

Collapse of the Inner Home and Establishment of the Self

Noga Levine Keini*

School of Clinical Social Work, Ashkelon Academic College, 18/21 Boier st. Tel Aviv, Israel

Abstract

The article sheds light on setting up home as a metaphor for the gradual process of establishing the self through the home. It examines, from the psychoanalytical viewpoint, the ability to internalize the home with all its accoutrements: physical, mental, spiritual, intrapsychic and interpersonal. The forces strengthening the inner home are examined, alongside those threatening to bring it down. The case of Yael, aged 9½, is presented. In the course of therapy, to which Yael arrived with a vulnerable, fragile self, she built structures which were destined to collapse over and over again, thus reenacting the failure in setting up home. In time, a shift took place, with the initial roles of victim and perpetrator being replaced with a much more reciprocal and committed relationship. Yael's sense of self was strengthened, alongside her capacity to distinguish between the inner world and the external reality. Yael began to experience herself in a more vital and authentic manner, while being much more ensconced in a mutual relationship. Although the eventual separation from the therapist was beyond her control, she succeeded in expressing her feelings about the break without withdrawing into herself as part of a schizoid defence mechanism.

Keywords: Self • Inner home • External reality • Mutual relationship • Therapist

Introduction

The concept of setting up home serves as a metaphor for establishment of the self. It connotes the process of nest building in nature, one twig at a time, until the final structure, with all its fine parts, takes shape, creating a vital domicile that is strong and fragile at the same time. In effect, setting up of home begins even before we are born through our parents' conceptualization of home, weaving its way through our lives thereafter as a common thread: in childhood, in adolescence, in leaving our parents' home, in building our own home as adults, even at times in leaving home and moving into a senior citizens' residence. The process encapsulates an entire range of experiences associated with the domain of home, in both physical and emotional senses. It satisfies the needs of both body and mind, capturing the contrast between the internal and external, between the homey and the "uncanny," between dependency and autonomy, and between the personal and the interpersonal.

Setting up of the inner home and consolidation of the self

By and large, the metaphor of the inner home describes the individual's inner horizons and spaces, including their thoughts, emotions, beliefs and sense of identity.

In contrast, consolidation of the self is tied in with a journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance, with the inner home serving as the basic space for this purpose and enabling complex inquiry.

A number of key connections exist between the inner home and consolidation of the self. The inner home serves as a temple for self-reflection, an inner space for scrutinizing thoughts and emotions with minimal judgmentalism, a place where we grope our way towards an understanding of who we are. Such understanding is essential for establishing a coherent self, through which we also get to know our values, motivations and desires.

A well-established inner home provides a good measure of emotional

security, being a place where we can accept our own vulnerability and imperfections. Acceptance is vital for developing a sound sense of self as it encourages us to embrace the true self within us, one that does not conform to external expectations.

The inner home promotes integration of past experiences, both negative and positive. Experiences are processed in our inner spaces, where we learn from them while entwining them into our inner identity, helping us to build up resistance and a nuanced understanding of ourselves.

Consolidation of our self also involves clarification of our values and personal beliefs, which often derive from the inner home, guiding us in performing various acts in the world. A sound sense of self goes hand in hand with a life that is lived authentically and is in sync with our internalized values.

The inner home is also the source of our creativity and self-expression. It is the place where our thoughts and emotions are expressed, whether artistically or in communication with the outside world. Although our inner home is a private, personal place, it has a significant effect on our means of communication with others. A well-established self fosters healthy, empathetic interpersonal relationships. Our inner home also helps us set boundaries in our relationships, while enabling us to experience mutual respect for others.

Given the fact that a person's life is filled with transitions, a well-established inner home serves as a firm basis from which to weather changes and navigate personal growth with relative ease. It provides a sense of continuity and unity, helping us to remain connected to our basic identity, to our own self.

The inner home is a curative domain. It allows us to encounter past traumas and deep-seated injuries in a safe environment. Such a space is essential for healing, even if only because it enables us to regard ourselves with compassion, understanding and self-acceptance.

The uncanny

Freud in 1923 used the term "the uncanny" (unheimlich) to connect the experience of home with sensations of horror and alienation. Home is generally a family concept, one that connotes familiarity and pleasing intimacy, while concealing sadness and at times wickedness, and providing serenity in the knowledge of being ensconced in native territory.

To his mind, "the uncanny" represents everything that should remain covert and suppressed but is instead exposed – a kind of horror that becomes familiar, the return of repressed and silenced material to well-known turf. "The uncanny" involves a blurring of the senses and an inability to distinguish between the foreign and the familiar. According to Freud, psychoanalysis arouses anxiety regarding "the uncanny" since during the course of treatment

*Address for Correspondence: Noga Levine Keini, School of Clinical Social Work, Ashkelon Academic College, 18/21 Boier st. Tel Aviv, Israel, Tel: +972-544308144; E-mail: keini_e@wall.co.il

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it is not entirely clear whether one is dealing with a true, emotional relationship or merely a professional one.

Case Study

Yael, age 9½, was referred to me by her school due to difficulties in her studies, as well as her emotional and social problems. Yael was diagnosed as suffering from a learning disorder, ADHD, avoidant personality disorder, and adaptation problems, accompanied by anxiety and depression. Her parents divorced when she was 3. The father lives with a new partner and her children. He spent his childhood in a boarding school. His presence during therapy was found by me to be domineering and at times even threatening. He described his relationship with Yael as being close, characterized at times by power struggles.

Yael's mother works as a kindergarten assistant. One of ten children, she describes the relationship between her parents as being violent.

On arriving for her first therapy session, Yael sat on her mother's lap and appeared to withdraw into herself.

The mother seemed pale and weak. She was full of concern for Yael, principally due to the social torments she was suffering. She described Yael as being extremely childish for her age, relating how difficult it was to understand her emotions and intentions. She described Yael as weak and lacking in energy. Yael has two older brothers, relations with whom are described as good. All siblings live with the mother.

Relations between the parents are problematic and filled with disputes. There is mutual blaming and extreme revulsion for each other. The process of divorce was prolonged, accompanied by a legal battle over the joint house and custody of the children. In their reports on the children there was a conspicuous disparity in terms of the development aspects they described.

Due to the mother's lack of amniotic fluid, Yael's birth was precipitated, and she was born in the eighth month. According to her mother, Yael was an easy baby who was breastfed till the age of three months. Difficulties in fine and gross motor skills were detected in her relatively early. She suffered from chronic ear inflammations, causing moderate hearing impairment in one ear. Language development in Yael was delayed, with speech starting slightly after the age of 3. At the time of her therapy too, Yael spoke slowly and stuttered. In the past she had undergone treatment with a speech therapist. She had also visited a clinic for occupational therapy.

Yael showed signs of dependency in her day-to-day activities. She sucked her thumb almost up to the time of her treatment. She reverted to bedwetting in her sleep after relations between her parents deteriorated, with various treatments for the condition being unsuccessful.

According to school reports, Yael was extremely slow in acquiring reading and writing skills. On the other hand, she showed no difficulty in mathematics. Her problems enabled her to receive additional time for completing her exams. Ultimately, her achievements in school were very good. She was being treated with Ritalin.

As regards Yael's social profile, her parents differed in their views. Her mother was extremely disturbed by her lack of friends, unlike her father, who claimed that socially her life was satisfactory. Both parents described Yael as being highly capable, though slow and procrastinating. Emotionally, both parents felt her to be extremely vulnerable, at times displaying outbursts of anger and tears that were disproportionate to the situation.

Yael received treatment over a period of about one year in a private clinic, with one session a week. Also included was counselling for the parents. Treatment was stopped due to the mother's moving to a new, more distant location.

Dynamic formulation

Yael suffers from congenital problems and retarded development, shaping her world reality and creating a cumulative experience of impingement [1].

The atmosphere in her home was tempestuous and unstable. She was an unwitting witness to the battles between her parents, even becoming the object of their wrath. Her mother formed an inordinately close a relationship with her, but failed to see her needs, capabilities and difficulties. The way in which her parents manipulated her did not allow her to develop an inner world that was separate from theirs. Investigating the world became a dangerous task for her and she tended to understand it the way her parents did. She thus failed to develop adaptive mechanisms and an independent curiosity to investigate and discover the world for herself [2,3].

Yael was forced to live defensively in the face of her external reality. Since this reality was not in sync with her spontaneity, she had to learn to protect herself from intrusion into her life by the environment and the hurt that this would entail. These created severances in her own experiences, arousing in her an all-consuming anxiety. In the face of all these factors, Yael developed a secondary protective skin by entering a bubble world [4] where she found a mental haven [5].

Yael made extensive use of defenses in the way of severance and avoidance. Thus, for example, she avoided making eye contact with her peers and developing meaningful relationships with them. It is possible that her slow, stammered speech was a reflection of the poor development of her own self. Whenever needs were aroused in her, a conflict took place between them and the use of her defense mechanisms. In such situations, Yael felt extreme frustration, with her outbursts expressing her helplessness and giving expression to her true self [6]. Yael's congenital weakness and her schizoid personality disorder defenses, alongside the turbulent, intrusive presence created by the battle between her parents, made it very difficult for me to view her as an integral subject, separate from them. I could, however, identify with the mental refuge she had created for herself in order to hide from the storm without.

Course of treatment

First stage: Yael arrived with her mother for treatment, left her easily and entered the room without making eye contact. She sat down in an armchair and remained silent. A short while later she asked me to play a game of Monopoly with her. Throughout the session Yael spoke little, and when she did it was slow and stuttering. She talked a bit about school while laughing incongruously. I found it difficult to understand her. On conclusion of the session, she requested me to make a note of where we had arrived in the game so that we could continue from that point on the next time.

In the following sessions too, Yael entered the room without a sound, without making eye contact, and with a flat effect. She immediately asked to continue the Monopoly game, seemingly erasing the gap between the sessions and the distance between us as a defensive act. Yael apparently wished to create a seamless experiential sequence.

We begin to play the game according to the rules. Subsequently, however, Yael determined new rules. This signalled, to my understanding, the onset of her presence in the room. It was as though she was now allowing herself to establish something of herself in the relationship between us. At a certain point in the game she won the jackpot, declaring: "Let's celebrate! I'm rich!" At the end of the session, she ran out of the room to her mother and told her about her win. I thought about her wonderment at the windfall – it was as though she was remedying her situation by having the world finally pay up what it owed her. The game continued in the following sessions, and the now well-heeled Yael wished to buy additional properties and more and more streets. Here too, she skipped over some of the rules, bending others to her advantage. I saw this as a refusal on her part to accept reality. I continued to walk streets that belonged to her, realizing I was in deep trouble, owing her a fortune. I felt defeated and began to lose interest in the game, which had been continuing for several weeks. It was repetitive and stagnant, just the way I was experiencing the relationship between us. I began to realize that my feelings stemmed from projective counter-identification: Yael projected onto me her childhood experience of self – one that was defeated and helpless – in the face of a reality that had been forced upon her. I told her that I would probably never be able to beat her at the game, adding how sad it was to lose all the time since I

was unable to keep pace with her successes. I asked her how long we would be playing the game as I had already ratcheted up a huge debt towards her.

Yael suggested that the game would end when I owed her an additional 100 shekels. It was precisely then, in recognition of her proposal, that I could have felt hurt, guilt and even responsibility, feelings that were never expressed by the adults in her life. (Adults in debt to Yael? Preposterous!). However, I was somewhat shaken by the possibility that Yael was too hasty in surrendering the wealth she had accumulated. I felt that she was hurrying to erase her presence, as though mutual existence was not an option. I therefore suggested that we should arrive at a debt that was greater than 100 shekels, allowing me to pay back in instalments and make a gradual exit from the game.

Second stage: Dialogue between Yael and me was becoming more elaborate. She now chose to play Dominoes. At first we played together, but after a while she started playing on her own. She built structures with the tiles. Her new solo game became a projective channel expressing her inner world and touching on the question of existence for her: to be or not to be, in terms of home – her home. Yael built structures of various kinds time after time, challenging their very being by bringing destructive forces to bear on them or by removing tiles from their base. She had no help from me. I observed her and from time to time interpreted her acts with guarded delicacy. The structures she built collapsed each time with a crashing sound. I was overwhelmed by her repeated efforts at building and destroying. I felt fatigued and my thoughts begin to wander.

The repeated collapse of Yael's buildings appeared to represent an ever-present experience of the collapse of her own home. It is possible, however, that this could touch on a more primeval collapse – one that had occurred but was not experienced [7]. In her repeated game playing Yael tried to return to a traumatic place in an attempt to create an experience of control and remediation. I realized that I was coping with materials that Yael had entrusted to me because of their huge significance for her. She sought a therapeutic figure that would accept these materials, ingest them, and return them to her processed and softened.

In our next session, I confessed to Yael that the crashing sound the tiles made when the structures collapsed was extremely unpleasant to the ear. She gave me a hint of a smile, then plunged her fist into an opening in the structure and brought it down. I said: "It's possible that you actually enjoy having the building collapse." A short while later, Yael arranged all the tiles in the box, then went off to fetch another game. Apparently, in validating my difficulty, I made it possible for Yael to also express something sadistic and destructive in her. On the other hand, rather than acting my distress out, I verbalized it, giving her back a part of herself, now processed. And perhaps her agitated and repetitive parts were calmed – something touched her, she felt understood. In observing the hope in her being shattered again and again, I sensed that I was succeeding in understanding her.

Third stage: In a different session Yael chose to return to her game of Monopoly. This time she decided to conclude the game in the same session.

It appeared that the crack in establishing the home was beginning to close. Yael's sense of self became more consolidated and she formed an inner continuity that enabled her to feel certain permanence. Her ability to bear frustration improved, together with her ability to feel fulfilled.

Fourth stage: Yael now used the box of Dominoes tiles to play hide and seek. She hid behind the box and I was supposed to find her. I felt the trust between us becoming firmer, as was her feeling that I could understand her. Yael appeared to be inviting me to continue searching her inner world and exposing things that were still not revealed to her.

In one of the following sessions, we were forced to move to a different room. Yael said: "You moved all our games to the new room." I pondered the fact of her expecting me to arrange the new room as one that was familiar to her. I sensed her need to identify in the new room too things that were known to her, and appropriate them to herself. Yael chose to play a game of bowling in the room. For her this was a new game in a strange room, reflecting an improvement in her feeling of confidence. I viewed this in the context of my

concern to create for her a certain permanence and continuity in the switch to the new room. Yael felt confident with the "new object" and set out to discover the world.

As the summer holidays drew nearer, Yael became aware of the fact that she would be moving to a distant town and that we would have to part ways. However, she turned down every attempt on my part to talk about this. In our next session she dressed up in costume and directed me to play the part of a "good guy" while she would be the "bad guy." The game involved a lot of vengeance, killing and terror, leaving me to wonder if this was how she felt about our coming separation. In one scene Yael asked me to sit with my eyes closed, strapped me to a chair, choked me and set me on fire. The scene was repeated, with variations. I expressed my feelings for the sake of the play: "I'm so afraid, I'm in pain, I feel helpless ..." I added that I hoped someone would hear or see my distress and come and save me.

On conclusion of the play of horrors, Yael declared: "I am both good and bad." I was quite affected by her statement, reflecting that our impending separation was arousing in her fears of evil, destructive forces. However, her act appeared to be a departure from inner chaos and destruction to a much more structured schizo-paranoid state. Moreover, in choosing me for the role of the good guy, she appeared to be starting out on her pathway to integration in the direction of the more developed depressed position.

In our final session we recalled various experiences we had encountered during the course of therapy. Despite the fact that in this session Yael reverted to her previous defensive, guarded attitude, I felt there was still a meaningful connection between us.

I pondered the joint path we had taken and thought about the difficulty I had at first in understanding her – indeed, in acknowledging her existence. I realized that it was only after I got to know her that I allowed her to come into being and feel alive.

I feel that in any event the therapy, though short-lived, resulted in a change for the better in establishing the inner home and in the way Yael perceived herself, even beginning to make contact with her surroundings.

Discussion

Yael arrived for treatment with a fragile, vulnerable self and totally withdrawn into a protective bubble. Her stammered speech and lack of self-confidence reflected a deep-seated sense of helplessness: she was unable to give authentic expression to her emotional world through meaningful connections and relations.

My initial goal in therapy was to create a primary holding, enabling her to achieve continuity, inner organization, and a capacity for adaptive regulation of disturbances from the external world [1,6]. Holding in the therapeutic relationship between Yael and me allowed her to acquire a sense of existence and reality, enabling her in turn to establish her home firmly.

The processes of transference and countertransference constituted the core of the therapy. I had to listen to unspoken, preverbal communication during Yael's game in order to understand the significance of the proceedings and the events occurring between us [8-10].

In the initial stages of therapy, the relationship between Yael and her parents, in all its nuances, was re-enacted. In her game playing she expressed her severance of self [11], the lack of vitality she was experiencing, and self-effacement. These harsh feelings were deposited in me. My difficulty in bearing her acutely painful emotions aroused in me no small measure of criticism towards her. I felt detached, fatigued and neutralized. The only way to escape these experiences was to establish a meaningful presence in her harsh reality through the process taking place between us. It took me some time to realize the disparity between her chronological age and physical appearance, on the one hand, and her emotional needs, on the other. It was only when I discovered her experiences within me that I stopped detaching myself or escaping the misery and pain they represented, succeeding in adapting my holding to her needs. The gap that yawned within her began to close, and her pain, which

had been deposited in me, was now returned to her, processed and bearable.

The repetitive destruction with the Dominoes tiles, during which Yael was withdrawn into herself and detached from me, represented for her, to my understanding, intolerable elements of "the uncanny" that could not be returned to, enabling her to be united with her home. Her attempts to draw a line between her external and internal reality failed. Outer and inner once again mixed chaotically and horrifyingly.

In Winnicott terms it may be said whether due to a vulnerable personality base or an environment that was unsuited to her needs, the potential for destruction based on her experience became real, haunting her as an "uncanny" element over and over again [6,12].

Given a sufficiently good environment, an earlier aggression, though retaining its destructive potential, can be ensnared positively and adaptively in a subject's mind (being displayed through assertiveness, competitiveness, creativity and sexuality, among other things).

In the fourth stage of therapy, the stage of separation, aggressiveness and the potential for destruction of the subject reappeared. Through the transference and counter-transference relations that existed between us, Yael did not feel the threatening primal anxiety as before, but rather anxiety over the loss of contact with the object.

To my understanding, interpreting my difficulty over the processes of destruction and collapse enabled Yael to transform them into symbolic play elements that could be expressed in a relationship. It was as though my interpretation had jolted her out of the confines of her stronghold and allowed both of us to escape reenacting the roles of aggressor and victim.

Durban J [13] describes three different levels of homeness in early childhood: home, homelessness and nowhere.

"Homelessness" arouses depressive, schizo-paranoid fears centering on relationships, such as the dangers inherent in them, and the gains and losses arising from them.

"Nowhere" arouses deeper archaic fears of existence as an entity that is defined and distinct in body, in time, in space and in an object [13]. Durban opines that the sense of nowhere lurks at times at the root of extreme homelessness. "Homelessness" implies loss of a home that once existed. But in "nowhere" there is a deeper feeling of loss – of a thing that never was or one that did exist, but elusively, evanescently and temporarily. Given the fact that individuals seek a home for their subjectivity, "homelessness" expresses a loss of affiliation, possibly leading to regret, pain, grief and longing, a condition that can be processed and borne. It is also overt. In "nowhere," however, the situation is chaotic and chronic. It is a question of "being without", helpless, lacking in both a way forward and a home. In a "nowhere" situation people are invisible: they do not succeed in becoming a subject and in being seen; they are characterized by destruction, insignificance and nameless agonies, these being supremely difficult to mentalize or overcome. Every defined fantasy relating to the object is missing. Thus "nowhere" is confined to the realm of "the uncanny" [13].

Durban views home and the feeling of belonging somewhere as involving an interrelationship between three developmental elements:

- Secure residence in the mother's body.
- Internalization of the mother as "me": the infant identifies himself and internalizes the mother as a "different" object providing him with a home in which to abide, such that his body becomes a home for him both mentally and physically, one that allows another object to reside in it. An interpersonal mental space is thus created inside the infant.
- Oedipal triangular space.

Disruptions in the three early development elements due to physical and mental threats can pierce the individual's safe boundaries and engender a spate of intense anxieties that threaten to crush most developmental achievements. Melzer and Ogden describes this as a crumbling of the building blocks of the home [14,15].

Yael's repetitive game playing, including the collapse of the Dominoes tiles, producing disparate pieces, is a sign of these experiential anxieties, associated with a sense of threat to existence as a detached psycho-biological unit. Experiences include one of being body less, devoid of a face or exterior, an oozing out and a draining. These are at times described by patients as falling, freezing, burning, mental collapse, and an absence of awareness of time and space.

In contrast, internalization and identification with the mother as a central object in the infant's inner home gives rise to a feeling of inside, space, continuity and time.

Following the secure taking up of residence in the body and acquisition of a sense of self-consolidation, the infant can take steps with the help of an increasing awareness of transitional space and space in the Oedipal triangle [7].

Durban is of the opinion that in order to build, or rebuild, an inner home for the patient, the therapist must temporarily relinquish their own inner home, thus enabling possible intrusion into the patient's inner anxiety, triggering an experience of destruction of what therapists refer to as their home [13].

The crashing sounds caused by the collapse of the Dominoes tiles penetrated my very being. I was drained and extremely fatigued following the session, feelings that represented an invasion of my body, my home, and engendering there a like destruction.

Durban proceeds to explain that only the absolute experiential presence of the therapist in the treatment space will result in a kind of "object implant" where the therapist becomes good and someone of principal importance [7].

Following construction of a transitional mental home, which included concomitantly the shattered, split parts of Yael's awareness, the therapeutic relationship became more mutual, and Yael's game playing more creative and freer. Thus, Yael could enter an important developmental stage – the transitional stage [16].

In the transitional stage Yael was not committed to a specific game. She chose to tinker with new games and learn. The proper development process apparently began through the therapeutic relationship, in which Yael could move at a pace that suited her towards discovery of her external object [16]. I felt great pleasure in observing her self-discovery, and it appeared that she too was hugely pleased at the process that had begun to stir in her.

When we were forced to move to a different room, Yael busied herself with a game that I had brought from the permanent room and some other game that was not there. It is as though she was occupied with identifying what is "me" and "not me" [17], thus creating an inside and outside for herself – a body scheme [13].

Amir presents a distinction made by Melzer D and Harris-Williams M [18], Harris and Williams between two types of knowledge:

Wrapping and carving

The first knowledge constitutes an effort to introduce something new from a previous relationship, one that is familiar and well known. The second refers to the willingness to confront the new as it is – naked and unfamiliar. According to Amir, these two states refer not only to different types of knowledge but also suggest diverse mental states.

In exploring this concept, it may be said that Yael encountered in the new room the unfamiliar and terrifying "uncanny". In order to remain there physically and emotionally, she needed to incorporate it into her system, swathed in a given, familiar continuity with no place for mysteries or singularities [19]. Yael succeeded in arranging for herself the inner and outer world by making me bring all the games from the familiar room to the new room.

Towards the conclusion of therapy, Yael's ego was sufficiently strengthened to enable establishment of a suitable, meaningful split in which the good objects were present and overpowered the bad objects. She then staged the schizo-paranoid tableau of the good vs. the bad [19].

It was possible to see how her attempts at hurting me in the game (I was able, nevertheless, to survive her potential destruction) allowed her to begin positioning me as her external object, beyond the domain of the omnipotent phenomena [17].

It may be said that Yael now experienced herself in a relationship in a more life-like and authentic manner. These were the signs of a depressive attitude, for Yael now saw herself as more integrated and complete.

Therapy served as a transitional space where Yael could develop and consolidate her sense of self. Accordingly, I decided to give thought to the significance of the games she chose to play through the metaphor of setting up home. Self-perception was expressed by means of the home, its construction and destruction, in the game of Monopoly, as well as through the imaginary plots she staged in which she burned me alive, this being part of the mental content arising in therapy due to the impending separation. Love and a relationship of this nature, in which there is a constant threat regarding the love object – if they withdraw their love from the subject, the subject will attack, burn and destroy the object – point to a schizo-paranoid attitude without separation. Such fiery love was demonstrated between me and Yael, and its staging allowed expression of the emotions of terror and pain on Yael's part in the face of the impending separation. In other ways too it was possible to see that Yael was undergoing intrapsychic changes based on the interaction that was part of the therapeutic relationship. She transitioned from a childish, omnipotent game, recognizing no rules – nay, inventing rules – to a competitive game played according to accepted rules. This was interspersed with games of imagination which enabled dramatization of the inner world in a rich and creative way.

The matter of processing for the purpose of a more integrative stand certainly does not end here. The "basic fault" [20] is not erasable and will undoubtedly reappear and challenge Yael at critical crossroads in her life. At the same time, thanks to therapy, she succeeded in mustering her strength to meet the diverse challenges that her development will undoubtedly present.

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