

# 'He Said That if I Stroke Him Men Would Want Me': The Dark Truth Behind the 'Sacred Sexuality' Community

Sex, humiliation, even bodily injury – all in the guise of therapy. Many women who turn to the so-called sacred sexuality community for help fall victim to a totally unsupervised form of ‘treatment’ that only deepens psychic wounds



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By [Neta Halperin](#)  
[www.haaretz.com](http://www.haaretz.com)

A few months ago, Hagar Ben Israel, 38, experienced a severe post-traumatic episode.

“I had experienced a number of incidents of sexual harassment and assaults, and had repressed most of them for many years,” she admits. “I underwent various types of therapy. In none of them was sexual harm mentioned and at a certain stage I felt that I could move on. I did notice certain symptoms in my personality, but I didn’t associate them with sexual trauma. I didn’t understand why I felt like my body was a prison – that I was shackled to it against my will.”

Nevertheless, last October, after she’d broken up with her partner, memories from the depths began to flood Ben Israel with unprecedented force: For the first time the recollections were connected to sexual assault and injuries she had experienced in the past; most of all she was shocked by the realization of the damage done to her in September 2016. At that time she had undergone a session of Shibari – a Japanese technique that involves tying a person up in ropes, based on the idea that the helplessness and discomfort of being bound enable a complete release from and even the healing of physical pain and psychological trauma. This ancient technique has become very popular in the West in recent years.

The therapist to whom Ben Israel had turned for treatment six years ago is an evangelist for the technique: Chris Bold, aka Bodhi Zapha, an Englishman who has been living mainly in Bali for the past several years and gives workshops on nearly every continent. He has also visited Israel several times, leading group gatherings as well as individual healing sessions.

“At that time,” Ben Israel recalls, “I was feeling that something in my sexuality was unresolved, and I was prepared to hand over control to an experienced therapist who would enable me to undergo a process that would involve healing. I came to this with 100-percent trust. I sensed that there was something locked inside my body and maybe if I took it to an extreme experience like Shibari, I would be able to let myself deal with it down to the very bottom and it would leave me.”

At first, she says, everything looked above board and respectable. The organizer of Zapha’s visit, an Israeli who defines himself as a sacred sexuality instructor, greeted Ben Israel at the entrance to a private home in Rosh Ha’ayin, a city in central Israel. She went upstairs to the second floor, where Zapha was waiting for her.

“We talked a bit and he looked deeply into my eyes and said that in this session there would be no sex in any form,” she relates. “And then we performed a kind of transition ritual, in which he took ropes and placed them in my hands, and after that I was instructed to take off all my clothes – except my underpants – and he covered my eyes. It was all done in a very structured way, and everything up until that moment was with my agreement.”

However, if the session started gradually and was aimed at creating trust, alarm bells soon started to go off. “I began to feel that he was touching my nipples in a very painful way. I’m not sure if he had wound the ropes around them or just whipped them – after all, my eyes were covered – but it was really painful and clearly not appropriate to the situation,” Ben Israel says.

“And then, at a certain stage, he shoved his penis deep into my mouth, really pushed my head down on it, again and again, so hard that I began to choke. But he didn’t stop. On the contrary: The more I gagged, the more he would say:

Excellent, this is cleansing that you are going through. And the more I choked, the more he was spurred to continue aggressively, each time talking about his sex organ as sacred. 'My organ is pure, it is my temple.' There was a stage when he even said: "This is how I serve my clients."

This first and last Shibari "treatment" lasted for six hours and after Ben Israel emerged, she repressed the whole experience. In the way psychologists describe the effort people make to reconcile the dissonance between incomprehensible injury and the behavior of an ostensibly benevolent authority figure – she even thanked Zapha.

"Maybe the subsequent repression was made possible because I had experienced so many episodes beforehand," Ben Israel says. "But recently, as I started to acknowledge what happened, it just became too heavy to bear."

Today, having acknowledged the grave emotional injury she experienced and undergoing proper professional therapy, she sees it as her mission to speak out publicly and name the therapist-attacker. "This is a person who is continuing to work as an active healer, so how is it possible for any one of us to sleep at night? The man shoved his penis into my throat until I choked. I just want to say this aloud."



**An illustration of the Shibari method. Based on the idea that the helplessness and discomfort of being bound enable a release from pain and psychological trauma.**Credit: Natalie magic / Shutterstock

Like Ben Israel, Kaitlin (who asks to be identified by only her first name), who lives in Toronto, wanted to say similar things out loud and did so in a closed, women’s Facebook forum about sacred sexuality: “I know many of you in this community highly recommend Bodhi – the Shibari practitioner because of your amazing experiences with him,” she wrote in a post there a few months ago. “I am here to share a completely different kind of experience, not to take away or diminish anyone’s prior experience, but to warn others of his flip side.”

In that post, and subsequently in a conversation with Haaretz, Kaitlin recalled that in her case too, Zapha did not mention sex during their preliminary conversation, before a lengthy Shibari session last September. “He quickly derobed himself,” she wrote. “This was normal for him, to me, not fully knowing all the ins and outs of this experience felt incredibly uncomfortable and he questions why I wasn’t getting naked and why I had ‘issues’ with it, as

it is our natural state. And by me feeling uncomfortable, it was making him feel that way too.”

Subsequently, when she rebuffed his intention to penetrate her, he claimed she was damaging his “inner feminine,” which aims to heal her. “He knew he f---d up and wayyyyyy over stepped the boundaries and quickly tried to close the ceremony, I was still tied up with my body screaming in pain. I sat up and ripped the ropes off me and went and put my clothes on.”

Kaitlin’s story very quickly elicited other, similar reports about Zapha. Women in the Facebook group began to collect accounts from other women. Others, with similar stories, directly approached Safe Mediation, an organization that serves as a bridge between victims and attackers through a restorative justice approach. The women seeking help from the group came from all over – the United States, Holland, Thailand, Australia and Israel – all claiming that Zapha assaulted them. But meanwhile, he has been keeping very busy, holding workshops in Europe, with others planned in South Africa, Australia, the United States and again Europe.

One might think “healing master” Zapha is an exceptional case of a serial predator who is continuing to move through the world as a superstar guru, leaving more and more damaged women by the wayside. Or at most, perhaps he represents one of a very few who have stirred up a storm but will eventually fade. However, the stories of Hagar, Kaitlin and other women like them are not so rare. According to accounts reviewed by Haaretz, cases like those involving Zapha have recurred in various parts of what is called “the sacred sexuality community.” It is even possible to say that the specific cases mentioned here, however dire they may be, clearly reflect a problem rooted in the very foundations of that community: the fact that behind the alluring and pretty words, this movement is in some cases built on breached boundaries.

Sometimes there is no agreement as to what is prohibited and what is permitted, what is legitimate and what goes too far; there is no regulation, no ethical code.

The term “sacred sexuality community,” or as it is sometimes called, the community of conscious sexuality, can be misleading. Essentially, it is used to refer to an assortment of groups and initiatives, practices and doctrines, independent therapists and shamans around the world including Shibari practitioners. And if the roots of the community as a cultural phenomenon are in the New Age movement that has been flourishing in Israel as elsewhere for over three decades, in the past few years it has experienced a noticeable surge. Festivals, retreats, so-called cuddle parties, podcasts, lectures, workshops for singles and couples, and so on – all these activities, within the same general framework, claim to have one common objective: facilitating a release from the guilt and humiliation that are at times part and parcel of contemporary sexuality, and examining personal and collective sexual experience as a jumping-off point for self-awareness and even redemption. Thus, alongside numerous well-qualified, educated and experienced professionals treating people around the globe for a myriad issues, there are therapists and counselors whose training is questionable, and still others, some of them quite veteran and well known, who are engaged in bullying and manipulative use of their status and leave a trail of trauma behind them.

Sexual relations under the pretext of healing, aggressive practices in workshops that are damaging or humiliating, sexual harm – the accounts Haaretz has collected show that these things apparently happen at times in the sacred sexuality community, and not only at the extremes of it. The danger inherent in this is obvious, but the damage is magnified because of one basic fact: Many of the women in question (although men are also involved)

approached the community already hurt, seeking repair and healing. They believed, specifically, that unlike other frameworks and approaches, this one was established precisely to create a safe space, one that would enable individuals to investigate their sexuality in a therapeutic, respectful and open environment. Which makes the blurring of boundaries in such instances an especially painful betrayal of trust.

In any event, a bustling social and cultural “sacred” community has taken shape in Israel and elsewhere, featuring a host of activities associated with approaches such as Shibari, naked yoga, neo-tantra, etc. The community, which is constantly evolving, thrives on human, social and cultural contact, carries on a brisk discourse and stormy debates in various WhatsApp and Facebook groups, provides a sort of haven for its numerous participants – and a source of income for its facilitators – and aims to enhance a person’s sense of identity and belonging. All of this attracts women, in particular, who are seeking to be healed from a sexual trauma they’ve undergone, to this whole realm.

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### **Hagar Ben Israel**

“Without making a generalization, over the course of 15 years of representing victims, I’ve met quite a few women who have found their way to the sacred sexuality community following an episode in which they were hurt,” says Vardit Avidan, a lawyer who heads the Clinic for Legal Feminism at the University of Haifa, and specializes in cases of sexual harassment. “A great number of them, in particular those who were harmed at a young age, have a

hard time placing trust in others and are deterred from institutional frameworks. Many have been hurt by the police or the courts. Many go through a series of therapists or recoil at seeking psychological treatment. Which is why many of them [opt for alternative treatments.](#)”

*Because alternative treatment, particularly in a space such as sacred sexuality, enables them to be part of a community?*

Avidan: “Exactly. A community provides a sense of belonging – meaning, someone to embrace – and a lot of these women are in need of that. And alternative treatment either within the sacred sexuality community or outside it, may be beneficial and healing. But at the same time it is a wide-open realm that totally lacks supervision or oversight. So it emerges that alongside skilled female and male therapists who have undergone serious professional training, there are also people who have themselves experienced an upheaval in their lives, have used Ayahuasca [a plant-based psychedelic drink] and discovered the therapist that lies within them.

“One way or another these people open a clinic and without any training are, for example, offering Greek massage [i.e., of the female genitals]. They are on a sort of ego trip and come up with abundant justification for all the harm they do. The current situation, which enables everyone to be a sexual therapist, is a Wild West. And on the other side are these [traumatized] women, who yearn so much for a sense of belonging, for a sense of meaning in life – and they constitute easy prey, very easy prey.”



**Attorney Vardit Avidan.**Credit: Michal Aviv

They end up playing that role at sacred sex community festivals, workshops or even clinics, in one-on-one sessions. That, for example, was the case for Dana (a pseudonym), age 30. A few years ago, she filed a complaint of rape with the Israel Police. “To this day, I do not go out with men,” she says. “I am scared to death.” But her case was closed for lack of evidence, and when Dana understood that salvation would not come through the legal authorities, she focused on healing. At the recommendation of friends, she approached a veteran therapist from the sacred sexuality community. She met with him several times during sessions in which he employed various healing practices; at one point, he proposed an ancient practice with roots in the Far East: the so-called Greek massage.

## Dancing naked

Greek massage – based on the premise that (also) in the female sexual organs there are pressure points that can be worked in order to affect the body and the soul, and can help lead to healing – is controversial, even within the sacred sexuality community itself. There are some well-known therapists who consider this technique to be an effective means for helping women cope with a wide variety of problems. And that is what Dana needed, like oxygen. Except that is not what she got.

“At the first stage he stripped off his clothes, and suggested that I also take off my clothes and dance naked with him,” she recalls. “He explained that this was part of the process. As far as I was concerned, it still sounded somewhat logical: After all, he’s the authority figure and I rely on him. Then he began the massage, and when he began to press and massage me in my vagina – it was strong and painful. I told him he was hurting me, and he said, ‘How gentle am I supposed to be with you women?’ In the plural, as his hands were inside me, as if I were all the women he knew, all of the women who asked him to be gentle. And then he simply kept on doing it.”

Dana says she froze, felt she was reliving the silencing of herself that began when she was raped. “But if the therapist is saying such a thing, maybe I should shut up?” she says, explaining why she didn’t leave at that point. “Later on, he put his penis near my head and said I could stroke it if I wanted. He told me that if I would open up, in other words if I would stroke him – men would want me and be attracted to me because things would no longer be so difficult for me [sexually]. I was in shock. I didn’t know how to react. I got up and left, feeling nauseous.”

This time around, she did not bother to turn to the police.

Dana: “Everyone among my good friends who has heard this says: ‘Dana, you went to someone so that he could touch your vagina, what were you expecting? Who’s even going to listen to you?’ And after what I had already gone through with the police – to go and complain that I had undergone another assault, that I had in fact paid money for it, would be the most humiliating thing possible.”

Like Dana, Yael, 28, an ultra-Orthodox university student, came for treatment in the wake of an acquaintance’s recommendation. The objects of complaints that have come to the attention of Haaretz – some thanks to the fruitful cooperation with the feminist website Politically Corret (the name is a play on words, in Hebrew) – are in fact predominantly male therapists and counselors, but others are women: moderators of workshops, and leading figures at festivals.

“I came for treatment in the wake of things that had happened to me in my life,” relates Yael, who prefers not to go into detail. “I myself am a therapist. I invest effort in my own spiritual welfare, I think it is important, and I got to a point at which I said: Okay, I feel that I am prepared also to go for treatment that includes contact and to see what happens there.”

The female therapist she turned to is a very busy and sought-after figure. “Her clinic is packed, people are always coming and going,” Yael explains, adding that she explained to the therapist, in preliminary correspondence, that at times she feels sexually overwhelmed and needs some sort of means of regulating it. The woman calmed her down, telling Yael she had come to the right address. “I treat traumas,” she wrote.

But the alarm bells went off already in the first therapy session, says Yael: “She said that prior to the treatment we would sit and talk. In practice, the moment I

walked in she told me to take off my clothes, lie down on the bed and call her when I was ready. There was no conversation about who I was, about what was disturbing me, what the treatment would include, what would be inappropriate for me.”

Nevertheless, Yael did as she was told. “You’re lying there, wearing only underpants, a sheet on top of you. And then she removes the sheet and pulls your underpants down, without explaining or asking if it’s okay, and you are saying to yourself: She is not supposed to massage you there. You realize that it’s improper.”



**ISTA workshops (the subjects have no connection to the content of the article). Behind the alluring words, the sacred sex movement is in some cases built on breached boundaries.**

Credit: Ohad Pele Mizrahi's YouTube channel/ISTA/Ali Vann

*Were you told at any point that the massage would include intimate vaginal contact?*

Yael: “No. Not before or during the treatment. It’s not that she focused on the vagina and massaged it for a long while, but neither was it cursory. It was as if she had incidentally happened to reach that place, and then wanted to get there again. My body was in a state of terror. It felt so wrong and so uncomfortable that at a certain point I simply detached myself. My body was there but I don’t know where I was.”

*Was there any communication between the two of you during the treatment?*

“Not really. Throughout the entire treatment she mumbled, as if she were tripping. She also informed me who it was that I was victimized by, and how and when. She totally put herself in the place of being an omniscient and all-powerful person.”

**You’re lying there, a sheet on top of you. And she removes the sheet and pulls your underpants down, without explaining or asking if it’s okay, and you are saying to yourself: She is not supposed to massage you there.**

**Yael**

Nevertheless, Yael was fearful of canceling a second appointment that had already been scheduled. But her distress eventually tipped the scale in making a decision: She screwed up her courage and wrote the therapist that she felt the treatment was not beneficial for her.

“In response, I received a torrent of humiliating responses [from her],” Yael says, like, “‘I am incredible at my job. You are hallucinating. You have zero self-awareness. You are like a little child.’ I have a hard time with the fact that in the wake of difficult experiences that I’ve gone through, I was prepared to expose myself and to give my body over in order to find a cure – and in the end it turned out that I had found my way to someone who was using me and doing

things in a harmful manner. You come to fix things, and you leave damaged by the experience.”

### **Sex for love**

If private clinics can be unsafe spaces, the situation is far more acute in the community’s workshops, a freer and more open arena where the difficulty of setting limits is heightened. In workshops on different themes and of various duration, rather daring elements – nudity, sex between participants, and sometimes even with the moderators, although that is officially forbidden in some spaces – may be combined with high-pressure group dynamics, under the guidance of a facilitator who lacks the requisite understanding or knowledge of therapy, or of some charismatic individual who is out to exploit his or her power. Because workshop leaders decide on the nature of the activities and how they will be conducted, their own persona essentially determines the whole, basic experience. If they have undergone proper training in counseling and therapy, and are empathetic individuals who understand human beings and human relations, the participants’ experience will be beneficial. But if these moderators are out to satisfy their own needs, the outcome can be truly damaging.

“There is a great deal of beauty in the sacred sexuality community, and much joy in learning and discovery there,” observes Dalit Simchai, head of the human services department at Tel-Hai College and author of the 2009 book (in Hebrew) “Flowing Against the Flow,” about New Age culture in Israel. “But sometimes the contradictions that exist at its [the community’s] base collide with one another. For example, people with even a slight, direct acquaintance with the spiritual world will say they are against gurus, because they are perceived to possess an overdeveloped ego. The teachers on the ground are

supposed to be there only to hold your hand, as part of a process for which you yourself are responsible.

“But alongside all this superficial, supposedly democratic discourse” against gurus, Dr. Simchai continues, “and even with its help, there are people who create a community of believers around themselves who surrender to a dynamic of power. And because in this particular community, sex is part of the story from the get-go, setting boundaries is particularly difficult.”

Indeed, such was the experience of Bar, who is 29. “I came out of an abusive relationship. I knew I had been experiencing a serious trauma that required urgent treatment,” she says. “I entered the world of sacred sexuality at the age of 20 and that is what I knew. So I said, fine, maybe they’ll be able to help me there. Deep inside, I knew it wasn’t so, but I didn’t listen to that voice. I approached the facilitator of a course, someone well-known and powerful in the community, and because I didn’t have enough money, I suggested that I be his assistant.”

The facilitator told her that after she attended a workshop as a participant, she would be able to be his “helper.” “In the beginning, he took me and a few other women who wanted to be assistants to a room, explained to us what they do, and added, ‘And you should know, I hit on my assistants. There are assistants who are my loves, and sometimes they also take part in a workshop, so don’t be surprised when that happens.’ When he said that, I had the feeling he was looking at me. Naturally I felt special; at that time that was how I felt I was getting love.”



**ISTA workshops (the subjects have no connection to the content of the article). Behind the alluring words, the sacred sex movement is in some cases built on breached boundaries.**

Credit: Ohad Pele Mizrahi's YouTube channel/ISTA/Ali Vann

The facilitator not only spoke frankly about sexual and other relationships he conducted with those subordinate to him, he also used explanations that exploited Bar's guilt feelings and her readiness to cooperate. "One day in the workshop I stood up to talk about the devastating relationship I had just come out of," she recalls. "After a few sentences he cut me off and said, 'I'm stopping you, because you're getting too much into victimhood. If you want to take responsibility for your life, stop playing the victim! Allow yourself to be in your sexiness.'

"At that moment, all I felt was that I didn't want to be in a victim mode. I felt so guilty and out of it, so I said okay, and just did what I know how to do best: I pretended. I let everyone who wanted touch me, so they would see that, hey, I'm a good girl and I'm sexy and I'm not a victim – when what I needed was to

be allowed to be in the place I was in, to process and to vomit up all the poison I'd absorbed.”

The day the workshop ended, the facilitator invited Bar to his room. “And of course I went. I didn't want to be there in any way, shape or form, but because he was the smart, strong instructor, and everyone followed him – I did it. Even though I felt totally disconnected during it all. I thought maybe he would save me, maybe he would give me love, affirmation.”

That was the first sexual encounter in a series, during private sessions that went on for a year. And not just with that one workshop leader. “I was the dream of all the facilitators I worked with. The best girl, the one who takes part, who does everything she's told. I was a really superb assistant,” Bar says. “I came from a damaged, broken home. I was very sexual and supposedly mature, I used my sexuality to get love – that was the way. I simply ended up in fields where they hunted me down – all of them very well-known in the community – and exploited the fact that I agreed to everything they wanted from me.”

Lavi, a therapist who has worked for years in the sacred sexuality community in Israel and abroad, discerns a more general phenomenon involving moderators in this story. “There are many factors in the facilitating field that can lead to sexual harm,” he says. “One of them is a basic distinction between informed consent and free consent. Even when a [workshop] participant says, ‘We are all adults’ – I don't find that relevant. In my view, that does not connote consent per se. The dynamic of relations involving an authority figure still exists, and it makes no difference whether that figure is a lecturer, a therapist, a facilitator or a staff member of some group.”

There apparently are, however, many participants, women as well as men, who take the opposite view: They see sexual relations between workshop moderators and participants as a legitimate act, even one involving learning and healing. One of them is Tal, who has experienced complex posttraumatic disorder.

“I had sex twice with a well-known tantra facilitator, and it was an important experience for me,” she says. “I took part in his workshops, and he realized that I was suffering from PTSD even beforehand. I can say that it was thanks to him that my sexuality changed. And I never felt exploited or deceived.”

**I had sex twice with a well-known tantra facilitator, and it was an important experience. I took part in his workshops; he realized I was suffering from PTSD even beforehand. I can say that it was thanks to him that my sexuality changed. And I never felt exploited or deceived.**

## **Tal**

Tamara, yoga teacher and leader of sacred sexuality-focused workshops, has a similar approach. “I can tell you that a few years ago I slept with one of the facilitators in a workshop and I really got off on it. Anyone who wants to say that there’s an issue of power relations here – let them say so. It served the process for me, I don’t regret it, and I know about a few other women who also had the same experience.”

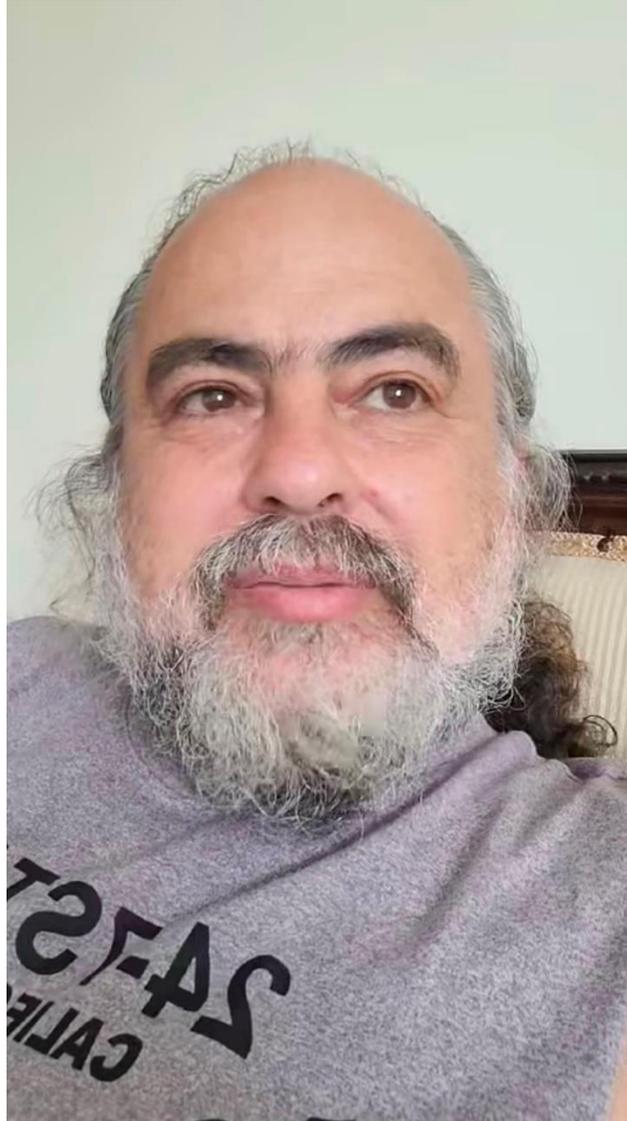
Hila, a therapist and moderator of workshops on sexuality and other subjects, objects to this narrative, particularly when it comes from female therapists. “You’ll hear female therapists and facilitators from this field say [to their clients]: ‘It’s hard for you, coming from the outside, with your social conditioning, to understand what’s actually going on here.’ In the New Age

movement and its offshoots,” Hila adds, “and especially in the field of sacred sexuality, there is an approach that’s often encapsulated in the saying, ‘You’re not developed enough to understand what you went through.’ There are therapists and facilitators who initiate intimate contact with female patients and say, for example, ‘At the beginning of the workshop I saw that she has a ‘father complex,’ and I decided to be there in her service, to give her this ‘gift’” – i.e., of engaging in sex as a means of treating her problems.

### **A transparent policy**

There is at least one organization in the realm of sacred sexuality that declares openly that everything that goes on in its workshops is transparent and agreed upon: the International School of Temple Arts, aka ISTA, which has a thriving branch in Israel. For example, ISTA’s level 1 (beginners’) and level 2 workshops are particularly popular. And in contrast to other organizations, which gloss over the issue of sexual relations between facilitators and participants, the most senior staff at ISTA workshops talk freely about the subject.

One person who has spoken out and written about this subject is Ohad Pele Ezrahi. Israeli-born Pele Ezrahi is a self-described international teacher of kabbalah, sacred sexuality, love and relationships, who is a senior staff member at ISTA and is among the most dominant figures in Israel’s sacred sex community. He has also been ordained as a rabbi in the Jewish Renewal movement.



**Ohad Pele Mizrahi. “There is no intention, heaven forbid, to harm or offend any of workshop participants,” he says.**

Credit: ISTA Facebook page

Interviewed in a 2019 podcast, he commented, “If I say categorically that because you are a pupil and I am a teacher, a relationship between us is forbidden, that distance creates between us: (a) diminishment – you are necessarily in a childlike situation; (b) my aggrandizement, and it doesn’t allow you to cope with reality as it is. What we demand from the staff is not ‘Don’t be in any sort of relationship with the pupils,’ but ‘Don’t be in a hidden relationship.’”

In the talk, Pele Ezrahi, who is 57, related that he himself had had sex with a woman who attended a workshop, with the backing of his female co-facilitators. “Four years ago, I was teaching in England and a gorgeous, charming woman came up to me and said, ‘I am very attracted to you and I want to be with you; and I am also aware that you are the teacher,’” he recalled. “I told her, ‘That’s beautiful, you should consult with the two other teachers, and see what they say.’”

As it happened, they thought a sexual relationship between him and the participant during and after the workshop would be cool.

However, not all women agree that it’s cool. Last June a Facebook group was created “as a space for those who would like to share experiences of boundaries that were crossed within the ISTA framework and want those institutions to undergo a substantial change.” From the day the page was created, the accounts posted on it have been generating nothing less than an earthquake in the global sacred sexuality community. One such account mentions Pele Ezrahi himself.

The writer is a young American woman named Rachel, who attended a level 2 workshop facilitated by Pele Ezrahi in Arizona a little over a year ago. In her extremely detailed, thoughtful and lengthy post, which she titles “An open letter to ISTA,” and subsequently in an interview with Haaretz, she describes how she began to realize that Pele Ezrahi himself was taking part both as an ordinary participant, while also serving as the powerful leader of the workshop.

“In one of the exercises Ohad told me explicitly that he would like to touch my breasts and my ‘yoni’ (vagina),” she relates. “I was astounded, but I felt safe, because this was during an exercise that was supposedly without physical

contact.” A few days later, when he randomly assigned her to an exercise that included such contact, “he moved close to me, and I felt a tidal wave of strong sexual energy from him. At that moment I felt as though I wasn’t capable of thinking lucidly or of expressing myself.”

He asked her what her boundaries were, Rachel writes in her post. She managed to reply only “no penetration” – and within minutes he pulled down her panties in front of everyone and repeated the question. I was shocked,” she writes, as she hadn’t planned “to take them off.” While she mumbled “only around [her genitals],” he hoisted her waist and vagina toward his lips and made contact with her inner thighs. Nevertheless, she discovered that Pele Ezrahi had been very displeased by the way things played out. “These aren’t your boundaries! I’m sick of your spiritual bullshit. Next time be here,” he scolded her, according to her account. Rachel adds that she felt “shocked and completely confused by the intensity of his words and by what he meant. In my confusion I remember feeling offended and disgusted. I felt as though I had been violated at that moment. Today I see it also as a manipulation.”

“In this context you have to remember one very important factor – the social pressure – especially in workshops like ISTA level 2,” says Shani Kedar, a psychotherapist, journalist and activist who writes about ethics in the realms of sacred sexuality and psychotherapy. “At those levels, the more daring a participant is perceived to be, as one who does extreme things, the more spiritual and advanced they are considered to be, and the more highly regarded they are, overall. The ideology is that your level of sexual openness corresponds with your level of spiritual openness.”

*So if you don’t display sexual openness, that’s not a good sign.*

Kedar: “Right. So, when a facilitator of this magnitude, one of the founders of ISTA, comes to you and asks you for something, it’s almost impossible to say no.”



**Shani Kedar, a psychotherapist, journalist and activist .**

Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

What if participants complain publicly and openly about the sexual contact they had with a facilitator – whether during a workshop or afterward – describing it as a harmful and improper act stemming from the unequal relations of power between them?

Pele Ezrahi, for his part, declared back in the same 2019 podcast that participants must share the burden of responsibility for what they experienced. “We come from a place of understanding and of taking responsibility, of both of us having been in that place. It’s not that someone raped anyone; we made a

mistake, we entered, let's say, into sexuality that wasn't precise, it wasn't appropriate for me [i.e., as the participant]... So let us take responsibility, let us learn where we made mistakes, we will ask forgiveness from one another," he said. "The moment there is fulminating and rage and vengefulness, I have no interest in it."

When Rachel tried to confront Pele Ezrahi, his response was in keeping with that attitude: She approached him the next day and said that what had happened should never have happened under any circumstances, but he became defensive and replied, "I asked you what your boundaries are. You place me in a vulnerable situation." A few weeks later, when she told him she had frozen in the face of his daunting presence and had not wanted physical interaction with him, he replied, according to her post, "You did not freeze." A facilitator who undermines the pupil and says that her experience is not right, is not a teacher who can be trusted, Rachel added.

These issues are addressed in the consent form drawn up by ISTA, whose purpose is to coordinate expectations between the workshop's facilitators and its participants. The seventh item on the form of the "Spiritual Sexual Shamanic Experience Group Agreement Field" states: "I agree to take full responsibility for the nature of my experience."

"I find that to be a very problematic clause," says Tamir, a veteran participant in the community of sacred sexuality in general and in ISTA in particular. "After all," he elaborates, "you enter a workshop without knowing its content, what exercises and what specific activities will take place in it. Part of the aura of ISTA's workshops is the secrecy; you know that sexuality is involved, but you don't know what you are going to do in practice. Even in the realms of BDSM [bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism] there is clear agreement about what happens and what doesn't happen. Here, there is no such thing. To

agree that I am responsible for everything that happens to me? That's ridiculous. And all the more so when we're talking about people who aren't necessarily ready to cope with this content and those sorts of acts. For example, how is it possible to request that responsibility be taken by a young woman of 23 who has undergone rape and who in challenging situations freezes and disconnects?"

*The staff at ISTA say: Others don't talk about it but when it comes to us, everything is on the table. Decide in advance if this is appropriate for you.*

Tamir: "It's true that from the outset they say something like, 'We are sexual beings like all of you, and anyone who doesn't wish to have sexual relations or has a problem setting limits, should say so now, and afterward we will not sleep with them, even if they want to.' The problem is that there is no real screening at the entrance – after all, in the final analysis this is a business. To the best of my experience and in terms of my own impression, it's natural that most of the people who come to the worlds of sacred sexuality have gone through a crisis – from sexual harm to dramatic life changes, like divorce. People in a difficult and fragile period in their life, or following such a time. So how can they now be told that it's their responsibility?"

ISTA's whole approach to that issue is encapsulated in its workshop registration form, which poses quite a few questions regarding the potential participants' past and/or recent life-changing events, ranging from the death of someone close to a difficult physical or psychological experience. But in practice there are many lacunae in this questionnaire, which asks respondents, who may be in a traumatic state, to declare they will take responsibility in the workshop for things they can't possibly control. Tamir says he experienced such issues himself, as did Mirit, who two years ago took part in an ISTA workshop in Loutraki, Greece. "Important questions are asked on the

registration form, and in response to them I mentioned incidents that had happened to me,” Mirit says, “but the conversation with the interviewer didn’t deal with any of that, and didn’t focus on the question of my ability to get through the workshop.”

### **Overcoming fears**

**When the assailant is from within the community, the woman gets silence and gaslighting – a kind of furious tantrum to the effect that the guru has come to ‘save’ her and she isn’t sufficiently developed to grasp this.**

### **Shani Kedar**

Indeed, the question of taking responsibility for what goes on in such frameworks is extraordinarily elusive in the community in question. In a post in late June, which instantly went viral both there and in the mainstream, a longtime member set forth something of a comprehensive indictment. “In this community there is a collective request that is repeated time and again: for the victim to take personal responsibility for their experience and for the reality of their life,” she wrote. “And I ask and want to know: What about mutual responsibility? Why doesn’t anyone ask the offender to take personal responsibility?”

For her part Maya, who has experienced sexual trauma and taken part in sacred sexuality workshops, says one of them triggered the memory of a serious assault she had experienced as a child. The facilitators didn’t even notice her distress, the fact that she had in essence disappeared, dissociated from what was going on.

“I later shared what had happened to me, but they didn’t react,” Maya says. “They said ‘okay,’ and that was the end of the matter as far as they were

concerned. But I continued to be upset. So, some time afterward, I called one of the facilitators and told her what I'd gone through then and how I felt, but again it was like talking to a wall. Very hurtful. There's a matter here of taking responsibility. Some facilitators like to take you to your extreme edge, and for them the story ends there ... They teach a practice that they don't understand in depth."



**An image from an ISTA promotional film (the subjects have no connection to the content of the article). Unlike other organizations, staff at ISTA talk openly about sexual relations between facilitators and participants.**

Credit: Ohad Pele Mizrahi's YouTube channel/ISTA/Ali Vann

Indeed, it emerges that in some cases, due to deficient training and education, there is ignorance among purveyors of sacred sexuality relating to the phenomenon of trauma and its manifestations: dissociation, brain fog, actual blackouts, difficulties expressing oneself, etc. Today even without any real experience, a person can open a clinic and treat people who have undergone sexual injury and/or are coping with PTSD at different levels of complexity.

A major focus of discourse in the community involves the need for a person to overcome trauma and achieve spirituality and healing by engaging in “de-armouring,” Hila explains, getting rid of blocked emotions. The idea is “to touch primary places that are extremely damaged – by sexual or emotional abuse in childhood and adolescence, without giving those things much thought. The discourse effectively says that even if you are afraid of something, you need to go do it. Act against your instincts. We have so many fears and obstacles that the solution is to push through them. The thing is that with sexuality it doesn’t work like that. A participant might have trauma she isn’t even aware of. And the trauma is liable to surface [in the workshops].”

Lee Reuveni, who has a master’s in social work and is a certified member of the Israel Society for Sex Therapy, expands on this point. “Sexuality is a space that is built on several levels: mental, emotional and physical,” she says. “Each of these levels can act as a magical gate through which I enter a world of pleasure and enjoyment. But it can also turn out to be a gate through which I enter a world of abuse and trauma reenactment, opening a very painful book of memories, and people have no control over what will be opened – that is, which channel.”

Hila: “When trauma surfaces, other participants in the workshop aren’t built to experience that kind of inundation. And in general, the facilitators and the assistants also don’t know how to respond.”

However, based on the two Facebook groups mentioned here, and the mindset they reflect, it appears that women who have experienced sexual violence and trauma are no longer willing to accept the combination of inadequate training or an aggressive approach on the part of those who are supposed to help them.

“Many women, whose complaint lies in gray areas legally, prefer not to file a lawsuit [against their assailant], but they don’t want the matter to pass as though it never happened either,” notes Vardit Avidan of the University of Haifa’s law faculty, who, along with social worker/mediator Dana Gilo, runs the Dispute Resolution Clinic there. “There are women who want to speak with the assailant, to receive recognition and get an apology,” she adds. “Others want him not to treat people anymore. For some women it’s important that recognition of the abuse should take place in a community forum, especially if rumors and counter-rumors have been circulating. They want a discourse.”

Safe Mediation, mentioned earlier, operates according to a similar principle, and according to Anaisa Seneda, a mediator and senior adviser in the organization, it has already carried out a procedure this year with the participation of Bodhi Zapha. Avidan, though, has reservations. “Quite often the women will not get what they seek. Many assailants are incapable of acknowledging the act they committed.”

Shani Kedar, the therapist and journalist, agrees with her. Kedar, who wrote the controversial June 2021 investigative report about the spiritual teacher Erez Arjuna (who committed suicide just before the report was publicized) on the Politically Corret website, uses her podcast to encourage a broad dialogue about therapists’ morality, “What goes on in my therapy?” (all in Hebrew).

“At a certain point, a concerned individual from the sacred sexuality community sent me screenshots of conversations that took place within their closed group,” she tells us. “What emerged from the texts is the policy of the community’s leaders regarding rape and sexual assault. When a woman brings up a case in which the assailant is a person from outside the community, she is given support and is encouraged to go to the police. But when the assailant is from within the community, she gets silence and gaslighting – a kind of

furious tantrum to the effect that the guru has come to 'save' her and she isn't sufficiently developed to grasp this.

"There is something deceptive about this community," Kedar continues.

"They talk about women as priestesses and goddesses, but the ideology they have imbibed is actually patriarchal. This community is not really subversive, though it tries to present itself as such ... It tries to sell itself as one that will liberate us from the world of institutionalized sexuality, from fear, shame and guilt. But in practice, it reenacts ancient and familiar dynamics of exploitation."

### **Pele Ezrahi: No personal interaction**

Ohad Pele Ezrahi states in response to this article: "In the workshops we conduct in ISTA there are various role-playing games, whose entire essence is inner exploration. In light of the fact that the instruction in these spaces is usually done by a team of three facilitators, it happens that one of the facilitators takes an active part in a particular exercise as a participant in every respect.

"Everything that the person called Rachel in the article reports occurred as part of role-playing games in which different characters were used, and not as any sort of personal interaction between us. There is no intention, heaven forbid, to harm or offend any of the participants. It is important to emphasize that I very much regret that this was her experience, even if it is not necessarily consistent with the facts as they occurred in practice and in the presence of dozens of participants.

"No one can judge a subjective experience, just as no one can describe things in dissociation from the situation in which they occurred. The details of the case

are being dealt with the aid of professionals, and it goes without saying that because of the sensitivity of the subject and the revelation of personal details, I do not find that it is fit to discuss it in the media.”

ISTA’s response: “The ISTA agreements are designed to support the creation of a deep and solid container. There is the space for questions, clarifications, and objections to be heard and considered ... With respect to agreement No. 7 there is refinement in what participants are responsible for, and an acknowledgment of the responsibility of the space holders/facilitators. The agreement is not to absolve the responsibility of the space holders. Participants are responsible for the ‘nature’ of their experience, not all that arises ... It is also stated that ISTA has a strong awareness that participants are in a deep process, and at times require additional support and care from the team.

“ISTA has on its website a statement for those who may want to join ISTA trainings that have a significant trauma history. We recommend that they seek guidance from relevant mental health professionals/therapists ... If the shared history or medication indicates a concern, more questions would be asked and if felt to be inappropriate their application declined ... In Israel there is an additional disclaimer sent to participants to acknowledge that this space is an experience and not a therapy space.

“ISTA is currently establishing a refresher course for all faculty covering aspects of trauma support and resourcing, guided by a highly experienced therapist in the field of mainstream trauma and the transformational model.

Bodhi Zapha did not respond to a request for comment, which was sent to him via several channels.