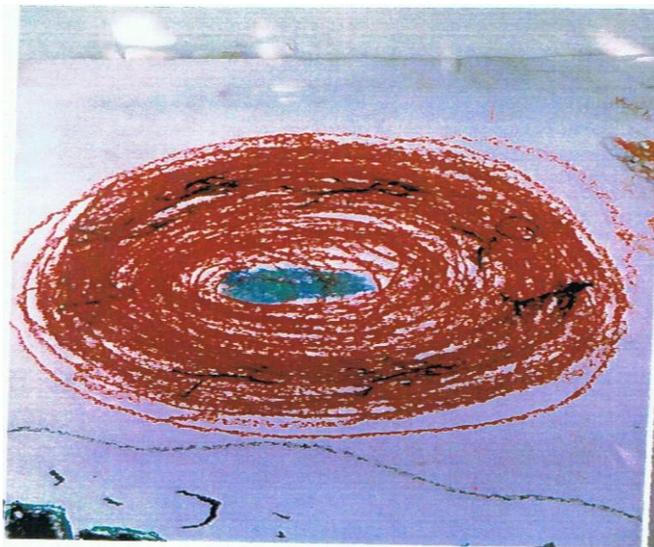
Smearing the contours of the Star of David constitutes shading ascribed to depression and sorrow. At the heart of the symbol, a red eye appears from which red stains drop, accumulating at the bottom of the drawing into a large red stain. The red eye seems to shed tears of blood that pour out from the Star of David into a large bloody pool. Looking carefully exposes that the blood drops increase in crescendo from the depth of the eye to the bleeding exterior. The disaster is exterior, the pain interior. The eye that serves as an archetype of looking inward into the self appears here as sad and in pain. The pupil detonates the symbols he was brought up on and defies them in his personal language as if in protest of the ideals he believed in up to the time of the disaster. It is likely that the values he grew up on and whose power he made an effort to believe in are undermined before his eyes. The pupil invested especially in the black edges of the Star of David and in the frame of the pool of blood. This over investment in the frames testifies to the need for control in the face of shock.

Drawing number 8 – "The Black Portrait"



The persona, the national mask laments. In black and white, with strong impulsive strokes of color, the pupil expresses a number of things through condensation (compression) of his very personal experience of shock. The powerful strokes signal the intensity of the rage and pain and his inner rhythm. The black frame around the mask brings up associations of an obituary. The male profile reflects the masculine suffering of this tragedy. The profile is also skull-like and symbolizes the blackened figures due to the helicopter explosion. The black color of the drawing expresses deep pain, bereavement and death. The color black is joined by the closed look of the face, the dark look of pain and suffering. The mask conceals the sensitive face of the self. The white tears were added later in order to emphasize the strong pain seen in the face. It is probable that the portrait that was drawn is a self-portrait, and undoubtedly the pupil chose to present a personal statement of the force of his emotions.

Drawing number 9 – "The Whirlpool that Contains Hope Within It"



Seemingly, with an impulsive and rapid mass of brown, spiraling color, the pupil vents her rage and pain. The gathering brown line moves from the outside inwardly as with centrifugal force.

Why does the pupil unconsciously leave a small white elliptical space that she later fills with sky blue? Human insignificance, expressed in the loss of such a large number of lives that crashed in an upward, downward movement find expression in 'mere people' scattered in a circle, drawn into the center of the spiral. This casual drawing reflects a deep work of the self making an effort to balance the alterations in a frightened mind: in contrast to the massive pulling of the loss to the inward depths of the spiral, a sky blue ellipse suddenly appears, giving an optimistic response to the death grinder. The sky blue is different in texture from the brown spiraling track, it is homogenous, and the pace of its making was decelerated. Below, watery ground awaits those falling -- compassionate, optimistic and accepting.

### Summary

The actuation in the drawings we reported on is based on accumulated experience in the educational-therapeutic area in intervention at the time of crisis (Ayalon, 1991, Klingman 1991, Klingman 1997, Elraz, 1994).

We will emphasize here that the experience in free drawing, proposed by educational counselors for their pupils, enabled them to carry out 'aesthetic distancing' (Robbins, 1989). That is to say, the pupils could undergo cognitive content emotionally, that being

traumatic, enabled a cathartic process by means of drawing. From the counselor's impressions, and based on their reports on the active involvement of the pupils in conversations that took place after the free drawing, it can certainly be recommended to continue this type of intervention.

Furthermore, since intervention at the time of crisis has already been done using drawings (that is a simple technique, easy, accepted and very applicable), we examined and found among the drawings themselves the existence of interesting differences. Examination of the drawings pointed to differences in their styles. One style we called 'ego drawing' and another 'idiomatic drawing'. We conjectured that the difference between the styles testifies to a different way of processing the traumatic experience. We were assisted by Bollas (1995) who pointed out that "if a person can experience his own very personal authentic language (idiom), it is a sign that he can submit to and withdraw inwardly to his creative unconscious, and in exchange part of the 'self' that has been externalized in awareness will be enriched " (p.76). That is to say, we can conclude that pupils who due to their personality structure experience situations authentically and deeply, can in exchange reach an artistic work that is impressive in its force and singularity.

However, it raises a question that has practical implications: Does originality and artistic creativity (as expressed in idiomatic paintings) indicate the resilience or sensitivity and weakness in the face of stress?

We tried to look at the painting after the helicopter disaster of adolescents through the criterion concept - Idiom. We have seen that there are indeed two artistic styles. We have seen that both have elements of the conscious and unconscious, but in the concrete

paintings the aspects of consciousness are dominant, and in the idiomatic paintings the very deep shades of authentic personality are dominant.

It should be noted in particular that, since the degree of personal artistic investment did not differ in the two categories we created (concrete drawings and idiomatic drawings), that is, no differences were evident between the two groups of paintings in terms of artistic quality, level of intelligence or motivation for investment. Therefore it can be assumed that there are certain psychological elements that cause some students to speak from a conscious -- rational source versus a smaller group of students who choose to unconsciously express a most personal source of inspiration, unconscious and symbolic, which was here presented by 'idiomatic drawings'.

Further to the differentiation done here, there is a need to continue investigating the cause of the choices of the two drawing styles. An examination was not done in the present case regarding the differences in the drawing language and other of the pupils' characteristics. It would be interesting to return to the pupils and check if a gap exists between the two groups in manifestations of stress, such as number of requests to see a counselor or psychologist or a decline in studies etc.

If it were possible to do projective tests (measuring characteristics of defense mechanisms, need for individuality, or standing up under pressure) for the student population who drew the pictures, a hypothesis could be presented with the following conjectures. Those who expressed themselves using an 'idiomatic' style in their drawings had much less rigid defense mechanisms, a tendency toward developed individualism but also a higher risk level at the time of exposure to stress, threat and loss in contrast to those who expressed themselves in their drawings in a concrete style.

A finding such as this would receive validation in correlation with other diagnostic measures between the two groups. We see a necessity for this kind of research, since confirmation of the hypothesis could bring a recommendation for the use of the idiom measure for initial spotting of the more sensitive pupils who are more at risk for states of distress at the time of disaster.

Since in any case pupils are given the opportunity to draw (for the purpose of catharsis emphasized at the beginning of the article), the Idiom measure could be used to recognize the pupils who are at risk. The psychologist and counselor at school could in a relatively short time, during supportive activity, gather drawings from many classes, identify particularly sensitive pupils and assist them as needed.

## References

Ayalon, E. (1991). The contribution of the therapist in the sealed room to understanding and assistance in times of stress for children and families. *Sichot, 5, Special Issue*, 8-13. (in Hebrew)

Bollas, C. (1991) *Forces of Destiny, Psychoanalysis and Human Idiom*. London: Free Association Books.

Bollas, C. (1995) *Cracking up*. London: Routledge.

Cirlot, J.E. (1962) *A Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge.

Elraz, Y., Ozmo, R. (1994). Uses of support sources in the event of a developing war. *Psychology, 4, 1-2*, 51-60. (in Hebrew)

Golub, D. (1985). Symbolic expression in post-traumatic stress disorder: Vietnam combat veterans in art-therapy. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 12*, 285-296.

Gregorian, V.S., Azarian, A., DeMaria, M.B., McDonald, L.D. (1996) Colors of Disaster: The Psychology of the "Black Sun". *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 23*, 1-15.

Itzkobitz, R., Zeidner, M., Klingman, A. (1994). Emotional responses of children to the Gulf War. *Psychology, 4, 1-2*, 170-180. (in Hebrew)

Jaffe, A. (1964). Symbolism in the visual arts. in: Jung, C.G. *Man and his symbols*. London: Picador, 255-323

Johnson, D. (1987). The role of the creative arts therapies in the diagnosis and treatment of psychological trauma. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*. 14, 7-14.

Klingman, A. (1991). *Psychological-educational intervention at the time of disaster*. Jerusalem: Shefi, Ministry of Education. (in Hebrew)

Klingman, A. Koenigsfeld, R. & Markman, D. (1987) Art activity with children following disaster. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*. 14(2), 153-166.

Klingman, A. (1997). *School intervention at the time of disaster*. Jerusalem: Shefi, Ministry of Education. (in Hebrew)

Miller, J. & Johnson, D.R. (1996) Drama therapy in the treatment of combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*. 23(5), 383-397.

Robbins, A. (1989) *The Psychoaesthetic Experience, an Approach to Depth-Oriented Treatment*, New York: Human Sciences Press, Inc.

Waysman, M., Schwarzwald, J., Weisenberg, M., Solomon, Z., Klingman, A. (1992). Responses of mental stress in pupils due to the Gulf War. *Sichot*, 6, 3, 256-264. (in Hebrew)