

59th Annual DPI/NGO Conference
Unfinished Business: Effective Partnerships for Human Security and
Sustainable Development

Promoting Respect for Cultural Diversity in Conflict Resolution
Roundtable #6

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On a recent Friday evening I attended prayer services at my Jerusalem synagogue, Kol HaNeshama. On entering, I had picked up two leaflets. They made me think about today's challenging panel discussion. Each leaflet offered commentary on the weekly Bible portion, *Shoftim* (Judges) (Deuteronomy 16:18 - 21:9). This portion ends with an injunction addressed to the elders, the leaders. It commands them to engage in an expiation ritual when an innocent person is found dead in the field. It states the overriding principle: "Thus you will remove from your midst guilt for the blood of the innocent, for you will be doing what is right in the sight of God". The leaflets, published by two different Orthodox Jewish organizations, are based on the same text. The two interpretations, however, differed radically.

A peace-oriented Orthodox movement published the first leaflet. It features an article borrowing its title from the "*Avot*" (Sayings of the Fathers), a 3rd century rabbinic tractate. "Who is a Hero? He who conquers his urges." It points to the laws of war as constituting one of the central aspects of the biblical portion. It characterizes them as reflecting concern over the preservation of human life even in times when, by necessity, we push aside our human values. It emphasizes the core rule, based on the verse in that week's bible portion, "You do not initiate war with anyone in the world until you propose a peaceful settlement." (Maimonides, Law of Kings 6:1).

The author of this leaflet connects the events of the time to his religious outlook. He asserts the justice of engaging in the recent war in Lebanon: "Any sovereign nation would react similarly when attacked along its international border by an extreme, murderous organization that proclaims Israel must be eliminated from the map of the Middle East." At the same time he quotes traditional commentaries that connect the themes of war and justice on a different plane. He concludes that no less important than whether we went to war for just reasons, is the question whether we went to war as a just society. We need to judge whether we conducted

ourselves during these weeks of battle as a society, sensitive to the values of justice, law and Jewish morality.

He feels the answer is equivocal.

He concludes that, "We do not live in the imaginary world of legends or in a world of pleasant rabbinic homilies. We have no illusions as to the murderous character of our foes. Yet we need to suppress the urge for vengeance and power for the sake of power. Only thus can we preserve the divine image within us as individuals and as a society."

The second came from a school of thought that emphasizes messianic ideas and the redemption of the nation of Israel. It included an article titled: "A Moral Foundation for War". It quotes Deuteronomy 20:1 "when you take the field against your enemies and see horses and chariots - horses larger than yours - have no fear of them, for the Lord your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, is with you." The author writes that this short verse contains a complete instruction as to war. Those who follow its moral teaching will surely be victorious in battle.

"When you take the field against your enemy," he continues, "you first have to know that you are embarking on a battle with a people that are an enemy, so don't look for innocents. "

He then quotes Rashi (11th century, French, leading commentator on the Bible and the Talmud): "You should view them when you fight as your enemy. Do not show them mercy as they will not have mercy for you."

The leaflet then offers, "With enemies who try to hurt you, you don't talk. You fight and when you fight enemies you put aside compassion. Strengthen your spirit and understand that life as a whole, including war, needs to be in God's way. We clearly see that when confronting our mortal enemies, there's no room for weakness or surrender (known as a 'negotiated solution'.) But courage and heroism will bring about the enemy's surrender in a war based on true morality, the morality of the bible."

The author, a rabbi who heads a rabbinic seminary (*yeshivah*) leaves us with this conclusion. He likewise applies the concept of the religious moral imperative to the events of recent days.

These two leaflets illustrate the extremes of opinion within a single religion. Nor is this phenomenon unique to Judaism but is experienced by many religious faiths. We also note the influence these differences have on educating children within each religious school of thought. Consider the influence on outlook and actions the teachings will have on children as they grow older and mature. How will it affect their perceptions of reality and the choices they will make?

Many of us here today face this challenge in the societies and religious communities to which we belong. We cannot ignore it. Consider the role

religion may play in advancing the value system that has brought us all, members of the UN family, here.

This holds true, especially, if we hope to advance the realization of the Millennium Development Goals.

Both Christianity and Islam have their own examples of extreme roles of religious bigotry. One, based on the Koran, came alive in New York City. In only three days we mark the anniversary of the destruction of the World Trade Center. Some Moslems proclaimed the attacks as acts of piety. They saw them as supposedly serving God in his battle against the infidels.

Coming from Israel, I feel compelled to mention another demonstration of this approach to Jihad and Islam, that which is found in the 1988 Charter of Hamas. As yet it remains unchanged, and it guides Hamas, now the legally elected Government of the Palestinian Authority.ⁱ

Extremely clear is their statement of: "The Slogan of the Islamic Resistance Movement",

Article 8 of the Charter reads: "Allah is its target, the Prophet is its model, the Koran its constitution: Jihad is its path and death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes. "

Similarly painful is their stated attitude to the Jewish People, the State of Israel and the solution to the Middle East conflict.ⁱⁱ

On the other hand, we need to recognize other voices within Islam, among some clerics and intellectuals, such as Dr. Abd Al-Hamid Al-Ansari, former dean of the Faculty of Islamic Law at the University of Qatar. He holds that modern Islamic *Fatwas* (religious legal opinions) distort the meaning of Jihad to justify an aggressive ideology. "Jihad, in its true sense", he says, "as defined in the Koran and as implemented by the Prophet [Muhammad] and his noble companions, is a means of defending differences, pluralism, and diversity. ..."It is [a means] of defending freedom of choice [as is written in the Koran]. 'There is no coercion in Islam'... [2:256]

From the beginning, Jihad has been defined by two goals, he asserts: The first responded to aggression and oppression [as told in the Koran 22:39]: 'To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged; and verily, Allah is most powerful in assisting.' The second [goal] is the liberation of the persecuted peoples from tyrannical regimes, as happened to the Persian and Byzantine peoples."ⁱⁱⁱ

Another important encouraging example is that of Shaker al-Nabulsi, Perhaps the most comprehensive and systematic in his reformist approach, who summed up the main principles of his position in a recent article. "9/11," he claims, "marks a watershed in the history of Islamic and Arab thought." The emergence of new liberal Arabic thought is a response to this critical challenge. Speaking for the new Arab liberals, al-Nabulsi traces their ideological roots to the prominent reformists Afghani and 'Abduh and other later Arab liberal thinkers. ^{iv}

As an Israeli Jew, I am constantly reminded of and challenged by the fact that the assassin of Prime Minister Rabin explained his actions as rooted in adherence to a religious calling, following the model of the biblical zealot, the priest, Pinchas (Numbers 25). In his eyes, Rabin's peace initiative constituted a grave religious offense and countered God's will. There are other individuals and groups, many of them claiming religious sanction, who share these and related sentiments, even as they do not contemplate further assassinations.

At the same time, I draw encouragement from such liturgical inspiration as that adopted by my own synagogue in expressing our religious commitment to peace and co-existence. The activities of such religious movements for peace as that which publishes Shabbat Shalom, heartens me. I also applaud public initiatives like that of our Israel Religious Action, Reform congregations and educational institutions across Israel that host Moslem and Christian dignitaries on March 21st, the International Day for the Elimination of Discrimination. Together we conduct services and programs decrying the ugly manifestations of racism and emphasizing the responsibility of religious communities in this realm. Similarly, here in North America the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center, Women of Reform Judaism, leaders and congregations are in the forefront of countering discrimination and intolerance, and so are their counterparts in the World Union family in England, Holland, Australia, Latin America and wherever it raises its ugly head..

Many tend to idealize and sanitize our respective religious traditions as we look to the religious sphere to provide inspiration and guidance toward peace, co-existence and progress. I wonder whether we do ourselves and our audiences a disservice. Do we do a disservice also to the prospects of harnessing religious teachings to the task of promoting these and other noble goals like the Millennium Development Goals. The seeds of evil, intolerance, violence and rejection of the "other" have been part and parcel of our respective religious traditions. Most horrific atrocities were and are carried out in the name of religion. By glossing over them we will not make them go away nor will we enhance the credibility of our religious action. I will attempt to further demonstrate these internal conflicts from my own

religious tradition Judaism, which I know best, and will recommend that in moving forward we need to bear in mind not only the injunction “do good”, but also “depart from evil” as the verse enjoins us to act: “Who is the man that desires life depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it”. (Psalms 34)

Religion may serve as the basis for drawing people together but might also provide the basis for pulling us apart. The religious forces for progress, equality, peace and human dignity exist within each of the major religious traditions. They need to unite to form a stronger international alliance drawing strength from each other and radiating greater inspiration for their environs. Alas, these forces do not represent all the followers of those religions. Often they constitute minority groups within their respective religions. Many of them face challenges, or worse, as they advocate reconciling religion with democracy, egalitarianism, scientific discovery, human rights and pluralism. In reaching out to each other and the larger society around us, we may have to frame explicitly, the values we endorse as well as those that we reject. We may face internal strife with those who choose other paths within our religious traditions. Without doing so we may find ourselves marred by their counter religious choices, to the point of undermining our own credibility and effectiveness. We need to recognize that religious integrity may not always lead us along the popular path.

The constant challenge is to distinguish between the virtuous principles of multiculturalism and respect for diversity in contrast to the intolerant, violent and discriminatory trends in religious thought and practice. Ofttimes these claim respectability under the banner of multiculturalism or tradition. Of great importance it is for those within the faith to find the courage to speak up against abuses within their own religious structure.

Of equal importance is that these like-thinking religious groups reach out and seek to form links with other groups committed to a peaceful, democratic and just society. When we do this, on a regional and global scale, we will better advance these values, as we will also celebrate our different perspectives in the spirit of multiculturalism. Some of these groups operate under conditions of persecution; others may be sailing against the prevailing wind. They will be further empowered and supported, as we advance our global alliance.

Let me not be misunderstood. Many important international interfaith groups, some of them represented here, promote dialogue and mutual respect. Their praiseworthy work in their effort to influence society and be fully representative of the religious faiths should continue. We may face stumbling blocks, however, when "religious establishments" seek consensus. They may be hindered in acting on matters that are internally controversial,

and may be accommodating or even choosing to identify and represent elements within their respective religious communities that do not share the values mentioned above. I understand that the recent Kyoto conference may have displayed some of those pitfalls.

Even more challenging is the realization that a gap often exists between noble statements aired on festive occasions or at interfaith gatherings and the actual policies and priorities pursued on the ground. One may test, for instance, how many of the religious dignitaries who participate in such interfaith opportunities actually attempt, and the degree of their success, in bringing the message of dialogue and tolerance, of respect for other faiths and for all God's children, to their own rank and file. It may be of note, for instance, that Muhamad Hatami, past president of Iran, called this week for dialogue and cooperation between the religions.

I don't intend to minimize the importance of interfaith dialogue that involves official representatives of the major religions. On the contrary! It is not about either/or but rather about both/and. The outcome of such dialogue, I fear, may be limited. The time has come for greater dialogue and cooperation that transcends religious boundaries, between those who clearly support the vision of religion sustaining peace and progress, tolerance and social justice, the sanctity and equality of human life. It's among these groups, beyond individuals of good will, that efforts must be focused to better bridge and facilitate cooperation.

In relating to the unfolding religious tradition, we should be mindful of the historic and social context. It is in the light of history that one understands the evolution of texts such as the one found in Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5. It deals with the procedure of criminal justice and with the admonition to witnesses in capital punishment cases that they need to give a true testimony lest their actions may lead to irrevocable consequences. Two distinct schools of thought are represented in the different readings of this text, which originally read:

"It is for this that man was created as a solitary human being, to instruct us that whoever destroys one life it is accounted to him by scripture as if he had destroyed a whole world and whoever preserves one life, it is accounted to him by scripture as if he had preserved a whole world". (Sanhedrin 4:5)

This text was later amended in some of the manuscripts, an amendment carried through to the printed text of the Mishnah currently in use. The word "*me-Israel*" was inserted. The text therefore no longer reads: "Whoever preserves or destroys one life", but "Whoever preserves or destroys the life of one Jew".^v

However, some codes still hold to the original, more universal view.^{vi} Can we doubt that the change in the text has occurred in response to times of persecution and powerlessness, when particularism (as opposed to universalism) seemed the preferred choice?!

The questions that we now face are which road do we take? Which religious insight is going to guide our endeavors, and the education of the next generation? Are we going to be able to see through the “standard” text that is found in every printed version of the Mishnah without exception? Will we be able to go back and seek guidance from the original and more universalistic religious voice of the manuscripts? Will we heed the prophet Malachi's call: “Have we not one father, has not one God created us all?” (Malachi 2:10). Are we going to be able to renew the spirit of Ben Azzai (a great sage of the 2nd century CE) who in a debate on the essence of Judaism found the answer in Genesis 5:1 “This is the book of the generations of *Adam* (Man). On the day that God created mankind, in the likeness of God He made him: male and female he created them: and blessed them, and called their name *Adam* on the day when they were created.”? Since all are created in the image of the Divine, Ben Azzai claimed, our obligation extends to all humanity, and violating each other is to be viewed as desecrating God in whose likeness man was made (Sifra on Leviticus 19:18 and Genesis Rabbah on Genesis 24:7).

Are we going to be as bold and daring in reviewing religious practices and commandments in light of meta-legal and overriding principles such as was the case with Rabbi Gamliel when he was confronted with the inequality and injustice of the biblical discriminatory rules regarding gentiles? The religious concepts relevant to understanding Rabbi Gamliel's departure from the literal text of the bible and the prevailing law are the concept of “*Chilul Hashem*” (desecration of God's name) and “*Kiddush Hashem*” (sanctification of God's name). We are commanded to sanctify God's name on earth and to refrain from any action that may result in desecration of the divine name. It has been applied by some as a meta-principle - having the power to suspend aspects of the Law - when they are deemed to be unjust as in the following Talmudic story -

“The (Roman) government sent two officers to study Torah from Rabban Gamliel. They studied with him Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, law, and lore. At the end they said to him: ‘The whole of your Torah is beautiful and praiseworthy, except ...which you state:...‘What is stolen from an Israelite is prohibited, but from a gentile is permitted.’ At that moment Rabban Gamliel issued a decree against stealing from a gentile, declaring it forbidden because of the profanation of God's name.” (J.T. Baba Qamma 4:3)^{vii}

The World Union for Progressive Judaism and its constituents around the world are often on the vanguard of efforts to advance these principles of human equality, social justice, care for minorities and the weaker classes of society, gender equality, civil liberties and democracy. We do so both on the legal advocacy front and through charitable initiatives. We urge our members to become active as individuals and with their communities, wherever possible, through coalition building with relevant faith groups and other grassroots organizations. We do so guided by the spirit of the prophets who have proclaimed the supremacy of social responsibility and the concern for the welfare of the stranger, the widow and the orphan. We do so by translating into contemporary context the historic formative experiences of the Jewish people as an enslaved and persecuted nation that gained its freedom and sovereignty through God's providence and was commanded forever after to remember this experience when we relate to the stranger that resides amongst us. As alluded to before, this is not the main thrust of all religious divisions within Judaism nor is it the focus of all within other faiths. Further progress in establishing effective partnerships, which is the challenge posed to this conference, in advancing respect for religious and cultural diversity as well as supporting the Millennium Development Goals will be achieved by mobilizing global cooperation between such faith groups and sub-groups as adhere to these values and see them as primary to their religious outlook.

To better illustrate how this spirit is expressed in our liturgy, and end with words of prayer, let me quote from the innovation our Reform synagogue in Jerusalem has introduced into the worship, as each service now ends with this creative prayer for peace which is recited in Hebrew with an Arabic phrase:

Prayer for Peace (Shalom)

Source of Shalom ruler of Shalom
grant Shalom to Your people Yisrael
let the Shalom spread to all Your creatures
let there be an end to hatred, jealousy,
competition between people
let there be only great love and shalom between us all
so that we can all gather together
everyone with their fellow
speaking to each other
learning the truth from each other
allah hu - inte salame minke salame
adon hashalom barchenu bashalom
Source of Shalom bless us with Shalom amen

(Based on a prayer of R. Nachman of Bratzlav – recited at the conclusion of services at Kol HaNeshama Reform congregation, Jerusalem, Israel)

ⁱ <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/hamas.htm>

ⁱⁱ See: Article 7: "...the Islamic Resistance Movement aspires to the realization of Allah's promise, no matter how long that should take. The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said:

"The Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him. Only the Gharkad tree, (evidently a certain kind of tree) would not do that because it is one of the trees of the Jews."

Article 13: "There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad. Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors. The Palestinian people know better than to consent to having their future, rights and fate toyed with. As in said in the honorable Hadith:

"The people of Syria are Allah's lash in His land. He wreaks His vengeance through them against whomsoever He wishes among His slaves It is unthinkable that those who are double-faced among them should prosper over the faithful. They will certainly die out of grief and desperation."

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP69904>
"Liberal Muslim Scholar: The Term 'Jihad' is Misunderstood by Islamist Clerics", MEMRI Special Report No. 699, April 23, 2004

^{iv} <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=reform&ID=SR3404>
"Reform vs. Islamism in the Arab World Today" By Prof. Menahem Milson, MEMRI Special Report No. 34, September 15, 2004.

Al-Nabulsi presents his "manifesto of New Arab Liberals," enumerating their guiding principles. Among their fundamental demands regarding religion are the calls to reform religious education "in light of the domination of religious terror"; to fight "all types of armed and bloody religious and political Pan-Arab terrorism"; and to "subject the prevailing sacred values, traditions, legislations, and moral values to in-depth scrutiny." He rejects hostility towards non-Muslims as "emanating from specific political and social circumstances that existed 1500 years ago." He regards the *Shari'a* laws as "having been legislated for their specific time and place, and not as laws that cut through history as the clerics claim." He

asserts that the obstacle to free thought and scientific thought today is not the religion as given by the Prophet himself, but Islamic thought as formulated by Muslim theologians and jurists.

^v See analysis of the manuscripts and the change in Hanokh Albeck, *The Mishnah (with introduction, commentary and notes)*, Mossad Bialik, 1959, Seder Nezikin, pp. 445, 511 and Leon Roth, *Moralization and Demoralization in Jewish Ethics*, Judaism Vol. 11 No. 4, 1962, pp. 291-302.

^{vi} Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Sanhedrin, 12:3

^{vii} Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel - a Preliminary Translation and Explanation*, Volume 28, p.96. For further reading on the concept of meta-principles in Jewish law, see Rabbi Dr. Moshe Zemer, *Evolving Halakhah: A Progressive Approach to Traditional Jewish Law*, Vt. Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999.