

# Healing the Holy Land

Interreligious Peacebuilding  
in Israel/Palestine

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## Summary

**E**ven though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is primarily a political dispute between two nations over a common homeland, it has religious aspects that need to be addressed in any effective peacemaking strategy. The peace agenda cannot be the monopoly of secular nationalist leaders, for such an approach guarantees that fervent religious believers on all sides will feel excluded and threatened by the diplomatic process. Religious militants need to be addressed in their own symbolic language; otherwise, they will continue to sabotage any peacebuilding efforts. Holy sites, including the city of Jerusalem, are claimed by both peoples, and deeper issues that fuel the conflict, including the elements of national identity and purpose, are matters of transcendent value that cannot be ignored by politicians or diplomats.

This report argues for the inclusion of religious leaders and educators in the long-term peacebuilding that is required to heal the bitter conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. It documents the efforts of Jews, Christians, and Muslims whose commitments toward a just peace are rooted in their religious convictions. Much of the information presented here is based on interviews conducted with clerics, educators, and peace activists from September 2002 to June 2003. The interviewees include high-level religious leaders who participated in the historic Alexandria Summit in January 2002, as well as facilitators of grassroots interfaith dialogue, religious educators from the different communities, and activists trying to forge bridges of compassion and cooperation across the political divide.

Politicians and diplomats need to tap the insights and experience of these religious professionals. The efforts described here deserve greater media coverage and philanthropic support. As the fate of the Oslo process shows, peacemaking that prescribes only political, military, and economic arrangements is doomed to fail; leaders on both sides must take into account the feelings, attitudes, yearnings, and symbolic images that Israelis and Palestinians harbor.

Drawing on personal testimonies, the report describes a broad range of initiatives in the area of religious peacebuilding, some of which seek to influence government policy and official negotiations, others that work at the grassroots level, and still others that focus on the international arena. The report examines, for instance, the Alexandria Summit and efforts to sustain its momentum; local interfaith dialogues; programs aimed specifically at schoolteachers; personal initiatives by Palestinian Muslims; projects that employ the power of traditional symbols and rituals; the work of groups such as Rabbis for Human Rights and Parents' Circle—Bereaved Parents for Tolerance, Democracy, Peace, and Judaism; and some of the very different journeys undertaken by individuals toward the common goal of peacebuilding.

The report concludes with a series of practical recommendations drawn from the narrative. Two appendices offer the full text of the Alexandria Declaration and a list of bibliographical resources and web links for additional information.

## Foreword

The interrelationship between religion and peace is complex and multidimensional. Religious differences have contributed to conflict—often violent conflict—in many parts of the world, and yet many religious leaders and organizations have been powerful forces for peace, even in places where religion has fed the conflict. In Northern Ireland, for example, although religion has been a highly divisive force, a number of ecumenical organizations have helped to contain the conflict and may in the long run contribute to its resolution. Similarly in Israel/Palestine, religion fuels both conflict and the struggle for peace.

The United States Institute of Peace has long recognized the complexity of the interrelationship between religion and peace. During the 1990s the Institute sponsored a program on religion, ethics, and human rights that focused on the ways in which religious beliefs can contribute to conflict. This program organized a series of study groups on such conflict-ridden countries as Sudan, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Lebanon in an attempt to understand the sources of local conflict and the prospects and techniques for ameliorating it. Since 2000 the Institute has taken a somewhat different approach through its Religion and Peacemaking Initiative, which works to strengthen the capacity of religious communities to help resolve conflicts.

The Religion and Peacemaking Initiative emphasizes interfaith peacemaking in places plagued by serious religious conflict. The Initiative has cosponsored extended dialogue between religious leaders in Macedonia (Muslim and Christian), Nigeria (Muslim and Christian), and Israel/Palestine (Jewish, Muslim, and Christian), and between Jews and Christians from the United States and Muslims from both the United States and other countries. Other projects promote the teaching of Islam in Christian theological seminaries and the preparation of a handbook on interfaith dialogue for the Middle East. The Institute has also published *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, a book that explores the concept and practice of initiatives that cross religious boundaries, as well as two shorter Special Reports, *Building Interreligious Trust in a Climate of Fear* and *Can Faith-Based NGOs Advance Interfaith Reconciliation? The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

This Peaceworks report, authored by Yehezkel Landau, is a fascinating exploration of religious peacemaking in Israel/Palestine. Landau focuses on efforts to build bridges between religious communities, especially Jewish and Muslim communities, as well as interfaith efforts to promote peace. A number of other religious organizations that also view themselves as religious peacemakers in Israel/Palestine are *not* featured here, either because they focus on political advocacy or because they side very explicitly with Israelis or Palestinians. The programs included in this publication are indigenous to Israel and Palestine and emphasize dialogue and mutual accommodation while also attempting to address the justice issues that underlie the conflict.

The Initiative contracted with Yehezkel Landau to research and write this report because of his unique qualifications. In addition to being a person of deep religious

commitment, he has spent the last twenty-five years living in Jerusalem to promote religious peacemaking. From 1991 until 2003 he was co-director of the Open House Center for Jewish-Arab Coexistence in Ramle, Israel. He is now faculty associate in interfaith relations at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut.

In this publication, Landau tells the remarkable but neglected stories of religious peacemakers in Israel/Palestine. As Rabbi Dr. Marc Gopin of George Mason University has noted, in this report “Landau has managed to bring alive, through extensive quotations, the lives and hearts of courageous actors who are almost never known within policymaking circles. Many do have followings in the West who sustain them with modest support, but they plainly would be far more effective if policymaking circles and political leaders had seen them from the beginning as assets to the peace process. In fact, they have sustained vital relations at times when everyone else has given up. Furthermore, their visibility from time to time on the streets of Israel, in the public square, has been among the few signs of hope that many Jews and Arabs ever see. I have personally witnessed how meaningful that has been for otherwise hopeless citizens on both sides of the conflict.”

The United States Institute of Peace has published this work to give greater visibility to the work of these dedicated religious peacemakers and to inspire religious peacemakers in other regions of conflict.

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## Introduction

**D**uring the fall of 2002, I conducted a series of interviews with some thirty Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Israel/Palestine, all of whom have long-standing commitments to peacebuilding that stem from their religious orientations. In most cases, these are colleagues I have known for twenty-five years, since I moved to Jerusalem from the United States. During that time, I have been working to improve relations between Jews and Palestinians out of a deep conviction that the Holy Land is God's laboratory on earth for practicing justice and compassion. These are the two cardinal virtues identified with our common spiritual ancestor, Abraham/Ibrahim (see Gen. 18:19).

Since the Al-Aqsa intifada erupted in September 2000 and Israeli-Palestinian relations degenerated into a horrifying cycle of violence and retaliation, the commitment of those working for reconciliation has been sorely tested. It has been a demoralizing time, all the more discouraging because of the hopes raised after the Oslo Accords were signed. People's core beliefs about themselves and their neighbors, the society they share, and what the future holds for their children have been shaken by the suicide bombings, the massive military reprisals, and the bellicose rhetoric from both sides. Another generation of children has been traumatized, and it will take years to restore psychic equilibrium for many people in both societies, including Israeli soldiers compelled to treat Palestinians in dehumanizing ways in the name of security. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have had their livelihoods disrupted, and many families in Gaza and the West Bank endure appalling conditions, their children suffering from malnutrition.

Recent developments in the region—including the war in Iraq, the involvement of the so-called Quartet (the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia) in designing a road map for a two-state resolution of the conflict, a new Palestinian prime minister and cabinet, a three-month cease-fire declared by militant factions, plus renewed engagement by the U.S. administration in advancing peace negotiations—hold out some promise for political movement that could reduce the violence and suffering. But it remains to be seen whether these efforts will achieve tangible results.

Meanwhile, religiously motivated peacebuilders continue their work. This report is based primarily on interviews I conducted in fall 2002, with some additional information from subsequent conversations. Because current circumstances make it impossible for me, an Israeli Jew, to enter Palestinian territory, and because most Palestinians are prohibited from entering Israel, my contacts with Palestinians beyond the Green Line were restricted to telephone conversations. My efforts to phone one key Palestinian were unsuccessful, and only in the week before completing this report was I fortunate to meet him at an international conference in Switzerland. Despite these limitations, and the skewed picture favoring grassroots initiatives on the Israeli side, I believe this report achieves its prin-

cial objective, which is to demonstrate the need to include religious leaders and educators in the long-term peacebuilding required to end the bitter conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

At the end of this report, I offer recommendations on how to advance this objective. Despite the discouraging events of the past three years, I have not lost my hope for the future. That hope is grounded in my religious faith, and I believe more than ever that people of faith need to keep the torch of hope burning when the winds of war threaten to extinguish it.

## Religion: A Blessing or a Curse?

Many commentators have observed that the conflict over Israel/Palestine is not, essentially, a religious conflict. However, religious traditions are invoked to justify nationalistic claims and grievances. Religious tradition, with its symbols and loyalties, is fundamental to the identities of both Arabs and Jews, even for those who do not define themselves as traditional or observant. And the land they both claim and love is, after all, considered “holy” by most Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Unlike many liberal Western societies, the Jewish and Palestinian cultures in Israel/Palestine are not conducive to total separation of religion and state. Throughout the Middle East, religion is a public concern, not just a private pursuit. There are pluses and minuses to this, as there are in the complementary reality that Americans take for granted. Even in Israel, whose culture is more Westernized than Palestinian society or Arab culture generally, the religious dimension is close to the surface. As a Jewish state, it is a hybrid of secular democratic political norms, the enlightened fruits of modernity, and ancient covenantal wisdom from Sinai. The homecoming of Jews to Israel has created a new setting in which Jews can define who they are and relate to Christians and Muslims out of that self-understanding. The political turmoil deflects the deeper cultural and spiritual energies that Jews and Palestinians could otherwise invest in national renewal.

The intermingling of religion and power politics corrupts both. Invoking God’s name to justify harm to others perverts everything sacred. But protracted conflicts have always generated this spiritual contamination, which is exacerbated by political violence. The problematic elements of the different Abrahamic traditions add fuel to the fire.

In other words, the mixture of religion and nationalism is dangerously combustible. Since September 11, 2001, much has been written on the paradox of religion: how it can inspire the most noble and altruistic human behavior but also be used to endorse actions that to outside observers are clearly criminal. (See, for example, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, by R. Scott Appleby, and *When Religion Becomes Evil*, by Charles Kimball.) Over the centuries, the Holy Land has offered more than enough evidence of both tendencies in religious traditions.

Since the dangers of nationalistic religion are considerable, many political analysts and theorists of conflict resolution see religion as a negative factor in society. Thus they favor keeping religious leaders out of any peacemaking process. But for Israel/Palestine, as elsewhere, this doctrinaire stance risks forfeiting the positive contribution of religious peacemakers.

Some experts in the field of conflict transformation argue that religious elements must be incorporated into the theory and praxis of healing international disputes. Rabbi Marc Gopin, in his recent book *Holy War, Holy Peace*, marshals strong evidence for this



position. To effect genuine reconciliation in the Israeli-Palestinian context, he asserts, peacemakers need to tap the resources of both Judaism and Islam (since Jews and Muslims are the two majorities). This report offers further support for this view while also examining the contributions that Christians can make.

## Three

### After the Collapse of Oslo

The Oslo process failed, in part, because it was a secular peace plan imposed by secular leaders on a Holy Land, where large and influential minorities of both Jews and Palestinians are motivated by deeply held religious convictions. The U.S.-sponsored “road map” initiative launched in the spring of 2003 is likely to suffer the same fate if its sponsors fail to take into account the spiritual needs of both peoples. For a peace plan to win the backing of those who oppose any compromise, it has to include, explicitly, a religious dimension grounded in sacred symbols and spiritually resonant actions. For there are festering wounds that require spiritual, not only political, remedies: the displacement and dispossession of Palestinians in 1948 and of Jews from Arab countries afterward; a series of Arab-Israeli wars spanning half a century; a prolonged, harsh, and humiliating occupation of Palestinian territory since 1967; continuing violence against civilians; reluctance on both sides to accept the other nation as a legitimate sovereign neighbor; and mutual dehumanization exacerbated by fear, anger, and grief. The resulting religious pathology must be addressed if a political agreement is to take hold.

These serious issues require simultaneous action on at least three levels: official, grassroots, and international. First, the official negotiations need to include credible religious authorities to lend them legitimacy, especially on religiously sensitive issues. The future of Jerusalem, access to holy sites in Israel and Palestine, and the status of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif require attention by religious leaders on all sides. But less obvious issues, such as the elements of national identity and purpose, also touch on questions of meaning and value. Religious authorities should help in reaching agreement on these points of contention, also.

Professor Uriel Simon teaches Hebrew Bible at Bar-Ilan University near Tel Aviv. He has been active for many years in the religious Zionist peace movement *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom*. In addition to delivering public lectures that relate scripture to issues of justice and peace, he writes articles and books to express his views, his latest entitled *Bakeish Shalom Veradfeihu* (Seek Peace and Pursue It, from Psalms 34:15). Simon told me that

to counter the negative impact of religion, there must be an alternative, positive interpretation of the traditional sources that is also religious. The reigning paradigm in politics is antireligious, a belief that only secular people can reach an agreement based on compromise. It is this bias that must be confronted. In the Bible, the dominant tone is militant. Peace is a messianic, utopian vision, not a realistic option for policymakers. International peace, in particular, is seen as a prospect to be realized in the distant future, as part of the messianic redemption. But despite this biblical view, it is possible and necessary for more partial, or less utopian, concepts of peace to be realized, also by religious believers.

Simon and I attended a symposium, “The Palestinian Struggle for Jerusalem,” which is the subject of a new book by Professor Moshe Amirav, who was the first speaker on the panel. The respondents were Ziad Abu-Zayyad, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, and Danny Yatom, an Israeli security expert who served as an aide to former prime minister Ehud Barak. Both Amirav and Yatom were ready to concede sovereignty over the whole Temple Mount to the Muslims. Simon later said this was a “spiritual scandal,” that Jewish claims and attachments to this most holy site were as legitimate as those of the Muslims and ought to be brought to the negotiating table. This meant, he said, that religious Jews should be involved in those negotiations, at least as consultants. “Future generations should not say of us that we sold the Temple Mount. Either it is so holy that both sides declare it is above politics, and they both decide to forgo claims to sovereignty there, with no flags flying over it; *or* the Muslims allow the Jews to build a synagogue at the southern corner of the plateau so that Jewish prayers can be recited there.”

“If I sound like a hawk on this issue, I say that peace must be based on truth, not on lies. This is a profound test for both Judaism and Islam, and one can’t avoid it,” Simon concluded. The option of making the Haram/Temple Mount extraterritorial, outside the sovereign borders of both Israel and Palestine and dedicated to God through mutual renunciation, was proposed by the late King Hussein of Jordan. I raised this possibility with a prominent Palestinian Muslim cleric, Sheikh Tal el-Sider. My comments on this conversation appear later in this report.

Informal discussions can supplement official negotiations. Religious educators can meet across the national divide to discuss curricula in the different religious school systems. Others can address humanitarian issues such as the rehabilitation of refugees, wherever they end up living, or environmental challenges that affect everyone. Restricting the role of religion to synagogues, churches, and mosques forfeits the opportunity to inject a necessary spiritual dimension into the process of reconciling Israelis and Palestinians. Peacemaking that prescribes only political, military, and economic arrangements may lack long-term effectiveness if there is no regard for people’s deeper feelings, attitudes, and symbolic images.

The educational challenge of transforming people’s hearts and minds, after generations of conflict, requires grassroots efforts across the board, in many locales and among people of all ages. Some of the activities documented here are contributing to lasting peace in just that way. Another recent initiative that has earned coverage in the Hebrew, Arabic, and international media is a campaign by Palestinian Israelis to demonstrate solidarity with Jewish suffering in the Holocaust, without demanding that Jews reciprocate through solidarity with Palestinian losses and grievances. This amazing reconciliation effort was originated by Fr. Emil Shufani, an archimandrite at the Greek Catholic Church in Nazareth. In the daily newspaper *Ha’aretz*, he is quoted as saying, “I realized that there is no chance for true dialogue and reconciliation unless we [Arabs] have an in-depth understanding of this matter of the Holocaust, unless we touch the suffering, the memory, the terminology. It may not be sufficient to get us out of the mud we’re stuck in, but it’s definitely necessary” (see Arie Lavie, “Partners in Pain,” *Ha’aretz*, February 10, 2003). The seminars for this initiative, in which Jews also participated, culminated in a four-day visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in May 2003, where the participants were joined by a large

Jewish-Muslim delegation from France (see Stuart Schoffman's essay, "Transcendence in a Cursed Place," *Jerusalem Report*, June 30, 2003).

Shufani's colleague in this project is journalist and editor Nazir Majli. In recent months, he was asked, "Why are you going to Auschwitz when the Israelis are killing our children in Jenin?" Majli's reply, recorded in *Ha'aretz*:

I tell people that we mustn't let ourselves be prisoners of the existing modes of thinking, that we shouldn't be fettered to outmoded concepts. Yes, we are trying to turn things inside out, which is good, because the present situation and all the hatred that exists will destroy both peoples. We know we'll get clobbered by critics and perhaps even pay a heavy personal price, but the hope for a better future in this region is worth more. We're living in hell and we want to breathe a little clean air, to be more pure. I'm out to cleanse myself and my people of the hatred that exists today.

Majli took his views to Cairo, where he talked with prominent intellectuals and the Egyptian foreign minister, all of whom gave him their blessing.

This courageous initiative was forged at the grassroots level, which must complement the inclusion of religious leaders in official diplomacy. Majli's trip to Cairo also pinpoints a third level of activity that should be encouraged, and that is activity in the international arena. The Egyptian government has promoted Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts by hosting the Alexandria interfaith summit (see the following section) in January 2002 and, more recently, discussions by the different Palestinian factions about a moratorium on violence directed at Israeli civilians. But governments are not the only actors with influence and responsibility in peacebuilding. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), the International Association for Religious Freedom, Initiatives of Change, and the Catholic community of Sant'Egidio can play their part by sponsoring international meetings that bring together religious leaders from the Middle East and other parts of the world. The warfare raging in the Holy Land is a global crisis that demands a global religious response. William Vendley, general secretary of WCRP, has observed that because issues such as Jerusalem and the Temple Mount/Haram are international in character, transnational bodies such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference should have a role in addressing them.

## Four

### The Alexandria Summit and Its Aftermath

**O**n January 21 and 22, 2002, a group of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Egypt met in Alexandria. The then-archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, served as convener and primary sponsor of this gathering. It was a historic occasion; never before had such distinguished religious authorities from the region, representing all three Abrahamic traditions, met to talk about ending the violence that has engulfed the Holy Land.

The seven-point statement that emerged from this meeting is titled the “First Alexandria Declaration of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land.” The full text, with names and titles of the signatories, is appended to this report. Seventeen religious dignitaries, including the Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel, Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron; Sheikh Mohammed Sayed Tantawi of the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo; and minister of state for the Palestinian Authority, Sheikh Tal el-Sider, signed the document. By meeting when they did, they tried to counter the slaughter and suffering with a common appeal for reconciliation. Sheikh el-Sider’s participation was especially meaningful. A prominent cleric in Hebron and a former Hamas sympathizer, he has over time come to side with those who see religion as a resource for peacemaking. He has said on various occasions that “we people of religion cannot wait for the politicians—it is our duty to do all we can to end the bloodshed.”

I will examine the Alexandria Declaration and its import in greater detail, but I first want to present the views of Sheikh el-Sider. My attempts to contact him by telephone over several months did not succeed. Fortunately, we were able to talk at an international conference in Caux, Switzerland, in June 2003. The gathering, sponsored by the Paris-based NGO *Hommes de Parole*, brought together Israelis, Palestinians, and Europeans (plus one American ambassador) interested in establishing an “Alliance for a Culture of Peace.” The Israelis—mostly Jews, but also a Muslim and a Druse—included a former Knesset member, former ambassadors to Germany and France, religious educators, coexistence activists, social workers, journalists, and others. The European Jews, Christians, and Muslims included university professors, two prominent rabbis (René-Samuel Sirat from France and Marc-Raphael Guedj from Geneva), writers and journalists, psychologists, and others. The Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza invited to participate, including Sheikh el-Sider, were at first prevented from coming by the Israeli authorities, injecting a dimension of political realism into the discussions. Political intervention by high-level Israelis finally enabled just two of them to get to Switzerland on the third day of the conference: Sheikh el-Sider and Hassan al-Balawi, chief of protocol in the Palestinian Authority and a director of the Palestinian television network.

At the conference, Sheikh el-Sider spoke passionately about his yearning for a just peace. “We must work together,” he said,

Palestinians and Israelis, to end the killing of innocents. I have proclaimed, for over ten years, that the Qur'an forbids the killing of innocent men, women, and children, whether in Tel Aviv or in any Jewish settlement. This prohibition holds for all monotheists, not only Muslims. I said this again recently at a large interfaith gathering in Germany, together with Rabbi Menachem Froman [from Tekoa in the West Bank] and Michel Sabbah [the Latin Patriarch from Jerusalem]. But condemnations of terror attacks are not enough. They will not bring the dead back to life. We need to take action, not only speak out.

Turning to Rabbis Sirat and Guedj, Sheikh el-Sider said, "These interreligious meetings are very important, as a means of creating a spiritual partnership against such violence. We will not agree on all questions, but let us base ourselves on what we can agree on, and work to resolve the issues in dispute. We need to find convincing answers or solutions, even if they are not totally satisfactory."

Sheikh el-Sider spoke fondly of his good friend Rabbi Froman, who has been meeting with Palestinian Muslim leaders over many years in an attempt to forge a Jewish-Muslim spiritual accord. (I present some of Froman's views later in this report.) "I have high regard for Rabbi Froman," the sheikh said.

In my eyes, he is an Israeli hero. He has been coming to my home to talk with me for eleven years. At the beginning, when I was a Hamas leader, he still visited me. I think such meetings are more important than declarations by politicians. Froman told me I had to meet the Israeli chief rabbi in his home, so I did. Eventually these private meetings bore fruit in the Alexandria Summit and Declaration. This was the first time in history that an interreligious document was produced by the regional leaders of the three monotheistic faiths. Despite the difficulties, these meetings must continue, alongside the official political discussions.

Rabbi Guedj, from Geneva, responded to Sheikh el-Sider's remarks by saying: "It is crucial to appreciate how the sheikh transformed his views over time through his dialogues with Rabbi Froman. We all need to learn from this example, however exceptional it might be. Interreligious discussions are extremely important, also for their impact on the nonreligious public."

Sheikh el-Sider continued:

With all due respect to the Americans, the Europeans, and other countries trying to help us, it is the Israelis and Palestinians themselves who have to resolve the problem, together. We drink the same water, and our electricity grids are interconnected. We Palestinians want our own state, and then we can have good relations with Israel and all other states. A peaceful settlement between Israel and Palestine will spread peace and blessing to the whole world, especially the Arab world, which eagerly awaits a settlement of this conflict.

Later in the conversation, el-Sider said that

the majority of Palestinians hate the Israeli occupation, not Israelis. Israelis have the right, and good reason, to be afraid. But their army is so strong, it can guarantee security for Israel once a Palestinian state is established. It is true that we Palestinians need to

prove that the end of occupation will bring real peace. At present, part of the Palestinian people lays claim to the whole land, while part of the Israeli people does the same. Christian pilgrims should be able to visit Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Nazareth on the same trip, without problems. And schoolbooks in both societies have to be changed, so that children are not fed hostility.

At this point, Rabbi Sirat agreed, saying, “We need to radically change the textbooks in schools and universities, putting peace at the center.”

Sheikh el-Sider shared an experience, which he said to the journalists present was a “scoop”:

About eight months ago [in October 2002] I was in the home of then-chief rabbi Bakshi-Doron, together with Rabbi Froman and others. I suggested to the chief rabbi that he invite Arafat and Sharon to his home for a conversation. Some of those present asked, “Are you crazy?” I telephoned Arafat on the spot, and he said that he was ready to meet Sharon at the rabbi’s home. But it was Sharon who refused. What more can I do? For years Rabbi Froman and I have been working for a *hudna* [religiously sanctioned truce] between the two peoples. But there will be no real peace without the involvement of both Sharon and Arafat. Both men were elected by their peoples, and both are seen as patriotic leaders, not just the heads of particular parties or factions. Sadly, the politicians, for the most part, do not really appreciate our [interreligious peacebuilding] efforts, and we have to exert great effort to get our views across to them.

In a private conversation, I asked Sheikh el-Sider about the Haram/Temple Mount. What did he think about King Hussein’s idea to have both nations renounce sovereignty over this holy site, offering it up to God? He said he found the proposal acceptable, since the whole land, not just that plateau, belongs to God. Regarding the possibility of Jews praying on the mount, he said: “It is premature to talk about this. Peace has to exist before we can consider such arrangements. Look what happened after Sharon’s politically charged visit there in September 2000. There is no trust now. Palestinians fear that, if Jews pray there, they will exploit that religious presence for political ends. Meanwhile, the Jews can pray at the Western Wall below.”

During the conference, the sheikh asserted:

Media reports indicate that some extremist Jews want to destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque or the Dome of the Rock. If they were to succeed, it would spark a war greater than anything we have yet seen. A former chief rabbi of Israel [perhaps he meant Ovadia Yosef] said that human lives are holier than holy places. I say the same. The life of any person—a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim, or anyone else—is more important than any holy place, including Mecca or Al-Aqsa. For this reason, I say to my Israeli partners that we must seek a just and inclusive peace. Justice is crucial—I would rather be ruled by just Jews than by unjust Arabs. Both sides have committed injustices toward themselves, as well as toward the other side. Even regarding Jerusalem there is a just solution, acceptable to all parties. We are waiting for Sharon to give the green light to this solution.

Rabbi Guedj said that “Jews should appreciate and celebrate the fact that the holy ground of the Temple Mount is being consecrated by Muslim prayer, and that Islam is a monotheistic faith nourished by the holiness of Judaism. Both faith communities should



acknowledge this positive interrelationship, but for this to happen we need greater trust and good will.” Sheikh el-Sider concurred: “Yes, Judaism is a part of our tradition. Your prophets are ours, too. The land is holy to all of us, first to you Jews, and then to the Christians, and then to us.”

Shifting from Switzerland in June 2003 to Alexandria in January 2002, we can examine the text of the declaration issued by Sheikh el-Sider and the other signatories. “According to our faith traditions,” the Alexandria statement affirmed, “killing innocents in the name of God is a desecration of His Holy Name, and defames religion in the world. The violence in the Holy Land is an evil which must be opposed by all people of good faith. . . . We call upon all to oppose incitement, hatred and the misrepresentation of the other.” The political authorities were urged to “work for a just, secure and durable solution in the spirit of the words of the Almighty and the Prophets.” As a first step, the declaration called for “a religiously sanctioned cease-fire, respected and observed on all sides, and for the implementation of the Mitchell and Tenet recommendations, including the lifting of restrictions and return to negotiations.” (In the meantime, of course, the road map has superseded these earlier proposals, while including elements from those stymied initiatives.)

The Alexandria Summit received considerable coverage in the Hebrew and Arabic media. But no cease-fire was achieved (with or without religious sanction), and instead the cycle of violence worsened in the spring of 2002. The long-term impact of this meeting and its joint declaration remains unclear. The last of the seven points “announce[s] the establishment of a permanent joint committee to carry out the recommendations of this declaration, and to engage with our respective political leadership accordingly.” From accounts by various participants, it is clear that the highest political echelons in Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Egypt gave their blessings to the Alexandria Summit.

In a statement issued on February 28, 2002, Rabbi Ron Kronish, who directs the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, wrote:

On Thursday, February 21st, I was privileged to participate in the first implementation meeting in Jerusalem with leaders who took part in the conference in Alexandria on January 21st. Plans are currently being drawn up to move from “declaration” to “implementation,” in cooperation with the staff of the International Ministry of Coventry Cathedral and with the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP). . . . We can only hope that the Alexandria Declaration will be the new beginning of an era in which religions—and religious leaders—will play a much more constructive role in peace-building than in the past in the Middle East, and that it will send positive signals about the role of religion in promoting peace throughout the respective societies in the region.

(The United States Institute of Peace has been one of the funding partners for the implementation phase of the Alexandria process.)

Several subsequent meetings have carried this initiative forward, including one at Lambeth Palace in London in October 2002, hosted by Carey just before he ended his tenure as archbishop of Canterbury. The Palestinian Christian leaders encountered difficulties at Ben-Gurion Airport as they tried to leave for London, and it took official intervention to get them on their plane. Two bishops I spoke to expressed outrage and dismay over this mistreatment, saying that such instances of harassment create obstacles to mutual cooper-



ation. They see no security justification for such behavior, and they believe it is meant simply to harass and humiliate them.

Such antagonisms between Israelis and Palestinians, even as they try to improve relations, underscore the crucial role of religiously motivated, nonpartisan third parties in reconciliation efforts. Archbishop Carey's sponsorship was essential for the Alexandria Summit and for the follow-up meetings in Jerusalem, Rome, and London. Canon Andrew White has been integrally involved in the Alexandria process from the outset. He has acted as Carey's special representative to the Middle East, while the International Centre for Reconciliation (ICR) at Coventry Cathedral has coordinated the Alexandria Summit and subsequent activities. During the tense thirty-eight-day siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which ended on May 10, 2002, Canon White participated in the negotiations to resolve the crisis. This nightmare scenario could have ended in catastrophe: a site sacred to Christians desecrated by a confrontation between the Palestinian Muslim militants inside and Israeli military forces outside. According to Canon White and his ICR colleague Alexander Chance, the network of relationships that emerged from the Alexandria Summit enabled them to help resolve the Bethlehem siege.

In a May 17, 2002, report on the siege, Chance wrote: "We have been working in a dangerous environment fraught with religious, political and military complexities. At times it felt as though we were making little progress. In spite of these difficulties, we know that our involvement significantly contributed to the peaceful resolution of a potentially very bloody situation in the Church of the Nativity. Much gratitude has been expressed to the Archbishop of Canterbury from both Israelis and Palestinians for his help and support throughout this situation."

After the summit a Permanent Committee for the Implementation of the Alexandria Declaration was established. The committee as a whole, as well as subgroups of participants, has worked to limit violence and incitement since early 2002. In addition to their help in resolving the Bethlehem crisis, committee members have helped deescalate other tense situations and have tried to convince more militant religious leaders to end the bloodshed. At the October 2002 consultation in London, the committee adopted a ten-point agenda for the following year:

1. To maintain the relationships and channels of communication developed since Alexandria;
2. To increase local ownership of the Alexandria Declaration implementation process;
3. To establish an interreligious council for Jerusalem and the holy sites;
4. To sustain the existing close working relationships with the political leadership of both the government of Israel and the Palestinian National Authority;
5. To engage with those religious leaders seen to be instruments in the perpetuation of violence;
6. To establish and set in motion clear channels of communication with the Quartet;
7. To develop a program of education—through religious institutions—that fosters and encourages an environment of tolerance and eventual reconciliation;
8. To systematically work through the implementation of the Alexandria Declaration;

9. To provide encouragement for the delegates to the Permanent Committee to enable them to continue the bold work that they have started; and
10. To engage with other nations of the Middle East region, at the highest level.

On the Israeli side, the most active catalyst of the Alexandria Summit and a central force in the subsequent implementation process has been Rabbi Michael Melchior. In early October 2002, I went to the Israeli Foreign Ministry to interview him. He was then serving as Israel's deputy foreign minister, since he heads the Meimad faction allied with the Labor Party. (Since our meeting, the Labor Party withdrew from the government headed by Prime Minister Sharon and then suffered a crushing defeat in the January 2003 elections.)

Here are some of Rabbi Melchior's observations during our conversation:

In all intergroup or international conflicts, with collective identities at stake, the foundational stories told are "narratives" if told by one's own side and "myths" if told by the other side. Social processes need to take identities into account, and for the majority on both sides religion plays a central role in identity formation. In September 1993, just after the White House signing ceremony, I stated that any peace process that neglected the clash of narratives and that failed to grant basic legitimacy to both of them would not succeed.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a territorial dispute, not a religious or existential one (which would make any solution impossible). But there *are* religious issues and overtones involved. Sadly, for the people leading the peace process, religion is a closed book. By failing to address core issues of faith and identity, they have allowed radical, totalitarian religious forces to dominate this crucial arena.

Since the peace effort has been led by secularists, peace itself has become identified in Israel with the secular left. Religiously committed people then feel threatened by it. They may not be against peace or compromise, but they see this effort linked to increased secularism.

The religious dimension of the struggle for peace transcends the specific issues of holy sites, even Jerusalem. Without a religious foundation to the whole process, the Prince of Death takes over and eclipses the Tree of Life, which is in every tradition. Demonization grows, and murderers like Barukh Goldstein and Yigal Amir become heroes to sections of the alienated religious community. And their slogans, like "Territories for Peace, not Terror," appeal to wider segments of the population.

"Religious leaders still have more credibility with the public than do the politicians," Melchior asserted. He mentioned some earlier instances in which he organized meetings of Jewish and Muslim religious leaders, back when Binyamin Netanyahu was prime minister. In that period, his intervention helped on one occasion to avert a crisis. A Russian Jewish immigrant had circulated a flyer in Hebron/Al-Halil, in which she depicted the prophet Muhammad as a pig. Naturally the Muslim inhabitants of the city were outraged, and the wave of protest spread throughout the Muslim world. The prime minister tried to calm the situation, but his credibility among Palestinians was low. So Rabbi Melchior brought Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron to meet the mufti of Hebron/Al-Halil. This meeting

received Yasir Arafat's approval. Rabbi Bakshi-Doron explained that what this fanatic woman did was a *chilul Hashem*, a desecration of the Divine Name. The mufti was amazed; Melchior says he almost fell off his chair when he heard Bakshi-Doron speak. The mufti then went to every Muslim preacher in the city to relay the message that what the woman had done was against the teachings of Judaism, citing the chief rabbi's remarks.

Melchior brought up the Alexandria Summit as an example of the positive impact of interreligious dialogue on the political arena. With emotion, he said that, at Alexandria, the hearts and minds of the participants were "really, really moved." He had advocated holding such a summit even before 1993. What triggered the opportunity, he said, were the events of September 11, 2001. After the terror attacks in the United States, the Muslim side suddenly needed to redeem its image. Before that, Muslim participants in interfaith conversations had been worried about publicity. But now, he said, "I was sitting with Sheikh Tantawi, asking him if we could use an expression like 'the desecration of God's Name,' and he said, 'Yes, you can use such a strong expression.'" Melchior said there were three unprecedented aspects to the Alexandria Summit: (1) that it happened at all; (2) that it produced the only document signed by both Israelis and Palestinians in more than four years; and (3) that it was the first time Muslim religious leaders were willing to go public, before the media, with such an interfaith initiative.

The Alexandria Declaration, he said, had ripple effects. In Texas, it attracted three hundred thousand signatures. A peace agreement in Nigeria between Christians and Muslims was based on the principles in the Alexandria statement: the same text was used, but the place names were changed. Melchior sent his blessing to the Nigerian peacemakers.

I asked him how secular politicians view such contributions to reconciliation by people of faith. He said, "Opponents of religious peacemaking say it is hard enough to arrive at compromise without addressing the foundational narratives and symbols. For someone like Ehud Barak, religion is seen as a negative force and something that a rational strategist cannot control. At the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony for Rabin, Peres, and Arafat, a high-level Palestinian had said that all the clergy should be locked up and the keys thrown away." Melchior went on to say that, given the prevailing negative stereotype of religion, the religious passions of whole communities remain "a blind spot" for secular politicians and security officers. He cited as an example the approval given to Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount/Haram in late September 2000. Melchior saw the potential danger; he said that he thought at the time that "the whole Middle East could explode."

I had the chance to talk with several other participants in the Alexandria Summit. In late November 2002, Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron came to my synagogue in the Kiryat Menachem neighborhood in Jerusalem. A Palestinian suicide bomber had blown himself up on a public bus in our neighborhood days before, killing eleven Jews, and the rabbi came to console the residents. He gave a talk during the third Sabbath meal, late Saturday afternoon. Among his remarks on that occasion: "Jew-hatred has no rational cause or motive. It is independent of our presence in the [Palestinian] territories. The animosity of non-Jews toward Jews is built into the Creation just as it is the nature of dogs to fight cats. And this is to test us, as a people. While there is a war waging down here, there is a battle above. The [angelic] Prince of Esau is fighting against our own guardian angels."

As he developed this idea of an ongoing metaphysical war of good versus evil, he declared that “for us, peace is more threatening than war, for it leads to assimilation.” He concluded that we Jews must beware of gentiles’ goodwill and generosity, for it may entice us to forsake our loyalty to Judaism. In his understanding, it is the existential fate of the Jewish people to remain separate from the other nations.

After the evening prayer, I asked him, “In light of what you said before, what is the significance of the Alexandria Declaration,” which he had signed. His reply: “We thought we would make something move forward, but it is difficult to believe it can happen. Still, we have to keep trying.” I remain bewildered by the evident paradox of the chief rabbi’s remarks, on the one hand, a defense of self-segregation as the best guarantee of Jewish survival (in the face of gentile goodwill as well as enmity) and, on the other hand, a professed commitment to religious bridge building across the political divide.

Rabbi Menachem Froman, Sheikh Tal el-Sider’s friend and another signatory to the Alexandria Declaration, holds a totally different religious outlook. One of the founders of the Gush Emunim settler movement and a resident of the West Bank community of Tekoa, he is well known for his longtime commitment to Jewish-Muslim reconciliation. In addition to his friendship with el-Sider, he has befriended Hamas leaders in Gaza and has had many meetings with Yasir Arafat to discuss religious peacebuilding. To Rabbi Froman himself, it appears “crazy” that one of the founders of Gush Emunim would have a close relationship with Arafat and Hamas leaders. “And these are deep personal relations,” he emphasized, “creating a sense of spiritual brotherhood.” Before the recent Muslim feast of ‘Id al-Adha, he had written a letter to the Palestinian people blessing them on this sacred occasion and calling for Israelis and Palestinians to model a Jewish-Muslim concord to the world. With Arafat’s help, he said, this letter appeared in Arabic in the major Palestinian newspapers.

Explaining the underlying conviction motivating him to pursue religious peacebuilding with Palestinian Muslims, Rabbi Froman cited the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the visionary mystic who served as chief rabbi under the British Mandate. According to Froman’s understanding of Kook’s philosophy, the existential problems of the Jewish people, in the political realm and elsewhere, are God’s way of pushing them to act in the way they should act, and this Divine prodding forces them to connect with other religions. He added: “The present political conflict challenges us to make peace with Islam. Along with the rest of humanity, we are moving toward peace, an end to hatred and bloodshed, and greater democracy. This is not a utopian vision. It is based on a real, tragic situation. We are challenged to find a higher level of religiosity that will enable dialogue with Islam.”

Regarding the follow-up to Alexandria, the London meeting in October was, as Rabbi Froman saw it, aimed at getting Prime Minister Tony Blair interested in Jewish-Muslim dialogue. “The political leaders in the Western Christian countries are key factors in this. President Bush is too busy. Blair might be more available to help. George Carey, still a member of the House of Lords, remains active in this process.” Froman hopes that religious leaders from Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar can meet with their Israeli counterparts, including Rabbis Bakshi-Doron, Melchior, Froman, and others.

Rabbi David Rosen was also at Alexandria and signed the declaration. He is director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee (working out of his Jerusalem office) and an international president of WCRP. In Rosen's view, the Alexandria process has the potential to address issues such as holy sites and cities, including Nazareth, Hebron/Al-Khalil, and Jerusalem. But nothing is yet happening on this front, he lamented. "For movement to happen," he said, "outside support is critical. There is a gulf between the expectations on the Israeli side and those of the Palestinian participants. Governments and religious leaders in the wider Muslim world, particularly the Saudis, have to give their backing to these efforts. And this is where international interreligious diplomacy can contribute to the overall peacemaking."

Rosen said that the formalized interfaith dialogues, such as those sponsored by the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), remain a "minority witness," attracting too few people and having minimal impact on the media and, therefore, on public opinion. "We need to involve establishment figures like Rabbi Bakshi-Doron and Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen [in Haifa]. In the past, the chief rabbis did not participate in international meetings with Christian or Muslim clerics. Now they do. The sea change for them came with the Vatican's recognition of Israel and then the Pope's Holy Land pilgrimage in 2000."

Rosen cautioned against an unrealistic expectation that religious leaders in the Middle East could exercise great influence on the politicians:

They operate under enormous constraints. Religious leaders in our region [among the Jews and Muslims, not the Christians] are political appointees. They are not independent actors, since they remain accountable to the political authorities. In meetings like the one in Alexandria, each side appeals to the other to get the adversary's political leaders behind a credible peace plan. And the other side responds: "If you would get *your* political leaders to change, then we would have a better chance of influencing our own."

In Rosen's assessment, both groups of religious leaders know, in their hearts, that their counterparts in the other community do not have the political influence to deliver on what is being demanded of them, but they nonetheless go through the exercise of appealing to them.

It is the Christian patriarchs and bishops who probably have the greatest freedom to maneuver. But is anyone really enlisting them as equal and valued partners? They represent such a tiny minority—some 3 percent of the overall population—that they can be too easily marginalized. Alternatively, they may be viewed as proxy representatives of worldwide Christendom rather than as indigenous voices with a prophetic ministry of their own. One senses that the Christian leaders are frustrated at the silent treatment they receive. Or worse, if they articulate a position that calls for inclusive justice, Israeli officials accuse them of meddling in politics, a stance that purportedly conflicts with their pastoral duties.

Lutheran bishop Munib Younan rejects the demand that the Christian leaders remain apolitical. "We are independent; we are not their mouthpieces," he says of the Israeli officials who reprimand him for his outspoken defense of his people and their rights. He says:

In essence they want us to bless the occupation, which we refuse to do. We are called to speak prophetically against injustice, against violence, against human rights violations—and, at the same time, we need to call on people to love their enemies. The same prophetic language has to be directed to the Jews and the Muslims, even if it is painful for them to hear it. But we have to remove the walls of hatred. This is extremely difficult to do when people are being killed every day, and you see it on television. But we need to retain our solidarity with all those who are suffering. As people of faith, we must not lose hope. The key element in creating goodwill is to respect others and affirm their dignity. In our Palestinian Lutheran schools, we are fostering reconciliation and nonviolence, even under military occupation.

Anglican bishop Riah Abu El-Assal voiced similar sentiments. He sees the role of religious leaders as challenging the politicians to make wise decisions, even as the people expect those politicians to do so on their own. He shared with me a personal attempt to intervene in the political arena:

I wrote to President Moshe Katzav [of Israel], urging him to pay a condolence visit to the family of Muhammad Al-Dura [the Palestinian boy whose televised death, in his wounded father's arms, fueled the Al-Aqsa intifada in its early days]. But I sense there is no receptivity to the idea of Christians as mediators. We are like the Jews or Muslims in Northern Ireland, seen as irrelevant. Prime Minister Sharon resists meeting with Christian leaders, but we continue to explore the possibility of the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, the Ecumenical Patriarch, and George Carey working together to sponsor Israeli-Palestinian discussions.



## Five

### Grassroots Interreligious Dialogues

**W**e have explored the role of religious leaders in creating an atmosphere for effective peacebuilding, adding a spiritual dimension that is usually absent from official diplomacy. Now let us examine the impact of inter-faith peacebuilding at the grassroots level. Several remarkable projects bring Jews, Christians, and Muslims together to discuss their respective faith traditions. Sadly, the media almost never report on these efforts.

Sarah Bernstein of the ICCI told me of a spectrum of dialogue frameworks now under way. These include a Women's Dialogue Group, with fifteen to twenty participants, that has been meeting for almost a year in participants' homes. Hanadi Younan, a Palestinian Christian, and Bernstein, an Israeli Jew, are the cofacilitators. Bernstein says, "Our primary aim is to convey empathy for the pain and suffering on both sides to the wider community, in symbolic ways that will resonate across the divide." She cited an example from Northern Ireland, where women sent memorial wreaths to funerals on the "other" side. Bernstein sees this kind of message appealing mainly to other women, that is, women empowering other women to be peacemakers. Compared with groups that consist of both men and women, Bernstein finds this group more empathetic, developing deeper emotional connections among the participants, and with a greater desire to strengthen those connections.

Among the other ICCI-sponsored dialogues is one for Jews and Christians in northern Israel. Catholic bishop Boulos Marcuzzo is the principal organizer of this group, which has met in Nazareth and Haifa so far. The Christian participants are all clergy from different churches. The Jews are mainly rabbis from the Galilee region. There is a parallel Jewish-Muslim dialogue group that has been meeting for two years, with eight representatives from each tradition, both men and women. The participants are teachers, rabbis, and community leaders. They study texts together, currently focusing on "the land." Ophir Yarden, an Israeli Jew, and Jallal Hassan, an Israeli Muslim, are the cofacilitators. These two men have different approaches to the study of religious texts: Yarden is trained in this discipline, whereas Hassan is a secular practitioner of conflict resolution. To help them mesh their spiritual and practical approaches, a clinical psychologist, Yitzhak Mendelson, has been working with the two group leaders. Hanin Maikey, a Christian Arab woman on the staff of ICCI and a participant in this group, says the group has skirted the painful political issues so far, preferring to examine texts as a way to build group solidarity and trust. The Arabs, in particular, are reluctant to bring up the painful political issues. Bernstein agrees that the group will have to grow into the next stage, in which what is learned about the land in Judaism and Islam can be applied to help resolve disputes over territory.

The ICCI sponsors yet more interreligious programs, including one for high-school teachers, one aimed at Jewish and Christian theologians with primarily Western back-

grounds (conducted in English), youth leadership training for teenagers, and a special program on religion and the environment. A new initiative encourages moderate religious voices that can spread a message of tolerance to their respective communities as a counterwitness to the militancy that attracts so much media attention.

Perhaps the most difficult and poignant dialogue framework facilitated by the ICCI is the so-called Jonah Group, which brings Israeli Jewish rabbis and lay educators together with Palestinian Christian clergy from Jerusalem and the West Bank. (In recent times, West Bankers could not attend meetings unless they had special permits allowing them past the army checkpoints.) According to Fr. Michael McGarry, rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the Jonah Group is trying to break out of the mold of traditional Jewish-Christian dialogue in Israel, in which Jews from Europe or North America encounter their Christian counterparts with similar backgrounds.

At a meeting of the Jonah Group in early October 2002, the anxiety and demoralization engendered by the ongoing violence weighed heavily on the participants, numbering close to twenty. Rabbi Michael Marmur, dean of Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, gave the opening presentation, followed by a Christian perspective from Hanadi Younan. Both addressed the challenge of combating the snowballing alienation and despair. How can we work together to bridge the wide gulf of mutual suspicion? They agreed that the current climate of estrangement provided fertile ground for chauvinism and demonization. They each wrestled with strategies for effecting constructive change, and other members of the group added their suggestions. Younan said we have to start with our own children, teaching them how to love the stranger. Rabbi Marmur concurred, saying it is vital to help our children know the reality of their peers living only three kilometers away but in another subjective world. He held out the hope that religious leaders could set an example by creating religious expressions of mutual respect. He suggested that they pay visits to one another's homes and places of worship, especially on holy days. One participant said that the Jonah Group itself was a vehicle to break the cycle of violence and demonstrate to others that this can be done. Bishop Munib Younan, the principal organizer on the Christian side for this group, agreed that interpersonal encounters were essential to maintain the bridges of trust and hope, even as the political reality seemed hopeless. Daniel Rossing, a Jewish educator with a rich background in interfaith relations, said that people have to be helped to understand the "other" in his or her own terms, with specific qualities that cannot be captured in generic terms like "non-Jew" that make reference to oneself. "We need to include others who are not 'professional dialoguers,'" Rossing added, "especially Oriental Jews."

Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman shared with the others the moving experience of hosting a group of Catholic seminarians at his Kol Haneshama liberal synagogue on the first night of Sukkot [Tabernacles]. These were Arab Christians from the Beit Jalla seminary of the Latin Patriarchate. "Our guests sang Psalm 27 in Arabic for us," he recalled, "and we could hear our own tradition interpreted through another lens. It was a profound experience for us." And Rabbi Ron Kronish, the ICCI director, said that, at the conclusion of the service, seminarians greeted him with Shabbat Shalom, which deeply moved him. Toward the end of this session of the Jonah Group, one participant asserted that we need to share within our own faith communities the face of God revealed in the person and tradition of the



“other”—especially the Muslim “other,” who was not present at that moment. The group decided to hold its next meeting in Rabbi Weiman-Kelman’s home during the festival of Chanukah. That gathering, with candle lighting and holiday food, occurred on December 2, 2002.

One other interfaith dialogue framework is worth mentioning here. Yehuda Stolov heads the Interfaith Encounter Association, whose goal is to allow people of faith to change their own lives, even if they cannot solve the larger political problems. The sessions, organized around different religious themes, are explicitly apolitical. Stolov says that “the wider conflict will end only when we overcome our prejudices, fears, and animosities. Interreligious dialogue makes its own contribution toward coexistence and needs to involve many more people from all walks of life.” He says that the methodology favored by his organization mixes theoretical lectures (“to stimulate the mind and expand knowledge”) with facilitated groups that are more informal (“to stimulate emotional change through the very act of meeting another who is different”). The sessions emphasize the interactive dimension of the encounter, so that no one remains passive. (The United States Institute of Peace has directed financial assistance to programs sponsored by the Interfaith Encounter Association.)

## Educating the Educators

Other grassroots interfaith initiatives are aimed specifically at schoolteachers, whose influence is primarily on the next generation. Adina Shapiro, an Orthodox Jew who gained some publicity a few years ago as an Israeli teacher at the Hope Flowers School in the West Bank, concentrates her energies now through the Middle East Children's Association (MECA), which she founded. She codirects the organization with her Palestinian colleague Ghassan Abdullah. The teachers and school principals in their workshops are encouraged to bring a pluralistic awareness and commitment to their students. MECA is one of the few organizations that continue to work across the Green Line separating Israel from the West Bank. (It has received funding from the United States Institute of Peace for its teacher-training efforts.) Given the violence of the past two years, most of the gatherings are now held abroad. A meeting with one hundred teachers was held in late December 2002 in Istanbul. Shapiro reports that

much of the work is with parallel unnational groups these days, but with coordination between the Israeli and Palestinian group leaders. Right now the major focus is how to cope with trauma and tension, in our individual lives and as teachers in schools. This combination of personal healing and professional development is what the educators need now. It is not explicitly "education for peace," but the long-term result is the forging of a common society based on mutual understanding and respect. Meeting with each other, even in Turkey, is vital for both sides now. The teachers need to keep their hope alive so that they can convey that spirit to their students. Otherwise we are all trapped in a dead-end situation.

Shapiro says that

my religiosity forces me to be active in this way. I have an aversion to the use of religion for political purposes. My own emphasis is on education, using the idea of a "holy argument" from my Jewish tradition to legitimize opposing views. Religion is generally a conservative force in society. But we can find common values through our traditions, such as granting honor to the elderly for their life experience and wisdom. Such values have the potential to help us transcend our ideological divisions.

Another project for professional educators is the Yesodot Center for the Study of Torah and Democracy. Rabbi Dov Maimon is the director and Shlomo Fisher is its educational director. Fisher told me that the project seeks to foster education for democracy and tolerance in state religious schools and in religious academies of the Bnei Akiva youth movement. During the past year, twenty-four religious educators—Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Druse—have participated in a program called "Religion, Democracy, and Coexistence." The center hosted ten meetings, plus a two-day retreat that featured Muslim guest speakers from Bosnia, Turkey, and France. These meetings helped to change attitudes

regarding religion and tolerance, and these changes could then be applied in schools and wider communities. In fact, some practical exchange programs have resulted from the links forged among the participants. Some of the funding for this pilot program has come from the United States Institute of Peace. Additional support has come from the Abraham Fund, which has offices in Jerusalem and New York. The fund supports scores of Jewish-Arab coexistence projects throughout Israel.

Batya Kallus, until recently a senior staff member in the Abraham Fund's Jerusalem office, is religiously observant herself. She was enthusiastic about the Yesodot program, seeing it as a model for reaching religious educators in many more communities. It is the practical, activist nature of the program, with input from practitioners abroad, that appeals to her:

The Arabs are not interested in talk; they want action to change their situation. Their aim is to create alliances with Jews who can help them achieve a better quality of life. For many Jews, coexistence activities are primarily a humanistic experience that deepens their exposure to another culture. They need to be encouraged to really listen to the Palestinian narrative and accommodate it in their own worldview. Of course, this is more difficult now given the high level of fear and existential anxiety among most Israeli Jews. But we need to overcome the fears of Jews and the resentments of Arabs if we are to succeed in achieving genuine coexistence. The Yesodot leaders have found a way to create a serious and successful model for interreligious coexistence. The participants learn and grow, and they commit themselves to working together.

## Seven

### Other Muslim Voices for Interreligious Peacebuilding

One of the remarkable stories connected with the Yesodot program is that of Sheikh Abdulsalaam Manasra in Nazareth. Born in the village of Ein Dor in 1941, he became an “internal refugee” when his family fled to Nazareth during the 1948 war. As a young man, he experienced discrimination against the Arab minority in Israel, which led him to join the Israeli Communist Party. He was an active communist for twenty-one years, until, in his mid-forties, he embraced traditional Islam. “My name challenged me,” he told me, since *Salaam* is one of Allah’s ninety-nine names, and he decided that religion was vital to achieve peace and the other societal aims he was struggling for. The organized Islamic movements did not appeal to him, since he felt they were primarily interested in power politics.

“In the early 1980s I was searching for my own way,” he recalled. “Then I met Sheikh Muhammad Hashem Al-Bardadi, in A-Tur outside Jerusalem. He converted me to Sufi Islam, and I became his disciple. For four and a half years I served as his assistant. After I had been with him for nine years, he died, and I inherited his position as head of that Sufi order.” As a Sufi, he tries to build bridges of cooperation with other faith communities, based on the mystical commonalities at the heart of all religions. “True peace has to be grounded in faith,” he said. “It goes beyond the Abrahamic traditions, to include all of humanity. In India, for example, peace between Hindus and Muslims must be based on a religious foundation that transcends Abraham, that goes back to Adam.”

Sheikh Manasra lectures on Islam at Israeli universities in Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Beersheva. He helped Dov Maimon and Shlomo Fisher establish the Yesodot program, and he took part in it. As a result of that experience, he established a nonprofit association to spread the message of moderate, peace-seeking Islam throughout the Middle East: in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt. He and his colleagues want to create a public center in Nazareth that would sponsor publications, host conferences and lectures, and offer a residential facility for those attending its events. Manasra’s order operates four mosques, and he hopes to establish an Islamic high school, as well. He is clearly a man of vision and determination. And his warm relations with religious Jews, corroborated by the testimonies of several of those interviewed, are a great asset as he seeks partners in interreligious peacebuilding.

In Jerusalem I spoke with a Muslim friend who was less optimistic, but no less dedicated, than Sheikh Manasra. Mohammad Hourani is a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, a center for religious research and conversation. His doctorate in education is from Sussex University in Britain. A resident of Beit Hanina in northern Jerusalem, he has been working for many years to create educational frameworks in which Jews and Arabs of different religious backgrounds can learn about each other. He has facilitated cross-cultural

encounters in high schools, directed the coexistence program at the David Yellin Teacher Training College, and coordinated a Jewish-Muslim dialogue program for educators, focusing on sacred texts, at the Yakar Center for Jewish Studies. As he devoted his efforts to these various educational projects, his eye was always on the wider society. "In working with teachers, who will then impact on students, I can help build a better society for both Arabs and Jews," he said.

Despite his many years of hard work, he was in despair when we talked in early December 2002. "My views have not had much impact," he said with sadness.

We are at the edge of an abyss, a double tragedy for both Israelis and Palestinians. Yet there has to be a way out. We need two states for the two peoples, right now. A Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with minor border adjustments mutually agreed upon, can negotiate with Israel the outstanding issues under dispute, with nothing taboo. The walls of separation need to come down. If the political leaders would change their ways of thinking, we could make peace. The religious leaders ought to be helping in this process by reducing tensions, advocating compromise, and, above all, affirming the ultimate value of human life. They should oppose incitement to violence, but they usually lack the confidence to do this. Throughout history, Muslim religious leaders have been dependent on the political authorities for their status, and only rarely did they confront the rulers by advocating different policies. They tended to prefer bad leaders rather than risk fomenting anarchy.

For me as a Muslim, there is no more a division of the world into two realms, *Dar al-Islam* [the Domain of Islam] and *Dar al-Harb* [the Domain of War, to be conquered for Allah]. There is now one world, and religious leaders must help in creating one world community by articulating a vision of a single humanity under God. Yes, there are different people and faith communities in God's design, as stated in Sura 49:13 of the Qur'an, and these differences are meant to enrich each group with knowledge and wisdom. But there must be one standard for human rights, human welfare, and freedom of expression. As God's agents on earth, all of us have the authority and responsibility to work for peace, in order to save human lives. Any religious leader who justifies the taking of human life by violence has made an alliance with Satan, not Allah. And, sadly, there are many such figures, some of whom are leading organized movements.

Sheikh Manasra and Hourani are Palestinian Muslims with Israeli citizenship, working within the Jewish state to make it more pluralistic and inclusive. On the other side of the Green Line, in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, are Muslim educators working within their own society to promote tolerance and better relations among Israelis and Palestinians. One of them is Yousef Al-Herimi, who lives on the outskirts of Bethlehem and teaches Islam, world civilization, and logical thinking at Al-Quds University. He works in the Issam Sartawi Center for Peace Studies, established at the university in 1992 by its president, Sari Nusseibeh. From 1998 to 2002, Al-Herimi directed the center, facilitating projects both within the university and with partner organizations, such as the Van Leer Institute in West Jerusalem. For many years he has been active in Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, following his graduate studies in international peace studies at Notre Dame University and in Islamic theology at Harvard Divinity School. Al-Herimi grew up near Rachel's Tomb at the north end of Bethlehem. He says the traditional Jews who came

to the tomb to pray made a deep impression on him as a boy. And as a teenager in the late 1970s, he went to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem for dental treatment, where he developed positive relationships with the Jewish dentists.

At a 1999 conference on religious incitement at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Al-Herimi and his Jewish interlocutor agreed that the sacred texts in both traditions include inciteful passages. "What is needed," he said, "is to focus on the texts that speak of tolerance and forgiveness."

The negative texts should be relativized and limited to certain periods of history, when religious wars were waged. Now we have to ease the tensions, but it takes time for religions and cultures to change, to mature. My approach in teaching Islam is *targhib walaysa tarhib*, which can be translated as "desire, not terror." I stress the teachings on God's mercy and compassion that stem from the Prophet's Medina period, rather than the teachings on God's judgment and punishment from his Meccan period.

Al-Herimi also teaches a course on religion at Bethlehem University with Fr. Peter DuBrul, an American-born Jesuit. The students are men and women from both Muslim and Christian backgrounds. Among the topics he addresses are jihad, militancy, and retribution versus compensation and forgiveness in Islamic law. He is careful when presenting his own views. He explained: "My critical stance on the use of violence would be considered unpatriotic under present conditions, so I defend my views in terms of effective strategy, what is likely to achieve results. I sometimes raise the issue of home demolitions as a painful consequence of violence toward the Israelis. Since my own family home was demolished by the Israeli army some years ago, my views have some credibility with my students." In broader terms, Al-Herimi is worried that the image of Islam throughout the world is growing darker and more menacing.

In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, he said, "Israel is favored by a military, economic, and technological advantage. Palestinians have only their spirit and morale. There is a direct connection between the religious rules for *halal* slaughtering, which stress humaneness toward animals, and the ethical limits placed on warfare. Human life should always be considered holier than territory."

Despite his self-restraint, he still encounters criticism at Bethlehem University for presenting a positive view of Shi'ite spirituality and for his critical thinking, rather than for urging blind acceptance of Islamic tenets. Assessing the impact of his work with students, Al-Herimi says he is successful in getting students to rethink how civil society in Palestine is organized and where it is heading. Since he is relatively young (thirty-eight), his message reaches the students. Even though he carries no religious title such as "sheikh" or "imam," his traditional lifestyle gives him credibility and authority in his students' eyes.

Mustafa Abu Sway is another faculty member at Al-Quds University. A resident of the East Jerusalem neighborhood Ras al-Amud, Abu Sway teaches Islamic law and jurisprudence. He holds a Ph.D. in Islamic studies from Boston College and taught for several years in Malaysia. He has taken part in interfaith meetings for many years, locally and throughout the world, and often speaks to groups visiting Jerusalem, including Jewish delegations. He notes that "Jews and Muslims have almost identical models of faith and *fiqh* [jurisprudence]. This is a mixed blessing, perhaps making it harder to compromise.

Christians might find it easier to make political and territorial concessions than would Jews or Muslims.”

Abu Sway offered a historical observation: “For Jews, their *halakhic* legal tradition developed over centuries in diaspora, living as a powerless minority. For Islam, there is no historical or legal precedent for nonsovereign minority status. When traditional Muslims find themselves as a minority in society [in Israel or Western countries], their aspiration is to restore or establish sovereign majority status. To imagine shared sovereignty or dual sovereignty is not being faithful to Islamic tradition.”

For Abu Sway, the idea of two states existing side by side is unrealistic. He believes the Palestinian refugees will not give up their dream of returning to their original homes in Israel. He advocates a single state, governed in accordance with Islamic principles, even though he knows that this utopian position, as he calls it, may not be acceptable to most people. For him, “the borders are not the issue; rather, it is the quality of life and the standards of holiness that governments should uphold. Right now both authorities, in Israel and Palestine, are violating the religious and ethical requirements associated with the land, which should be viewed as a sacred trust [*waqf*]. The gambling casino in Jericho and the sex trade in Tel Aviv are two examples of this desecration.” By making his idealistic arguments in the name of religion, Abu Sway seeks to identify some of the deeper problems ignored in most political discussions and to encourage people—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—to take them seriously.



## Eight

### Symbolic Ritual as a Mode of Peacemaking

The initiatives described thus far generally favor interreligious dialogue or conversation as a path to mutual understanding and reconciliation. Alongside these efforts are some less conventional undertakings that focus on symbolic rituals. Marc Gopin, in his book *Holy War, Holy Peace*, recommends this approach as one with largely untapped potential for peacebuilding.

Eliyahu McLean is an American Jew who moved to Israel several years ago. He now directs the Peacemaker Community, a multifaith association that includes Druse and Jewish Buddhists, as well as traditional Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In his words, the association seeks “to empower peacemakers with a spiritual orientation that includes a social-action dimension, a stance we call *engaged spirituality*. We also link peacemakers here with spiritual activists abroad. Combining social action with spiritual disciplines like prayer and meditation offers an integrated path to both inner peace and peace in the wider society.”

The Peacemaker Community sponsors or cosponsors various ongoing projects. The first is the Old City Peace Vigil, held on Fridays from 11:30 A.M. to 1:30 P.M. on a tourist overlook opposite the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The vigil comprises various elements, including interfaith prayer, chanting, Muslim *zikr* (the remembrance and evocation of God), drumming, storytelling, sharing visions of peace, and periods of silent meditation. It draws Israeli peace activists, Palestinians from East Jerusalem, and foreign visitors of different faiths. McLean’s cofacilitator of the vigil has been Ibrahim Abu el-Hawa, who lives on the Mount of Olives. They initiated the weekly vigil at the start of the Al-Aqsa intifada, beginning with a prayer fast at the same spot. McLean, two other Jews, and Abu el-Hawa protested the growing violence by ingesting nothing but liquids for three days. They issued a statement in Hebrew, Arabic, and English mourning the loss of life among the Children of Abraham, calling for a just political solution, and offering prayers for peace and reconciliation.

More than two years later, how does McLean view the impact of the vigil? He says,

In these days, for Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others to come together in the Old City of Jerusalem, near the holiest sites for the Abrahamic faiths, to sustain spiritual fellowship under such trying conditions, is a significant achievement and a sign of hope. Sometimes soldiers express their solidarity with our efforts and offer their blessings. At one particularly violent time, when Palestinians on the Haram were throwing objects onto Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall below, the police ordered everyone away from the area except for those of us conducting the peace vigil. We remained in a prayer circle holding hands, about six Jews and two Muslims out of the forty people who had begun the vigil. From the beginning, we have timed our vigils to coincide with the *jumma* [Friday] prayers at Al-Aqsa Mosque just a few hundred meters away.



The Peacemaker Community helps to plan other activities that employ spiritual symbols and rituals to create interfaith fellowship. One is the Israel Walk Project, in which scores of people of various religious orientations walk in single file through Arab villages and kibbutz or moshav Jewish communities, through city neighborhoods, and along highways to demonstrate a witness for peace through walking meditation. The group has organized several walks, with both local and national media coverage. Stephen Fulder, a Jewish Buddhist activist, is one of the leaders of the Walk Project. It is the contemplative practice and peaceful intentions of the walkers that make an impression on those who engage them in discussions along their way. The basic message conveyed is that sharing disciplines that foster inner peace can also promote interreligious conversation and solidarity, which, in turn, are resources for the social and political process of peacemaking.

Another interfaith initiative that uses traditional symbols and rituals is the Sulha Project. Its principal organizers are Gabi Mayer, a Jew, and Elias Jabbour, a Christian Arab. McLean and the Peacemaker Community also help enlist participants and plan events. The aim of this project is to tap the wisdom of traditional Middle Eastern rituals for healing conflicts. The central practice is the Arab process of *sulha*, with its rituals for acknowledging harm, meeting through respected mediators, orchestrating rituals of reconciliation, and implementing methods of compensation. Jabbour, who directs the House of Hope, a center for peace education in the village of Shefaram, is an expert on this tradition and has written a small book on the subject. He envisions the whole society, both Arabs and Jews, using this method to resolve intercommunal disputes and the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hundreds of people attended the first two gatherings sponsored by the Sulha Project, which convened in a Galilee restaurant associated with a vegetarian kibbutz. Gabi Mayer and other Jews who immigrated to Israel from America shared mystical and ethical teachings from the Jewish tradition. These Jewish facilitators are rooted in the contemporary movement called Jewish Renewal, but they are also bringing more traditional Jews into the project. So the initiative brings together symbolism and ritual from Arab tradition (accepted by Muslims and Christians alike) and esoteric wisdom within Judaism.

Jabbour envisions a National Sulha Day during which Israeli Jews and Arabs throughout the country would be encouraged to move from enmity to friendship, building cooperation from the local level upward. In our conversation, he criticized the media for reporting on bloody events and ignoring peacemaking efforts. He also lamented the scarcity of funds available for initiatives such as the Sulha Project. Grassroots encounters and relationships are vital, he believes, for building a culture of peace. He was also critical of the Alexandria Summit, saying “we have had so many official meetings and declarations. This is an elitist approach, with little impact on the average citizen. A National Sulha Day could involve both religious and civic leaders, along with ordinary people. Teachers can educate others in how to live together peacefully, while children can play games together throughout the day.” He concluded by acknowledging that the Sulha Project “is a modest beginning. I would not overestimate its importance, but neither would I dismiss it as naïve or impractical.” As this report was being completed, a “Meta-Sulha” event was being planned for June 30 and July 1, 2003, near the Galilee village of M’ghrar.

A final word on the use of symbolic rituals: The religious peace activists who favor this approach seem to be the most open to integrating the mystical dimensions of the Abrahamic faiths, as well as teachings from the Far East, particularly Buddhist meditation practices. It remains to be seen how more traditional Jews, Christians, and Muslims will respond to these initiatives. My own sense is that the religions of the Middle East could use some healing correctives from the faith traditions of the Far East to confront some of the darker tendencies of monotheism—the self-centered notions that foster intolerance, triumphalism, and, all too often, horrific violence. One Muslim I spoke with, an engineer named Kamal Halawa, had joined a Jerusalem *sangha* group based on the “engaged Buddhist” philosophy of the Vietnamese monk and practitioner of nonviolence Thich Nhat Hanh. In their weekly meetings, some fifteen Jews and three Arabs engaged in sitting and walking meditations, along with a discussion circle. This experience, Halawa said, strengthened his own spirituality as a Muslim and allowed him to maintain friendships with Jews, despite the continued violence. “I can’t stop believing in a future peace,” he said. “My prayer life, including the sangha group, bolsters my conviction that peace is possible. Justice and peace must be achieved nonviolently, and it is through friendships with Jews that we Palestinians can forge an alliance on behalf of a shared future. My wife is a good example—her life was totally changed by her friendship with a Jewish woman.”

## Active Solidarity: Rabbis for Human Rights

**A**mong the Israeli and Palestinian organizations committed to a religious vision of peace and justice, Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR) stands out. It is the only organization in Israel (and perhaps anywhere) that has succeeded in bringing together rabbis from the four major branches of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. In a social context in which rabbis are often seen as establishment figures, sometimes earning their livelihood as state employees, the members of RHR are assertively independent. And whereas many rabbis in Israel seem concerned with issues such as Sabbath observance and the kosher dietary laws, RHR's focus is on social and ethical issues. Among these issues are the rights of foreign workers in Israel and the economic impact of government policies on the poor. The rabbis in RHR would, with few exceptions, call themselves Zionists, loyal to Israel as a Jewish state, but they take issue with the nationalistic form of Judaism identified with the Gush Emunim settler movement. When all these characteristics are combined, the result is an exceptional group of religious leaders (numbering several dozen) who exemplify a humanistic interpretation of Judaism and Zionism. For many Palestinians, the presence of RHR at peace rallies and their visible protests against official Israeli policies serve to redeem an otherwise negative image of Jewish tradition.

In October 2002, I had a long conversation with Rabbi Arik Ascherman, the American-born Reform rabbi who is executive director of RHR. (The organization's Hebrew name, *Shomrei Mishpat*, means "Guardians of Justice," from Psalms 106:3.) He said that the fundamental principle uniting its members is the cardinal affirmation that every human being is created in the Divine Image.

Before the Al-Aqsa intifada, the RHR agenda included safeguarding Christian and Muslim holy sites in Israel; helping the Jahalin Bedouin in their struggle against government efforts to uproot them from their traditional grazing lands east of Jerusalem; similar solidarity actions on behalf of cave dwellers in the South Hebron hills; and protesting against the demolition of Palestinian homes. Since the fall of 2002, the agenda has reflected the worsening cycle of violence and its toll in human lives and human rights.

Rabbi Ascherman said that

since this intifada started, the Israeli Jewish public is less open to hearing moral criticism [in Hebrew, *tokhachah*] of government policy. Fear and anger have taken over, making ethical protest seem disloyal. And the partisan media compound the challenge, since they are the gatekeepers in influencing public opinion.

At the beginning of the intifada, many Israelis in the peace camp felt betrayed by the Palestinians. The journalists, on the whole, were also caught up in this sense of betrayal and in the anxiety caused by the violence that had spread to Arab communities within Israel. The media reported on Palestinian violence, while Israeli military responses were

seen as restrained. Our Palestinian contacts told us to stay out of the territories, since they could not guarantee our safety and it was their own national struggle.

This began to change in November 2000, with the olive harvest at the village of Harres, the first joint activity we undertook with Palestinians since the violence began. We were responding to the threat which Jewish settlers posed to Palestinian olive growers—it was a form of economic warfare. Our basic approach was formulated then: Judaism is not a pacifist tradition. Self-defense when attacked is justified and necessary, but red lines were being crossed when official policies imposed collective punishment on innocent populations, whether through military means or economic hardship. With our participation in the olive harvest, which attracted media coverage, the Israeli public began to appreciate the suffering on the other side, too. No alternative vision affirming the humanity of both sides was being offered by any of our leaders. At the same time, the existential vulnerability made it difficult to protest against immoral behavior which seemed necessary for ensuring our own safety. So we felt it was necessary to define ethical limits on what we could do in the name of security.

Another moral witness was made through hospital visits to comfort the injured on both sides. RHR members, accompanied by Muslim and Christian clerics, went to Hadassah and Makassed Hospitals in Jerusalem. The journalists who accompanied them gave visibility to this poignant demonstration of indiscriminate solidarity with the victims of violence. This was a rare message in a polarized climate, one that transcended political ideology and aimed at stirring people's hearts.

A new level of activity began when the Israeli army cut off entire villages with huge boulders and trenches. For Rabbi Ascherman, this was a moment of severe testing:

I asked myself, what can I do so that if, one day, my infant daughter asks me what I did in these terrible times, I could answer her without shame. RHR decided to move from protest to nonviolent resistance, removing mounds of earth and filling in ditches near Palestinian villages, like Rantis. I was arrested close to ten times, interrogated but never jailed. But the army grew harsher in clamping down on dissidents, and our Palestinian partners were getting injured, so we decided to curtail these activities so as not to injure *them*. People called us “radicals,” but most of us felt like middle-of-the-road citizens who were simply taking our religious values to their logical conclusion.

We have worked with nonreligious human rights organizations, like the Israeli Committee against Home Demolitions, with whom we've cooperated in rebuilding destroyed Palestinian homes. But now we are trying to return to our roots as a distinctly religious organization, as we seek to make common cause with Christian and Muslim religious leaders. If clergy can be mobilized to affirm together our common humanity and a single standard of human rights, we can empower ourselves and our communities to create the foundations for a just peace. We have been circulating the text of an Interfaith Declaration, which we feel is stronger than the Alexandria statement. It not only condemns violence and human rights violations; it also calls on everyone to recognize the deep roots that both sides have in this land and the national aspirations of both peoples. It welcomes the Saudi proposal emanating from Mecca, the heart of Islam; it affirms our obligation to protect houses of worship and the inner sanctuaries implanted by God in every human being; and it calls on clergy to act as mediators in adversarial situations, where possible. We declare our intention to act so as to “realize a vision which

goes beyond the cessation of hostilities and looks forward to the day when our peoples will be a mutual blessing to each other.”

While efforts are under way to gather signatures of prominent religious leaders for this statement, RHR continues its humanitarian relief efforts. Ascherman reported that North American Jews had donated some \$100,000 to help Palestinian families, money that has been spent on such initiatives as the replanting of destroyed olive groves. RHR has a North American support network, headed by Rabbi Brian Walt in the Philadelphia area. Rabbi Ascherman acknowledged that

it has always been difficult for us to cast our message in proactive, visionary terms rather than as a reactive protest. And we lack the clout with the media that would allow us to frame the national debate on television or the op-ed pages. Still, we have succeeded in showing Jews and Palestinians that rabbis and other religious Jews can be positive role models, remaining faithful to Torah values even in extreme circumstances. Palestinians tell us how important this is for them, especially as they try to educate their children about Jews and Judaism. This education can come through the simplest act, like sharing a meal together.

## From Personal Grief to Collective Compassion

**B**etter the pains of peace than the agonies of war” is the message of a remarkable organization making a unique contribution toward peacebuilding among Israelis and Palestinians. On its brochure it identifies itself as the Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families for Peace. Its official name is the Parents’ Circle—Bereaved Parents for Tolerance, Democracy, Peace, and Judaism. It comprises two interrelated organizations: the Parents’ Circle, an ideological framework for the exchange of ideas and visions, and the Families’ Forum, with a more activist agenda. Both were founded by Yitzhak Frankenthal, whose story is known to millions of people in Israel/Palestine and around the world.

Frankenthal’s son Arik was a soldier in the Israeli army when he was abducted and murdered by Hamas militants. This tragedy altered Frankenthal’s life forever. He quit his business and became a full-time peace activist, determined to spare other parents the hell that the conflict had imposed on him. He was for a time, in the mid-1990s, the director of the religious peace movement *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom*. Then he decided to devote his energies to establishing an organization that would bring together Israeli and Palestinian parents who had lost children during the course of the conflict.

Almost all the people identified on his brochure are Jews, and nonobservant Jews at that. Frankenthal himself is a traditional Jew, whose flowing gray hair topped by a knitted gray skullcap is a familiar sight on Israeli television. Asked to explain the absence of more Arab names on the committees listed in his brochure, he said “the Palestinians are afraid to be identified publicly, so their names are not included in our literature.”

Though not named, the Palestinian families, both Christian and Muslim, are full partners in Frankenthal’s effort. Their common goal is to foster tolerance and reconciliation between the two peoples. Their primary method is using the mass media to change attitudes and feelings on both sides. The Parents’ Circle has succeeded in attracting large donations from abroad, including a large grant from the European Union. With an annual budget of about \$1.5 million, the organization fills hundreds of billboards on both sides of the Green Line with messages of peace and mutual acceptance. Several months ago they sponsored a display of coffins in New York and Washington, hoping to change attitudes and policies in the United States. One thousand and fifty coffins were arranged in long rows on the street (in New York, they covered the plaza opposite United Nations headquarters), 800 draped with Palestinian flags and 250 with Israeli flags. This ratio represented the proportion of Palestinian deaths to Israeli fatalities at that stage of the intifada. Frankenthal brought a group of his colleagues, Jews and Palestinians, to speak with media representatives and at public events. Their collective message was powerful: We know what it feels like to lose a child on the altar of war, and we say it is not worth it. The

killing must stop now; otherwise, more families will experience the lifelong agony we endure.

Frankenthal appears occasionally on Israeli television and radio, sometimes opposite other speakers. When Ezer Weizman was president of Israel, the bereaved parents were welcomed into his official residence, generating additional publicity. Frankenthal believes in the power of the media. “If we had more money,” he told me, “we would place more newspaper ads, billboards, and radio spots on behalf of tolerance and peace. We would also produce a video for children. Our success is measured by the degree of media coverage we receive.” To attract the media’s attention, the group organizes symbolic events such as the coffins display or candle-lighting ceremonies. Unlike other peace organizations, Frankenthal’s is not interested in attracting new members or fostering one-to-one encounters. Instead, it aims for a wide and powerful impact on public opinion through its media campaigns, presentations at schools and community centers, and press coverage. Representatives also meet with politicians and journalists, “to convey our message to such influential people who will, in turn, affect policies and persuade both sides to reach a peaceful agreement.”

In early October 2002, Frankenthal and his colleagues inaugurated a new, large-scale initiative: a free telephone call-in service that Israelis and Palestinians can use to speak with each other. Called “Hello, Shalom! Hello, Salaam!”, the service allows people to dial a four-digit number and choose someone from the other side who has already registered and whose particulars are in the database. In its first few days, close to six thousand people called in, and by now tens of thousands have used the service. Advertisements in the Israeli and Palestinian newspapers have announced this initiative and invited callers interested in finding a dialogue partner. One ad in *Ha’aretz* included these words: “Two years have passed without our speaking to each other. I from Gilo and you from Beit Jala. I from Hadera and you from Tulkarm. You get shot at and we get blown up. We’re angry and in pain, and on your side people surely feel the same. It’s time to put an end to this.” The telephone network and the publicity are clearly expensive. Frankenthal estimated the cost of the phone system at close to \$2,500 monthly. In addition are the costly newspaper ads, running \$12,000 to \$15,000 for a full-page ad in the Hebrew and English papers.

In any conflict, political leaders can easily manipulate people’s anger and grief to sustain their power base and justify belligerent policies. Frankenthal and his associates reject the exploitation of pain for political purposes. Instead, they project a radically different message, demonstrating that grief can be transformed into empathy for the suffering of others. Frankenthal hopes that by touching the spiritual reservoir of compassion—even in the midst of conflict—the political situation can be changed, the occupation of Palestinian territory can end, Jews can be liberated from their sense of vulnerability, and the two peoples can forge a just and lasting peace.

Since the Parents’ Circle was established, Frankenthal has been the central personality conveying its message. Reflecting on this fact, he said, “it is a mixed blessing to have our effort so identified with one person, myself. I try to arrange for others to be interviewed by the media. But sometimes they insist on speaking just to me. My own tragic story helps to raise people’s awareness, which in turn helps to raise funds to disseminate the message.

Without me, I doubt the organization would continue to function at its present level of effectiveness.” Even with this built-in limitation, the Parents’ Circle demonstrates what one person of faith, working with others who share his vision, can do to affect the wider society and to heal the festering wounds that politicians either ignore or aggravate.



## Eleven

### Journeys of Personal Transformation

**A**s we near the end of this report, I present three stories of people who have undergone unusual faith journeys, similar to that of Sheikh Manasra. Their experiences touch on the issues raised in this report, and their commitment to religious peacebuilding affects the lives of many others. They have certainly been inspirations to me.



Fr. David Neuhaus is a Jesuit priest. He was born a Jew in South Africa and immigrated to Israel as a young man. As he tried to clarify his spiritual identity, he participated in various interfaith frameworks in the early 1980s. That is when we first met. At some point he decided to convert to Catholicism and become a priest. He went to Rome for several years of theological training and returned to Israel as a Jesuit priest. He resides in the Pontifical Biblical Institute, a Jesuit center in West Jerusalem.

Given his background, Neuhaus is a living bridge. But he connects more than Jews and Christians. His knowledge of Arabic and his close friendships with Palestinian Christians and Muslims allow him to establish close relationships with West Bankers. He teaches religion at the Latin Patriarchate Seminary in Beit Jala and at Bethlehem University. His duties include instruction in basic Judaism for the Palestinians and Jordanians enrolled in these two institutions. His teaching convinced him that there is no good book in Arabic that presents Judaism in a positive light. He is now writing one, to be published by his Jesuit colleagues in Lebanon.

In addition to his teaching and writing, Neuhaus participates in a variety of interfaith settings. He is a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, the Jewish center where Hourani also works. He is a member of at least two theological commissions established by the Latin Patriarch, Michel Sabbah, to foster interfaith relations. One is a small group that includes Arabic- and French-speaking Jews who teach Judaism at different universities. The other is an all-Catholic commission that is formulating theological positions on subjects relevant to achieving justice and peace in the Holy Land. Neuhaus's busy schedule is testimony to his profound commitment to using his many talents, and his personal life experience, in the service of spiritual reconciliation.



The next story is that of Dalia Landau, to whom I have been married for twenty-four years. Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, she came to Israel with her family when she was a year old, at the end of 1948. Like many families, hers was placed in an Arab house in Ramle, then

considered abandoned property. Dalia grew up in a secular home, but her own spiritual quest led her to explore Christianity and Far Eastern religions, eventually bringing her to the study of her own Jewish heritage. After the Six Day War in 1967, the original Palestinian owners of her family home came to visit, not just once but several times. Dalia also visited them, and over the years a special bond developed with the Al-Khayri family, who now live in the West Bank city of El-Bireh. Dalia learned that they had not left the Ramle house voluntarily but had been forcibly evacuated by the Israeli army in July of 1948. After her parents died and she inherited the house, the two of us (now married) sought out the Al-Khayris to consult with them about what to do with the property. The resulting discussions led to the creation of Open House in 1991, a peace education center based in that Ramle house: a home of two families, symbolizing Israel/Palestine as the homeland of two nations. Open House sponsors affirmative action programs for Arab children and their families, as well as joint programs for Jews and Arabs of all ages.

The Al-Khayris are Muslims, and Dalia and I are Jews. The third corner of the Abrahamic triangle entered the story in the person of Michail Fanous, a native of Ramle born in 1958 into a devout Christian family with deep roots in the city. Michail, who serves on the Ramle City Council, has been executive director of Open House since its founding, and I served until recently as the international relations director. Together these three families have sought to actualize the promise made to Abraham/Ibrahim in Genesis 12:3: “through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

A shy woman, Dalia never dreamed of attracting media attention. She harbored tremendous fears as she set out, with Michail and me, to realize our vision for Open House. “I decided to simply carry my fears along with me,” she has said many times. The journey of faith and courage that led Dalia to dedicate her childhood home to educational projects fostering reconciliation is documented in reports that have aired on CNN, CBS, Israeli national and local television, Dutch, Spanish, and Italian TV networks, and National Public Radio in the United States. Her story has also appeared in print in many languages. Dalia has been invited to share her testimony at interfaith conferences around the world. Whenever she speaks, she conveys her belief that, to achieve genuine reconciliation, we must undertake three steps: (1) to *acknowledge* the harm done by one’s own side; (2) to *apologize* for the hurt and injustice inflicted; and (3) to make *amends* for past actions by acts of repentance and rectification now and in the future. These three “A’s” are her practical guidelines for peacebuilding, and Open House is a vessel for their application.



Finally, the abbreviated story of my dear friend Yossi Halevi. The son of a Holocaust survivor, he grew up in the Jewish neighborhood of Boro Park, Brooklyn. His rage over the Shoah and the history of torment caused by anti-Semitism led him to join Meir Kahane’s militant Jewish Defense League. This phase of his life is documented in his first book, *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist: An American Story*. After he moved to Israel, he became a writer for various publications. He was for several years a senior writer for the *Jerusalem Report*, writing most of its articles on religious issues. Today he writes editorials for the *Jerusalem Post* and articles for the *New Republic* and the *Los Angeles Times*. His second

book, which appeared in late 2001, is titled *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*. It chronicles his two-year journey into the devotional rites of Christians and Muslims, including monastics and Sufi sheikhs. The book offers a spiritual angle on the political problems in Israel/Palestine, in the belief that such an approach is essential for true peacemaking.

In a recent conversation, Yossi Halevi expressed some views that provide closure to this narrative:

If the religions of this region cannot produce people who, in the nuclear era, are capable of offering a vision for saving humanity, then all three Abrahamic traditions have outlived their usefulness. It is easy to be pessimistic, listening to the official spokespeople for the religions. But, fortunately, there are deeper sources of spiritual strength and renewal in each of the faiths that can be tapped. We need to move from conferences and intellectual dialogues to a dialogue of the heart, of prayer, of meditation. We need to bring God into this conflict, because only God has the power to create the kind of miracles that can save us. When people of different faiths, especially in this Holy Land, pray or meditate together, my sense is that the effort is greater than the sum of their separate prayers. Joining different languages of prayer together, when they are too often pretexts for conflict, can reverberate and draw God's protection and active intervention, in a way that is more powerful than when each faith community prays on its own.

## Twelve

### Practical Recommendations

In conclusion, I offer some recommendations drawn from the verbal testimonies and the model programs presented in this report:

- ▶ For effective peacebuilding in the Middle East, an interreligious “track” paralleling political diplomacy is essential. Building relationships of trust and cooperation among religious figures at all levels requires discreet activity, far from the television cameras, as well as publicized meetings and statements to sustain the hope of others.
- ▶ Interreligious solidarity among distinguished leaders and grassroots activists is mutually supportive. To succeed, each group needs the other, and from time to time they should come together to discuss how their efforts can reinforce one another. Since clerics in the Middle East are almost always men, bringing them in contact with both women and men from local NGOs will help diversify the pool of insights for religious peacebuilding.
- ▶ Discussions, conferences, and declarations need to be supplemented by symbolic or ritualized gestures of rectification and reconciliation, grounded in the wisdom of the different religious traditions.
- ▶ Religious leaders from throughout the region, backed by their counterparts in other parts of the world, need to meet more frequently to develop common agendas for peacemaking and to demonstrate that making sacrifices for peace is a religious obligation.
- ▶ Interreligious NGOs that operate across boundaries (for example, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, the International Association for Religion and Freedom, Initiatives of Change, and the Community of Sant’Egidio) need to be more involved in promoting religious peacebuilding in the Middle East.
- ▶ Media professionals should be challenged to give more coverage to peacebuilding efforts, including interreligious initiatives for peace and inspirational stories of personal transformation.
- ▶ Philanthropic agencies and individuals need to invest far more resources in interreligious peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine. The peace pioneers on the ground struggle against high odds, and their frustrations are multiplied by limited funding. Jews, Christians, and Muslims worldwide have a stake in the success of these efforts, and they should be more active in soliciting funds for these projects from their coreligionists.

- ▶ Finally, politicians and diplomats need to understand that religion can be a force for peacebuilding rather than conflict. Institutions such as the United States Institute of Peace should organize seminars for these public servants, with theorists and practitioners in the field of religious peacemaking offering their insights. Such seminars would help ensure that the religious dimension is not neglected in diplomacy and that future peace agreements are accepted by fervent religious adherents on all sides of the conflict.

## Appendices

### I. Resources for Additional Information

#### Books

- Abu-Nimer, Mohammed. *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003.
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- Kimball, Charles. *When Religion Becomes Evil*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002.
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- Raheb, Mitri. *I Am a Palestinian Christian*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Ravitzky, Aviezer. *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Simon, Uriel. *Seek Peace and Pursue It: Topical Issues in the Light of the Bible, the Bible in the Light of Topical Issues* [in Hebrew]. Tel Aviv: Yediot Achronot/Sifrei Hemed, 2002.
- Smock, David R., ed. *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002.

### Web Links

For the United States Institute of Peace, which includes a Religion and Peacemaking web link:

[www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)

For the Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom religious Zionist peace movement:

[www.netivot-shalom.org.il](http://www.netivot-shalom.org.il)

For the initiative by Fr. Emil Shufani and his colleagues to explore the impact of the Holocaust:

[www.counterpunch.org/lavie02122003.html](http://www.counterpunch.org/lavie02122003.html)

For WCRP-Religions for Peace: [www.wcrp.org](http://www.wcrp.org)

For the International Association for Religious Freedom: [www.iarf.net](http://www.iarf.net)

For Initiatives of Change: [www.initiativesofchange.org](http://www.initiativesofchange.org)

For the Community of Sant'Egidio: [www.santegidio.org/en](http://www.santegidio.org/en)

For information on the Alexandria Summit: [www.coventrycathedral.org/news](http://www.coventrycathedral.org/news)

For the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel: [www.icci.co.il](http://www.icci.co.il)

For the Interfaith Encounter Association: [www.interfaith-encounter.org](http://www.interfaith-encounter.org)

For the Abraham Fund and its grantees, including Yesodot: [www.abrahamfund.org](http://www.abrahamfund.org)

For Rabbi Michael Melchior and the Meimad Party: [www.meimad.org.il](http://www.meimad.org.il)

For a presentation about Jerusalem by Muhammad Hourani:

<http://info.jpost.com/2000/Supplements/Millennium/encounters2.html>

For a presentation by Rabbi David Rosen on interfaith dialogue:

<http://info.jpost.com/2000/Supplements/Millennium/encounters1.html>

For an online dialogue with Professor Mustafa Abu Sway: [www.islamonline.net/livedialogue/](http://www.islamonline.net/livedialogue/english/Browse.asp?hGuestID=O1c5K5)

[english/Browse.asp?hGuestID=O1c5K5](http://www.islamonline.net/livedialogue/english/Browse.asp?hGuestID=O1c5K5)

For the Peacemaker Community and the Sulha Project:

[www.peacemakercommunity.org/Hebrew/index.html](http://www.peacemakercommunity.org/Hebrew/index.html) and [www.metasulha.org](http://www.metasulha.org)

For Rabbis for Human Rights: [www.rhr.israel.net](http://www.rhr.israel.net)

For the network of bereaved parents: [www.theparentcircle.com](http://www.theparentcircle.com) and their telephone dialogue

service: [www.hellopeace.net](http://www.hellopeace.net)

For Open House in Ramle: [www.openhouse.org.il](http://www.openhouse.org.il)



## II. The First Alexandria Declaration of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land

Alexandria, January 21, 2002

*The first Middle East Interfaith Summit with the participation of the leaders of the three monotheistic faiths, held in Alexandria, Egypt, issued the following statement:*

In the name of God who is Almighty, Merciful and Compassionate, we, who have gathered as religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, pray for true peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and declare our commitment to ending the violence and bloodshed that denies the right of life and dignity.

According to our faith traditions, killing innocents in the name of God is a desecration of His Holy Name, and defames religion in the world. The violence in the Holy Land is an evil which must be opposed by all people of good faith. We seek to live together as neighbors respecting the integrity of each other's historical and religious inheritance. We call upon all to oppose incitement, hatred and misrepresentation of the other.

1. The Holy Land is holy to all three of our faiths. Therefore, followers of the divine religions must respect its sanctity, and bloodshed must not be allowed to pollute it. The sanctity and integrity of the holy places must be preserved, and freedom of religious worship must be ensured for all.
2. Palestinians and Israelis must respect the divinely ordained purposes of the Creator by whose grace they live in the same land that is called holy.
3. We call on the political leaders of both peoples to work for a just, secure and durable solution in the spirit of the words of the Almighty and the Prophets.
4. As a first step now, we call for a religiously sanctioned cease-fire, respected and observed on all sides, and for the implementation of the Mitchell and Tenet recommendations, including the lifting of restrictions and return to negotiations.
5. We seek to help create an atmosphere where present and future generations will co-exist with mutual respect and trust in the other. We call on all to refrain from incitement and demonization, and to educate our future generations accordingly.
6. As religious leaders, we pledge ourselves to continue a joint quest for a just peace that leads to reconciliation in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, for the common good of all our peoples.
7. We announce the establishment of a permanent joint committee to carry out the recommendations of this declaration, and to engage with our respective political leadership accordingly.

### *Signatories:*

His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey  
His Eminence Sheikh Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, head of  
Al-Azhar Islamic University, Cairo  
Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron  
Rabbi Michael Melchior, Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel  
Rabbi Menachem Froman, Rabbi of Tekoa  
Rabbi David Rosen, President of WCRP

Rabbi David Brodman, Rabbi of Savyon  
Rabbi Yitzhak Ralbag, Rabbi of Ma'alot Dafna  
Sheikh Taisir Tamimi, Chief Justice of the Palestinian Sharia' Courts  
Sheikh Tal El-Sider, Minister of State for the Palestinian Authority  
Sheikh Abdulsalam Abu-Shkedem, Mufti of the Palestinian Armed Forces  
Sheikh Taweel, Mufti of Bethlehem  
Archbishop Aristarchos, Representative of the Greek Patriarch  
His Beatitude Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch  
Archbishop Boutros Mualem, the Melkite Archbishop  
Archbishop Chinchinian, Representative of the Armenian Patriarch  
The Rt. Rev. Riah Abu El-Assal, the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem

## About the Author

After earning a B.A. from Harvard University and an M.T.S. from Harvard Divinity School, **Yehezkel Landau** immigrated to Israel in 1978. He served as program coordinator for the Israel Interfaith Association (1980–82), then as executive director of the OzeShalom-Netivot Shalom religious peace movement (1982–91). From 1991 until 2003 he was codirector of the Open House Center for Jewish-Arab Coexistence in Ramle, Israel. He has authored numerous articles on Judaism, interfaith relations, and Middle East peace issues and has lectured on these subjects at several ecumenical institutes in Jerusalem, as well as internationally. He is coeditor, with David Burrell, of the book *Voices from Jerusalem: Jews and Christians Reflect on the Holy Land*. Currently he is faculty associate in Interfaith Relations at Hartford Seminary, a position underwritten through 2006 by the Henry Luce Foundation.

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Peaceworks 51

Peaceworks No. 51. First published September 2003.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone.  
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