

IF ONLY...

*An appeal addressed to Jews, Arabs, and concerned people everywhere
in response to the war between Israel and Hamas*

by Yehezkel Landau
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If only our empathy and compassion were as strong as our capacity for self-justification;

If only we could protect ourselves in ways that do not inflict harm on others;

If only we could see ourselves as interdependent, rather than isolated and threatened;

If only we could see the Image of God in one another, rather than projecting mythic images of Arab Nazis or Jewish Crusaders;

If only our leaders were committed to transforming conflict nonviolently rather than too often using military means to achieve political aims;

If only peace education were a part of school curricula throughout Palestine and Israel;

If only political agreements outlawed incitement and demonization in public speeches;

If only the Israeli and Arab media conveyed multiple perspectives, along with humanizing stories and images, rather than reinforcing prejudices;

If only we could address the core issues and grievances, rather than reacting to the latest round of violence or the fear of further violence;

If only the Arab perception of the state of Israel (in its pre-1967 borders, with mutually accepted adjustments) was of a people coming home and exercising the right of self-determination, rather than of a colonial conquest by outsiders;

If only Arab and Muslim leaders could acknowledge the existential fears of the Jewish people following the Holocaust and reinforced by subsequent wars, bellicose rhetoric, and the prospect of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Israel's adversaries;

If only the Jewish people, in Israel and elsewhere, could acknowledge the deep, unhealed wound of the Palestinian people, displaced and dispossessed in large numbers in the war of 1948 and under prolonged occupation following the 1967 war;

If only Israel would join the Palestinian people in developing democratic institutions rather than destroying their civic infrastructure in the name of self-defense;

If only we could see the problem as a regional crisis, with multiple, inter-related challenges, rather than a bilateral conflict between Israelis and Palestinians;

If only the new American administration would engage wholeheartedly in Middle East peacemaking, deploying a full-time envoy to the region with negotiating skills comparable to those exhibited by George Mitchell in Northern Ireland;

If only a spiritual dimension to peace-building — drawing on the practical resources in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity — were included in Middle East diplomacy, so that religious extremists would be countered in their own terms and political arrangements would be grounded in mutual repentance, the healing of trauma, and sustained hope for the future;

If only we could envision a future of cooperation and shared blessing, rather than a no-win war lasting generations;

If only the children on “the other side” were as precious to us as our neighbors’ children;

If only our young people were exposed to their peers on “the other side” early on, so that they could build friendships that transcend the “us-vs.-them” dichotomy;

If only we could build *Shalom/Salaam* together, with a Jewish-Arab peace corps constructing homes, schools, and hospitals in a state of Palestine alongside Israel, and with expanded cross-border initiatives in the areas of health, education, culture, the environment, and sports;

...then perhaps, with God’s help and courageous leadership on all sides, both Israelis and Palestinians could experience genuine peace and security, with fear transformed to trust, anger to forgiveness, grief to compassion, and narrow self-interest to mutual solidarity.

The writer is a dual American-Israeli citizen who co-founded the Open House Center for Jewish-Arab Coexistence in Ramle, Israel, and now teaches Judaism and interfaith relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.