Establishing a Religious Peace

by Rabbi Michael Melchior

Background—the need for Religious Peace

Religious identity and tradition have long been considered the main obstacles to peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and a main factor in many of the conflicts throughout the Middle East. It is perhaps understandable that until now, attempts to solve the Israeli Palestinian conflict have avoided these core issues. Politicians and policy makers alike have consistently viewed them as so complicated or emotionally loaded that addressing them would only hinder the political process, if not cause it to (often quite literally) blow up.

Yet, I have always believed that ignoring the religious existential components of the conflict and the core identities and narratives of the peoples involved will not make them disappear, but rather will maintain the accepted “norm” that religion is the problem rather than the solution. More important still, is that the opposite of what politicians and policy makers have believed is actually true. That is, any political process disconnected from these narratives will have a very limited chance at success.

Through my years living in Israel and working in government, I have learned that the general approach to the peace process as a secular process, as a very western way of looking at peace, is the wrong approach. This is something that I have argued about with my secular friends on both the Israeli and Palestinian Left as well as those in Europe and America.

I was a supporter of the political peace process from the beginning of the Oslo meetings in 1993, when, as the Chief Rabbi of Norway, I was involved and very close to Norwegian policy-makers. I was supportive, but skeptical throughout, and shared that view with many others. I was afraid then—and I remain so now-- that it would not succeed if we don't change the narrative of the peace by including the right people, groups and ideas in the process. Without religious authorities involved talking openly about their respective narratives and why religious teachings themselves compel us to make compromise for the sake of peace, there will be no way that society as a whole, on either side of the conflict, will see the peace process as credible or acceptable.

One often hears the simplistic claim that these groups or narratives are irrelevant. The dichotomous thinking of the Western world is that religion is something that belongs to the private sphere - to the home, the synagogue, the church and the mosque - and it has nothing to do with the public sphere. That is how Western policy-makers look at the world and therefore, the religious narrative has no place in political peace-making or in the world of conflict resolution.

For many years, it has been a commonly held belief that religion often played a role in instigating and perpetuating conflict, but could have no role in bringing about peace. Therefore,
if we could ignore the identity, the ethnicity, the culture of the peoples in the region, then these issues would simply become non-factors and disappear. I believe that this kind of peace becomes a "peace of interests" and not a "peace of values". There is a significant difference in the substance of these two types of peace. Interests are temporary and can, and often do, change. Whereas values tend to have permanence. Look, for example, at the peace made between Egypt and Israel. This is a peace that was signed into being by two leaders, but the peace has certainly not trickled down to the people. I only hope and pray that our countries’ interests do in fact remain aligned.

The view of analysts or policy makers who are more in-tune with the reality of the situation is different than those who see religious groups and narratives as irrelevant. They will admit that there may be a need to address the existential issues. But, they argue that the best solution is for the politicians to conclude a "quick-fix" peace deal and only afterward will it be necessary or appropriate to deal with the existential issues. "You are right," they will tell me, "you can't just make the issues go away, but we will deal with them in a later phase." Yossi Beilin, for example, argued that, "we will do it like in South Africa. We will solve the problem, then we will create a Truth Commission and deal with the substantial issues there."

My claim is that those who make this argument have not learned the lessons of history well. In South Africa, there was a lengthy and important process dealing with the identities of the two parties, not the least of which was their collective religious identities. This process was led by impressive religious leaders such as Bishop Desmond Tutu1 through which issues of legitimacy and identity were addressed in order to create a political process. It wasn't that de Klerk and Mandela woke up one day and simply decided to sign an agreement that would change reality. There was a process that dealt with the religious and cultural identities of the populations in a peaceful and dignified way, a process which dealt with the narratives of the people. The Truth Commission would not have been possible if it had been disconnected from the issues which legitimatized it and created justice for both populations. This is not what has happened here in our conflict in the past, nor is it happening now.

If Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abu Mazen were to suddenly announce today that we have crossed the Rubicon and cut a deal, it would be so totally disconnected from any narrative which exists, that it would likely be impossible to implement. No one would have enough faith in the other side to trust that they are truly ending the conflict and will truly make the concessions necessary. Oslo had great support throughout the world and in the region. It had great energy and much financial support. Why did it fail? And why have all the other processes since then also failed, despite all the effort and resources invested in them? Is it because peace is the wrong goal? My claim is that it is because certain components necessary to secure the very foundation of the political process have been missing from the start. In many cases, leaders have not only

---

1 Bishop Desmond Tutu was an Anglican Bishop in South Africa who used his position to fight apartheid, long before the period of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
ignored the foundational components of religion and tradition, they have actively worked to remove them from the process.

There are many battles being fought in our area. This is not only true for Israel and Palestine, it is true for the whole region. One battle is for the character of our societies - what kind of society do we want to have? There are those who want religion to have a greater role and those who want society to be totally secular. Fighting for one or the other is a completely legitimate battle and there are many different opinions and arguments to be made for each side.

The problem is that political leaders have often tried to combine one battle with another - namely, secularization versus traditionalism on the one hand and peace on the other. If the peace process is defined as a “secular” process, it will inevitably alienate the key constituencies in this conflict. Major parties and group identities will coalesce around their positions and see others, within their own societies as much as from without, as the enemy and will work to sabotage whatever possible solution is reached.

Fighting both these battles at the same time can only lead to everyone losing. One cannot fight the battle for secularization of society, while doing so under the guise of seeking peace with one's external enemies. This is what happened here in the 1990s on both the Jewish and the Palestinian side.

Yossi Sarid\textsuperscript{2}, one of Israel's most brilliant politicians, during the tragic election campaign between Netanyahu and Peres in 1996, said on national television, “Just as we led Rabin to a platform of peace, we will run Peres on a platform of secularization.” That sentence alone may have lost Peres an election which he otherwise should have won. It forced many middle-of-the-road religious voters to say we cannot vote for Peres. "If we cannot have a traditional society, if we have to have a secular society like Yossi Sarid wants," goes the argument, "then we are willing to give up on peace".

I have argued the same point with Yasser Abed Rabbo\textsuperscript{3}, a devout Palestinian secularist. He has always fought for secularization, but most of his people say that if peace means secularization, then you will find us on the front line against peace.

Another critical factor affecting the process aimed at solving the conflict has to do with how we in Israel define the problem itself. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a tremendously important debate between the Israeli right and center/left about the implications of the peace process on the very nature of Israel. At the heart of the debate was a triangle of three values that are all important for us as Israeli Jews. First is Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel. It is vital that we have the land – a relatively small area in fact. Second is democracy, which is crucial for the

\textsuperscript{2} Yossi Sarid is a left-wing former politician who served as a Member of the Israeli Knesset from 1974 to 2006. During some of those years, he led the Meretz political party and served as a Minister in the government.

\textsuperscript{3} Yasser Abed Rabbo is a leading Palestinian politician, former PLO executive committee member, minister in the Palestinian National Authority and member of several negotiating teams with Israel.
existence of our state. And the third is the Jewishness of the State of Israel – with varying
definitions of what that means, but still a critical value in the triangle. Many Israelis believed that
we could have all three values-- we can be a Jewish state, a democracy, and can keep the Land.

The great victory of the center/left in the debate in Israel of the 1990s was that it established the
fact that we can’t have all three. Because of simple demographics, we can't have a democracy,
keep all of the Land of Israel, and also maintain the Jewishness of the state. We have to give up
one of the three. This was a very important cornerstone in the debate here in this country. And
yet, while this demographic framing of the argument helped the center-left win the debate, it
became a problematic paradigm open to misuse by those who cultivated fear and hate of the
Palestinian Arab population.

The extreme Israeli Right took this argument of the Left and made their own policy
prescriptions. The Kahanists argued that Israel should throw out all the Arabs. The Ghandis said
that we should bribe the Arabs to agree to be “transferred”. People like Avigdor Lieberman said
that Israel could make swaps and transfer Israeli Arab citizens to Palestine.

This paradigm shift, in fact, it led to an ideological split within the ruling Likud Party. Many of
its members, especially those in its more democratic liberal wing, could no longer tow the party
line of the Likud. People like Tsippi Livni and Ehud Olmert could not remain within Likud, and
people like Benny Begin, Dan Meridor and Ruby Rivlin stayed in the party, but were
marginalized because none were willing to give up on democracy. Keeping all of Judaea and
Samaria and giving all its non-Jewish residents voting rights endangered the Jewishness of the
State, while not giving them voting rights would be the end of democracy. The rest of Israel’s
political right-wing, including most of the Likud and the religious right, were, ultimately, willing
to sacrifice democracy rather than consider giving up on any portion of the Land of Israel.

My problem with defining the issue in demographic terms is that the peace becomes one of
interests rather than a peace based upon values. What kind of peace could we really have if
Jewish citizens of Israel look at their fellow Arab citizens as a threat? If one sees the womb of
the Arab woman as a threat, then we are basing our policies, our prescriptions for peace on fear.
This is no way to establish a real, lasting peace.

Religious Peace

On the other hand, a religious peace is a peace of values, where the values of the belief
systems— such as that we are all created by and in the image of the same God, that crushing the
other is crushing the Divine in the other - are part of the fabric of the peace. I believe that if we
believe that it was God’s plan for us to come back to the Holy Land and establish a Jewish State
again as part of the fulfillment of our prophecies, then it was also part of God's plan that there is
another people living here. It is very important to make this theological statement.
On the basis of this belief, it is clear to me we have to work it out together, not because we are doomed to be here together, but because that is part of what God expects us to do. Based on the value, "do not do unto another, that which is hateful to you," which is both a Jewish value and one shared by Christians and Muslims alike, it is incumbent upon Israelis and Palestinians to compromise and reach an accommodation together. If we expect Palestinians and Muslims to accept our right to self-determination, so too must we accept the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, from the point of view of a basic religious and ethical value.

If we look at the other as a partner and not as an enemy, and we don't work on a “divide and conquer” attitude toward the other, then we might conclude that it would be good for all Palestinian parties to be involved in making peace with us. This would create a difference in our attitude and policies towards the Palestinians, and vice versa.

According to this viewpoint, it would not necessarily be a problem if there are Palestinians living in the State of Israel and Jews living in the State of Palestine, once peace is established. Rather than being each other’s enemies, the Palestinians and Israelis would actually become partners with each other. Israeli Jews would be partners to a broader Muslim and Arab world who would also become partners to a peace process (which they are not part of today). This is another benefit of the religious peace process over the secular peace process.

My theory of a religious peace process has dominated my efforts toward peace within the Middle East for the past several decades and still guides me in all that I do in this field today.

**Practical Peacebuilding: The Alexandria Process**

While I believe in theory, I also know that theories must be tested in practice. And this is what I have been doing for the past 25 years, first on a smaller scale, then on a larger scale, most of which are efforts that must remain, for now, under the radar of the public. We have a principal that, "a blessing is hidden from the eye."

I started meeting more than two decades ago with leading Arab and Palestinian figures to confirm my belief that there are partners both on the Jewish and on the Arab side of this conflict. At every place I visited and with so many leaders with whom I have spoken and described the idea of a peace based upon religious values and not devoid of them, I received positive responses. I was told that if there is truly a religious peace process then they are willing to go all the way for peace.

This led to the historic interreligious meeting in Alexandria, Egypt, in 2002. Together with my Palestinian counterpart, the late Sheikh Talal Sider, we initiated an interreligious summit, co-sponsored by the Mufti of Egypt, Grand Imam of al-Azhar Mosque and Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar University - Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the Archbishop of Canterbury - George Carey,
and Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron. The idea was to bring all the essential religious figures from Israel and Palestine together, under the auspices of Egypt, and the biggest religious institution in the Muslim world, Al Azhar, to adopt common principles aimed at preventing the region's religious sensibilities from being exploited during conflicts, and declaring the need to work together towards peaceful solutions of the conflicts.

At that time, I served as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Israel. Sheikh Talal Sider, who was a minister in the Palestinian Government, became a close friend and excellent partner. Our work took place during the peak of the Second Intifada, which made it very complicated since bombs were going off all the time and there was much counter-terrorism activity as well. Nevertheless, the process sent an important message and has had multiple effects within and outside of the region.

The Declaration of Principles we wrote and signed in Alexandria has become the basis in our region and in other areas of the world for understanding how to create the religious basis for peace. The idea is that religious peace should support the secular peace, which is negotiated by the elected leaders, rather than replacing it. The religious leaders would work on Track II diplomacy to legitimize the religious perspective toward peace. Everyone involved was in agreement with these principles.4

Even as far away as Kaduna, Nigeria, Christians and Muslims carved the text of the Alexandria document in stone, in a place where tens of thousands of people had been killed. All the warring factions, led by courageous leaders, signed their own agreement using the same formula as the Alexandria Agreement. There has not been one person killed due to religious conflict in this place since.

The major part of the text of the Alexandria Declaration reads as follows:

"According to our faith traditions, 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 seek to live together as neighbors, respecting the integrity of each other's historical and religious inheritance. We call upon all to oppose incitement, hatred, and the misrepresentation of the other.

1. The Holy Land is holy to all three of our faiths. Therefore, followers of the divine religions must respect its sanctity, and bloodshed must not be allowed to pollute it. The sanctity and integrity of the Holy Places must be preserved, and the freedom of religious worship must be ensured for all.

4 On this basis, later on, the Council of Religious Leaders in the Holy Land was created.
2. Palestinians and Israelis must respect the divinely ordained purposes of the Creator by whose grace they live in the same land that is called Holy.

3. We call on the political leaders of both parties to work for a just, secure, and durable solution in the spirit of the words of the Almighty and the Prophets.

4. As a first step now, we call for a religiously sanctioned cease-fire, respected and observed from all sides, and for the implementation of the Mitchell and Tenet recommendations, including the lifting of restrictions and return to negotiations.

5. We seek to help create an atmosphere where present and future generations will co-exist with mutual respect and trust in the other. We call on all to refrain from incitement and demonization, and to educate our future generations accordingly.

6. As religious leaders, we pledge ourselves to continue a joint quest for a just peace that leads to reconciliation in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, for the common good of all our peoples.

7. We announce the establishment of a permanent joint committee to carry out the recommendations of this declaration, and to engage with our respective political leadership accordingly."

Alexandria was supported by both the Israeli and Palestinian governments and many religious leaders. Many positive development stemmed from it, but there was a major factor that kept us from progressing to the next level and creating a full religious peace. That factor was that those who participated in the Alexandria Conference were for the most part, already believers in compromise and peace.

What I came to understand during the Alexandria Process and afterwards is that we need to get those who are skeptical and opposed to peace, those who are in favor of jihad, those who are in strong opposition, to join our forces for a religious peace. Therefore, in the last three to four years, we have built a Jewish center called "Mosaica" and our Muslim partners have built four centers they call, “Adam Centers” -- led by Sheikh Imad el-Falugi in Gaza, Sheikh Nimr Darwish in Kafr Kassem, Dr. Abed Abdul Rahman in East Jerusalem, and one in Ramallah. Together, these centers function as hubs for our work on religious conflict transformation.

In addition, we have created a broad network of contacts throughout the Jewish, Muslim and Christian world. Our coalition is made up of religious authorities from Egypt (from both sides in the Egyptian controversy) and leading figures from many other countries, including radical figures whom most people would be surprised to learn are willing to talk about peace. We have also gained the participation of leading figures in Israel and the Jewish world, who are joining our movement in order to create and promote religious peace under certain guidelines. In principle, the idea is to rally support from more extreme factions, from those who have been skeptical. We have reached many people in much of the Muslim world (including countries with whom Israel has no relations), who want peace with the State of Israel, not peace at the expense of the State of Israel, and who are willing to accept it, if it is done on the premise of a religious
peace. These are people who distance themselves from the current secular peace process, people who have been supporting jihad (Holy war) whose entire lives have become transformed when they encounter this alternative and are today willing to accept the principle of two states for two peoples. I have had remarkable encounters with Islamic figures. This is an alternative which was never presented to them before. In the past, they were only presented with secular versions of peace. Likewise, when rabbis hear the Islamists in our meetings, they are remarkably transformed. They say, “This is completely different from the concept of 'The New Middle East' which we are totally estranged from”.

There is potential for a major change today in the Islamic world. We know that there were planned terrorist acts that were stopped because of this work. We know that there have been teachers in the Islamic world who are now teaching a different story because of the relationships that have been established. And on the Jewish side we have a network of influential rabbinical figures who support our work. Therefore, I believe that this work remains essential. I think that it has all the potential to change the world. This is the test of our religions, that is, the ability to transform the world from war to peace.

One question that remains is whether the policy makers are serious in wanting to make peace. And this remains to be seen. The fact that our leaders today are theoretically working for peace while sending messages to the public totally disconnected from that effort makes me skeptical. Saying, "There is no partner for peace" and, "It’s not going to happen in our lifetime" and then suddenly telling Israelis that, "We've given away half of Jerusalem and all of Judea and Samaria, and now we have peace" is not a recipe for success. If our leaders are serious, then the religious peace is the missing link.

The religions and religious leaders and teachers have to be part of creating an identity, a narrative, which makes Track I diplomacy possible. There has to be a change in the substance of Track I. If that happens, the religious leaders may give their support to the policy makers, to legitimize the work they are doing and the path they are taking us on. Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin once said that he could never have signed the Oslo Accords without the support of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. This is important even though Rabin didn’t necessarily think through all the implications of that statement.

When the whole issue of a religious cultural narrative led by religious leaders and teachers comes together, there will have to be a meeting point between Track I and Track II. In this process, the religious leaders will support track two once they feel it really benefits their communities and their societies.

Once Abu Mazen said to me at one of our meetings “what your coalition is doing is taking the biggest stumbling block on the path to peace and pushing it aside”. That was the metaphor that he used. And I think it's true. The sincere policy makers will be able to see the potential in this. I
will continue to be involved in this because it is central to who we are as a religious people. It is the essence of Judaism and is an effort to help our set of values and morals survive.

As I wrote above, a peace of interests, signed by political leaders alone, like that between Begin and Sadat, is not enough. If a religious peace is part of the process, then it can be a real peace between the peoples which touches on their core identities. I am not naive. Of course security precautions will be necessary, but the issue is very different when the peoples actively support the peace. That is part of creating a whole new vision, not because we hate and fear each other, but because we are talking about a whole new way of living together, and it doesn't happen overnight. And that's why it's so important.

As opposed to most people who talk about making peace, we are actually "doing it" and showing that it is possible. There is no guarantee, but I know that it is possible. It is in our hands.

------------------------------------------------------------

Bio

Rabbi MICHAEL MELCHIOR is the founder and chairman of The Mosaica Center for Religious Conflict Transformation in the Middle East. He is an internationally renowned Jewish leader, thinker and activist and a leading advocate for social justice in Israel, interfaith dialogue and a voice for peaceful co-existence.

A descendant of seven generations of Danish Rabbis, Rabbi Melchior was born in Denmark, is an ordained Orthodox rabbi and immigrated to Israel in 1986. He serves as the Chief Rabbi of Norway and as rabbi of a young orthodox community in Jerusalem. He was elected to the Knesset in 1999 and served for 10 years in roles including: Minister for Social Affairs and World Jewry; Deputy Minister of Education & Culture; and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

In addition to founding Mosaica, which actively works to build a religious peace between leaders of all religions in the Middle East, Rabbi Melchior has founded The Yachad Council, which promotes open dialogue between different strands of Israeli society, fighting religious and political extremism; Meitarim, a network of over 50 pluralistic Jewish schools and communities in Israel; The Citizen's Accord Forum, which promotes the building of bridges of coexistence and justice between Israeli Jews and Israeli-Arabs and he was the founding chairman of Birthright Israel.