

## **Jewish contributions to interfaith dialogue and peaceful co-existence** **Jonathan Magonet (Tokyo 31.5.2015)**

### **On Jews and Judaism**

When speaking about Judaism and the Jewish people in Japan I am faced with a particular dilemma. According to the only statistics that I could find, the total Jewish population in Japan amounts to about two thousand people (0.0016% of the population). I presume this figure is based on the two small Jewish communities to be found here, in Tokyo and Kobe. Even if this figure is an underestimate, it does mean that most Japanese people are never likely in their lives to meet a Jewish person. In Europe or America there is a small but significant Jewish presence and a long and complex history, so that some aspects of Jewish beliefs and culture are well known. The situation here is very different. This means that when addressing a Japanese audience I am always faced with the question of how much background information I need to give when speaking on any particular topic relating to Jews and Judaism. This is particularly the case when it comes to the question of interfaith dialogue between the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Even the relative size of the three raises interesting questions. Though these figures are only approximate, there are about 2.2 billion adherents to Christianity worldwide, just over 30 percent of the world population; Islam has about 1.6 billion adherents, just under 25 percent of the world population; in sharp contrast the total number of Jewish people in the world amounts to about 14 million, 0.2 percent of the world population. So if size alone is to be taken into consideration Judaism hardly belongs in the same league as the other two major religions. And yet, all three belong together as the three so-called 'monotheistic faiths', and are also identified together as the 'Abrahamic' religions. Before addressing the topic of interfaith dialogue itself I would like to explain more about the nature of Jewish society today.

The origins of the Jewish people are to be found in the pages of the Hebrew Bible, a library of books that record the selected memories of a particular people and the civilisation they created between two and three thousand years ago. It reflects their struggles over the period of a millennium in trying to comprehend, and find a way of living with, their revolutionary understanding of the nature and demands of God. This God was understood to be the single Creator of, and power within, the universe, was invisible and in no way to be represented by physical symbols. Yet this God had entered into a special relationship with their ancestor Abraham and ultimately with his descendants, the people known as Israel, a name which means either one who struggles with God or one who struggles for, on behalf of, God. The basis of that relationship according to one important Biblical formulation was that Abraham would educate his offspring to champion the values of 'righteousness and justice' in the world (Gen 18:19). This would be exemplified by the society they would build in a land promised to them by God. Moreover, through them all the families of the world would find 'blessing', a Biblical term embracing fruitfulness, material prosperity and security. God's promise was borne out by the rescue of Abraham's descendants from slavery in Egypt, thus enshrining the concept of freedom from slavery within the Biblical religious system. The relationship with God was formalised in a covenant of mutual responsibility between God and the people of Israel, at Mount Sinai. It was sealed and confirmed by the entry into and settlement in the land of Canaan.

The subsequent Biblical materials describe the ups and downs of that experiment in creating a new society, the challenges it faced through internal human successes, failures and follies, and the difficult interaction with both local neighbouring nations and the contemporary super-powers, Egypt to the south and Assyria and Babylon, and their successors, to the north. Key elements in this story include the creation of a successful state and briefly a minor empire of their own, the subsequent division into two separate kingdoms, both of which became subject to conquest and the deportation of their leadership and large parts of their population. Only the southern kingdom, Judah, from which will come the name 'Jew', with its capital in Jerusalem, was restored after a period of exile in Babylon. The second exile, under the Romans some five hundred years later, continued the process of creating what we now know as the Jewish Diaspora, communities of Jews scattered throughout the known world. The people had lost all the previous landmarks of their national religious identity: the Temple in Jerusalem, its priesthood, the land itself and a royal family. The Judaism that emerged, created by a scholarly elite of rabbis, became a faith community, struggling to maintain its unique identity in widely differing circumstances. Jews lived subsequently under both Christianity and Islam, both of which religions, in different ways, saw themselves as inheritors and successors of Judaism. So Jews had to find ways of responding to the very different spiritual challenges raised by this experience of exile and dependency, whether living as isolated and often oppressed minority communities, or in some kind of intellectual and spiritual symbiotic relationship with the majority society and culture whenever this was possible. The basic Jewish legal principle, '*dina d'malkhuta dina*', 'the law of the land is the law', enabled Jewish communities to conform and indeed contribute to the surrounding societies, as long as the law of the host society did not undermine some ultimate Jewish values.

Among the consequences of this history were the removal of any missionary activity from Judaism and a marked caution about welcoming newcomers. But as a corollary Judaism taught that there was no need to become Jewish in order to find God, but that any individual or society would be acceptable to God if they kept seven basic social laws, the 'laws of the sons of Noah', mostly derived from the Ten Commandments. Alongside six prohibitions, including murder, idolatry and adultery, there was a seventh positive demand, to ensure that the society created the necessary institutions for promoting justice and the rule of law – the legacy of God's initial choice of Abraham.

This successful model of Jewish existence was to change radically following the European Enlightenment and Emancipation. Jews found themselves for the first time as independent citizens of their respective emerging national states. Their previous collective existence was as a closed self-contained community. This situation was enforced externally by the society in which they lived, and supported internally by a shared commitment to Jewish law, controlled by rabbinic authorities and lay leaders. This closed world came to an end and was gradually replaced by that of individual Jewish citizens of the nation state whose personal relationship with Judaism and the Jewish community became a matter of personal choice. A number of movements and trends emerged that still offered the possibility of belonging formally to the Jewish people but through the personal decision of the individual to belong. The religious groupings, based on their interpretation of Jewish tradition and their relationship to it, ranged from Liberal or Reform through Conservative to a variety of degrees of Orthodox Judaism. But other Jews, aware of the precarious nature of Jewish life in the Diaspora, and influenced by contemporary nationalistic

aspirations in the nineteenth century, looked to ending the two thousand years' experience of exile by returning to their Biblical homeland. Zionism, in its many different forms, religious and secular, socialist and practical, aimed at a permanent solution to the vulnerability of Jewish existence. The movement was ultimately successful in the creation of the State of Israel, but only because of the world's horror at the Nazi attempt to wipe out all traces of the Jewish people.

Yet these trends, religious or ideological, only account for part of the Jewish response to Emancipation and modern society. It can be argued that the major Jewish post-emancipation movement was assimilation to the host society whenever and to the extent that this was possible. This desire to 'normalise' the Jewish situation, though experienced as a private matter and as a personal break with the past, was shared by many, but was nevertheless influenced by traditional Jewish religious elements. For example, Jews as individuals identified themselves, often in large numbers, with certain emerging intellectual and ideological trends in Europe, sometimes playing a leading role. While they understood this activity as a conscious rebellion against what they saw as the backwardness and constraints of the Judaism of their parents' generation, certain aspects of this trend can be seen as 'secular' versions of the earlier religious value system. Thus the demand for social justice to be found in Biblical teachings of the prophets and in rabbinic law found their expression in socialist and communist movements, particularly in the history leading up to the Russian revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish commitment to study of traditional texts as a central religious value of rabbinic Judaism became translated into intellectual attainments in the arts, sciences, academia and the professions. In the Middle Ages Christian societies had forced Jews to be engaged in areas of commerce and international trade. They were helped in this activity by their network of family and other connections in different countries and the fact that those they worked with shared the same Jewish legal system to regulate their activities. This experience led to Jewish engagement in major entrepreneurial and commercial activity in this new social situation.

The more that Jews adapted to the secular culture of their respective countries, the more the previous interweaving of people-hood, religious belief and practice became separated. To put it another way, today most Jews live within a complex and often confusing web of loyalties, identities and allegiances formed by their sense of belonging to a specific people, yet equally acculturated to the particular country in which they were raised and live. At the same time they are affected by the expectations of a religious tradition to which they have an ambivalent relationship, whose ritual activities are identified as essentially cultural or family commitments. Perhaps as many as seventy percent of Jews today regard themselves as essentially 'secular' or 'humanist' individuals. Whereas for most of two millennia the question occupying Jews was the nature of their relationship collectively to God in their often difficult exile, the question that most engages Jews today is that of their individual 'identity'.<sup>2</sup> This issue of identity became even more significant in the light of the Shoah, the Holocaust, with the destruction of almost one half of the Jewish people by

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<sup>1</sup> For a fascinating and detailed account see Yuri Slezkine *The Jewish Century* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2004).

<sup>2</sup> One traditional classification of the nature of Judaism expresses it in terms of the interaction between three elements: God – Torah – Israel. If the major focus in the Biblical period was on understanding God, in the mediaeval period, with its rabbinic focus on interpreting and applying the content of revelation, the major element was Torah, whereas the modern period is more concerned with 'Israel', the nature of Jewish people-hood.

the Nazis in the period between 1933 and 1945. This has strengthened the defiant resolve of some Jews to ensure the continuity of Jewish existence, be it in secular or religious, cultural, ethnic, or national terms. But the Shoah carries a deeper price in terms of an ultimate Jewish sense of insecurity, borne out by ever-recurring experiences of anti-Semitism which is rising again today. This must also lead to the intuitive awareness by some Jews that to be Jewish is a dangerous luxury which is best left behind for the comfortable obscurity of assimilation to the outside world – insofar as this is possible.

The point I wish to make by this introduction is to indicate that when speaking of ‘Judaism’ and the ‘Jewish people’ we are addressing a wide variety of people and institutions, with both religious and secular expressions, so that generalisations become difficult. Moreover there is no central authority that can claim to speak officially for Judaism or the Jewish people, whether it be as a rabbi or even as the Prime Minister of the State of Israel. In fact Jews pride ourselves on the plurality of our opinions. An important consequence is that any generalisation about what ‘Jews’ believe or how they behave, may be both true and not true at the same time; we resist stereotyping. But this also means that as Jews we should also be wary of any generalisations that talk about ‘the Muslims’ or ‘the Christians’ without respecting the individuality of adherents to those faiths as well. This is another of the lessons that constantly emerges from the practice and experience of dialogue.

Of the fourteen million Jews, about six million live in the State of Israel, some five million in the United States, and of the rest about one and a half million in Western and Eastern Europe, while others live in Commonwealth countries, some in Asia, Africa and South America. There is a significant difference in the sense of identity between those who are citizens of the State of Israel and those who live in the Diaspora. For Israelis their identity and culture is their nationality within which religious and other elements play a variety of roles. Diaspora Jewish communities experience themselves as part of whatever country to which they belong, though the degree to which they feel ‘at home’ will depend on local attitudes towards them. The long-term viability of Diaspora communities is always being questioned whether because of anti-Semitic actions making Jews wish to emigrate, or because of factors like intermarriage with non-Jews with a resultant loss of the sense of belonging to the Jewish people for subsequent generations. A book with the title ‘Vanishing Diaspora’<sup>3</sup> predicted the demise for European Jewish societies, on the basis of demographic evidence of aging and shrinking communities, and the general estrangement from classical forms of Jewish religious life. Nevertheless there is a kind of resilience that should not be underestimated, coupled with the impact of, for example, the opening up of Europe, which fosters greater mobility and potential mutual strengthening of Jewish community life.<sup>4</sup>

Diaspora Jewish communities play a similar fundamental role in society to other faith communities. With their commitment to education, welfare, good-neighbourliness and a commitment to democratic values in their governance and external relations, such communities are essential building blocks of Western civil society. It is at this grass roots level, in the interactions between synagogues,

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diaspora: The Jews in Europe since 1945* (Harvard University Press, Harvard, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Amongst several of her important papers on contemporary Jewish life in Europe by Diana Pinto, see the recent ‘Are there Jewish Answers to Europe’s Questions?’ in *European Judaism*, Volume 39, No 2 Autumn 2006, 47-57.

churches and mosques, that valuable, and largely unrecognized, interfaith dialogue takes place.

Though I have treated Israel and the Diaspora separately they are bound together in complex and often contradictory ways, through family connections, but also different religious and political perspectives. The early Zionist ideology assumed that with the creation of a Jewish nation state, all Jews would immigrate and the Diaspora would 'wither away'. Since that has not happened, there is instead the assumption, at least on a political level within Israel, that the Diaspora should be a largely uncritical supporters' club of Israel and a further source of potential immigration, financial and political support. Conversely, within the Diaspora, Israel is a source of pride and to some extent is a factor in Jewish identity. But it is also a major, and sometimes problematic, factor in determining attitudes towards the Jewish community in any given country. While it was easy to support Israel publicly in earlier decades, when the State was seen by European and American society as a model democratic achievement in the Middle East, the impact of the occupation of Palestine, the growing awareness of the tragic fate of the Palestinians, and the linkage of Israel with America, have all diminished Israel's standing, particularly in Europe. While it is sometimes possible to equate 'anti-Zionism' with anti-Semitism, Jews have to accept legitimate criticism of Israel's actions. Nevertheless, events which have major public disapproval, like the war in Southern Lebanon and the recent conflict in Gaza, lead to a rising number of anti-Semitic attacks on Jews and Jewish property in European countries, including deliberate terrorist killings. Diaspora Jews are often disturbed by the actions of Israel, but are sometimes silenced by the accusation that they have the luxury of not living in the State and so have no right to criticize decisions that are made by those on the 'front-line' of what is actually a long-term ongoing conflict. Nevertheless, there are Jewish voices that protest against Israeli actions and face the anger of the Jewish community which, despite its reservations, knows that there are times when it must show solidarity with Israel. If Jews tend naturally to show support for Israel, Muslims may well feel some kind of solidarity with the Palestinians, so that the conflict in the Middle East can have consequences in local areas outside. Nevertheless the Diaspora does offer opportunities for bridge building, particularly in the area of interfaith dialogue between Jews and Muslims where the two communities live as minorities in their respective Diasporas. Let us look at the state of that particular dialogue today.

### **The growth of interfaith dialogue**

Last year saw the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of a European interfaith initiative involving the three monotheistic religions, a project I have been personally engaged with since its initiation. Called the Standing Conference of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Europe (JCM), this week-long international student conference invites future leaders of the three faiths during their period of training to meet with each other for an intensive experience of shared study, discussion, religious services and informal meeting. I have spoken often about it here in Japan so do not want to repeat the details. At the anniversary celebration I talked about the difficulties and anxieties that accompanied the first conferences.<sup>5</sup> In that earlier period dialogue tended to be confined to a few individuals within their respective faiths, often somewhat marginal to the mainstream. However they were people with the

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<sup>5</sup> For the full paper see Jonathan Magonet 'Dialogue and Beyond' *European Judaism* Autumn 2015 forthcoming.

vision to recognize that dialogue with other religions was an essential task in a world where distances had shrunk, where communities previously living apart were increasingly becoming neighbours in the 'global village'. Finding partners at the beginning of the Conference series was a difficult task, partly because of the very different proportions of adherents to the three faiths in different European countries. Moreover, in the case of Muslims, as the newest arrivals in Europe they were still struggling to find their place and acculturate to the very different social situation they encountered. We found potential participants through personal contacts, which was important as we wanted people to participate as themselves and not feel that they had to represent their religion in some formal or official way. Our ignorance of each other's inner worlds inevitably led to mistakes. For example, did meeting with someone from a particular community actually alienate other communities belonging to the same faith and prevent them attending? How did one overcome the suspicion that 'dialogue' was a really a secret plot to missionize the other? How far should the conference remain a closed world where confidences were kept so as to build trust over time? This meant resisting the pressures to make public statements about contemporary issues. Such questions probably occur at the beginning of any new such initiative today. But, especially during the last twenty years or so, in part as a response to the challenges posed by 9/11, there has been a phenomenal growth of organisations, publications, programmes and even academic studies of interfaith dialogue

Most trace the beginnings of attempts at a global encounter amongst the different religions to the *World's Parliament of Religions* that took place in Chicago in 1893. Subsequent initiatives included the creation of the *World Congress of Faiths*, begun in 1936 through the vision of Sir Francis Younghusband. The organisation called *Religions for Peace* was founded in 1961, when a handful of senior leaders from the world's major faith traditions began to explore the possibility of organizing a "religious summit." They felt the urgent need for believers around the world to take action toward achieving world peace. The World Conference of *Religions for Peace* convened for the first time in Kyoto, Japan, in 1970.

In the 1990's Professor Hans Küng began to formulate a theological basis to dialogue in activities that led him to create the *Foundation for a Global Ethic*. He defined its task in a formula that has become well known:

No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.

Beginning in the 1990's Bishop William Swing in America created the *United Religions Initiative (URI)* which now claims hundreds of thousands of members in more than 80 countries to promote dialogue and action.

In 1995, the *International Council of Christians and Jews* decided at its Annual General Meeting to establish the '*Abrahamic Forum*' - a trilateral Jewish-Christian-Muslim committee. This decision to include a Muslim component in their programme was taken in recognition of the increasing numbers of Muslims, particularly in Europe, and the growing impact of Islam in the western world. This expansion of their work reflected the Council's awareness of the essential need for dialogue, tolerance and respect, and for positive actions to help overcome fears and prejudices. One of the earliest Muslim initiatives is the *Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS)* established in Amman in 1994 under the patronage of His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal where I had the privilege of lecturing in 1997.

Interfaith dialogue has now entered the political arena through the United Nations. In November 2008 Ban Ki-Moon opened the United Nations High-Level Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue. He said: 'Traditionally, peace involves balancing the interests of different States. But we have learned that lasting peace requires more than a competitive equilibrium. For peace to endure, individuals, groups and nations must come to respect and understand each other. Interfaith initiatives are addressing this need with ever greater frequency.' He added: 'For this to work, we need to involve everyone: government officials, grassroots groups, CEOs, philanthropists, academics and the media.'

Alongside the actual practice of interfaith dialogue, the same forty year period has witnessed the beginnings of academic programmes designed to explore the relationship between the three 'Abrahamic' faiths. While there is already a long history of Jewish-Christian dialogue, the relations between Jews and Muslims is a relative newcomer to this process, so it is worth noting some recent developments. One in particular grew out of a Jewish initiative. In the 1990's the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations was created in Cambridge by Dr. Edward Kessler, to be followed in 2006 with the Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations, the first such programme in Europe. The two centres are jointly part of the Woolf Institute. As well as its important role in education and research, one significant result of the collaborative work undertaken by the Institute has been the publication of 'An Open Letter: A Call to Peace, Dialogue and Understanding between Muslims and Jews'. Written in consultation with Muslim authorities worldwide it is the first such document from a Muslim perspective.<sup>6</sup>

In America between 2010 and 2014 three institutions, The Jewish Theological Seminary, Hartford Seminary and the Islamic Society of North America, worked together on academic workshops and community-based pilot projects. The results were published in a special issue of the academic journal *The Muslim World* on "Judaism and Islam in America" and the resource guide "Sharing the Well."<sup>7</sup> This latter document includes a set of guidelines for how to conduct dialogue, and I take a particular pride in recognizing here the same principles worked out over the years in the JCM conference. It reads:

**In order to engage in dialogue rather than debate, we will:**

**Listen with a view of wanting to understand, rather than listening with a view of countering what we hear.**

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<sup>6</sup> It can be found on the website of the Woolf Institute: [www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/uploads/open%20Letter9620text.pdf](http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/uploads/open%20Letter9620text.pdf) A Jewish response from the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) can be found under the title 'Seek Peace and Pursue It: A Jewish Call to Muslim-Jewish Dialogue on the website of Belief Net at <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Judaism/2008/03/Seek-Peace-And-Pursue-It-A-Jewish-Call-To-Muslim-Jewish-Dialogue.aspx?p=1>.

<sup>7</sup> For the resource guide 'Sharing the Well' see <http://learn.jtsa.edu/content/commentary/5775/sharing-well-resource-guide-jewish-muslim-engagement>

Listen for strengths so as to affirm and learn, rather than listening for weaknesses so as to discount and devalue.

Speak for ourselves from our own understanding and experiences, rather than speaking based on our assumptions about others' positions and motives.

Ask questions to increase understanding, rather than asking questions to trip up or to confuse.

Allow others to complete their communications, rather than interrupting or changing the topic.

Keep our remarks as brief as possible and invite the quieter, less vocal participants into the conversation, rather than letting the stronger voices dominate.

Concentrate on others' words and feelings, rather than focusing on the next point we want to make.

Accept others' experiences as real and valid for them, rather than critiquing others' experiences as distorted or invalid.

Allow the expression of real feelings (in ourselves and in others) for understanding and catharsis, rather than expressing our feelings to manipulate others and deny their feelings are legitimate.

Honor silence, rather than using silence to gain advantage.

*(Guidelines for "Before Beginning," by Joyce Schreibman)*

*(Guidelines for "Dialogue Rather than Debate" adapted by Yehezkel Landau and Karen Nell Smith for use in the Building Abrahamic Partnerships program at Hartford Seminary)*

Another important resource in America is the Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement, created in 2008, which grew out of the friendship amongst a number of colleagues including the Jewish scholar of Islam Professor Reuven Firestone. It is a joint activity supported by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC), the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation and the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences. The website contains scholarly articles written by Dr. Reuven Firestone and Dr. Fathi Osman in order to portray perspectives from both religions. Topics by these scholars include Abraham, women, human rights, Religious Holy War, Sharia, and much more. In addition, there is information about heritage, shared traditions and values. The goal of these resources is to provide a solid one-stop reference for Muslims and Jewish people who are interested in learning about one another. The Center has opened up a YouTube channel and have stocked it with videos containing short interviews and addresses from Dr. Firestone and Dr. Osman. The videos address



topics such as Apostasy, Interfaith Friendship, Historic relationships between Islam and Judaism, Medieval History etc.

In 2009 Professor Jacob Neusner, a renowned scholar of classical Jewish texts and teachings, advocated the development of a theological ‘trialogue’ between the three faiths, and attempted to indicate some of the commonalities and differences that could be addressed. He writes:

All three affirm that God is one and unique. So they worship the same God. All three concur that God rewards virtue and punishes sin and governs the fate of all humanity. All three believe that God has sent prophets to humanity and all three are religions centered on revealed books, the Torah, the Bible and the Quran. So they share elements of a common structure and as a matter of fact a common morality.

Second, all three share a common heritage of narrative contained in Scripture. They are not strangers to one another. They maintain a common program of story-telling and differ on a shared agendum. Islam recapitulates the narrative of Christianity and Judaism, and Christianity that of Judaism.

That leads directly to the third and most important link among the monotheisms: Christianity sees itself in continuity with Judaism, and Islam undertakes to continue Christianity and Judaism. Moses is prophet in not only Judaism but also Christianity and Islam. Abraham and Sarah are father and mother in Christianity and Judaism.<sup>8</sup>

Neusner goes on to indicate five areas in which fruitful mutual interchange could be significant because in each instance whereas two of the three traditions represent radically different positions, the third partner may represent some kind of middle ground. These include the classical theological concepts: Monotheism, the People of God, the Holy Way of Life, the relation of Believers and infidels or Unbelievers, and the End of Days. In each category he offers what he considers to be the respective positions of the three faiths, while recognizing that he speaks out of a Jewish perspective.

Neusner brings a valuable detailed analysis of themes to be explored. Another approach to thinking about the relationship between Judaism and the other two religions is to recognize that it shares different features with each. With regards Islam, without over-romanticising the past relationship between Jews and Muslims in ‘the Golden Age of Spain’, the two religions share a considerable number of beliefs and values, the product of centuries of interaction. These include a faith rooted in and expressed through law, a revealed text, parallel traditions of interpretation and commentary, and often a shared Hebrew/Arabic spiritual vocabulary. But Jews also share a lot with Christians as post-enlightenment religions, products of historical-critical scholarship, more individualistic in our thinking, sharing at least the Hebrew Bible, and both joined and separated by the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Jew. Thus in an ideal world Jews could play a mediating role between these two great spiritual stepchildren which seem so determinedly set on a collision course with each other. But, tragically, the conflict in the Middle East makes such a Jewish role unlikely.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Time for Islam: From Dialogue to Trialogue in Interfaith Relations’, By Jacob Neusner. It can be found on the website of the Journal of Interreligious Studies at <http://irdialogue.org/articles/time-for-islam-from-dialogue-to-trialogue-in-interfaith-relations-by-jacob-neusner/>

## **The elephant in the room**

In all such ‘trialogues’ or in any encounter between Jews and Muslims, the unspoken topic, the ‘elephant in the room’, which must nevertheless be addressed, is the Israel-Palestine conflict. There is no doubt that the deepest yearning of the average Palestinian and the average Israeli is for peace, and that its elusive nature is an ever-present tragedy. The origins of the conflict are complex and there are narratives on both sides that reinforce assertions of blame for past and present realities. Clearly the Jewish experience of the Shoah, the Holocaust, is still an enormous factor in Jewish attitudes to any kind of threat to Jewish existence, and the rhetoric of the Arab, and increasingly the Muslim world, do nothing to alleviate such fears. On the other hand the policies of successive Israeli governments, dictated by external threats, but also internal struggles and ambitions, can be criticised on many levels. Indeed it is one of the strengths of Israel that despite the political conflict there are numerous private initiatives and programmes that promote dialogue with Arabs, Palestinians and Muslims, as well as organisations that resist certain activities by the government, including soldiers refusing to serve in certain occupied areas. The desire is for peace, but at what price and at how great a risk?

Interfaith dialogue does exist there in many different ways, even though it seems to have made little impact on the political level. A recent study ‘Interfaith Dialogue in Israel-Palestine: Real Contribution or Venting Mechanism?’ was written by Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Associate Professor of International Peace and Conflict Resolution at American University’s School of International Service in Washington DC. He indicates some of the problems that tend to undermine dialogue efforts in this region:

In a context like the Israel-Palestine conflict, religion has been manipulated by the three religious groups involved to fuel and perpetuate past and current violence (religious symbols, rituals, and sites are constantly brought into the conflict dynamics). It is, therefore, crucial to constructively engage people’s religious identity as a source of peace and pluralism to counter its manipulation in the cycle of political violence.

Having completed a study that examined interfaith dialogue in five Middle Eastern societies of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine, it became clear that many civil societies and some of these governments understand the potential constructive role that interreligious meetings can play in bridging the gaps within each society. However, there are few interfaith initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians in the region. Some of the reasons Palestinians gave for demonstrating caution in participating in such meetings were the risk of normalizing the occupation; frustration resulting from the failed Oslo peace process; the fact that Jewish-Israeli organizations are the initiators of these activities; and that most of these meetings avoid focusing on the political reality of occupation and oppression. ...

Despite the above critique and reasons for rejecting interfaith work, a few interfaith initiatives do offer an exceptional opportunity for Muslims, Christians and Jews to discuss their faiths in a peaceful setting. As a result, they contribute to breaking down negative stereotypes; learning more about other faith groups (their rituals, ceremonies and basic tenets); and, most importantly, rehumanizing the “enemy.” In a reality of hatred, suicide bombings and forty years of occupation and humiliation, images of the other side are dehumanized and the two people have no space (social, public or even personal) to meet face to face. Under such circumstances, interfaith dialogue

becomes a rare window through which Arabs and Jews view each other as humans and learn to cope with their mutual ignorance of each other's faiths.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth reminding ourselves of some of the peace initiatives that do exist in the Israel-Palestine context. Interfaith dialogue in Israel was established already in the 1950's amongst a group of peace activists, including the philosopher Martin Buber. One organisation that includes a number of dialogue groups, for example amongst professionals and school groups, is the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA). According to its mission statement it 'is dedicated to promoting peace in the Middle East through interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural study. We believe that, rather than being a cause of the problem, religion can and should be a source of the solution for conflicts that exist in the region and beyond.'<sup>10</sup> For its work UNESCO has recognized the IEA as an organization that is contributing to the culture of peace and as an actor of the global movement for a culture of peace.

One extraordinary product of the constant wars that Israel has fought is The Parents Circle – Family Forum, a joint Palestinian Israeli organization of over 600 families, all of whom have lost a close family member as a result of the prolonged conflict. According to their website:

PCFF's most broad-reaching activity is its "Dialogue Encounters" program. Dialogue encounters allow a group of individuals to hear the personal narrative and message of reconciliation of one Palestinian and one Israeli. These messages aim to increase the willingness of participants to embrace dialogue as an alternative to violence, and to better understand the needs and perspectives of the 'other side'. One of the primary goals of this program is to allow Palestinians and Israelis to meet one another, which has been increasingly rare since the Second Intifada. For many participants, the Dialogue Encounter is their first time meeting a member of the other side.<sup>11</sup>

Other programmes include a Narrative Project which brings together groups of Israelis and Palestinians from similar disciplines who meet with one another on a regular basis in order to forge mutual understanding and respect. It has established a Reconciliation Center which has meetings to promote public debate; also an annual summer camp for bereaved Palestinian and Israeli children. Its 'Crack in the Wall' Facebook group aims to use social media as a tool to increase connections between Israelis and Palestinians.

The newest such initiative is 'women wage peace' which emerged out of the fighting in Gaza in the summer of 2014.<sup>12</sup> Their website describes their aims and goals as follows:

The "Women Wage Peace" movement is a non-political, broad-based, and rapidly growing movement of thousands of women, taking action to influence

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<sup>9</sup> Common Ground News Service Jan 26, 2006. ([www.commongroundnews.org](http://www.commongroundnews.org))

<sup>10</sup> The executive director is Dr. Yehuda Stolov, and their website can be found at [www.interfaith-encounter.org](http://www.interfaith-encounter.org).

<sup>11</sup> Their website can be found at [www.theparentscircle.com](http://www.theparentscircle.com)

<sup>12</sup> Their website can be found at [womenwagepeace.org.il](http://womenwagepeace.org.il).

the public and political arena. We want to restore hope and work towards a peaceful existence for ourselves, our children and future generations. Our goal is to prevent the next war and lead to resolution of the conflict that is non-violent, respectable and agreeable to both sides – Israeli and Palestinian, within four years.

The number of such organisations could be multiplied. One other example that approaches the work of Israel-Palestinian reconciliation from a Jewish religious point of view is Rabbis for Human Rights.<sup>13</sup> Their website describes their mission as follows:

Founded in 1988, Rabbis for Human Rights is the only rabbinic voice in Israel that is explicitly dedicated to human rights. Representing over 100 Israeli rabbis and rabbinical students from different streams of Judaism, we derive our authority from our Jewish tradition and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Our mission is to inform the Israeli public about human rights violations, and to pressure the State institutions to redress these injustices. In a time in which a nationalist and isolationist understanding of Jewish tradition is heard frequently and loudly, Rabbis for Human Rights give expression to the traditional Jewish responsibility for the safety and welfare of the stranger, the different and the weak, the convert, the widow and the orphan.

### **Jewish teachings on peace**

It is relatively easy to make the case that Judaism is a religion whose prime concern is with peace. One need only turn to the frequent appearance of the word '*shalom*', conventionally translated as 'peace', in the Hebrew Bible to prove this contention. It occurs more than two hundred times and is found in all three divisions of the Hebrew Bible. In the Book of Numbers it is the climactic term in the Priestly blessing that subsequently became part of the daily Jewish liturgy: 'May God's face turn towards you and give you peace.' In the Book of Psalms it is evoked in a wordplay on the city of Jerusalem (*sha'alu sh'lom yerushalayim* – 'seek the peace of Jerusalem', Psalm 122:6). From Biblical times the word has been used in greetings, as in the commonly used '*shalom aleichem*', 'peace be upon you'. On the Shabbat, the holiest day of the week, which is intended to be a foretaste of the messianic age of universal peace, Jews greet one another with '*Shabbat Shalom*', 'Sabbath Peace', and the phrase has become the basis of a popular liturgical song. The Psalmist invites us to 'seek peace and pursue it' (Psalm 34:15) as the significant attribute of the individual who 'delights in life and in goodness'. The rabbinic tradition expands on this phrase as: 'seek peace in your own place and run after it in another'. They also note that whereas all the other commandments given by God in the Hebrew Bible are to be fulfilled when you encounter them in your daily life, only of peace are we commanded actively to seek it. (Numbers Rabbah Hukkat 19:27, cf Avot d'Rabbi Natan 12:26a)

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<sup>13</sup> Their website can be found at [rhr.org.il](http://rhr.org.il).

In a rabbinic saying, peace is one of the three pillars upon which the world depends for its continued existence (Mishnah Avot 1:18). But it forms a complex relationship with the other two pillars, 'truth' and 'justice'. If both 'truth' and 'justice' are insisted upon, conflict is inevitable as there is little room for 'peace' which depends for its success on the ability of all parties to compromise on their absolute demands. Indeed the acknowledgment of this requirement is encapsulated in a practice related to a phrase that appears frequently in Jewish liturgy: 'May the One who makes peace in the highest bring this peace upon us ('and upon all the world 'in some modern liturgies)'. As we recite it we take three steps backwards, one explanation for which is that in order to make peace we have to step back from our demands and create a space in which agreement can be reached.

Judaism has existed for most of two millennia as the faith of a minority group, surviving in many lands, amongst different cultures and religious traditions, without any material or political power. This was in sharp contrast to the dominant majority cultures, Christianity and Islam, which had to address the challenges and responsibilities of imperial power and ambition, with all their political consequences. The absence of power for Jewish communities, despite all the inherent dangers of suffering from exploitation, expulsions and ultimately attempted extermination, gave to Jews a kind of spiritual freedom to value peace and preach peace, without having to face the realities of exerting power over others, of legislation and enforcement. However, a theology that can support spiritual values for an embattled minority leaves Judaism ill-prepared for the enormous challenges, theological, moral and political, that arise with the emergence of the State of Israel, the 'Jewish return into history'. That is the challenge faced by Jews today in a global world but one in which we perceive ourselves as under threat.

Interfaith dialogue offers a new dimension to the way we encounter the world and a hope for a better future for all the children of Abraham. Let me conclude with a prayer that I composed some years ago and which has been included in the liturgy of the Reform Jewish movement in the UK to which I belong. It has also been used in other interfaith meetings elsewhere, a reminder that old barriers between the faiths are slowly breaking down.

God of all creation, we stand in awe before You, impelled by visions of human harmony. We are children of many traditions – inheritors of shared wisdom and tragic misunderstanding, of proud hopes and humble successes. Now it is time for us to meet – in memory and truth, in courage and trust, in love and promise.

In that which we share, let us see the common prayer of humanity; where we differ, let us wonder at human freedom; in our unity and our difference, let us know the uniqueness that is God.

May our courage match our convictions, and our integrity match our hope.

May our faith in You bring us closer to each other.

May our meeting with past and present bring blessing for the future.

Amen.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Seder Ha-tefillot*, Forms of Prayer Vol 1 Daily, Sabbath and Occasional Prayers 8<sup>th</sup> Edition (Movement for Reform Judaism, London 2008) page 249.