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A Statement by the Israeli Center for Cult Victims regarding ISTA ("International School of Temple Arts")

As an organization entrusted with raising public awareness of the activities of destructive cults and harmful groups and in order to prevent victimization and/or subjugation, the Israeli Center for Cult Victims (hereinafter "The Center") deems appropriate the publication of a public statement regarding workshops of the ISTA organization ("International School of Temple Arts"), which resumes its activity in Israel and plans a workshop this month (September 2023) in Israel in an undisclosed location.

The Center has obtained testimonials of men and women that participated in ISTA workshops or workshops of teachers trained by ISTA. Following these testimonials, the Center examined publications and texts written by the organization itself and dozens of publications and texts of teachers associated with it. The Center identified disturbing characteristics with potential to harm participants in the activities of ISTA. The Center believes it is its duty to share these concerns with the public.

ISTA is an international US-based NGO that holds events and festivals in many countries, which it presents as personal development workshops. According to publications that the organization advertises, the content of the different activities is "shamanic", meaning religious, spiritual and ritualistic, and mainly focuses on sexuality. In an official US tax record the organization has the following description: "Ista is part of a global transformational movement where human consciousness is being opened to its source as love and harmoniously integrating with other sentient kingdoms and dimensions".

At the entry level workshop of ISTA called "Level1," which lasts about a week, participants go through different experiences that can be described as extreme. Participants are not informed about these experiences when signing up. In a typical "Level1" activity, participants gaze at the bare genitals of several female participants. In another typical "Level1" activity, group masturbation takes place, including staff. The instructions at the workshop are built in such a way that there is an increasing implied-to-explicit pressure for sexual openness that does not necessarily match participants' abilities, under problematic conditions such as sleep deprivation. According to testimonials, the ideology revealed from the content of the workshops links spiritual and mental development to willingness to participate in different sexual activities, including activities in a social space and/or group sexual activities. At the peak of the "Level1" workshop there is a ceremony where male participants massage the female participants' genitals. The ceremony takes part in pairs with a random selection, using a raffle. Regarding the follow-up workshop, called "Level2", reports were obtained describing ritualistic animal slaughter ceremonies, ceremonies that involve sexuality and death, insertion of carrots into participants' anuses and more.

These activities, that are unknown to participants upon signing up, certainly not in detail or in a clear manner, consistently occur at ISTA workshops (although activities between different workshops may vary), and their potential effect on the mental state of participants raise serious concerns for participants' mental well-being. The activities are not examined by a qualified therapeutic body, yet the ISTA organization encourages participation of young adults and other vulnerable groups, such as trauma victims, by providing dedicated scholarships for such groups. The organization denies having an

administrative and hierarchical structure and refers to itself as an “organism”. It represents itself to the public as a “school” that has a lead “faculty” and multiple facilitation teams teaching, without any clarity regarding the criteria or qualifications of being accepted as “faculty.”

Moreover, complaints have been submitted to various bodies, including law enforcement agencies, against prominent figures associated with the organization or that have been associated with it in the past. The complaints raise suspicion of sexual exploitation, encouragement into (and glorification of) prostitution, animal abuse, abuse of power and hosting of group activities that may leave participants with long-term harm.

The Center does not have a general stance on workshops or spiritual studies that involve sexual activity of any kind. The Center’s interest is in harmful practices, and not in spiritual-ideological perceptions themselves. Every person has the freedom of choice, freedom of expression, freedom of religion and worship, and the freedom to choose personal and spiritual development routes. However, in this case it seems that there is an appearance of spiritual development and a promise for healing, when in fact manipulations and social pressure take place to allegedly coerce participants to partake in intimate sexual activities within the group, as well as sexual activities between students and teachers. To re-emphasize, participants are not informed about the workshop’s content in a clear or detailed manner, and hence their ability to consider potential ramifications before the workshop is compromised. This kind of sexual workshop entails obvious concerns of harm, exploitation, re-traumatization, mental crisis that may result in psychotic episodes, and more. These concerns, according to our best knowledge and according to publications, were unfortunately confirmed.

Workshops of this kind require caution and meticulous emphasis on keeping basic rules of real transparency, free and conscious consent, maintenance of a safe environment, safeguarding of participants, supportive companionship and reduction of the risk of traumatic harm to a minimum, and more.

For the sake of clarity, it is emphasized that the workshops are not all conducted in the same manner. Not all include every activity described heretofore. There are differences between teachers and the way they conduct activities. Not every participant will experience the workshops in the same manner and will be affected by them in the same way. However, judging from testimonials that the Center obtained it is clear that the potential for being taken advantage of and for being harmed is substantial and prevalent, and that the extent of harm is sometimes revealed many years after the incident.

The center would like to further clarify as for its interest in ISTA activities: According to knowledge on cults, cultic conduct and its unique characteristics that include undue influence, could also exist in an intense, ad-hoc temporary/short-term group. Workshops (such as ones discussed here) exemplify the following: a micro-cosmos existing for a certain amount of time, that exhibits cultic conduct as explained above: promise of healing, personal/spiritual advancement in exchange for cooperation; a leader (“lead facilitator”) gaining control of the group using different psychological means; attribution of superior qualities for the leader (for example: the leader’s penis can be referred to as a “wand of light”, a teacher claiming that penetration is done for healing or that the “hand of God” touches whoever the teacher has sexual intercourse with); creation of atmosphere and dynamic that discourages doubt and criticism; “punishment” and exclusion of participants (can be “indirectly” and “informally”) that act or speak in a way that can be seen as doubtful, critical, or lacking cooperation; using manipulations and inducing negative feelings to encourage participants to cooperate and perform actions that most likely would not have taken place outside the workshop (an example of inducing negative feelings: suggesting that lack of cooperation means choosing “death” / lack of right to exist / inability to heal / “to make progress”); creating a polarity of “us”

versus “them” (those that do not take the workshop); lack of transparency and secrecy – participants are not informed about activities when signing up and even while the workshop takes place there is not enough information about what is going to happen at every step. In addition, participants are required to sign on confidentiality, which affects transparency for future potential participants (as heretofore explained, not every workshop will include all the characteristics mentioned above and at the same intensity).

For the reasons mentioned above the Center takes interest in ISTA’s workshops or in ISTA-trained teachers.

It’s important to know that according to Israel’s penal law (section 347b) it is forbidden for a spiritual teacher to have sexual relations with participants even when consent is given, due to the authority relationship that exists between a spiritual teacher and students of the teacher.

Following the aforementioned information, the Israeli Center for Cult Victims advises the public to search for information, to read and to educate itself in order to make an informed decision before attending workshops by ISTA and its teachers.

Provided below are relevant articles, available online:

1. 'He Said That if I Stroke Him Men Would Want Me': The Dark Truth Behind the 'Sacred Sexuality' Community, Haaretz, 2022
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-10/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/he-said-if-i-stroke-him-men-would-want-me-the-truth-behind-the-sacred-sex-community/00000183-22e1-d2c9-a387-e7f99cdc0000>
2. International School for Temple Arts: sacred sexual community, or cult?, OnlySky, 2022 <https://onlysky.media/bgarrison/international-school-for-temple-arts-sacred-sexual-community-or-cult/>
3. Complainants warn against 'sacred sexuality' courses, RNZ, 2022
<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/477548/complainants-warn-against-sacred-sexuality-courses>
4. The accidental cult tourist, The Echo, 2023
<https://www.echo.net.au/2023/08/the-accidental-cult-tourist/>

Provided below are publications by ISTA itself:

1. The official website of ISTA: <https://ista.life/>
2. Official ISTA FAQ following the media exposure:
<https://ista.life/faq?category=media>
3. The official website of Ohad Ezrahi, ISTA lead teacher:
<https://www.kabalove.org/>
4. An article by Ohad Ezrahi published on his website in which he addresses some of the allegations against him: <https://www.kabalove.org/articles/public-statement>

It should be noted that in a statement published on ISTA’s official website <https://ista.life/articles/accountability-process-statement> the organization announces, “radical re-structure and upgrade in many areas”. Also, the organization announces an internal “accountability” process with 3 teachers “invited” to it, without specifying who these teachers are. Finally, the organization states that it believes in a holistic approach and does not believe in punishment or “cancel culture”. It should also be noted that to the best of our understanding this “accountability” process does not have the support or participation of a significant percentage of victims.

The Center recommends the following for whoever chooses to participate in similar workshops:

- Ask for full information about the program of the workshop and its content and don't settle for general statements.
- Ask for references regarding the ideologies, religious or spiritual perceptions, and therapeutic theories that will be used at the workshop.
- Ask and ensure that there will be no involvement of teachers, guides, assistants or staff - of any kind - in sexual activities involving participants.
- Tell a close friend that you're going to the workshop and ask them to check up on you when you come back to see how you are and make sure you are well.
- It is highly recommended, if possible, not to go to the workshop alone, but rather to go with a person close to you. With a close person present you can look after each other.
- Consciously keep critical thinking.

The Center encourages anyone harmed by ISTA or by any similar organization in Israel to reach out and report. We are committed to providing assistance and safe space for people interested in rehabilitation. Any conversation with the Center is in a safe, discreet environment with professionals that specialize in the relevant areas.

Together, with awareness, education and support we will be able to protect ourselves and our environment.