

JEWS, MUSLIMS, AND PEACE

By Yehezkel Landau and Yahya Hendi

With ongoing violence sapping the spirits of Israelis and Palestinians, and with the Iraq war generating shock waves throughout the Middle East, we call on our fellow Jews and Muslims to join forces with concerned Christians to transcend this cycle of death and destruction. Jews and Muslims should be spiritual allies, not adversaries. Any student of comparative religion knows that Judaism and Islam are as close to one another as any two faith traditions can be. In both, the sacred texts prescribe communal norms, and the criterion for genuine faithfulness is the practice of justice and compassion. The Hebrew and Arabic languages, too, are amazingly close to one another. Muslim and Jewish scholars, at times both writing in Arabic, have nourished each other's spiritualities for centuries. It is only in the past hundred years that the conflict over the Holy Land, whether called Israel or Palestine, has engendered competing nationalisms and the violation of basic human rights affirmed as sacred by all three faith traditions. The conflict has also undermined the historic cross-fertilization of these traditions.

The mixture of religion and nationalism is dangerously combustible. On a human, pragmatic level, two nations in a dispute over a land claimed by both should be able to compromise and share the territory. But when God's will is invoked to absolutize one or the other claim, then compromise becomes sacrilege, and religious extremism generates grotesque ideologies of domination, death, and destruction.

In recent years, we have wept as our sacred traditions have been hijacked and contaminated in this way. Religious leaders who share our sorrow are sometimes intimidated into silence by the extremists, or else the political constraints of their public roles encourage self-censorship. Their reticence only compounds the tragedy.

One of the reasons the Oslo "peace process" failed is that it was a secular peace plan imposed by secular leaders on a Holy Land, where large minorities of Jews and Palestinians are motivated by deeply held religious convictions. 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 afterwards; a series of Arab-Israeli wars over half a century; a prolonged, unjust, and humiliating occupation of Palestinian territory since 1967; continuing violence against civilians; the reluctance of many to accept each other as neighbors; and the growth of hatred and suppression. All of these factors have sustained a chronic religious pathology.

Despite this crisis of the spirit, leaders of the various religious communities were not enlisted as partners in the struggle for peace. If the September, 1993, signing ceremony on the White House lawn had included an Israeli chief rabbi and a high-ranking Palestinian Muslim cleric, the message projected on that occasion, especially to the faithful, would have been very different. And if religious leaders from the three faiths had been brought together from the outset to help make peace possible, the diplomacy would have had a much greater chance of success.

Instead, Israeli and Palestinian leaders, with the endorsement of American and European diplomats, labeled Islamic militants and ultra-nationalist religious Jews as "enemies of peace". The dynamic that ensued, with fervent Muslims and Jews feeling threatened by a "peace process" that excluded them, has contributed to the dreadful impasse in which we are all caught. Religious issues important to both sides were pushed aside and not properly addressed. These include sensitive issues like Jerusalem and the status of what Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims call the Haram Al-Shareef.

In a more conducive context of trust and good will, it might be possible for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to design a political framework for peaceful coexistence in a shared Jerusalem. Both nations could agree to offer up to God the sacred plateau at its heart, as extra-territorial space in terms of sovereignty and with the *waqf* Islamic trust continuing to administer the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock. This was the late King Hussein's proposal, and it seems to us the fairest and most practical option. But, in the meantime, voices are heard on both sides delegitimizing each other's attachments to this sacred site. This mutual denial adds poison to an already lethal atmosphere.

Part of the problem is that the notion of "political sovereignty" often eclipses the fundamental religious truth that only God is sovereign over Creation, and that we human beings are God's regents or servant-partners in blessing and perfecting this world. This means that all political realms are under Divine judgment and that their power is relativized by God's ultimate authority. The ramification for Israel and Palestine, under any agreement establishing two adjacent sovereignties, is that these two states should be understood as means for ensuring the rights and opportunities of people, not ends in themselves. A federation or confederation, perhaps including Jordan as well, might be a more effective framework for enabling the self-determination of each people and, simultaneously, serving the needs of all on the basis of equity and interdependence.

In fostering interreligious peacebuilding, a Christian mediation role is helpful on two counts: to encourage polarized Jews and Muslims to find common ground, and to inspire Western Christians to make amends for their own bloody history toward the other two Abrahamic communities. For Palestinian Christians, rooted in the land for centuries, reconciliation between their Muslim brethren and Israeli Jews is essential for their own economic and spiritual welfare.

The major burden, however, falls on the Jews and the Muslims themselves. Both communities, guided by wise leadership, need to overcome longstanding prejudices and resentments. Each tradition has sacred teachings that can be enlisted to build bridges of respect, reconciliation, and cooperation. Wise religious leadership consists of identifying those teachings and educating both peoples in that spirit.

There will be no political peace in the Middle East without a spiritual underpinning reconciling Jews and Muslims. At this critical moment in our history, with heartbreaking suffering and loss on all sides, we need to be inspired by the Divine light that shines forth from the holy Qur'an and the holy Torah. They both affirm life, not death. They both teach compassion, not callousness or hatred. They both call for a richly diverse human family under the sovereignty of the One God.

We both pray that—*insh'Allah, b'ezrat Hashem*, with God's help—people the world over who are suffering in the midst of violent conflict will experience genuine peace and security, starting with all the children, women, and men in our common homeland, Israel/Palestine.

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