

The Religious Dimension of Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking

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Introduction: Rationale and Summary

Even 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 diplomacy. 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 paper¹ 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. The collapse of the Oslo process, the ascendancy of Hamas within Palestinian society, and the enmity between Israel and Shi'ite Iran and Hizbollah all demonstrate that

¹ This paper is an abbreviated and updated version of a more extensive research report that I wrote for the United States Institute of Peace, based largely on interviews I conducted in 2002 and 2003 with some 30 Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Israel and Palestine. All of them have long-standing commitments to peacebuilding that stem from their religious convictions. Entitled *Healing the Holy Land: Interreligious Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine*, the report was published in September, 2003, as No. 51 in the U.S.I.P. series of monographs called *Peaceworks*. It is accessible at www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks51.pdf

negotiations that prescribe only political, military, and economic arrangements are doomed to fail. Israeli and Palestinian leaders, as well as representatives of other governments and organizations (including the United States and the United Nations), must take into account the deep feelings, the fervently held convictions, the spiritual yearnings, and the symbolic images that Israelis and Palestinians harbor.

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 Arab 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

setting² 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 that is 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 our world today, 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 and can 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. 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

² There are Biblical precedents for the Zionist homecoming, of course. While some Jews cite the military conquest under Joshua, religious Zionists like myself prefer to cite the nonviolent return of the Babylonian exiles—part of the exiled community returning to part of the beloved homeland, under the auspices of the new Persian Emperor Cyrus. Psalm 126 captures the spirit of this Providential return, as the Jews felt “like dreamers.” In the last century, the homecoming dream of Jews turned into a nightmare for the Palestinian people, and the challenge to all of us now is how to ensure that both people's dreams, and rights, of return are mutually accommodated in two sovereign states living in peace alongside each other.

elements must be incorporated into the theory and praxis of healing international disputes. For example, Rabbi Dr. Marc Gopin, in his 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). I share this conviction and believe, also, that local and international Christians have their own constructive roles to play in healing this tragic conflict.

Challenging the Secularist Paradigm

The Oslo Accords failed, in part, because they were a secular framework 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 and bolstered by the recent summit in Annapolis, is likely to suffer the same fate if its sponsors fail to take into account the spiritual needs of both peoples. The same can be said for peace plans formulated by nongovernmental representatives, such as the Geneva Initiative. For a peace agreement 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 more than half a century; a prolonged, harsh, and debilitating occupation of Palestinian territory by Israel since 1967; a forty-

year policy of building Jewish settlements and access roads in that occupied territory; continuing violence on all sides directed against civilians; reluctance among both peoples to accept the other as a legitimate sovereign neighbor, sometimes out of a territorial ideology, with Jewish or Islamic “religious” justification, claiming an exclusive right of sovereignty between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River; and mutual dehumanization exacerbated by fear, anger, and grief. All of these factors engender a spiritual pathology that 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. 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.

To complement the conversations at the highest political and diplomatic levels, grassroots educators, artists (including writers and musicians), and media professionals in both societies need to generate a “civil society” ethos that encourages fruitful engagement of these fundamental issues among the wider public. Teachers and administrators should meet across the national divide to discuss curricula in the different religious school systems. Religious activists 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, mosques, and Ministries of Religious Affairs forfeits the opportunity to inject a deeper spiritual dimension into the process of reconciling Israelis and Palestinians.

An exemplary religious initiative that earned coverage in the Hebrew, Arabic, and international media was 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 was 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," *The Jerusalem Report*, June 30, 2003). Shufani's colleague in this project was journalist and editor Nazir Majli. He was asked at the time, "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 in January, 2002 (see the following section), and, in the years since, by sponsoring discussions with the different Palestinian factions aimed at reaching a moratorium on violence (*hudna*).

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.

The Role of Religious Authorities: The Alexandria Summit and Its Aftermath

On January 21 and 22, 2002, at the height of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, 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. From accounts by various participants, it is clear that the highest political echelons in Israel, the PA, and Egypt gave their blessings to the Alexandria Summit. The seven-point statement that emerged from this meeting was titled the “First Alexandria Declaration of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land.”³ 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 Talal 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 came over time to side with those who see religion as a resource for peacemaking.⁴ He 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.”

³ The full text of the declaration, with the names and titles of the signatories, is appended to my U.S.I.P research report.

⁴ Sheikh el-Sider attributed his change of heart to the many meetings he held with Rabbi Menachem Froman from Tekoa in the West Bank. Rabbi Froman is an indefatigable peace activist who has spent years forging and sustaining relationships with Palestinian leaders, including high-level figures in Hamas.

“According to our faith traditions,” the Alexandria Declaration 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 and has continued until today. The ongoing warfare in and around Gaza, now controlled by Hamas, and the war between Hizbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006, have deepened the mutual enmity and augmented the sense of hopelessness on both sides.

Despite its limitations, the Alexandria Summit did produce some significant results. The network of relationships that emerged from that meeting helped resolve the thirty-eight-day siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in April and May of 2002.⁵ A

⁵ The site, sacred to Christians, was taken over by Palestinian Muslim militants, who confronted Israeli military forces surrounding the building. This nightmare scenario could have ended in catastrophe, with international repercussions. Canon Andrew White, Archbishop Carey’s special representative to the Middle East, was integrally involved in the Alexandria Summit from the outset and participated in the negotiations to end the Bethlehem crisis.

committee for implementing the declaration's points met several times, including one consultation in London in October, 2002, that produced a practical agenda with religious, political, and educational goals.

In recent months, a new interreligious framework has emerged to actualize the Alexandria Summit's aspirations. Established in 2005, it is called the Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land. Just before the Annapolis Summit, its high-ranking Jewish, Muslim, and Christian clerics from Israel and Palestine issued a six-point statement pledging to work together "to prevent religion being used as a source of conflict, and to serve the goals of a just and comprehensive peace and reconciliation." Council members traveled to the United States to deliver their message, after meeting with Secretary of State Rice in Jerusalem. Among the steps they called for are: creating a "hot line" to address issues of access to holy sites and their protection; establishing mechanisms for monitoring negative religious stereotypes in the media; seeking a "common vision" for the holy city of Jerusalem; launching a joint educational campaign, in schools and the media, advocating mutual respect; and consulting with political leaders on the wider peace process.

Rabbi David Rosen, Director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, was a signatory of the Alexandria Declaration and is a member of the new Council. He sees this latest initiative as a further step forward, noting that the Alexandria meeting brought together individuals, not institutions, and the subsequent turnover among the high-level clerics undermined the efforts to involve religious leaders in peacemaking. It remains to be seen how effective the new Council will be, but the visibility and official

status of its members gives it an uncommon opportunity to convince the wider public in both Israel and Palestine that making peace with long-time adversaries is a religious and moral imperative, not just a political expediency.⁶

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. 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

⁶ For a journalistic report on the Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land, which quotes Rabbi Rosen and other religious observers, see Jane Lampman, "Can Religion Aid Peace Effort?", *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 20, 2007, pp. 13, 16.

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 then-PA President 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.'"

I asked Melchior 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 [who did not invite Melchior to the Camp David Summit in July, 2000, even though Jerusalem was on the agenda], 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.

Grassroots Interreligious Initiatives

Religious leaders can add a spiritual dimension that is too often absent from politics and diplomacy in the Middle East. Yet they are not the only ones who can do so. In fact, they need the help of grassroots religious educators and activists, individuals and organizations that can make a concrete difference in the lives of ordinary people. Religious elites can set a tone and an example for the society at large. Photos of imams and rabbis meeting, and the positive messages that emerge from such encounters, do have an impact in countering the polarized climate that prevails in Israel/Palestine. But the educational effect needs to be reinforced on a regular basis in schools, universities, seminaries, summer camps for youth, and many other informal settings.

There are many educational initiatives that promote interreligious dialogue and cooperation among Jews and Palestinians, both within Israel and across the Green Line. In this paper I can only offer a general overview of these activities, but I want to emphasize that the dedicated professionals in this field need recognition and support. They labor under serious constraints, both political and financial. Most of their efforts go unreported, since the media focus more on the sensational, particularly the violent or the salacious.

The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI) sponsors a wide range of educational programs: for women, for religious educators and community leaders, for high school teachers, for theologians, and for environmental activists. One particularly noteworthy initiative has brought Jewish rabbis and lay educators together with Palestinian Christian clergy from Jerusalem and the West Bank. Participants focus on how spiritual resources from their respective traditions can help overcome anxiety and despair, especially among the younger generation. Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan, the principal organizer on the Palestinian Christian side, affirms that interpersonal encounters are essential to maintain bridges of trust and hope, even as the political reality seems hopeless.

The Interfaith Encounter Association, headed by Yehuda Stolov, sponsors seminars and weekend retreats that are avowedly apolitical. The sessions are organized around different religious themes, encouraging interactions that can help people overcome their conditioned fears and prejudices. When people's emotions and attitudes are transformed,

Stolov believes, they can be more effective agents of social change and help forge a more peaceful society.

Adina Shapiro is an Orthodox Jew who attracted some media attention several years ago as an Israeli teacher at the Hope Flowers School in the West Bank. She founded the Middle East Children's Association (MECA), which she co-directs with her Palestinian colleague Ghassan Abdullah. It is one of the few organizations that works across the Green Line, forging friendships and alliances among Israeli and Palestinian educators. Given the violence close to home, meetings are usually held abroad, in places like Istanbul. Shapiro reported that "much of the work is with parallel unination groups these days, but with coordination between Israeli and Palestinian group leaders. Right now the 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." Reflecting on the role of religion in her work, she says that "my religiosity forces me to be active in this way. 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, headed by Rabbi Dov Maimon and Shlomo Fisher. This initiative seeks to foster education for democracy and tolerance in Israeli state religious schools and in academies of the Bnei Akiva religious youth movement. One program, called "Religion, Democracy, and Coexistence," involved twenty-four religious educators—Jews,

Christians, Muslims, and Druse. They met ten times, then shared a two-day retreat with Muslim guest speakers from Bosnia, Turkey, and France. Some practical exchange programs resulted from the links forged among the participants.

Other initiatives focus on public rituals and ceremonies as catalysts for peacemaking. Marc Gopin, in the book cited earlier, recommends this approach as one with largely untapped potential for peacebuilding. One example is the Peacemaker Community, directed by an American Jewish immigrant to Israel, Eliyahu McLean. He says his multifaith association seeks “to empower peacemakers with a spiritual orientation that includes a social action dimension, a stance we call engaged spirituality. Combining social action with spiritual disciplines like prayer and mediation offers an integrated path to both inner peace and peace in the wider society.” Together with co-facilitator Ibrahim Abu el-Hawa, McLean initiated a peace vigil at the start of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, held on Fridays from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. near the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Included were interfaith prayer, chanting, Muslim *zikr*, drumming, storytelling, sharing visions of peace, and periods of silent mediation. It has drawn Israeli peace activists, Palestinians from East Jerusalem, and foreign visitors of different faiths. For McLean, this “sustained spiritual fellowship under such trying conditions is a significant achievement and a sign of hope.

Another interfaith framework using traditional symbols and rituals is the Sulha Project. Its principal organizers are Gabi Meyer, a Jew, and Elias Jabbour, a Christian Arab. Their aim is to tap the wisdom of traditional Middle Eastern rituals and methods for healing conflicts, particularly the Arab reconciliation process of *sulha*. Peace-oriented teachings

from Jewish tradition, music from different cultures, and kosher/halal food prepared jointly are other elements of the annual Sulha Days that draw hundreds of participants from all over the country.

An organization that is more politically active, working explicitly for inclusive justice, peace, and reconciliation is Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR). In strictly Jewish terms, it is exceptional, for it 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, the members of RHR are assertively independent. They focus on social and ethical issues, including the rights of foreign workers in Israel and the impact of government policies on the poor. But most of the media attention they elicit, especially in recent years, centers on their active solidarity with Palestinians who are victims of injustice or who suffer hardship at the hands of soldiers or Jewish settlers. RHR members, often in concert with other human rights groups, help to rebuild demolished Palestinian homes or to replant uprooted olive and fruit trees of Palestinian families. In some cases, acts of civil disobedience protesting Israeli government policy result in the arrest of RHR members—most often it is the executive director, American-born Reform Rabbi Arik Ascherman. For many Palestinians, such acts of solidarity and affirmation of our common humanity, amidst a climate of mutual de-humanization, serve to redeem an otherwise negative image of Jews and Judaism.

The religious Zionist peace movement *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom* (Strength and Peace/Paths of Peace) has been active since the mid-1970's, when *Oz veShalom* was

founded to counter the partisan, militantly messianic views of the *Gush Emunim* settler movement. Through seminars, conferences, Sabbath retreats, newspaper ads, publications in various languages (including Arabic), and occasional public demonstrations, this small organization (numbering several hundred members) has presented a dovish, humanistic and humane interpretation of Judaism and Zionism. It sees itself as having a dual purpose: offering a religious dimension to the Israeli peace camp (which is generally secular) and offering a peace-oriented theology (rooted in Biblical and Rabbinic sources) to the religiously observant Jewish community. Among its leaders are rabbis and educators, including Professors Aviezer Ravitzky and Uriel Simon and Dr. Deborah Weissman.⁷

Journeys of Personal Transformation

“Better the pains of peace than the agonies of war” is the message of a remarkable organization making a unique contribution toward Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding. The Parents’ Circle/Bereaved Families Forum was founded by Yitzhak Frankenthal, an observant Jew who was, during the mid-1990’s, the director of *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom*. After his soldier-son Arik was kidnapped and murdered by Hamas gunmen, Frankenthal decided to devote his energies to establishing an organization that would bring together Israeli and Palestinian families that had lost loved ones in the course of the conflict. Frankenthal has since left the Parents’ Circle, which has close to 500 families participating. Its powerful message, of grief transformed to compassion and

⁷ I was executive director of *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom* from 1982 to 1991.

reconciliation, is conveyed through media campaigns, public teach-ins, and occasional activities that use potent symbols—like hundreds of coffins draped with Israeli and Palestinian flags. Ronit Avni’s documentary film, “Encounter Point,” presents the moving stories of Parents’ Circle members, and it shows how the group’s emotional and spiritual appeal—to transform a war mentality to a stance of principled nonviolence—elicits different reactions from disparate segments of Israeli and Palestinian society.

Finally, a brief look at the initiative with which I myself have been most closely associated in recent years: the Open House Center for Jewish-Arab Coexistence and Reconciliation in Ramle, Israel.⁸ The central figure in this story is my former wife, Dalia Landau. 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 at the time, hers was placed in an Arab house in Ramle, then considered “abandoned property.” 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 (then 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

⁸ I was co-founder and co-director of Open House from 1991 until 2003. I am now vice chair of the U.S. support organization, Friends of Open House (see www.friendsofopenhouse.org)

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 into a devout Christian family with roots in that mixed city. Together these three families 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 we set out 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, and Sandy Tolan has recently chronicled the story of the two families and their common home in his book *The Lemon Tree*. 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.

I will end this paper with the abbreviated story of my dear friend Yossi Halevi, who serves as the board chair of Open House. 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 articles for the *New Republic* and the *Los Angeles Times*, while working on another book dealing with the Israeli paratroopers who took East Jerusalem from the Jordanians and reached the Western Wall in June, 1967. His second book, which appeared in late 2001, is entitled *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 expressed some views that provide some closure to this reflection:

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.

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