

A HOLISTIC PEACE PROCESS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

By YEHEZKEL LANDAU

With the Oslo peace process in shambles, and Israelis and Palestinians feeling demoralized after almost two years of war and terror, it is time to explore other ways of healing this seemingly intractable conflict. It is clear that military force, from either side, can not prevail, for it can not make the opposing side accept the terms dictated by the perpetrators of violence. Both sides are exhausted by the ongoing cycle of violence and retaliation, but neither has a vision of an alternative way toward peace and security.

The architects of the Oslo framework were well-meaning political leaders who tried to strike a deal that would bring about the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem in return for guarantees ensuring Israel's security and acceptance by the Arab world. That exchange sounds reasonable, but something got distorted in the translation from vision to reality. Partly it was a breakdown of trust between the two sides. But there was, in my view, a more fundamental problem, a "congenital defect" in the Oslo concept: its rationalist assumption of how the conflict could be resolved. The negotiators were secular nationalists who tried to impose a "secular" peace plan on a holy land whose inhabitants include many people motivated by religious passions. Since the religious militants on both sides were effectively shut out of the negotiating process, they have done their best to sabotage the outcome. In order to overcome this serious obstacle to any mutually acceptable agreement, we need to adopt what I would call a more holistic approach to peacemaking, involving a broader spectrum of Israelis and Palestinians than just the politicians and diplomats. A genuine peace process for Israel/Palestine has to address the following four aspects simultaneously:

On the **political** level, both Jews and Palestinians need to compromise on the tangible issues in dispute, including territory, sovereignty in Jerusalem, water resources, arsenals of weapons, and the repatriation or rehabilitation of refugees. Painful concessions need to be made by both sides, forcing them to undergo what is tantamount to an amputation of the collective body, so that the State of Israel will be smaller than the Land of Israel and the State of Palestine will be smaller than the Land of Palestine. Political leaders must acknowledge the painful sacrifices this renunciation entails--for the other side as well as their own--and they have to find appropriate symbolic expressions of the collective grief. Economic incentives for both parties, especially the much poorer Palestinians, are a key element in the peacemaking agenda. Commercial interdependence based on equity, in a regional framework involving Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Lebanon has to be established. For this political transformation from hostility to partnership, courageous political leadership will be required from all sides, including outside powers like the Americans and Europeans.

On the **cognitive** level, new understandings of identity--who I am in relation to the "Other"--have to be nurtured. It is much more challenging than simply changing the notion of "enemy" into "peaceful neighbor". Both Israelis and Palestinians have cultivated "victim scripts" over many years. The interior landscape requires a brutal adversary in order to justify an existential struggle that gives meaning to life, with a deep sense of belonging and loyalty. One of the chapter titles in Menachem Begin's book THE REVOLT is "We Fight, Therefore We Are". Who do we become when the war is over? How do we justify what we have done, or what others have done in our name, when we no longer have the other side to blame for all the horrors of war? How can we move from partisan scripts to more inclusive renderings of history? The Oslo process began with declarations of "mutual recognition"—but neither side was ready back in 1993 to **re-cognize** the other side, to perceive and conceive the "enemy," and one's own self and

community, in non-dualistic terms. To transform the two dualistic worldviews pitting “us” against “them,” and to inculcate a more inclusive humanistic vision, will require the diligent labor of many professional educators over the coming years. At OPEN HOUSE in Ramle, Israel, a site that has been home to a Muslim Palestinian family before 1948 and a Jewish Israeli family since then, our peace education for children and adults is based on a candid retelling of the tragic events of the 1948 war, including the Arab world’s rejection of Jewish statehood and expulsions of Palestinian civilians by the Israeli army.

On the **emotional** level, we need to address and transform intense feelings that keep both peoples locked in antagonistic interdependence. The most obvious one is **fear**. Transforming fear to mutual trust requires re-humanizing encounters with the “enemy” at all levels, from the political echelon down to the classroom, ideally at kindergarten age. To prepare people to actually meet their dreaded counterparts, video representations of the positive qualities in the demonized “Other” should be broadcast on both national television networks, replacing the negative accounts we are fed daily. The media are a serious problem in this regard, and we have to challenge communications professionals to change the “script”. The messages we receive every day not only perpetuate our cognitive dualism; they also keep us trapped in “visceral inertia,” preventing us from taking responsibility for our conditioned feelings and response patterns. Fear, in particular, is a powerful irrational force driving much of the destructive behavior in Israel/Palestine, as it does in so many other places. And both peoples have legitimate reasons for feeling afraid. But if we want to overcome our fears, we need to organize widespread encounters between Arabs and Jews of all ages. Our experience at OPEN HOUSE has taught us that joint activities which focus on common interests and provide practical skills have a much greater chance of success than amorphous “Jewish-Arab dialogues”.

Another strong feeling that keeps us trapped is **anger**. To transform anger to acceptance, perhaps even forgiveness, requires a capacity for empathy that is sadly lacking among both Palestinians and Israelis. The challenge for educators and mental health professionals is to help people see that they have been a real threat to the well-being of the other side. In other words, we are victimizers as well as victims. We need to grasp that the other side has understandable reasons to be angry, too, and that had we been born among “them,” we would probably be fighting “us” instead of the reverse. To deal with our anger constructively, we need to take at least two practical steps:

1. listening with empathy to the grievances on the other side, so that our own are put into a broader perspective. There is a U.S.-based project called “Compassionate Listening” which trains Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans in this discipline.
2. deciding together with our adversaries how to make amends for the respective experiences of injustice. Apologies can be expressed by individuals and by governments. But to be sincere, the expressions of remorse have to be matched by acts of moral rectification, what in Jewish tradition is called *tikkun*. For example, if refugees are not able to return to their homes (Palestinians from what is today Israel, or Jews from Arab countries), then fair compensation must be offered to the families that suffered.

The third and last major emotion that has to be transformed is **grief**. Everyone has lost a loved one, a friend, or a neighbor during the course of this conflict. How can we help each other to embrace with compassion the suffering on the other side, too? We have to open our hearts to their stories of loss and grief, the stories we have filtered out by our own pain and denial. The Bereaved Parents Forum, comprised of Israelis and Palestinians who have lost loved ones to the conflict, offers an inspiring example of shared grief transformed into compassion. Educators, social workers, and psychologists, reinforced by the media, have to find

ways to replicate this example by communicating the poignant stories of suffering across the barriers of willful ignorance.

Finally, on the **spiritual** level, a different understanding of holiness has to be taught by religious leaders and educators. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druse, and others in the Holy Land are hungry for an experience of true holiness, based in an awareness of the all-loving and inclusively just God. Partisan interpretations of the sacred, especially regarding territory and history, need to be supplanted by a different theological paradigm whose essence can be summarized as “pluralistic monotheism”. The One God not only suffers or tolerates difference; that God has created individuals and nations with such striking differences in order to create a variegated human community that can celebrate diversity instead of feeling threatened by it. If both Jews and Palestinians can be brought to see, and to know deeply, that the Land belongs to God alone, and that by the grace of God both peoples belong to the Land (see Exodus 19:5-6), then a new political vision can be generated on this spiritual foundation. Within this practical vision, all the children of Abraham can be partners in consecration, rather than rivals competing for Divine favor on the basis of a scarcity principle. In regard to truth, holiness, and Divine love, the principle of abundance, of gracious generosity, has to take over. For this to happen, religious educators have to assume responsibility for developing and teaching an inclusive understanding of holiness. They must learn from one another, pray for one another, and work together to support the political agenda of reconciliation. Without a shared spiritual commitment to genuine sacrifice—humility and renunciation for the sake of God—all the peace plans advanced by diplomats will fail. Peace in the outer society can not come about so long as people’s hearts are steeped in bitter resentment. God’s Holy Land is meant to be a laboratory for practicing justice and compassion towards all. As privileged inhabitants of that land, we are called to transcend the bloody, divisive past and create a common future. If we rise to the challenge, we will all be blessed by the holiness of Shalom,

Salaam, Peace. And then life will prevail, not death and destruction.

With such a holistic peace agenda, enlisting the services of a broad spectrum of people within society, not only the political leaders, we have a chance to redeem our tragic situation. The hour is late, the suffering on all sides heart-breaking. But if we commit ourselves to a new beginning, we can, with God's help, make the Holy Land a land of genuine holiness for all.

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