Rabbi Michael Melchior on how Religion can be an Agent for Peace in the Middle East

Ever since the earliest recorded origins of humankind, religion has been the major source of life, future and redemption in its ideal form. At the same time, it has been abused as the ultimate source of fear, hatred, strife, war and death. The Talmud paraphrased this accurately by equating the holy Tora to the tree of life, which when misused becomes the drug of death.

The first chronicled killing in the Bible is the murder by Cain of his brother Abel. It is obvious from the biblical story that this murder is closely entwined with religion. Perhaps the murder takes place against the backdrop of a sibling rivalry over whose sacrifice is accepted by God, as the Scriptures tell us, or perhaps it is the outcome of a violent argument between them, concerning whose land the Temple should be built on, according to Rabbinical commentary. In any case, religion in the primary narrative of the human condition is the cause of envy and strife. The idea that the physical location of the Temple could be shared, already at that time, did not seem to occur to them, even though there were only very few people around, and those who were around were brothers. The totalitarianism of religion had already taken a dominant place, a place that was to remain permanent and central throughout human history.

Religion has been a major factor in relations both between and within countries and nations, playing either a major role, or the major role in these relations, very often at the core of conflicts and wars. While this has been the case throughout human history, this was less true in the 20th century, to a certain degree. The source of the major wars and genocides from the outset of the First World War until the fall of the Berlin Wall cannot primarily be traced back to religion. However, already from the beginning of the 21st century, it can be said that God has returned to the forefront of history as religion has reemerged as a dominant factor all over the world.

Again, religion plays a dual role. On one hand, religion enriches the human existence by committing it to fundamental values regarding the human condition and survival, yet, on the other hand, religion serves as a dramatic source of conflict in all of the twenty-odd major battlefields and wars currently raging in different regions of the world. Whether in Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Nigeria, Iraq, Cyprus, or our part of the Middle East, religion is at the focal point of bloody conflicts. And while there can be no peace between nations without peace between religions, to quote Professor Hans Kung, those involved in these conflicts as well as those who are assisting in trying to resolve the conflicts, choose to ignore this truth. And the reasons for this are manifold. It is possible that it is much easier ignoring this truth than dealing with it, or because religion was hardly ever dealt with in the context of conflict resolution, or because of a generally-accepted convention among politicians, the academia and opinion builders, that in any case nothing peaceful could ever emanate from religion. This is an axiom which I, as a staunch believer in religion, can never accept. At the same time, I also cannot deny that there is seemingly some truth to that concept when I see how religion is used and abused by religious and political leaders.

The problem with this approach is that even if somewhat true as a strategy, it will lead nowhere. Conflicts which are ignored, have the very annoying tendency of shattering our hopes of building a more just and peaceful future, instead of just disappearing,
we wish they would. More problematic is the fact that even in classical, national conflicts - which by far and large are not rooted in religion, but which nevertheless contain religious and cultural elements - the more totalitarian forces of religion have been able to step up and dominate, filling a vacuum created by the disregard of these elements. By doing so, they have even succeeded in turning these conflicts into clashes between religions and civilizations.

Since the outset of the Middle East conflict, the clash between religions has been a major component. Even the socialist-atheist-Zionist fathers could paraphrase their relationship to God and the land by saying that "while we do not believe in the existence of a God, He certainly did promise us the land". On the Arab side, from the beginning, the conflict had very deep religious roots. The appeal to religious legitimacy both before the creation of the State of Israel and in many ways also during the War of Independence is very dominant. This has certainly become evident in recent years. Today, the vast majorities of people in Israel and the Palestinian area, as well as in the Middle East at large, are religious or at least look towards religion and tradition as their major source of identity and legitimization.

Because the peace process is seen as a threat to this identity, the processes, and the leaders identified with this cause themselves, become an existential threat in their opponents' eyes. In any case, it has become evident that the secular peace has little credibility, not only in theological terms but in the sense that such a peace will never sustain nor have any potential of creating the kind of future that its promoters promise. No matter how good Shimon Peres' intentions were when introducing the concept of the "New Middle East" in the ears of the believers, this is a Middle East which promotes the cheapest brand of western values, while on its path, crushing traditional ethics and patterns of familial and community living. With the language of mistrust, fear and distorted perceptions prevailing on both sides, nothing is easier than to play the religious card, and in doing so turning the fear into hatred and violence and tragically eliminating hope and belief that peace is actually possible.

Until recently, even the serious peace makers have decided to strategically ignore the religious element. In my own personal outcry against this attempt, which I have been promoting with the same persistence as the claim of the Old Cato for the last 25 years, I have not even aroused sufficient interest to be dismissed. Yossi Beilin, probably the most courageous and innovative of the peacemakers on the Israeli side, is one of the few who has been able to relate to the argument at all. However, since even before the Oslo Agreement he has been telling me that while in theory I might be right, he and his colleagues would lead a "quick fix" peace deal and that only in its aftermath, just as with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, will we approach and try to solve the underlying existential issues which no doubt need to be dealt with. I supported this approach, always wanting to give peace a chance. I did not believe in putting pre-conditions on any process, trying to prove myself wrong. On a certain level I still advocate this approach. I fully supported the Oslo accords even though I was skeptical regarding the exclusion of the religious element. I felt that no concept could be closer to emulating the ways of God "Imitato Dei", just as He makes peace in the heavens, so must we do our utmost to make peace and eliminate bloodshed on earth.

During the 1990s, I participated in a variety of people-to-people efforts, peace initiatives and negotiations all over the world. I went into politics, became Deputy
Minister of Foreign Affairs (with Shimon Peres as the Minister) and served as a Cabinet Minister in the Barak government; I had a certain part around the unfortunate Camp David negotiations that took place that summer. As an anecdote of that period, I built together with Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders, a concept of religious peace in Jerusalem and a model for a viable solution for the issues concerning the Old City. I approached Barak, offering him these ideas on a silver platter, which he totally dismissed, assuring me that he would succeed in reaching an agreement and that involving religious leaders and religious issues would only mess things up.

What really did mess things up was the way this issue was dealt with at Camp David. In a totally misconceived desire to appease the Jewish religious opposition to a compromise on the Jerusalem issue, Barak raised the suggestion of building a synagogue on the Temple Mount. This suggestion reinforced Arafat's negation of any Jewish connection and aspiration to the Mount, and Clinton - having just returned from Church, listening there to the words of Jesus preaching to his disciples in the Temple - did not understand how this could be. How could Jesus be preaching in a place which according to Arafat never existed, or at least was never a Jewish Temple. Clinton then came up with a very innovative but hopeless proposal that the Temple Mount be divided horizontally, with Israeli sovereignty under the ground, and Palestinian above ground. This concept, which Clinton no doubt received from the Israeli team, fed into Barak's misconception of what he called: "Kodshei Yisrael" - the Holies of Israel - understood by him to be archaeological relics from the Temple. This idea again fed into the false Muslim narrative that Jews have no real connection to that holy place and that we just want underground control in order to blow up the Muslim holy sites. Not surprisingly, while the first intifada was a political uprising by young people, frustrated over their oppression and the lack of any prospect for a political solution to their aspirations, the second intifada was the El-Aqsa intifada. The religious sentiment had turned very much into the core issue.

As a result of my active political involvement over the next decade, I became convinced that ignoring or postponing the dealings with the religious existential components of the conflict had not and would never make them disappear, but has rather turned them into the main obstacle to the success of any peace attempt, even in the few cases when these attempts were sincere. Time and again the religious delegitimization of the process has set us back instead of these attempts leading us forward. On the Islamic side this is evident. With the growth of radical Islam, the world Jihad and the Palestinian branch of the Moslem Brotherhood, Hamas was created, which very rapidly developed from being an education, social, cultural and religious factor into a leading radical totalitarian political force. Hamas has the will and the power - spiritually, politically and physically - to disrupt the process. The power of Hamas and its ability to deliver does not only stem from the failures and corruption of the Fatah, but also from it constituting a serious political and religious force which just cannot be ignored – as most people have now come to realize.

On the Jewish side, likewise, although in a different way, religion and even the name of God himself have been hijacked and distorted in order to delegitimize the political process. After Oslo, Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir became extreme catastrophic expressions of this ever-growing delegitimization. The political objection to uprooting settlements or even freezing them is rooted in a religious messianic expression of our future, which makes it impossible to proceed politically. The formal religious legal argument laid down is the strict prohibition to give up land, no matter what the price.
While from a legal-religious perspective this could easily be solved, the issues involved here reach far beyond the legal aspects and into the ideological, messianic vision of this branch of religious Zionism.

The ultra-orthodox element, which for various reasons was indifferent or neutral to the peace process in the early stages, has become still more nationalistic and hateful towards the other side of the conflict. Furthermore, because some of the elements amongst the peacemakers have seen peace in the context of the ultimate secularization of our societies, the orthodox elements are currently utilizing their growing political power to halt any real progress in the peace process. This is the real reason why we need to look not only at what the peace process contains, but rather at what it lacks. The peace process does not need yet another summit meeting in Washington, Paris or Sharm el-Sheikh, it does not need yet another road map, or a suggestion for a political deal. That deal has been known to all parties at least since the Clinton proposals in 2000. How many blind alleys do we need to go down before we halt and ask ourselves why it's not working?

What is needed today is a restored belief and trust that there is indeed a partner on the other side, a partner who has the legitimacy and support to be able to create and sign a comprehensive peace agreement which will actually be implemented and will transform our future.

In contrary to the past, nearly all those involved in the peace efforts today would agree that if it were possible to harness the power of the mainstream religious identities and legitimization, this would create the energy and confidence so sorely lacking, in order to facilitate the paradigm shift that could end the dangerous present stalemate. I stress that this should be done not in order to substitute the political process and its leaders but on the contrary, in order to empower and give credibility to their wish to create a new reality for our peoples.

This must also relate to the opportunities which have presented themselves with the events of the "Arab Spring". Instead of just looking at the dangers in the processes happening in the Arab world, I believe that there is immense potential in the new situation primarily as it relates to basic Jewish ethics. I believe we should be pleased when nations rise up against regimes of torture, despotism and slavery. Prior to any political consideration, I believe that we should be moved by the magnitude of the change also from the point of view of Jewish ethics, emanating from the belief in a Tora which confirms every human being's basic rights and which validates the freedom of man and the divine dignity of every human being.

While it is true that on the political plain there was a great blessing in the peace agreement with Egypt, at the same time we must not forget that this was a peace agreement contracted with an autocrat and dictator, not a genuine peace based on common values that would have led to the creation of an honest and open relationship with the Egyptian people. Moreover, as is true of all tyrants, the Egyptian despot used anti-Semitism as a shock absorber in order to divert the oppositions' criticism leveled at him towards the Jewish people and the State of Israel. I saw this with my own eyes. In 2002, together with my Palestinian counterpart, the late Sheikh Talal Sider, I convened a summit meeting of all the main religious leaders of the three monotheistic religions for the first time in history under the auspices of the late Grand Imam of al-Azhar Mosque and Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar University –
Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the Archbishop of Canterbury - Lord George Carey and Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron – Israel's Chief rabbi. The summit, which launched The Alexandria Process, brought together religious leaders from the Middle-East to adopt common principles aimed at preventing the region's religious sensibilities being exploited during conflicts, and declaring the need to work together towards peaceful solutions of the conflicts.

In proximity to this meeting some of us sat with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. At this encounter, I expressed my concern to him regarding the anti-Semitism that was flourishing in the state media in his country. I told Mubarak that I believe that no peace can ever be built when accompanied with stereotypical lies about the other. Mubarak responded with a statement that revealed his tactics. You don't understand, he said, those who oppose me the most are also the worst anti-Semites. What he wanted to say was that this is how they find some release for their expressions of hostility and hatred. They have two options: to hate us or to hate him. And for some reason he preferred the former.

The result of all of this is an immense barrier that has been created between Jews and Israelis on one side and the Egyptian people on the other, in spite of the formal peace. There is no doubt, however, for those who are following the changes in Egypt as well as most of the Arab world, that the vast majority of the people there are religious. That does not mean that they all become part of the most extreme totalitarian expressions of religion or that they throw themselves into the arms and the advocacy of Ahmadinijahd or Al-Qaeda. It definitely says something very important about the place of religion in building the future and the identity of this region. This fact also opens windows of opportunities which we have never seen before. If we could solve our conflict with the Palestinians on the basis of a genuine peace between our religions based on a religious legal legitimization of the two-state solution, then we will have a real opportunity for connecting with each other in this area which we both inhabit, and making peace with the entire Arab and Muslim world.

Now, while most could agree with this theory, they would also claim that it is simply not possible. This approach would merely strengthen the common conviction of the unfeasibility of peace in this area, and that we need to be reconciled to this reality, try to control the situation as best as we can and when necessary, and live for the foreseeable future by the strength of our swords. This despair will once again expand the vacuum into which the extremists and enemies on both sides can play their trump cards.

For a long time now, it has been beyond me how governments and international non-governmental bodies could believe that they seriously could promote peace with people-to-people initiatives that served only to "preach to the converted", reaching out to people from the left-wing fringe, which lack the legitimacy and power to move anybody but themselves. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been poured into these efforts with little results to show. In the same style, inter-religious events have been organized, gatherings with official leaders, in their photogenic hats and gowns, who have come together to declare that their religions are synonymous with peace. They say this, turn around and return home where they continue to preach that such a messianic peace can obviously be obtained only through the elimination of the other side, at least spiritually.
For several years I have tried to identify and develop a different approach. This approach has led me to work head-on with authentic mainstream Imams and teachers from the Islamic movement who have great influence among their communities and societies. They are not numbered among the peacemakers, but rather are skeptical, even in total opposition to the political processes. Along this path, my colleagues and I have had to invent a new discipline, a systematic conflict resolution in the religious existential context. This is something which hardly exists anywhere in the world. During this period I have been able to participate, in secrecy, at Islamic summit meetings even in countries with which we have no diplomatic relations, speaking as an orthodox rabbi, at times as an Israeli official, a devoted Zionist, always traveling on an Israeli passport.

During these years, I have learnt a lot, both from my own mistakes as well as others'. However, the good news is that I have always returned optimistic, having seen that even at the worst and most difficult levels it is possible to make the walls of hatred and suspicion come tumbling down. I have witnessed sincere debate amongst the Islamists, seen courageous visionary leaders who are grappling with the fundamental issues of religion and modernity; Islamic law versus liberal constitutions; democracy - not only as a basis for getting elected and majoritizing society but also in context of the basic issues of freedom of speech, freedom of and from religion, and minority rights both individual and collective.

Amongst these crucial issues, the issue of creating a religious peace between the monotheistic religions and giving religious motivation and authorization to the peace process and the two state solution has also emerged. On the Jewish side, I have been able to identify religious mainstream leaders who nobody would believe could be a part of this process, including some settler rabbis and their supporters, who have also put innovative solutions for some of the very difficult political issues, on the table.

The burden of proof is totally on us. The main challenge which faces us therefore, is how we can take responsibility for an authentic religious process which can transform religion from being a destructive and deadly sword, into being a powerful lever for pursuing and obtaining peace. Is it really possible to turn religion from being the core of the problem to becoming the source of the solution?

The latest developments in the Arab world might help us in creating a synthesis between a deep commitment to religion, traditional ethical and moral values, together with an equally-deep commitment to peace. Many of us, for too long, have sat detached on our little clouds with our totalitarian truths, not relating to events on the ground or truly taking responsibility for the physical and spiritual wellbeing of our believers and societies. This period is probably over.

Now comes the real test. I believe that the inter-religious peace dialogue could become the ladder with which we can take responsibility for actual happenings without in any way loosing contact with heaven above. This ladder is well rooted in the belief in one God and His word, as well as the modesty of man, knowing the limitation of human understanding and power, in a conviction that we are here on this earth not to replace but to serve God. God cannot be honored by crushing his creations and creatures. This ladder must be deeply-rooted in ethical values common to the believers in one God, freedom, justice, peace, morality and ethics.
While very well knowing who we are and understanding the boundaries between our beliefs, there we can find a common fertile ground on which a very different Middle East can grow. We need to introduce a religious language which has been excluded from the process until now. In this language land is not real estate which you can annex or get rid of as seen opportune at any given moment. In this language you should not give up your ultimate dreams and quests which are legitimate, but you can support giving up land for true peace if this can promote other religious values such as the good of your community the sanctity of human life, and spreading the respect for religion and religious commitment. The Talmud talks about the decision of a religious court, when two people appear in front of the court holding onto two ends of the same cloth, each claiming it to be their own. The Talmud says that they both have to swear that at least half is theirs, and then they have to divide it into two.

By only swearing that half is theirs, the court in a sophisticated manner, prevents one of the parties from becoming a perjurer which would otherwise happen if both would have to swear that it was all theirs. But at the same time, the court does not exclude either claim or quest to the totality. This is a religious legalistic approach which has deep roots in both the Jewish and Islamic thinking, where both accommodate for pragmatism without losing sight of the overall vision. Having reached this common ground we might be able to lift ourselves up to the next level in recognition that eventually the land, all the land, belongs to God the Almighty and that we are here on earth as temporary residents. Observing this aspect of human existence we can then turn to view issues of territory and sovereignty with a very different perception No believer can dismiss this concept. And although it might be perceived as naïve in the political context the naïveté itself is a religious ideal.

This message will have a dramatic effect all over the world that if we can - and we can - work it out in Jerusalem, then there is no reason not to do so in Baghdad, Kaduna, Derry or the slums of Paris.

The dramatic effect that this will create inside Israel and for Israel's relations with the world will be transformative. For too long, our actions and reactions have been built on and led by our fears. These fears have not been without reason. Not for one day have we had peace, not for one day has there not been somebody in the vicinity calling to wipe us out. We have not even for one day known where our borders are. Besides the unnecessary urge to defend ourselves, this fear has led to many destructive results on which it is impossible to build a sane future. The fear has developed phobias inside our society and has built a growing abyss between us and the parts of the world with which we could and should cooperate. The message of religious peace and its consequences for our relations with our neighbors will place us in the role which for many Jews is the essence of our existence - to repair our world by building a new world together with our surroundings. We might even be able to turn the clash of civilizations into a much more productive and even romantic coalition of civilizations, with one foot firmly rooted in a western, democratic, liberal tradition and the other foot rooted in an eastern, religious commitment to belief and obedience towards the word of God.