

PEACEBUILDING IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE: A 30-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

By YEHEZKEL LANDAU

April 5, 2008, marked the 30th anniversary of my arrival in Israel. I came on an El Al plane from New York, courtesy of a rabbi who bought me a one-way ticket so that I could work and study at his academy in Jerusalem. I never bought the other half of the ticket, even though I am temporarily living in Hartford, Connecticut, and teaching at Hartford Seminary, a school that has pioneered in the field of interfaith studies. I became a dual American-Israeli citizen, married my former wife Dalia, who had grown up in Israel, and together we built a home in the southwest corner of the Holy City that includes our 20-year-old son Raphael, now a soldier in the Israeli army, and four endearingly neurotic dogs.

I was the last member of my immediate family to visit Israel and the only one who stayed. This is because I did not go as a tourist, or as a pilgrim, but as a prospective resident and citizen. The Jewish yearnings in my soul had intensified to the point where I needed to experience life in Israel first-hand. While still in the U.S., it pained me deeply to watch the evening news and vicariously suffer the indignities of Palestinians and the existential dread of Israeli Jews. I felt that, as a Jew who identified with the Zionist homecoming, as an interfaith educator, and as someone committed to seeking inclusive justice and the reconciliation of wounded, angry, embittered hearts, I might be able to contribute something to the alleviation of people's suffering.

I also believed, and still believe, that the Holy Land of Israel/Palestine is God's primary laboratory on earth for the practice of justice and lovingkindness, in Hebrew *mishpat* and *tzedakah*. In Jewish tradition, these are the two main attributes of God, and they are also exemplified in the personality and the interactions of our common forefather Abraham/Ibrahim (see Genesis 18:19). Tragically, in Israel/Palestine today these sacred principles are being violated, with an immense toll in human lives and spirits, by a chronic state of spiritual pathology that breeds injustice and violence. Deeply ingrained "victim scripts" compete for validation. Two opposing historical narratives reflect a shared attachment, not just to a common homeland, but also to a scarcity principle selfishly applied to territory, history, and identity.

I am convinced that there will be no genuine peace between the two peoples fighting over God's Holy Land until there is a shared commitment to consecrate life and land. Hebrew Scripture, in Exodus 19:5-6, teaches us that the land belongs to God, and that, by the grace of God, we Jews belong to the land. In our time, the challenge is to share the land equitably with another people that has its own sense of belonging. This theological

re-visioning, with a willingness to sacrifice territory in both directions to safeguard human life, is essential for a political transformation. At present, what is professed to be holy by Jews, Christians, or Muslims is being desecrated by horrific violence and by the trampling of basic human rights in the name of “security” or “freedom” or “liberation.”

In my view, no peace plan, or road map, or negotiated agreement will succeed unless it includes, explicitly, a religious dimension grounded in sacred symbols and in spiritually resonant actions. One of the reasons for the collapse of the Oslo peace process was the failure of its sponsors to take the spiritual needs of both peoples into account. And by this I do not mean only or primarily pre-empting the religious extremists on all sides. What I have in mind is a strategy for realizing the deepest yearnings of Israelis and Palestinians, which are essentially the same: to feel at home, secure and free (in political jargon, exercising the right to “self-determination”); to be accepted by one’s neighbors in one’s own terms, that is, to have one’s identity honored rather than denigrated; to be forgiven for harm inflicted on others; to raise one’s children without fear for their future; and to exercise the capacity for love and creativity unimpeded by physical threats. If these spiritual needs were met, then the extremists would be neutralized automatically.

Sadly, for too long both peoples have been emotionally overwhelmed by fear, anger, grief, bitter resentment, hatred in some quarters, and now widespread despair. It is this oppressive mix of negative feelings that provides religious and ideological militants with the emotional “justification” for their destructive agendas. Transforming the emotional matrix of whole peoples is an enormous task, requiring diligence, patience, and the efforts of many people, including political leaders, religious authorities, grass-roots educators and activists, and dedicated media professionals.

During the 1980’s, the framework for my own peacebuilding efforts was the religious Zionist peace movement, *OZ veSHALOM-NETIVOT SHALOM* (“Strength and Peace-Paths of Peace,” from two verses in Psalms and Proverbs, respectively). To some, the notion of a “religious Zionist peace movement” may sound like an oxymoron. For decades, the chauvinistic spokespeople among the Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, using the media very effectively, have offered their own version of religious Zionism. Their movement, *Gush Emunim* (Bloc of the Faithful) espouses a pseudo-messianic ideology rooted in “territoriolatry” and historical determinism. They see the covenant linking God, the People of Israel, and the Land of Israel as a “no-fault insurance plan” from Heaven, promising the Jews political victory and spiritual blessing so long as they control the whole land from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. In this worldview, the human and political rights of the other nation in the land are dismissed as irrelevant or nonexistent. Those of us who are the “minority within a minority,” religious Zionists who advocate territorial and political compromise—represented in the Knesset by Rabbi Michael Melchior of the dovish *Meimad* movement, a part of the Labor Party—have received scant media coverage. As a result, secular left-wing groups like *Shalom Akhshav* (Peace Now) or *Gush Shalom* or *Women in Black* tend to see the cause of peace

as incompatible with Jewish religious tradition and practice. This mutual alienation, between the secular left and the religious right, has created a seismic fault line that threatens to tear Israeli society apart. *SHALOM*, one of God's Holy Names, is ironically perceived as the monopoly of secular leftists and is, therefore, deemed an anathema by religiously committed Jews.

Let me illustrate this bifurcation of Israeli Jewry by drawing on one of the most well-known sources in our oral tradition. *Pirkei Avot* (literally, Chapters of the Fathers) is a homiletical tractate within the Mishnah, the compilation of the Oral Torah which is the basis for what came to be called the Talmud. In its first chapter are two teachings attributed to one of two sages named Shimon. The first, in the name of Shimon haTzaddik (Simon the Righteous), reads, "The world stands on three things: on Torah (study), on Sacrificial Worship or Service, and on Acts of Lovingkindness." In later rabbinic literature, these three virtues were attributed to the three patriarchs in Genesis: Abraham is the embodiment of lovingkindness; Isaac is ready to be sacrificed himself; and Jacob is depicted as a Torah scholar studying all day in his tent. These three virtues are the essence of what I would call "particularistic Judaism," the ideal attributes of an educated and committed Jew. At the end of the same chapter, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel is quoted as saying, "By three things is the world sustained: by justice, by truth, and by peace, as it is said [in Zekhariah 8:16], 'truth and justice-peace you shall administer in your gates.'" This second tripartite teaching can be said to encapsulate the "universalistic Judaism" of the Hebrew prophets. In my imagination, each of these three-part teachings can be represented as a triangle; and the two triangles together, as in a Star of David, comprise holistic Judaism, integrating both the particularistic and universalistic aspects. Note that peace, *shalom*, is only one of six points on this star and is thus seen as one element of a larger whole. (This is why I never joined the Peace Now movement, or any movement that holds up peace as a value independent of other values within an inclusive spiritual matrix.)

The cultural, even existential, strife that afflicts Israeli Jewry can be diagnosed as the severing of these two triangles which are meant to be joined together. The secular left has embraced the universal ethical values of truth, justice, and peace; while the religiously observant Jewish community has identified largely with the more particularistic agenda of the first triangle, both educationally and politically. In the particularistic worldview, lovingkindness is reserved for fellow Jews, and justice and peace are defined in self-referencing terms. In the universalistic mindset, holiness does not exist, any piece of territory can be given up without any qualms, and the attachment to Judea and Samaria felt strongly by *Gush Emunim* is dismissed as fantastical and dangerous. The result of this mutual negation and alienation is a Jewish population suffering deep internal divisions, and these divisions are a formidable obstacle to a just peace between Israel and Palestine. (Palestinian society is similarly divided into contesting factions, making any peace agreement between these two fragmented nations an almost super-human challenge.)

OZ veSHALOM-NETIVOT SHALOM has sought to be a bridge between the two Israeli constituencies, each of which has its own vision of an authentic “Jewish state.” Each is loyal to only part of the Jewish heritage, and what is needed is a sacred synthesis of the two positions. Consequently, the religious peace movement in Israel has taken on a double mission: to offer a Jewish religious foundation to the entire Israeli peace camp, and to develop a “kosher peace politics” acceptable to the religious community (i.e., rooted in Jewish religious law, *halakhah*). Returning to *Pirkei Avot* for help in reconciling the two adversarial worldviews, I would point to a teaching by the renowned sage Hillel, which appears in the text between the two tripartite statements by Shimon HaTzaddik and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel. Hillel said: “Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humankind, and drawing them closer to the Torah.” To me, this is the healing approach for Jews in conflict: engage the Torah tradition together, find a holy common denominator rooted in its wisdom, and build community on this sacred foundation.

Since its founding in 1975, the religious peace movement in Israel has had very limited success. It has sponsored seminars and learning retreats, dissemination of published materials, public protests and demonstrations, media pronouncements, and direct appeals to both political and rabbinic leaders. I would say that its primary achievement has been to demonstrate that there is an alternative interpretation of religious Zionism, grounded in Torah Judaism, that challenges the ideology of the *Gush Emunim* settlers.

I have heard it said, facetiously, that it is harder to make peace among Jews than it is to make peace between Israel and Palestine. There is another, more sober, assessment: It is easier to take the Jews out of Exile than it is to take the internal reality of Exile out of the Jews. It will take a long time before Jews, so accustomed to being vulnerable victims, are fully comfortable with majority status in Israel, and with the responsibilities that come with sovereign power. Even if there were a viable peace agreement between Israel and Palestine, the civil rights agenda within Israeli society would still need to be addressed with much more seriousness and perseverance. For it is true that peace begins at home. The Jewish majority in Israel has difficulty dealing with the Palestinian national minority within the state, which comprises some 20% of the population. Especially since the riots of October, 2000, at the start of the second Intifada, which provoked a violent response by the security services that left 13 Arab citizens dead, the rift between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis has grown.

This brings me to the story and peacebuilding work of OPEN HOUSE. After almost ten years of activism in *OZ veSHALOM-NETIVOT SHALOM*, which involved teaching, writing, planning educational programs, interviews with journalists, traveling, and raising funds, I felt the need to engage in a concrete peacebuilding effort. My then-wife and I were trying to transform her childhood home into a laboratory for reconciliation. Dalia was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, and came to Israel with her family when she was a year old,

at the end of 1948. Like many other immigrant families at that time, hers was placed in an “Arab house” in Ramle, between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The Israeli government considered the confiscated homes of Palestinian refugees as “abandoned property.” After the Six-Day War in 1967, the original Palestinian owners of her family home came to visit. They were then living in the West Bank city of El-Bireh, next to Ramallah. The Al-Khayri family paid several visits to the house in Ramle, and Dalia also visited them. Over time, a special bond developed between the two families, brought together by a house and garden that each called “home.”

Dalia came to learn that the Al-Khayris did not leave the Ramle house voluntarily. They had been forcibly evacuated by the Israeli army in July of 1948, along with most of the residents of Ramle and nearby Lydda/Lod. These expulsions were deemed necessary at the time, as Israel was waging a war of survival following the Arab world’s rejection of the 1947 U.N. partition plan. After her father died in 1985 and she inherited the house, Dalia and I (by then married) sought out the Al-Khayri family to consult with them about what to do with the property. The resulting discussions led to the creation of OPEN HOUSE, a peace education center based in that Ramle house. The house remains the 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 Jewish and Arab Israelis of all ages. Recalling the two Divine attributes that are the criteria for consecrated living in God’s Holy Land, I would say that the first program area, which addresses the discrimination experienced by the local Arab community, reflects our commitment to *mishpat*, justice; while our mixed activities are meant to keep hearts open and caring, as a practical model of *tzedakah*, compassion.

Dalia is rather shy, and she never dreamed of attracting media attention. She harbored tremendous fears as she set out, with me and with our Palestinian partners, 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 television, Dutch, Spanish and Italian TV networks, and National Public Radio in the U.S. Her story has also appeared in print in many languages, including an Italian translation of her open letter to Bashir Al-Khairy that appeared in *LA REPUBBLICA*. A recent book by Sandy Tolan entitled *THE LEMON TREE* chronicles the interwoven stories of Dalia, Bashir, and their families.

Dalia has been invited to share her testimony at interfaith conferences throughout the world. Whenever she speaks, she conveys her belief that, to achieve genuine reconciliation, each side must undertake three steps: (1) to acknowledge the harm done by one’s own side to the other 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 into the future. These three “A’s” are her practical guidelines for peacebuilding, and

OPEN HOUSE is a vessel for their application. We both believe that these guidelines are equally applicable to the macro-level of negotiations and peacebuilding gestures between the two peoples. Unfortunately, it is a rationalist, utilitarian, and incrementalist mentality that characterizes most diplomatic efforts. Such an approach focuses more on interests than on feelings or spiritual yearnings, so it neglects opportunities to heal hearts and transform spirits. Grass-roots efforts need to make up for this deficiency at the official level. Hopefully, if these localized efforts succeed, they can inspire diplomats and political leaders to apply their methods to the macro-process of building trust and cooperation between warring nations.

OPEN HOUSE, since its founding in 1991, has touched the lives of thousands of Jews and Arabs, mostly young people. By investing in our youth, helping them to experience a social environment based on equality and mutual appreciation, we are establishing a firm foundation for a society at peace within itself. And since the Holy Land is a focus for so many people's hopes and dreams, a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians promises to radiate inspiration and blessing to the far corners of the earth.

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