Visual Essay

To the Roots

Me, My Brother, Heroin and Iboga

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This is the root of the Iboga plant.

And here it is in its raw state.

This is a sample I have uprooted, in order to show people.

Mallendi Nzamba, Traditional healer, Panga, Gabon

Transcript of excerpt of the documentary 'Ibogaine - Rite of Passage'

In July 2018 we met at the airport, my brother Haim and I. We were bound for Portugal, where my brother was about to undergo treatment for his heroin addiction. This was not the first time he'd attempted to get clean; but it was the first time he was going to try it with Iboga.

I came from Jerusalem, Haim came on a three-hour train from Acco (Acre), a Northern port city in Israel. Acco is our hometown, where we grew up, he and I and another brother, three siblings born to the first-generation immigrants who arrived to the temporary barracks for immigrants in Acco in 1949. My mother came from Morocco via Marseilles, my father from Bulgaria. My mother never felt at home in the Hebrew-Zionist land. She spoke Arabic fluently, she felt uncomfortable in a country which blatantly, racistly preferred immigrants from Europe; oddly, her birth certificate was never found, and we never celebrated her birthday. When I think of Acco, I think of an ancient beautiful port city, and of poverty, racism and ostracization.

My brother Haim & Me, Acco 1975; Our Mother Mazal Mezamer as a young nurse, 1964.

My mother died from a violent cancer in 2016. At the time of her death she had known for thirty years that her eldest boy was a heroin addict.

My brother used to internalize the feelings of dislocation as a personal failure and be only dimly aware of the adaptive function of his addiction.

Parents of addicted people may see their children's addictions as inexplicable habit caused by addictive drugs or by genetic predispositions or brain dysfunction because acknowledging the adaptive functions that it actually serves would require facing up to the fragmented nature of the family – of their own (Alexander 2014).

In 1982, when I was 8, both of my brothers began serving in the Lebanon war, which began as what Israel defined as a military operation and which the Lebanese termed an invasion. This rapidly escalated into a war which led to twenty years of military Israeli presence in South Lebanon. They came home, for one weekend a month, during which they mostly slept. Very young men, frightened and thin. They saw men like themselves, friends, killed and maimed, and they saw unspeakable acts committed in their name in the villages and camps of Lebanon. An Israeli soldier's mandatory service is three years long; my brother Haim signed up voluntarily for three more years of service. None of us voiced the question: Why?

Years later we found out. He described Lebanon as a promised land of hash, opium (Afyūn), heroin – a promised land of self-forgetfulness, and self-treatment for the ongoing trauma of war.

Haim was sure that his time in Lebanon was at the root of his addiction.

During the initiation... a mirror is presented. It is placed in front of you. And your face is painted. From that moment you look at yourself in the mirror. So you begin to see your double personality. – *Mallendi Nzamba, Traditional healer, Panga, Gabon*

Effects of ibogaine, the active alkaloid extract of Iboga, may begin anywhere from 45 minutes up to 3 hours after you take it. The entire experience may last approximately between 24-36 hours. During the first phase, usually people experience visual phenomena generally consisting of rapid imagery lasting approximately 6 hours. These visions may be quite intense. Some people have reported experiencing images or memories of their life appearing as if in a “waking dream”. Ibogaine has been termed an “oneirophrenic”, which essentially means a substance that causes a dream-like experience. – *Excerpt from ‘Ibogaine Treatment - Patient Informed Consent Form’, Portugal, 2018*

I was 12 when I found a letter, one that I was not meant to read. In it, Haim’s friend from Florida wrote about their addiction. He thanked my brother for introducing him to these life-changing drugs, heroin and cocaine. I told my mother. She had worried for some time, but now it fell into place for her – she became the mother of a heroin addict. The mother of Opium.

All drawings are ink and watercolor on paper (2016-2019) by Sagit Mezamer.

For the following thirty years she held that role, and she did it well. At times it seemed her starring role, her only role: to circle him, feed him, care for him and debate if he was or wasn't using right now. She used to rotate the carpet on our living room floor so the burns from heroin, and Haim's passing out with a cigarette in his hand, were hidden. Until there were more holes than fabric.

Carpets, Burnt synthetic Felt Carpets

When she died, the family dis-integrated. The support was gone. My brother, now bereft of his one constant, tried, vainly, to drown his grief with heroin, cocaine, whatever came his way.

Two years after my mother died, he called me. He had collapsed, financially and physically. He was ready to do anything.

I asked him if he had heard of Iboga. He had. He was willing to try.

Ibogaine is a naturally occurring plant-based alkaloid, extracted from the root bark of the plant *Tabernanthe Iboga*. It is especially sacred to the peoples of the Bwiti religion of Cameroon and Gabon where they use raw Iboga as a natural healer and in rites of passage ceremonies (Bastiaans 2004; Fernandez 1982; Lotsof and Alexander 2001).

In 1963, Howard Lotsof, a young man, addicted to heroin, living in the Bronx, inadvertently tried Ibogaine. To his surprise, as the effects wore off, he discovered he no longer craved heroin. Lotsof decided to make studying Ibogaine and the effects it had on addiction his life's work (Taub, 2015).

Ibogaine treatment is illegal in Israel and most addicts and their families are unaware of this option. When I researched it for Haim, I found that most ibogaine treatment centers provide medical, spiritual and psychological guidance. We found a relatively new center in Portugal, the closest we could find. I skyped the center and we began our journey. One of the first communications from the center was a forty-page long Patient Informed Consent Form in which the risks of taking Ibogaine, such as adverse interactions with other drugs, allergic response, changes in blood pressure or pulse, dehydration, heart arrhythmias and possibly death were clearly stated.

You enter and breach the mirror, because you have yourself in front of you. You penetrate your inner self... to discover exactly who you are on the inside. – *Mallendi Nzamba, Traditional healer, Panga, Gabon*

Phase two is evaluative – People describe it as sort of a life review whereby the images they see become more personally related, and more connected to the process of life change. It is often a very personal experience and during this phase, people often

Sagit Mezamer – To the Roots

stop talking and remain silent and thoughtful. – *Excerpt from 'Ibo-gaine Treatment - Patient Informed Consent Form', Portugal, 2018*

Your heart, Mom, 2019, ink and watercolor on paper 56x76cm

Haim had to undergo preliminary medical tests, especially heart tests, to ensure he was physically fit enough to survive the treatment. Usually, the patient undergoes the treatment alone. But my brother speaks no English. He needed a translator. I went with him to the treatment center in Portugal.

When we were there, in the beautiful countryside, surrounded by professional and devoted people, my brother was asked to sign a contract headed *Your Commitment to Return*. The two paragraphs explain that Iboga takes you deep inside yourself, and also outside yourself. You might meet the dead; you might receive an invitation. But it is important to remember that you are loved and needed here, and your departure would be very distressing for your loved ones. Commit to return.

I translated and my brother agreed. He was afraid, but he was not more afraid of death than he was of the life he was trapped in. He could not sign his name in English. So, I signed for him.

A Day that Lasts an Eternity – Ibogaine Treatment

The opposite of addiction is not sobriety; the opposite of addiction is connection. (Hari, 2015).

The night before the treatment, Haim suffered from withdrawal pains. He didn't want to participate in the ceremony that was being held for him, an intention setting ceremony. We sat without him, together with the healers and others who had completed treatment and read the intention Haim had written on a piece of paper. The healer conducting the ceremony asked for the forces of nature to be helpful and present during the treatment, which was to begin the next morning. I was anxious and tense.

The morning came. We gathered round Haim, praying for him like a tiny tribe, full of healing intention and focus. He burst into tears; then suddenly grabbed the Ibogaine capsules and swallowed them.

He was monitored for 36 hours. I prayed silently and held his hand, let go, held it again.

I watched the heart monitor, willing the rate not to drop. When it did, I prayed harder.

I could witness Haim passing through the three phases that had been outlined in the guidebook. At first, he was fitful, complaining of feeling hot, then cold, mumbling, incoherent. Crying, then laughing. He asked for water several times. Then, after a few hours, he became quiet. This quiet lasted a long time. In fact, it was only a day after the ibogaine wore off that he began to talk again. This is the third and last phase, a period of time where the visual effects start to subside and people

remain awake, often reviewing the experience. A return to normal consciousness occurs over time with some remaining stimulation.

As a rule, whatever we don't deal with in our lives, we pass on to our children. Our unfinished emotional business becomes theirs. Children swim in their parents' unconscious like fish swim in the sea (Maté 2008, 253).

Haim, the therapist and I, as his translator, met for the integrative part of the session – understanding and reviewing what had passed; this is crucial, as Ibogaine not only eases withdrawal symptoms and suppresses the craving for the addictive drug, it also supplies insight into the roots of the need on which the addiction feeds.

Haim remembered meeting our grandmother, and our great grandmother. Then my mother appeared, only to turn into a wolf who seemed about to devour him. Haim always thought the roots of his terror, and the roots of his addiction, were to be found in the war. But he had no visions of the war – he found a more primal terror, himself as a young child; faced with an unsafe mother, afraid, looking for a way to disappear, to dissociate. He remembered things long buried – among them that his first use of opiates had not been in the Army, but that when he was fourteen, he had taken Afyūn, a kind of local opium, in Acco.

Iboga has been used for thousands of years to assist in profound spiritual growth and deep introspection, and to regain connection to the tribe (Taub 2015).

‘Mother of Opium’ is the name of a new artwork that I have been working on this past year or so.

'I met Mom, but only for a second, because she immediately turned into a frightening wolf.' Haim Mezamer, *after the Iboga treatment*, 2018, Ink and watercolor on burnt paper.

The work includes about twenty interviews with opiate addicts in Israel and the West Bank, together with drawings, photographs and a visual research archive. The name comes from the ancient rituals depicted in pottery of the Poppy Goddess, found in the area of Crete, dating back to the Bronze Age (1300 BCE). The earliest use of opiates for ritual and medicinal purposes is found here, in what is today Northern Israel, Lebanon and the Middle East (Carod-Artal, 2013). The first of my interviewees is Haim, my brother. In Hebrew, Haim means life.

Sagit Mezamer – To the Roots

My brother still sits nervously at the table. His leg still vibrates with pent up energy. He still smokes and does cocaine on a more or less regular basis. But he has gained weight. He has a job. He is no longer addicted to heroin.

He has a new tattoo. It reads Ha'tikkun Ha'ishi- Iboga. Tikkun is often translated as repair. But in Jewish religious tradition it has a wide range of meanings- to improve, repair, set up, or even just to imbue something with special intention. The highest meaning of the word refers to setting a thing right – especially – the soul. To restore the soul to its proper, undamaged state. I cannot think of a word that suffices in English.

So, my brother's tattoo reads – The personal Tikkun-Iboga.

My brother has redefined his role – he is the one who has located, and reconnected to the roots – for himself, and for our family.

Author Bio

Sagit Mezamer is an artist and curator, with MA in clinical psychology, a lecturer at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, and served as artistic director and curator of “Yaffo 23”, Center for Art and Research in Jerusalem from 2010 to 2013. Mezamer curated The Curfew Tower residency in Northern Ireland 2014-2017 (with the artist Bill Drummond). Currently, she is working on the solo project The Mother of Opium, an anthropological docu-installation dealing with opiate addiction in Israel and the West Bank. The imagery in this essay is taken from drawings and photographs from this project, most being published for the first time. If you wish to use any content/images in this visual essay, a permission is needed from the author according to our copyright policy: sagit.m@gmail.com All drawings are ink and watercolor on paper (2016-2019) by Sagit Mezamer.

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