

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

Dabro LeShalom¹: A Jewish Contemplation of PeacemakingRabbi Edward Rettig²

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True peace cannot come except by studying and understanding diverging views, knowing that they have their place, each according to its concerns. In the union of opposites do we behold the blessing of peace.

– Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kuk, *Olat Re'aya* 1:330-331

It has been hard of late to be a supporter of dialogue in this fractured Holy Land. The recent trend toward unilateralism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in large part an expression of disillusionment with dialogue. The "disengagement" or "convergence" plans and the electoral (and military) victories of the rejectionists such as Hamas are part of this despair. Many well-meaning groups on both sides of the conflict are now tempted as never before to abandon the path of peace through dialogue.

However, for truly religious Jews, as for Christians and Muslims, despair is not an option. Among Jews, *shalom* – peace or tranquility – is at the heart of our religious identity. In the Midrash, a set of collections of rabbinic maxims redacted in the first several centuries of the Common Era, Rabbi Yudan son of Rabbi Yossi interprets the phrase, "And he called God, Peace!" (Jgs 6:24). Rabbi Yudan says: "Great is peace, since the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is called Peace." In the world of the Sages, *shalom* is interwoven with Godliness. When we bring peace, they teach us, we are partners with God's own indwelling presence. In the same lengthy discussion of the value of peace, the Midrashic teacher Hezekiah further stipulates: "seek it in your own place, and pursue it even to another place" (Leviticus Rabbah 9).

In another early rabbinical text, the "Ethics of the Fathers" Hillel instructs us to be active in peacemaking, to be "of the disciples of Aaron," not only "loving peace" but "pursuing" it.³ We are forbidden from passively awaiting its coming, but must pursue it as vigorously as we claim to love it. The Jewish tradition forbids us to be content until peace, complete and universal, has been achieved.

¹ *Dabro leShalom*: See Gn 37: 4 "And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him." וַיִּרְאוּ אֶחָיו, כִּי-אֵתוֹ אָהַב אָבִיהֶם מִכָּל-אֶחָיו--וַיִּשְׂנְאוּ, אֹתוֹ; וְלֹא יָכְלוּ, דַּבְּרוּ לְשָׁלוֹם.

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³ *Pirkei Avot* 1:12.

The Sages also provide us with a conceptual key with which we can fulfill the duty of peacemaking, a paradigm that is at once ancient and profoundly relevant. According to the Jerusalem Talmud, "By three things the world is preserved: by justice, by truth, and by peace. And these three are one. If justice has been accomplished, so has truth, and so has peace." (j. Ta'anit 4:2) Justice is the gauge by which peace and truth are measured in a commutative relationship where none is possible without the others.

Justice can be understood in very different ways, and applying it as a gauge in a complicated conflict is no simple matter. Still, the perception of justice in a conflict can be divided into two basic models.

The first is the zero-sum perspective. In the "zero-sum game," one party can gain only at the commensurate expense of the other party. If one party is at plus one, the other must be at minus one, for the total must always be zero. The zero sum perspective interprets justice as in a court of criminal law, the assumption being that there is a wrong-doer and there is a victim and thus essentially justice is on only one side.

Consider the infamous photograph of a Nazi SS officer shooting a Jewish woman who is trying desperately to shield her child with her own body.⁴ Observing the situation, and considering the ideological context of the act, we perceive no justice on the side of the Nazi, while the catastrophe facing the woman and her child is universally recognized. It is important to realize that there are no grounds for compromise between the sides in a zero-sum conflict. It is inherently insoluble except through total victory or defeat.

The second model of justice in a conflict is one in which justice is not perceived by the conflicted parties as aligned in a zero-sum dichotomy, but justice (and perhaps injustice) exist to a significant extent on both sides. This understanding of conflict is best described as "tragic" in the familiar meaning of the term: "calamity" or "misfortune."⁵ Such conflicts are morally complex and therefore difficult to analyze and resolve.

These two perceptions of conflict lead to radically different assessments of what constitutes moral conflict resolution. If one side is evil and the other side blameless, compromise is inherently wrong, since ultimately, compromise with evil is evil.

One could argue that this oversimplifies matters. Yet, consider a ceasefire between enemies who see each other as evil. More often than not, experience teaches us that it is used to gain strength in order to reignite the conflict under more favorable circumstances. Occasionally we encounter the argument that even zero-sum conflicts can have moments in which a short-term compromise might make limited moral sense, such as a ceasefire to treat the battlefield wounded.

But what happens in the hearts of leaders and the populations they serve when they advocate an end to violence while at the same time framing the conflict in zero-sum terms? Those who truly advocate conciliation with evil carry a psychological burden: if leaders truly believe that the other side is without justice, they are vulnerable to the claim, perhaps in their own hearts, that they surrendered their morality. Leaders who advocate compromise with perceived evil are

⁴ It is titled *Nazi Shoots Jewish Woman and Child*, and can be viewed at www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/RM2.N.SHOOT.WOMEN.JPG.

⁵ See <http://mw1.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tragedy>. Retrieved October 12, 2007.

(often justly) accused of lacking scruples and honor, and of folly. Generations later, the name Chamberlain still evokes the immorality of the pre-WWII compromise with Nazism and its consequences.

The opposite occurs when protagonists see their struggle as a tragic conflict between two just aspirations. Recognizing the justice on the other side and compromising with it serves to enhance the moral stature of the leader who engages in peacemaking. Compromising due to an acceptance of an opponent's just grievances is the basis for a stable agreement, an agreement that, according to both sides, *should* have been there in the first place.

For this reason, only a tragic conflict is amenable to compromise. Peacemaking through compromise cannot be conducted unless its first step is to move the sides from the zero-sum to the tragic understanding of the conflict. Recognizing the importance of the perception of justice on the other side as a foundation for peace can serve to refocus our efforts from ameliorating the symptoms (i.e., humiliating examinations at checkpoints, indiscriminate Qassam missile attacks) to healing the underlying disease.

The metaphoric language of "underlying disease" is drawn from psychology. A metaphor drawn from family systems theory (FST) may be particularly helpful. FST sees families as systems and instructs us to recognize that families can possess pathologies and exhibit symptoms that are shared across the system in sometimes confusing ways. One member of the family may exhibit the symptoms of pathology, while the illness itself may reside in another member.

For example, a teacher confronted by a violent student may respond to his symptoms by assigning him a "big brother" or sending him to the principal's office. Yet, if the teacher discovers that one of his parents is an alcoholic, family systems theory would suggest that the child's symptoms may be an expression of the parent's illness. Turning the active alcoholic into a recovering one often removes the child's pathological behaviors. Family systems theory cautions not to mistake the symptom for the underlying affliction.⁶

What happens when we apply this theory to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has much in common with the alcoholic family. Recent peace initiatives have focused on the symptoms of the conflict – suicide bombings, the practices of the occupation forces – but not on their underlying causes. Outsiders attempt to discipline either the Palestinians or the Israelis based on their judgments of the morality of these behaviors. Such attempts at intervention by well-meaning outside groups can render them useless as active peacemakers, because they are often perceived as aligning themselves with the worst abuses of the other side. Yet, just as disciplining a wayward student while ignoring an alcoholic parent can be unintentionally cruel, misguided one-sided efforts can be immoral in a conflict so complex and bloody.

In the wake of the violence of the past seven years, we must ask ourselves whether the focus on the evil of a particular side (for example, the pointless question of the relative despicability of occupation vs. terror) moves us toward peace. It is time courageously to examine a different paradigm based on an understanding of how the dynamics of justice impact on this particular conflict.

⁶ See Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1986). For an application of Family Systems Theory to religious communal life see: Edwin Friedman, *Generation To Generation* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985).

Above all, this requires us to recognize that the need to move the parties from a zero-sum to a tragic perception means addressing the underlying pathology rather than focusing on its more violent symptoms. The path out of this conflict requires both sides to recognize the fundamental justice on the other side. Both societies, traumatized by three generations of suffering and war, need help if they are to reach out to their neighbors in this way. Developing an approach to peacemaking that addresses the deficit of mutual recognition of the competing just causes would constitute a genuine contribution to peace. If we take the family systems metaphor one step further, we may find guidance as to where the teacher should intervene first or the peacemaker should take a stand.

Speaking as an Israeli; as a human rights advocate and activist but a veteran of combat in two wars; as a father who, with my wife, raised our youngest son in Jerusalem through the six years of suicide bombings, who sent our three sons in turn to serve in the army where they too have experienced the horrors of combat, whose youngest son even now sits in an Israeli army mountaintop position on the Lebanese border; I cannot pretend to scholarly objectivity. I can only humbly offer these observations in the hope that they can be appreciated at their value.

From where I sit, Jewish expressions of the zero-sum perspective are sadly plentiful. A political party advocating the transfer of Israeli Arab towns to the Palestinian state (effectively expelling the occupants from their country without driving them from their land) garnered eleven seats in Israel's parliament. Exasperation with the rain of missiles on the town of Sderot led its mayor to call for the "leveling" of the neighboring Palestinian town of Beit Hanoun, inside the Gaza Strip, from which around one thousand rockets were launched. Security arrangements in the West Bank, while effectively limiting terror assaults and thereby saving lives (on both sides), have made life unbearable for Palestinian civilians and contributed to the appalling decline in living standards since the outbreak of the violence in 2000.

However, alongside the existence of a group of citizens who exhibit zero-sum pathology, Israeli society has over the last three decades made undeniable strides toward recognizing the justice on the Palestinian side. A pioneering generation of academics, people like Benny Morris whose book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1929*,⁷ is widely credited with opening a new era of Israeli historical self-examination, have changed Israeli public discourse beyond recognition. While some important scholars raise serious reservations about some of the work done by this generation of pioneering historians and sociologists⁸ (and I have my own questions), there is no doubt that one result is that more Israelis than ever (according to polls, a majority) have come to appreciate and even empathize with the Palestinian understanding of the conflict. They do this without agreeing with some of the central claims made by the Palestinian narrative, and yet they have come to support a two-state solution. It is this, more than anything else that made possible a situation where even the right wing government of Ariel Sharon incorporated the creation of a Palestinian state into the governing principles of his coalition agreement and disengaged from the Gaza Strip taking down settlements along the way.

Many Palestinians and their supporters agree that the Palestinian failure to cope with the Zionist project is a failure of political diagnosis, of bad decisions made by a problematic leadership. Yet, it is also a profound failure of empathy. Recognizing Israel as a regrettable reality, as the moderates among the Palestinians are wont to do, in the way a sick person might recognize his

⁷ Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1929* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁸ For a harsh critique of the "New Historians" see Ephraim Karsh, *Fabricating Israeli History: The "New Historians"* (London, Frank Cass, 1997).

or her diabetes and therefore agree to insulin treatments, is not a foundation for peace. Rather, it is the quintessential expression of the zero-sum paradigm, and can only offer short-term respite before the outbreak of renewed fighting.

Indeed, based on our earlier analysis of the zero-sum conflict, recognizing the “reality” of the Israeli state without recognizing the justice of Jewish self-determination must lead to the tragic results that we experienced with the Oslo process. Recognizing Israel as an unjust but temporarily unassailable reality is the logic behind the Hamas offer of a ten-year tactical cease-fire and their campaign of vilification against PA President Mahmud Abbas, in the year or so prior to their coup against his regime and the effective secession of a Hamas led Gaza District from the PA. Another frightening symptom of this paradigm is the spate of what might be called “Temple denial” in Palestinian statements, in which influential Palestinians have publicly doubted the existence of the First and Second Temples on the Temple Mount (Haram e-Sharif).⁹ This zero sum approach then, can be the basis for occasional ceasefires of convenience, with even this small gain coming at the expense of the perceived honor and credibility of any Palestinian leader who would agree to it.

The Palestinian leadership could have made the leap from the perspective of the zero-sum game to that of the tragic conflict, helping their people to understand the truth about their Jewish enemy/neighbor. Instead, the commonly accepted Palestinian analysis of Zionism often displays a startling ignorance of Jewish civilization.

A central point seems to have escaped their attention: that the question of Palestine is also, in the deepest sense, the question of the Land of Israel. It fails to undertake a substantive examination of the concept “Land of Israel” from the perspective of the Jewish people themselves. One reason is that Palestinians and many other detractors of the Jewish national narrative, arrogate to themselves the right to cherry-pick their sources on Judaism, and thereby to determine for the Jews the permissible boundaries of their national identity, an intellectual exercise often aimed at stripping them of a right to a state.

The ultimate tragedy is that a deeper understanding of the importance of the idea of the Land of Israel in Jewish religious and historical experience might help the Palestinian leadership and its supporters to get beyond the fruitless and essentially zero-sum view of Zionism as a kind of European colonial project. We know this is a failed analysis not only because it is not substantively accurate, but also, because attempts to use anti-colonial strategies to dislodge the Jews from the Land of Israel/Palestine have failed. Time and again, for over a century, the Palestinians have based their strategic initiatives on the assumption that the Jews living in the Land of Israel would behave like the Europeans who were engaged in far-flung colonial endeavors. Yet, the Jews have behaved like something else entirely: despite the fact that they are a population made up overwhelmingly of refugees and their descendants, they act like an indigenous people defending their historic homeland and the birthplace of their identity. This is because the Land of Israel plays a role in Jewish culture, history, identity, in short in Jewish civilization, that is probably unique and therefore hard for others to understand.

⁹ See Walter Reich, “King Herod's Return,” *LA Times*, May 30, 2007.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-reich30may30.0.728037.print.story?coll=la-opinion-righttrail> : “But at the Camp David summit in 2000, Yasser Arafat insisted that a Jewish temple had existed not on the Temple Mount but in Nablus. And an Arafat aide, Saeb Erekat, said, to President Clinton's amazement, “I don't believe there was a temple on top of the Haram, I really don't.” Mahmoud Abbas, the current Palestinian Authority president, later agreed with Erekat, as did the mufti of Jerusalem. Arafat later went further and denied the temple existed anywhere in Israel, the West Bank or Gaza, *including* Nablus.”

One of the major difficulties that I find in conversation with Palestinians and their supporters is that they have no exposure to the concept of the Land of Israel as a critical component of understanding Jewish civilization. It is one of those profound notions that are tools for framing identity. From the earliest records that we have of Jewish intellectual life Jews have understood themselves in terms of their relationship with the Land of Israel. Any historical survey of Jewish religious sources from the Bible through the Talmud and the medieval commentators, and on to the modern theological writings of thinkers from all the denominations of Judaism, will show how formative and central this idea is to Jewish identity and civilization.

There is the Bible itself, in which God opens his relationship with Abraham, by instructing him to “Get thee out” of a different land, to go to “the Land that I will show thee.” In that Land, “I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing” (Gn 12:1-2). In other words, God calls upon Abraham to redefine his concept of his very self using the Land of Israel as the new frame. From the very earliest manifestations of what would become a recognizably “Jewish” identity, that identity is framed in important ways by the concept of the Land of Israel.

This is true of the Spanish scholar and poet Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, who famously declared in the twelfth century that, though he, living in Arab Spain, was in the farthest reaches of the West, his heart lay in the East. Halevi’s last act as an old man was to set off for the Land of Israel, leaving everything behind. According to legend, he perished on the way, although modern scholarship suggests that he actually arrived in the Land and died shortly thereafter.

Responding to the challenges of modernity in the nineteenth century, the Reform Movement in modern Judaism (the movement to which I belong and in which I am ordained), sought to reframe Jewish identity by discarding the connection with the Land of Israel. Yet, by 1937, Reform Judaism reaffirmed its centrality to Jewish religious thought, compelled by the realization that a Jewish identity built without the framing mechanism of the Land of Israel simply could not engage Jewishly with other Jews.¹⁰

It is important to note that this is not a “Zionist” idea (i.e. political) in any particular way. Indeed, perhaps the other way around. Political Zionism would never have had traction in the Jewish world if it did not express a foundational cultural and identity-framing reality of Jewish civilization. Once we take the time to learn about the profound place the Land of Israel holds in Jewish culture, an analysis that sees a Jewish return as a kind of European colonialism becomes not merely counter-productive, but absurd.

The historical experience of many downtrodden peoples has taught us that in a colonialist context, anti-colonialist violence works. The Palestinian leadership early on, developed a strategy based upon this analysis of Zionism. Consequently, it has used every violent trick in the anti-colonialist handbook and has promised its people that Jewish sovereignty would collapse. Palestinian leaders expected a colonialist response to a struggle they had framed in anti-colonial terms. However, unlike the colonial regimes, the Jews in Israel perceived the attacks as targeting their rights not only to the only national homeland in their cultural memory, but also to one of the most fundamental anchors of their identity.

¹⁰ For an expression of the 19th century approach see: The Pittsburgh Platform (1885) http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=39&pge_id=1606 ; for the 1937 revisiting of the issue see: The Columbus Platform – 1937 http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=40&pge_id=1606 .

With the family systems metaphor in mind, it is important to decide where peacemakers can effectively intervene. Outsiders, too, will need to break free from their own framing of the conflict in zero-sum terms, as is the case with the pro-Palestinian divestiture and boycott initiatives in Europe and in several American Protestant denominations, as well as the Christian Zionist interventions on behalf of the settlers on the West Bank. So long as the intervener attacks the symptoms and neglects the underlying pathology, deals with the errant student's behaviors and not with the parent's alcoholism, the intervention can do no good. The would-be healer becomes a part of the problem. It is only when the peace-makers find a way to help the parties wrestle with the flawed paradigm of justice that frames the conflict, that their work becomes a healing blessing. To outsiders who wish to help us toward that Promised Land of peace, I say: help us to replace our discussion of the evil on the other side with a radically different discussion of the fundamental justice on each side.

We must say to the Palestinians that, far from being challenged by a colonial regime, they face another indigenous identity whose claims to the land are equally just and whose presence there is of a right and not just of might. The Jewish side to this conflict has a history and a moral foundation that so many Palestinians and their foreign supporters have trouble acknowledging. Communicating this message will also help to alleviate the scourge of terror that so weighs down the Palestinian cause. The use of "anti-colonial" violence when proven ineffectual has a tendency to escalate in horror. This is because the logic of the zero-sum game does not permit a serious reexamination of fundamental strategic blunders.

Palestinian recognition of the justice underlying the indigenous Jewish claim to the Land of Israel, coupled with Jewish recognition of the justice of the equally indigenous Palestinian claim to Palestine, is the only way out of the present dead-end.

Humility and patience will be crucial in helping to achieve this goal. To the extent that the conflict will continue to be framed in Israeli discourse and even more so in Palestinian discourse as a zero-sum conflict – an anti-terror or an anti-colonial struggle – compromise will seem appalling and will be inherently unstable. At the same time, peacemakers who intervene with the message of the tragic paradigm may at first be neither thanked nor trusted by either side. Even so, those who wish to be peacemakers in this wounded land must frame the clash as a conflict between two just causes. Only in this way can they offer the parties what may be the last hope for the kind of compromise that brings about a higher justice, a peace that will be stable because it is not merely political on the ground, but also spiritual, in the hearts of the men and women of the Holy Land.