The National-Religious Public and the Prospects of Peace with the Palestinians – Between Scuttling and Leading

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The national tension on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is rooted in matters that draw on religious tradition – philosophy, thought and religious law. Among large parts of the Jewish and Muslim public, policy positions are intertwined with duties imposed on the religious believer by the sanctity of the land, and with how their sacred scriptures relate to the stranger and the other. But despite the centrality of these issues on both sides, they are largely absent from the efforts at rapprochement and finding solutions that have become known as the “peace process.”

First, the preference of most of the politicians and policymakers is to complete the negotiation of a settlement with the Palestinians before anything else. The political leaders must first hammer out the details of the agreement, then determine the institutions and borders, after which the legal aspects and security arrangements will be signed and sealed. Only once a state of non-belligerence has been reached, only after the conflict has been resolved, will it be possible to address the enmity between the peoples and gradually try to dispel it. Consequently, so they believe, any current public discussion of the tensions related to identity, culture and religion would only undermine the political negotiations and compromise the diplomatic efforts to thaw the relations between the peoples. Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it, they say, when the circumstances are ripe, because how can we hold a fundamental theological debate at a time when bloodshed is raging.

Second, many fear that the conflict would intensify were it to move from its status as a political struggle to become a religious clash. As long as the disagreement focuses on practical interests, or even on historical accounts, a compromise is feasible. This is not the case where competing belief systems are involved: Conflicts of this kind cannot be resolved and the metaphysical tension that underlies them cannot be alleviated. “Theocratism” of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is believed, would make it all embracing, eternal and irresolvable.1

For these reasons and others, the religious populations of both nations played almost no role in shaping the sought-after peace agreement, their leaders were not included in the negotiations and their philosophy and outlook were not taken into account at the negotiating table.

The repeated failures of the negotiations between the political leaderships led many to realize that peace will never be achieved unless additional individuals, groups and worldviews are included in it. Hamas’s victory in the Palestinian elections in Gaza in 2006, and in a different vein, the burgeoning political power wielded by religious Zionism in Israeli politics (both as an independent party as well as within the ruling party), serve as an incentive to reconsider the importance of religious motivations for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Alongside the academic study of the unique positions taken by the religious communities towards a solution, and the complexities that derive from the religious aspects of the conflict,2 activities involving “interreligious dialogue” began to gain momentum, because this type of dialogue was viewed as a means to pursue peace. The involvement of religious leaders, it was claimed, can prepare the hearts and minds of the people to make a future peace acceptable to the entirety of the two societies – if those leaders are able to openly discuss the way in which their holy scriptures enable them to live in peace with the other. In this article, I will discuss the importance and utility of this process, describe the conditions of its feasibility, address its challenges and warn of its cost.

“The Palestinians are just an excuse to dismantle the Jewish state” – The peace process and forging Israel’s inner character

Recent decades have seen a significant increase in the presence of the religious population in Israel’s political, military and ideological centers of power and decision-making. This has accordingly increased the influence of religious politicians and actors on the official stances taken by the state with regard to the future of Israel’s relations with the Palestinians, affecting both the nature of the solution to the conflict, and the activities on the ground, especially as it relates to the settlement enterprise. Given this increasing salience, it is surprising to discover that efforts to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rarely figure on the agendas of the leaders and opinion makers of the religious public in Israel. They invest a great deal of effort in dismissing and attacking the solutions promoted by their political opponents, but the

1 See Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Jewish people and the clash of civilizations,” in Ravitzky and Stern (eds.), The Jewishness of Israel, Israel Democracy Institute: Jerusalem 2007, pp. 725-726. [This and all the sources that follow are in Hebrew].

question of a satisfactory solution, whether by modifying an existing one or offering an alternative, has been pursued by no more than a handful. The vast majority of the religious public’s leaders consider a peace agreement with Palestinians a threat, and believe that it is their duty to thwart such an agreement and prevent it from coming to fruition.

The most common explanation for this lies in the price that Israel can be expected to pay for a peace agreement with the Palestinians: The various proposals involve Israel relinquishing sovereignty over part of the Land of Israel, thereby reversing the achievements of the settlement enterprise, a central element in the Zionist-redemptive vision of the students of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. But from conversations held with prominent rabbis, I have learned that the decisive element, the one that causes them to resist any proposed agreement – and as public leaders to neglect the issue of settling the conflict – is specifically related to Israel’s inner character.

Among Israeli Jews – and among Muslims in all the countries of the region – an ongoing debate is raging about the influence of religion on politics. In the Israeli case, we tend to classify the legal aspects of this issue under the heading of “religion and state,” but it encompasses further tensions between the Jewish and civil character of the state, between conservatives and liberals and between the particular and the universal. All these are important arguments that reflect legitimate differences, and an in-depth internal debate within each society will be required to determine how religious or secular the institutions of each country in the region will be. Yet, politicians and public leaders have often tried to combine two areas of dispute, with the efforts to attain peace between Israel and its neighbors also being relegated to the tension between secularism and tradition. Peace has been presented and justified as a secular project, or even a project aimed at secularization, in the context of which the establishment of an independent Palestinian state would also involve a change in the character of Israel itself and the constitution of a democratic-neutral public space to replace the Jewish one. It is this formulation that has led most religious people in Israel (not unlike what happened in the Palestinian Islamic movements too) to vehemently oppose any attempt at rapprochement, fearing that it would lead to a “loss” of their religious identity, and to their defeat in the other, internal battle being waged. Thus, when the campaign to secularize society goes hand in hand with the peace efforts, attitudes toward peace parallel positions regarding the desirable religious character of the states and their political institutions. It is not only the anticipated price of peace that deters rabbis and community leaders from supporting it, but also, and even more intensely so, what appears to be its hidden agenda – to void the state’s Jewishness of all content, and to thereby gain a victory in the battle between the competing elites in Israeli society, which have adopted the Palestinian issue as a watershed.

We hear the perspective described here repeated again and again by national-religious rabbis and public-opinion leaders. “The Palestinians,” says a leading yeshiva head in Samaria, “are just an excuse to dismantle the Jewish state. The left dreams of turning Israel into yet another European country, a country with no purpose and no unique character. And harming the settlements is the means to get to that point. After all, the commandment to settle the Land of Israel isn’t appropriate for ‘a state of all its citizens.’” The rabbi of a settlement in the Binyamin region described the mission of the settlement enterprise as follows: “We keep Israel from becoming ordinary, from decline, from the danger of becoming the nation like all nations. This is the real reason the left feels such hostility for us – we are a constant annoying reminder of the Jewish mission, of the fact that Israel is not just another country.”

The remarks of the various rabbis reveal their suspicions regarding the purity of the intentions of the architects of peace. When they analyze what drives their political rivals on the left, they find that the issue of Israel’s military control over the Palestinians appears to be only a secondary consideration, or perhaps merely an excuse. This built-in suspicion against the consequences of the agreement has deterred religious people on both sides from becoming involved in finding a solution, causing them to withdraw, isolate themselves and radicalize their positions. Very few have found it possible to rise above their fear to deal directly with the halakhic and theological challenges that finding a political solution to the conflict poses – to find a shared path where the worshippers of both Hashem and Allah can coexist without feeling that they are rebelling against Him.

An unmediated dialogue held between religious leaders on the details and justifications of a possible peace agreement may help to overcome this hurdle. Were the professional negotiators to disappear from the negotiating table – temporarily – it might enable rabbis from various streams to address the most burning questions on their own terms and in their own language. In the current situation, they are forced to constantly calibrate their positions against those of their internal rivals. A new discussion setting with religious underpinnings might enable them to step out of their defensive positions and thus more freely explore the relevant issues.

“Does the Palestinian Authority even have the power?” – The sustainability of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement in an era of Islamic awakening

Whenever the possibility of signing of a peace agreement is raised, there are those who wonder who the potential signatories actually represent and who has been left out

3 See, for example, “The national religious public and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” Report of the International Crisis Group No 147, November 2013, p. 35.
4 Interview, Jerusalem, December 2015 [This and the interviews that follow were conducted in Hebrew].
5 Interview, Binyamin Regional Council, April 2016.
of the negotiations and thus can be expected not to honor the agreement. The rifts and divisions among the various factions of Palestinian society heighten the concern that signing understandings with one faction will only herald the start of fighting with another. The Fatah leadership, many Israelis believe, cannot guarantee that the other Palestinian organizations will also carry out the agreements. This may partly explain why public opinion surveys have repeatedly demonstrated a significant gap, both in Israel and among the Palestinians, between the percentage of people that support a peace agreement and the percentage of those who believe that such an agreement is feasible. Do those sitting across the negotiating table also speak for their rivals in the field? With whom, if anyone, can we sign a sustainable agreement?

One possible answer lies in the Arab peace initiative, which includes a proposal to the Israeli public to view a peace agreement with the Palestinians as a step whose significance goes beyond the relations between the two peoples, and that would lead to full regional normalization, which would change Israel’s broad geopolitical status in the Arab expanson and Middle East as a whole. However, given the changes in our region, tying the Palestinian issue to the Arab region as a whole would likely have the opposite effect on Israelis. The transition from the hope of the Arab Spring to what commentators and columnists now call the “Islamic Winter” has reversed the impact of the regional prism, and instead of offering the promise of guarantees, it confirms our fears. The fear that Islamic organizations will take over Palestinian politics the day after an agreement is signed appears to be supported by the regional trend, whereby state power is undermined by radical religious movements.

Doubts about the stability of the states in the region shift the focus from the Arab League to Islam, from the region to the religion. Those who seek to enlist support in Israel for a peace agreement would do well to recognize the challenges they face – not just to get Israelis to trust that the Palestinian leadership sincerely desires peace, but also to have confidence in the ability and willingness of political Islam to support this peace, or at the very least, to enable it. As a senior Yesha Council official put it: “Abu Mazen is not the story. Let’s assume that he indeed intends to establish a friendly neighboring country that will live alongside Israel in peace and cooperation. Why assume that the Palestinian Authority even has the power? The real power, from Gaza to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, is in the hands of the Islamists [...] You want to know what awaits us? Go see what they’re teaching in the mosques, and not just here, but in all the Arab countries. All the talk about peace is a fantasy, as long as the Arabs remain unwilling to accept a Jewish state in Israel. And they will never be able to, because their religion does not allow it.”

If it is at all possible to increase the belief in the possibility of peace among the Israeli public, it is only by refuting this essentialist view of Islam as a monolithic, unchanging, violent and intolerant culture. Significant processes involving reflection and interpretation by the most important religious leaders, Muslims in Palestinian society as well as from the wider Islamic world, along with Jews from Israel may vitiate the presumption that an insurmountable religious barrier renders all the diplomatic efforts futile. When those who are generally considered opponents of conciliation become allies and take responsibility for its success, a new degree of trust becomes possible.

“Ask me what God wants of me, not where the borders should be” – What religious language can offer

Situated in the heart of Jerusalem – as well as at the heart of the conflict – the Temple Mount – or al-Haram al-Sharif – is the focus of aspirations, dreams and desires, as well as tensions, hostility and the potential for escalation. While most arbiters of Jewish law prohibit Jews from ascending to the Temple Mount at this time, there are those that allow, recommend and even mandate it. The eyes of the Arab world and Israel’s Muslim minority are on this small group and scrutinize its actions, which are often interpreted as a challenge to the very right of Muslims to worship on the holy mountain.

What do those Jews who focus their political-religious activities on the Temple Mount really want, and how can they fulfill their yearning for it? Different religious leaders will give different answers to this question. Some wish to visit the Temple Mount, to be allowed to pray there freely and hold Jewish ceremonies. Others seek to rebuild the temple atop the mountain – some to actually build it with their own hands and in the foreseeable future, and others by means of indirect endeavors at some hoped-for eschatological time that lies ahead. Another group wants the Muslims on the Mount to recognize that it was once the site of the Jewish temple, and that it is the source of its sanctity. Very few would consider their intense religious longings fulfilled by the fact that the secular State of Israel enjoys legal sovereignty over a piece of land.

Nevertheless, a considerable part of


7 Interview, Gush Etzion, June 2016.

8 Another aspect of the religious perspective is the lack of importance of internal borders within the Islamic “Ummah.” As noted by a prominent sheikh, a member of the Islamic Movement in Israel (interview, Umm al-Fahm, February 2016): “We do not have states, we have one Ummah (nation), and the arbiters of religious law in Palestine do not decide on their own. We speak first because we live here and are familiar with the complexity of living among Jews, but it is a matter for all Muslims, not just for us.”

9 Although some religious groups consider the secular institutions of the State of Israel to contain an inherent sanctity, there is little overlap between them and those who ascend to the Temple Mount.
the public debate boils down to one question – Who has sovereignty over the Temple Mount and who will hold it in the context of a future agreement?

Why is this so?

The issue of sovereignty appears to stir the hearts and minds of so many not because of something intrinsic to it, but rather because of the assumption that it is a prerequisite for the realization of all other hopes. Legal sovereignty over the territory functions as a kind of “finger in the dike” without which all other aspirations will be washed away, preventing action of any kind in the desired direction – because the ability to operate in the Temple Mount compound is directly dependent on who controls it.

Is this a foregone conclusion? According to a prominent Jerusalem sheikh: “There is no problem with Jews coming to pray in the mosques esplanade. They can even build themselves a synagogue there and worship Allah in their own way. But this cannot be said aloud, because right now, it is not a question of religious law that we are discussing, but rather the less important and more urgent one of who the proprietor is. As long as the Jews do not come to pray, but rather to demonstrate ownership and continue the occupation, we cannot give them a foothold.”10 The sheikh offers a different paradigm from the one we have become accustomed to, and according to his words and philosophy, there is an inverse relationship between Israel’s sovereignty and control over the Temple Mount and the freedom of Jews to worship on it. It would be intriguing to see what certain religious groups would decide were there a choice between the current situation, in which Israel has sovereignty, but is limited in its ability to operate on the ground, and a hypothetical one, in which Israel gives up its sovereignty, thereby creating a situation that actually increases the capacity of Jews to fulfill their religious aspirations.

Public debate does not often directly deal with religious motivations, but rather with the concrete diplomatic solutions that may serve those same motivations. The challenge is to gain an in-depth understanding of religious thought and motivation, and to try to integrate them into the desired and available diplomatic solutions. The constant need on the part of religious populations to translate their innermost desires and needs into a language that is intelligible to those who do not share their religious premises leads them to adhere stubbornly to a single possible course of action, of which they become the standard bearer as if it itself is the achievement, hope and fulfillment. The way to uncover alternative, less dichotomous solutions that may simultaneously fulfill the hope and fulfillment. Here, too, an alternative may be possible if the solution is replaced by the desire underlying it. These are the words of a Jerusalem rabbi: “If we as Jews believe that our return to the Holy Land to establish a state in it is part of the divine

Recognition of Israel as a legitimate state presents a religious challenge to Muslims, because of their perception that the whole of Palestine is sacred Waqf land and that the entire region must be part of a long-awaited Islamic caliphate. Based on this position, not only is the existence of a sovereign Jewish state in the Arab expanse intolerable, so is the division of the region’s land into separate Arab nation-states, which is a legacy of European colonialism. In order to realize the Israeli hope of normalization in the Arab expanse, the Muslims must seemingly abandon all aspirations to constitute a caliphate, completely secularize their political thinking and learn to take an instrumental approach to the land. Only in that way, so it seems, will Muslims ever be able to sign a viable peace agreement with Israel and accept its existence.

A possible alternative may emerge by moving away from the proposed solution – in this case, the dismantling of all state borders and the repudiation of any non-Muslim sovereignty towards uncovering the religious motivation driving it. A prominent religious authority in the Islamic Movement in Israel maintains that the anticipation of an Islamic caliphate does not necessarily conflict with recognition of an independent Jewish state: “Suppose a caliphate is established and Jews remain living in it. After all, under Islamic law, they are entitled to live, manage their affairs on their own, reside in their own community, with their own legal system. What prohibits them from doing it as a collective and calling it a state?”11

The presence of an Arab collective presents a religious challenge to Jews too, because some of them perceive the Zionist movement as the realization of the anticipated return to Zion, the harbinger of redemption and a renewal of the commandment to inherit the Promised Land. Those who maintain this perspective will find it difficult to accept the existence of a polity belonging to another people in part of the Land of Israel. To hope for the members of the national-religious community in Israel to support Palestinian independence, therefore, seemingly means to hope that they also relinquish their redemptive-messianic perspective, completely divorce Israeli politics from theology and to take a purely material approach to the history of the Zionist movement. Only in such a context, so it seems, would religious Jews be able to sign a lasting peace agreement with the Palestinian people and accept the establishment of its sovereign state.

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10 Interview, Jerusalem, August 2015. See also in “How to maintain the fragile calm on the Temple Mount.” Debriefing of the International Crisis Group, no. 48, April 2016, footnote 80.

11 Interview, Kafr Qassem, May 2015.
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plan and the fulfillment of the prophecy, then we must also believe that the presence of another people in that land is part of the same divine plan. On the basis of this belief, it is clear to me that we must resolve the conflict between us, not because fate has decreed that we must live here together, but because we are fortunate that fate has destined us to live here together and fulfill God’s will.¹²

The positions cited here are not those of the mainstream of the various religious groups. Nevertheless, they are an example of the need for a paradigm shift in the public debate. Conventional wisdom has it that when a discourse is founded on interests, it is possible to reach an outcome that faithfully serves the interests of both sides. It is further assumed, however, that the dichotomous language of religion dictates a zero-sum attitude to political disputes. This is indeed the case when the religious believers are unable to express what they want to say in their own language and are forced to participate in a public discourse based on instrumental assumptions. As a result, religious positions become unhappily associated with certain policy proposals – policies that do not fundamentally need to be pursued – giving those proposals an aura of religious sanctity. Creative solutions may emerge when religious leaders talk to one another, and the terminology of faith becomes a legitimate language of negotiations. In the words of the head of a yeshiva in southern Israel: “I can argue about politics in the language of the newspaper, but in that conversation, there is no advantage to my role as a rabbi. But perhaps there is another language. Ask me what God wants of me, not in the context of an agreement, a high-ranking director of a peace NGO replied: “If you’re asking whether I’ll miss Bet El, then I’m sorry to disappoint you.”¹⁵

The camp that currently fiercely opposes a peace agreement is the one that will end up paying for it with the total eradication of its lifework when the time comes, while the camp that is proudly leading peace efforts will end up paying nothing at all. In this situation, the political debate in Israel has ceased to be a mere dispute about necessary policy measures. When those that stress the importance of compromise do not themselves have to make any concessions, any victory for them would mean overwhelming defeat for an entire political and ideological camp. Those who seek to increase support for an agreement should ask themselves what price its supporters may have to pay, and how its opponents might benefit from it?

Conversations with various prominent religious-Zionist rabbis reveal that in their minds, support for the establishment of a Palestinian state casts doubt on the future Jewishness of the State of Israel, and thus offers compelling evidence of malicious intent. A particular channel that might allay their concerns in this area involves “compensation” in the form of an increased emphasis on the Jewishness of the state in other areas.

The rabbi of a settlement in the Hebron Hills maintains that increasing Jewish education in the non-religious public school system would make territorial concessions easier for him and his following to swallow: “If you want to take away my home, promise that you’ll let me into yours. I’ll bring a backpack filled with the Talmud, and if you pledge that we will sit down together, the whole family, to learn in your living room – then I’ll consider agreeing to pack my bags. Otherwise, a country without Judea, in what way would it be Jewish?”¹⁶

“A country without Judea, in what way would it be Jewish?” – The price of peace and those who pay it

Speeches delivered by Ehud Barak and Ariel Sharon when serving as prime ministers turned the phrase “painful concessions,” used to describe the anticipated cost of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, and especially the evacuation of settlements, into a cliché. But who in Israeli society would feel the pain of these concessions?

The word “occupation,” used to describe the Israeli control of Judea and Samaria, can be understood in two ways. One describes the holding of the territory, and the other the regime under which the population lives. However, in the minds of large parts of the Israeli public, the two are intertwined. The slogan of the religious right, “A nation cannot be an occupier in its own land,” which is rooted in the bond that the Jewish people has to the land of Israel, is used to refute accusations coming from the field of international law. However, it is also frequently used to respond to moral arguments, and to deny as a matter of principle the injustices perpetrated against the civilian population in Judea and Samaria. On the other hand, the outrage sparked among parts of the Israeli public by the fact of Israel’s military control of millions of Palestinians, subsequently led to those Israelis becoming alienated from those parts of the land where the Palestinians live, undoing their sense of belonging to them. “The question is not whether we are prepared to give the Palestinians these territories out of the goodness of our hearts to reach peace,” said a Knesset member from a leftist party, “but rather when we will finally understand that they were not ours to begin with.”¹⁴

¹² Interview, Jerusalem, April 2016.
¹³ Interview, southern Israel, June 2016.
¹⁴ Interview, Tel Aviv, July 2016.
¹⁶ Interview, Hebron Hills Regional Council, March 2016.
A rabbi in a yeshiva in Samaria discussed the importance of the Jewish public sphere on the Israeli street, and how it could impact his willingness to evacuate: “Elkana will be less necessary the more Tel Aviv resembles Elkana.”17 All this can be summed up in the words a prominent religious-Zionist rabbi: “The vision is the Land of Israel for the people of Israel, according to the Torah of Israel. This is the foundation of religious Zionism; it is the destination we wish to advance toward, and we have no right to retreat from it. Anyone who believes, for whatever reason, that it is necessary to retreat in order to advance in the context of 'the Land of Israel for the people of Israel' should toil in the context of 'the people of Israel according to the Torah of Israel' so that there will be no overall diminution of sanctity.”18

Enhancement of the Jewish character of the state in its public sphere, institutions and education system may in some way compensate for the evacuation of the settlements in Judea and Samaria. This might prevent such a solution from being perceived as a lethal blow to religious Zionism’s vision, one delivered by those whose beliefs and passions are not at risk.19 The above remarks should not be interpreted in praise of these measures in of themselves, but rather only to point out their persuasive power. Those investigating the value of peace initiatives should first measure their ability to increase the number of people interested in it.

“They’re looking for horses for a runaway wagon” – on an ineffectual inter-religious dialogue

A measured “theocratization” of the peace process could, as noted, bring about a positive turnaround on several levels and improve the prospects of ending the conflict. However, certain common types of interreligious dialogue are of little benefit and make only a questionable contribution.

Numerous organizations and countless initiatives bring Jews and Muslims together for an open discussion about both religions. At these meetings, the sides discuss the similarities and differences between their various beliefs, traditions, legal systems, holidays and customs. These meetings enable people who do not normally meet to get to know one another and help to diminish the alienation, hatred and suspicion. However, the central message of this kind of dialogue, which declares that “we are all the same,” ignores the elephant in the room, along with the obvious differences in living conditions, personal status and political context between Jews and Muslims on both sides of the conflict. The focus on common values creates a false symmetry, serving only to distract from the conflictual issues underlying the meeting.20

In other cases, the sessions engage directly in the pursuit of the political challenge, in an attempt to enlist the support of religious leaders for an existing, fixed, formulated and detailed political solution. The rabbis and Muslim leaders are considered public-opinion makers with broad and influential networks who can convince their flocks on the advisability of a peace agreement. However, they are not perceived as people able to offer new, pathbreaking insights as to what form that peace agreement should take. Rabbis are viewed as architects of the dissemination of the peace process but not of its content or form.21

Only a small part of the religious work related to Israeli-Palestinian conflict directly addresses religious leaders in order to investigate the contribution they might be able to make in shaping the sought-after peace agreement. But even among these initiatives, most restrict themselves to working with the most moderate, pragmatic and liberal religious leaders, those who believe that peace is a paramount commandment and do not need to engage in meetings as part of a transformative thinking process, but rather only in order to work for a common goal. It is not from these leaders that the desired new voices and insights will come. The vast majority of the public debate on peace is held in an echo chamber of the converted, religious and secular both. In order to move outside this circle, the voices of prominent rabbis and Muslim clerics must be heard, even those perceived as radicals who wish to scuttle the peace process. They are the only ones who can chart a path to peace that doesn’t compromise the Torah – but fulfills it.

Summary and conclusion

Courageous leaders who suddenly arise and decide to sign an agreement will not be able to set about implementing it on the ground and in the hearts and minds of their people’s if the agreement is disconnected to one degree or another from the prevalent narratives among both peoples. The trust between the sides is at such a low ebb that the signing of an agreement would only be a starting point in the race towards mutual recriminations regarding its violation. Those seeking to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do not lack for proposals and declarations of principles, but rather for trust and motivation. Most of the outstanding questions in the framework of an agreement are a function of the degree of trust between the parties. Confederate elements, open borders to a greater or lesser degree, the return of merely a

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17 Interview, Petah Tikva, November 2015.
18 Interview, Jerusalem, March 2016.
19 Should an evacuation of this kind become necessary or desirable in the context of a peace agreement. This issue itself could be addressed in different ways if the basic religious assumptions, both Jewish and Muslim, are added to the diplomatic terminology.
20 Encounters of this kind are also liable to quickly encounter resistance on the part of Palestinians who oppose normalization with Israel.
21 In order to refrain from making this mistake, this article does not enumerate the various religious challenges to resolving the conflict and the possible ways of addressing them, or the concrete alternatives to the political proposals that may emerge as a result of striving for peace from a religious perspective. Recommendations such as these must arise from an unmediated discourse between religious leaders from both peoples.
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few or many refugees, the feasibility of allowing the settlers in Judea and Samaria to remain in their communities – the resolution of all these issues is contingent on breaking the dichotomy between the welfare of Israelis and that of Palestinians and ending the zero-sum game approach. Only when “pro-Palestinian” no longer means “anti-Israel,” and vice versa, can we start to grow solutions.

But as long as important elements of both Israeli and Palestinian societies remain outside the decision-making process, the exclusion of their identity from the discussion of peace will continue to cause them to exclude themselves from believing peace is possible. The inclusion of religious figures from both nations in a joint effort to find a way out of the conflict will enable them to work together for the benefit of a common future, and to support a political solution that addresses the religious aspirations and self-determination of both peoples.

Israeli national-religious society is founded on a depth of historical consciousness that carefully intertwines the annals of Zionism with the history of the Jewish people over the generations. It is precisely from this perspective that we can see the depth of that change that religious civilizations are undergoing in their attitudes to one another. The Christian church, that for years tormented the Jews living in Christian countries and encouraged or permitted their persecution, took a revolutionary step in the 20th century in its attitude toward the Jews, based on a re-interpretation of the scriptures. It is this marked change in approach that has led to the prevalent discussion these days of a shared Judeo-Christian heritage. Hence, when considering the relations between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East, we should do so with humility. The Jewish nation is taking its first steps in political sovereignty, and Muslims are taking their first steps both as minorities in non-Muslim countries and as democracies. The patient, religious hope that both sides will be wise enough to learn to walk steadily and confidently is the hope of mending the world in the kingdom of God.