

Jewish Islamic Negotiations in Israel and Palestine:

A Participant Observer's Critical Analysis

©Marc Gopin

[Note: This is an earlier version of a chapter in *Promise and Peril: The Paradox of Religion as Resource and Threat*, ed. Leroy Rouner (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003)]

I began my journey as a scholar/practitioner of peace making by studying religious ethics. Throughout this journey, I have found that the abstract study of the subject could not easily translate into the hardest details of conflict scenarios, which defy easy categories of traditional ethical choices. I also became fascinated with the moral dilemmas —what one ought to do about them. Nevertheless, if one fixes one's attention too much on these dilemmas problems of great significance do arise.

Before I enter into some detailed stories, I want to put a frame around the odd place of being a participant observer or a scholar practitioner. The field of culture and conflict resolution that some of us have created is basically a composite of a series of challenges to the social sciences. These challenges are related to the understanding of paradoxical human behavior in terms of peace and violence, pro-social values and anti-social values, compassion and demonic barbarism, all of which exist side by side in the human psyche's potential. How is it possible for us to have all these capacities at the same time? This is a question that is basic to many branches of social and psychological inquiry. It is also a fundamental crux of anthropological studies of societies around the world.

Years ago I became fascinated by Conflict Analysis and Conflict Resolution as a field of analysis. It draws from fields such as anthropology, social psychology, and sociology. At its early inception—only about ten years ago--anthropologists were the troublemakers, raising basic doubts about the arrogance of Western models of analysis and intervention. My experience with religion brought about further trouble as I entered the field. As this field continued to invent its constructs, anthropologists and political scientists like Marc Ross and Kevin Avruch started posing further questions with regard to the validity and applicability of the field. [\[1\]](#) These questions addressed the fact that Conflict Analysis and Resolution, as well as the field and profession of Diplomacy and Negotiation, were inadequately addressing the “non-rational” or emotional side of human experience. Further criticisms were made because this “non-rational” side was only considered as a problem to be solved, something to be suppressed, or something to get removed from the formula so that one could get on with the real business or methods of negotiation. To this day, this character—the approach of a social science that evades the non-rational factors— still dominates the style, character, and substance of thousands of negotiations around the world. This is especially the case for those processes involving treaties and basic state-to-state relations. Nevertheless, this same style has also dominated the attempted negotiations to solve intractable conflicts (i.e., conflicts that go on for generations).

It became obvious to some of us that, when it comes to intractable conflicts, the methods focused on rational negotiation help partially. However, at other times, these same methods have failed miserably. As I got into the research and compared it to the empirical reality of human experience in deadly conflict I discovered some extraordinary discrepancies. In class after class of students from cultural conflicts around the world I found a definite trend of antipathy to these methods. As I drew on my own experiences with family conflict and life-long exposure to the Israeli-Arab or

Jewish-Arab conflict, I knew immediately that these methods were only truly applicable to highly educated negotiators at best, and certainly not to those members of my extended family and community who were heavily invested in the Middle East conflict. Not only were these methods failing, they were actually causing a lot of the problems in their raising false hopes of settlements. [\[2\]](#)

It started to become clear that the first and second parties in conflict do what they are supposed to be doing. In other words, these two actors engage in pre-established patterns or specific psychodynamics. These patterns involve the collective tendency to engage in cycles of violence such as escalation, demonization, or slow and steady mimesis where both parties end up resembling each other. But the third parties and the bystanders had the greatest potential to act creatively. But they were mostly a class of people who were treated in the literature as if they were disembodied observers. In fact, their unawareness of their own biases and emotional reactions to the conflicts at hand made them singularly unprepared to help the first and second parties achieve a greater level of self-awareness that needed to precede any rational negotiation.

It was not until Vamik Volkan and others began studying the deeper aspects of psychology that we started to see that in places of deep injury there were deeper processes going on that flew in the face of and undermined typical negotiating structures. [\[3\]](#) It became clearer that if one were to break the pre-established cycles or dynamics, then the third party has to be very self-aware and very keenly tuned into the non-rational aspects of the dynamic. The third party would need to be very familiar with how one works with the emotional or primal side of the human experience. This ought to be done in a way that allows people to eventually wake up from these unconscious, primal processes. Only after having done so, parties would be able to get to the more rational, interest-based negotiations, as well as rational compromises. The

way had to be found to help large populations go through these processes, with the help of good enough leadership, especially if that leadership wanted to discover the political maneuvering room to make difficult compromises called for by rational investigation.

In sum, the fundamental argument of the various schools of psychological thought has been that there is such a thing as a more reasonable human behavior. The degree of normalcy—present in some groups more than in others—allows for the existence of such things as civility, covenants, and social contracts. In the presence of these firmly established legal norms there would be no reason for revisiting life histories or ancestral traumas if one needs to negotiate a treaty over, say, rights to various fisheries. However, when human relations break down to such a severe degree that no rational negotiations are working; deeper things need to be studied in order to help people.

In this context I started to realize that religion was a dark abyss in academic research of conflict. Religion is a dark abyss partly because it has been compartmentalized within the study of human phenomena and within the university. Therefore, it is hardly something that is easily subject to cross-disciplinary investigations. There are a number of reasons for this—many of which are subject to the very understandable human biases of social science and social scientists. The realm of religion is a realm of trouble for many people who have escaped from repressive religious structures. One ought to note that there are innumerable religious institutions in all the major religions that are repressive. This dark fear of religion brings about absurd circumstances. For example, before it became obvious that religion played a major role in the Middle Eastern suicide bombings it was dismissed as irrelevant to the power politics or the material interests of all parties. Even after the best hope for

peace to come along in a generation, Anwar Sadat, was assassinated, religion was still dismissed. Then Yitshak Rabin, the next great hope, was assassinated. Still religion had to be irrelevant. Then wave after wave of religiously inspired suicide bombs rocked Jerusalem and brought about Netanyahu's election and his stalling of the peace process. Still nothing. Then September 11, 2001. Now everything changed. If one spoke about religion as a pathology or a problem, vast audiences would listen. On the other hand, if religion was presented as a solution, this was perceived as a dangerous threat to public order by many, despite the most clear assurances of a subtle approach to the simple use of religious texts, symbols, ethical acts, or rituals.

This evokes and must be related to a contemporary global struggle for public space that is a virtual war between many fundamentalisms around the world and the realms of secular culture. There are millions of human beings who are religious and who are perfectly comfortable with the public space being shared or being exclusively secular. In contrast, millions of others around the world are determined to take back that space by manipulation, by elections, or by violence, in the name of religion.

In the midst of this, to try to arrive at a constructive relationship with diplomacy and third party intervention has not been easy. In fact, the religious element, as one element among many in its relation to conflict analysis and diplomatic efforts, has been inherently challenged on a constant basis.

Scott Appleby and I have explored some of these challenges. [\[4\]](#) What has been accomplished so far, at the theoretical level, is the recognition and establishment of what Appleby has called "the ambivalence of the sacred". This term refers to the hermeneutical and behavioral possibility of religion to be at the forefront of the most aggressive and successful forms of peace making that the world has seen in the hands of people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the Dalai Lama. The vision of figures

like these ones prevented the suffering and death of millions of people. On the other hand the term “ambivalence” alludes to the millions of people that have died because of religiously inspired violence. It is important to note that since September 11, 2001 there is a tendency to perceive religion as hijacked by pathological individuals. In other words, there is a tendency to deny the fact that authentic religion can cause violence.

For political and diplomatic reasons, it is probably a good idea to not delve too deeply into the extremely violent texts within the world religious traditions in a very public way. This is especially the case if one were to dwell on them in an uneven handed way. On the other hand, no one that belongs to academia or professional practice will be able to help a cancerous agent without understanding its depths. Unfortunately, even at the academic level, there is a lot of blindness in relation to the depths of religious experience of violence.

We have been presented through religious readings and re-readings in recent times with the most passionate embrace of violence that has related to religion —not only as legal justification— but also as an experiential phenomenon. In other words, there has been an embrace of violence that is intrinsically related to the religious experience.

The ambivalence of the sacred can also be found if one were to revisit some of the texts. Peaceful laws, such as the prohibition to kill and the duty to help ones enemy, can be found in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, for example. [\[5\]](#) Nevertheless, the same texts refer to the duty of killing every man, woman, and children that belong to the Canaanite nations. [\[6\]](#) Likewise, some of the most beautiful poems of medieval saints, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, will also report on glorious visions of the bloody streets of Jerusalem during the Crusades. [\[7\]](#)

Today, one can refer to letters like the one written by Mohammed Atta—one of the September 11 hijackers. [8] This last testament is an important source that does not allude to revenge or anger but to the purity and preparations needed just before the encounter with God. It is important because Atta is referring to the preparation of a number of individuals who will arrive to the heavenly encounter only after murdering thousands of civilians. These examples help us understand that the ambivalence of the sacred refers to the primal forces of the human being. These primal forces have both an incredible capacity for barbarity and a passionate capacity for altruism, surrender, care, empathy, and self sacrifice. Throughout history, all of these forces have flowed within religious experience. Sometimes they actually flow together, as one, such as one someone who advocates or practices mass murder prepares himself for the ultimate act of altruism, giving his life for the greater glory of God and the sanctification of his name.

There is a need to deeply examine these texts and moments in history. One should analyze how this ambivalence and the multiple religious capacities, experiences, and interpretations can be shaped and moved in the direction of pro-social values and behavior, or whether secular repression of religious enthusiasm is the only way to safeguard innocent victims of war. A further question is whether the already formulated pro-social values of many religious systems can merge creatively with a new, “quasi religion” of humanity, namely the widespread commitment to freedom, democracy, civil rights, and universal human rights as the basis of civil societies of the future. These form part of an evolving “secular religion of the human community,” which has been gradually accepted by many. These universal principles have emerged in the same powerful and widespread way as the countervailing religious extremist trends that move in the opposite direction.

Political scientists, anthropologists, and psychologists have explored the way in which to arrive at some positive coexistence between the two countervailing trends. For example Marc Ross offers interesting insights in relation to the case of Northern Ireland. [\[9\]](#) He has focused on the fascinating symbolic aspects of the Protestant marches. There are a number of reasons that lead authors to explore the intricacies and secrets of these symbols. Myths, symbols, metaphors, and rituals are the way in which people often arrive in a violent hell of their own making. Consequently, I argue that these same elements will provide the ways in which to help people emerge from the violent hell in which they are immersed. Therefore, the elite rational negotiations that take place in far away castles or in London cannot really affect the Irish marches. If there is a need to use the same symbols and allude to the same myths, better approaches should be considered. For example, some efforts have included the creation of alternative marches. Many alternative efforts have been experimented with in Ireland, and so many of them are focused on people to people work that focuses on touching the deeper injuries of the conflict and the cultural roots of both conflict and peacemaking. This has shaped individuals on the ground and at the negotiation tables who have now become intimately familiar with the importance of the symbolic processes of change.

These religious and symbolic frameworks are a useful introduction to the question of Israel and Palestine. Let me introduce at this juncture the relevance of the Temple Mount/*haram-al-sherif*, as a powerful symbol capable of destroying many of the processes that took place at Camp David. The one square mile of the Temple Mount, home to the vestiges of both ancient Jewish Temples, the holiest site in the world of Judaism, the third holiest site of Islam with the magnificent Al Aqsa mosque, and also the Temple site through which Jesus walked and made his pronouncements, are at the core of the imaginative and symbolic conflict of Palestinians and Israelis. It is their

umbilical chord to legitimacy upon the land itself. It is their treasure and their comfort in the face of massive historical losses. This one symbolic space is also intimately connected to billions of people around the world who are rooted in monotheistic cultures of the Abrahamic faiths.

One of the reasons why this conflict is so intractable is because there are no third parties who are not part of the conflict and for whom these symbols do not affect them in ways that they may not have examined. In fact, there might be third parties —such as Americans, Protestants, Catholics, or secular people— who think that they are not part of this conflict. Nevertheless, all of these groups come from monotheistic cultures that are deeply related to this ancient spot in Jerusalem. It is a primal place of birth, of loss, and of longing—as all birth places are. The fights over legitimacy on the Temple Mount, the denial of Jewish historical connection to this spot have roused the most intense degree of anger in people to people relations as well as right inside the failed negotiations of Camp David in 2000.

So far very few people in this conflict, both unofficial and official, have demonstrated the capacity to listen to the depths of the story, the mythic/cultural/religious significance of story, and the pathologies of all sides of this conflict embedded in memory. Even worse, they mistake the lack of conversation about these older strata of consciousness as evidence of their lack of importance.

Let me give an example. I know a prominent Palestinian liberal intellectual in Eastern Jerusalem who has engaged in many discussions and conversations that took place between Muslims and Jews during the Oslo years. It was not until recently that this scholar realized that the Temple Mount was truly important to most Jews. There might be many reasons for his misunderstanding. A simple one could be that his interlocutors did not realize the importance until the issue was brought to the table. In

other words, no one had previously understood the importance of Old Jerusalem. In fact, the fascinating aspect of primal symbols is that they are not important until they “hit you in the face.” His claim is that in numerous conversations even religious Jews downplayed its importance to him, and so he claims that the Palestinian side was completely unprepared for the fact that denying Jewish sovereignty on or rights to this spot could have destroyed so much at Camp David. But the Jews, and even the Americans, would argue that the outrageous denial of Jewish presence on that ancient site was evidence of a larger unwillingness to truly recognize Israel’s right to existence as such. Why were these things not discussed deeply for thirteen years of Oslo? Why were the surprises saved for the last minute?

We have this moment in time of thirteen years of Oslo, built on billions of dollars of projects that went down the drain in corruption, twelve police forces ending up in the West Bank, absolutely no serious trust built of a deep cultural nature with very clear results. All of this happened without a single truly honest conversation on the most primal space of longing, mourning, rage, and aspirations that are embodied in that one square kilometer. There were endless plans for that one spot, and for the Old City, and for Jerusalem as such. Many clever plans by very smart people, some officials and some academics. But I could not believe my ears when I realized that those conversations were never cross-cultural. They never touched the bi-communal depths of memory and longing, past, present and future, never probed the linkage of existence, meaning and survival and the symbol of this one place. And so they were unprepared for the moment of truth, the moment in which civilization choose between war and peace, death and life.

This exemplifies how all parties—including the Americans and the Europeans—unconsciously conspired so as not to think about these primal spaces, because they did not have a way to deal with it.

My Arab and Jewish religious friends in Israel, who are for the most part ignored politically but who do have personal linkages to Israeli and Palestinian officials, sit every Friday morning overlooking the Temple Mount. They are Jews, Muslims, Sufis, and Christians who sit there for an hour while chanting ‘*shalom*’ and ‘*salaam*.’, and sharing hopes and prayers. People come and visit them, and they keep chanting. Do they have an impact on the leadership? No. On the other hand, one would be surprised about how much is and was going on beneath the surface between these kind of actors and officials at the highest level. Was it enough to stop the violence? No, not yet. But, at the same time, considering how little financial support and protection that there has been for these courageous people it is remarkable how much impact they have had as individuals. Finding and supporting such unusual religious actors, especially those with good political sensibilities, is one of the key tasks of religious peacebuilding.

I travel to Israel often with the intention of doing something called “active compassionate listening.” I went with a group called Initiatives of Change, a group that is not perfect, but whose intuitive peacemaking methods are brilliant in creating relationships. And relationship building is the gateway through which cultural and religious conflict resolution takes place. For many practitioners of conflict resolution—particularly those who devote attention to conflict transformation and to John Paul Lederach’s literature on the Mennonite Model—relationship building is central. [\[10\]](#) These relationships do not mean ‘dialogue.’ Instead, they involve gestures, symbols, and deeds that represent the key for the basis of what these scholars have observed in terms of changing relationships in numerous Latin American and

African conflicts. The group I traveled with decided to try to do this in Israel and Palestine, especially because they knew that they had previously failed at it. They had failed because they themselves had had a problem with the capacity for empathy simultaneously with both Arabs and Jews. This group began trying to change their internal need to demonize one side and be in denial of the other.

The Christian world is particularly divided between two forces. On the one hand, there are those who demonize the Jews and are in denial about the dangers inherent in the current expression of the Palestinian Authority, PLO, Islamic terrorism, etc. On the other hand, one can find those who need to demonize the Muslims and are in denial of the behavior of the Israel Defense Forces and the things that Israel did from the very beginning to contribute to the misery of the Palestinian people. The conflict is made worse by these two Christian forces supporting both sides. The conflict is exacerbated because these external forces strengthen both sides. This represents the dangers of pretending to be a peacemaker. If one does not have the discipline of “radical empathy” simultaneously with all sides, in the long run, the third party, “the peacemaker” will become part of the problem.

During the visit to Israel we decided to speak to everybody across the spectrum of ethnicity, religion and education. We engaged in classic “second track diplomacy” involving Haredi and Hasidic rabbis, Sephardi cultural leaders, members of the Israeli Parliament, people in the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Palestinian officials, Palestinian intellectuals, Palestinian activists, Palestinian professors, and even simple Palestinian newlyweds. In the process of doing this classic “track two” work, I became involved in what we now call “track one and a half diplomacy.” This means that we were moving in between these actors on the ground —mostly of a religious nature— and the official elites, such as the Office of the Israeli Prime Minister and the President of the Palestinian Authority.

Another feature of the peacemaking that I have come to embrace is called elicitive peacemaking, and the bottom line of such a method is humility and great attention to what people “on the ground” and in the conflict claim is essential for stopping the violence or moving peacemaking forward. This has not prevented me from disagreeing with or distancing myself from local methods of peacemaking where the evidence seems clear that they are actually doing more harm than good. [\[11\]](#) On the other hand, where there is clear uncertainty about which path to follow I stand very cautiously before the advice of local actors in terms of next steps.

I was being encouraged by local actors to engage in a new peace track which was meant to behave as a parallel peace process—a religious one. These efforts yielded some results. Nevertheless, these results have been completely overshadowed by the levels of violence and barbarity that have come up in 2002.

Years were spent working on a “religious peace treaty.” A meeting in the winter of 2002 in Alexandria, Egypt is one of the most recent attempts to revive previous efforts in this regard. Among the signatures of this meeting’s documents are the names of the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Israeli government, a Minister of the PA Talal Seder, the Chief Sheikh of Alazar University, Tantawi, the second in command to the Mufti of Jerusalem, and a number of religious Christian clerics who are heads of the churches in Israel. Rabbi Menahem Frohman, one of the central proponents of religious peacemaking, also signed the document.

This represents a remarkable accomplishment and the flowering of much of what has been done in the past. Nevertheless, it fell far short of the kind of symbolic and ethical gestures that I and Rabbi Frohman have been advocating. This action focused on a statement, on a document, and was not nearly strong enough to impact the kind of primal spaces of human psychology and culture that were mentioned earlier.

However, one should note that statements are also important. The fact that all of these leaders could come to the conclusion that the Holy Land is holy to all three Faiths, that all must respect the purposes of the Creator, that nobody should shed innocent blood, these are not insignificant achievements. They framed their ideas under the “name of the God who is all mighty, merciful and compassionate,” a line that symbolizes the fusion of Jewish and Islamic prolegomena. It was a remarkable document that unfortunately delivered far too little and arrived far too late to stem the violence done by months and months of barbaric violence.

It is important to note that never in our work have we believed that this kind of inter-religious statements would be enough to stop the violence. What is needed are a series of gestures, statements, and moments between religious faiths. These should be directed at creating cognitive and emotional dissonance capable of breaking the demonized structure of enemy systems. This process takes a long time. However, it eventually causes enough shock to the system by involving enough people. Once this shift occurs, there are enough people in the middle so as to isolate radicals on both sides.

As a follow-up to Alexandria, I have proposed gestures such as joint religious rituals of mourning the dead and expressing sorrow over the loss of sacred life, especially of the innocent children. Consciousness of death infects most conflicts and the rational methods of negotiation do not even begin to address its destructive power within the peacemaking process. These approaches do not acknowledge that people kill and die for generations because of their need to honor the dead, to ensure that they did not die for nothing. Therefore, there is a need for religious and political leaders to —by word and deed— mourn and acknowledge both peoples’ losses.

I have also proposed various ways of honoring the Torah and the Koran in a very physical and immediate way. This would be demonstrable evidence symbolizing a “new era,” that would seriously affect the perceptions and behavior of religious people on both sides, making it harder for them to drift toward extremist groups and extremist behavior. Mourning the dead, honoring cultural symbols of a group affect a far broader group of people than the devout, however. The key is to provoke enough change in the middle of both cultures to create a majority for peace and justice.

The type of cognitive dissonance that triggers actors’ reactions is what one needs to achieve. For example, initial reactions to new gestures are critical but then they provoke thought and discussion. Fresh gestures take matters further and begin to shift the nature of the communal debates. The reactions to an initial statement or gesture have the potential to provide a momentum for questions, dialogue, and introspection. There is no doubt that if this were a repeated gesture and leaders on both sides were pressured by smart third parties to embrace the gesture, over time it would start to make an impact.

This process of entering into what I sometimes call “mythic peacemaking” is, indeed, a very strange one. There was a point in my journey to Yasser Arafat’s headquarters in 2000, when the West Bank rabbi, the Sufi sheikh, some of my other colleagues, and I finally made it into Arafat’s office, after experiencing some perilous impediments. I have visited Arafat with great misgivings. I know his history. I know how he plays both sides constantly. I also questioned, however, whether he was in full control of his emotions. And I still do as of this writing. My sense was and is that standard forms of diplomacy and enemy negotiations had not successfully accessed a place in this man’s mind and heart where he veers constantly between war and peace. I was moved by

local colleagues who felt that it was worth trying where rational methods of negotiations had failed.

Arafat sat with us for hours on that pivotal day of my life. And we spoke for so long, inside a religious, mythic universe that rabbis, sheikhs and ministers would understand, but which would drive average diplomats crazy. We spoke and dreamed about a Holy Land where there were no states, a kind of nonviolent version of messianic Jewish dreams and Islamic dreams of the Caliphate. In Arafat's mind the real vision was to become the liberator of this Holy Land, a guardian of all three Abrahamic faiths. And I considered it our job to help him find ways politically to accomplish that without violence, to be a Salaadin to his people, to be a liberator and caretaker of the holy places of all three religions--but without violence.

Arafat liked the role that we were offering him —the protector of holy spaces. While we were there, he put us on Palestinian television three times. Now this is the same man that permitted the continuation of Hamas, Al Aqsa brigades, Tanzim, suicide bombing activity against civilians, against children. He is a man of complete contradiction. Those of us who were there felt that it would not be the first time in history in which unstable leaders need to be moved and cajoled in one direction. We also felt that the rationalist methods had failed completely and would in the future.

As a follow-up to this visit local activists envisioned a group comprised of religious practitioners, some leaders, working together. They wanted this group to help the political leaders move to a different cultural and psychological space. The objective would be to change their attitude with regard to the “enemy.”

There is some reasonable evidence that I cannot go into here that if we had had a third party such as the United States that really understood the power of cultural gestures

and the motivating power of religious and cultural visioning for these leaders things would be different today, especially if this had been incorporated into interventions of the Oslo years, before the unbelievable destruction of life and property in 2001-2002. I must recognize that some third parties —such as the State Department— did not prevent our efforts. Nevertheless they decided to ignore us, and that hurt our work with the political leaderships. At various points leaders on both sides indicated quite clearly that they might have embraced cultural, ethical and religious gestures if third parties had indicated to them that this was critical to the peace processes. This failure is a simple and profound tragedy. In my darkest moments I have considered it practically criminal. Leaders in conflict are expected to be paralyzed and incapable of humanitarian gestures. Psychodynamically speaking they are regressed; that is their role. But third parties are supposed to have the wisdom and courage to see what people on both sides need to see and hear from their enemies. Where were these third parties of wise empathy and wise advice? Where were the Americans? The Europeans? The clergy of the West? The answer is that they were too wrapped up in the conflict themselves to tell both sides what they really needed to do. And this is where we stand today, missing third parties who can take an enraged Arab and Muslim world, and an angry Israeli rejectionist camp back from the precipice of total war.

The independent and rather unsupported religious efforts of the unsung heroes who I have alluded to here took place for years, well before people started dying in large numbers. It was very clear that Israelis and Palestinians were both saying that they needed somebody to intervene for them. Even Arafat mentioned, “We need the Americans.” Like this meeting we had, there are fascinating moments of the inter-penetration of the power of myth and symbol. The power of religious inter-cultural

relationships represents a “strange space.” It is a “space” that evokes questions and carries answers of whether the leaders that have been killing can stop doing so.

The meeting with Arafat took place about six months into the Al-Aqsa Intifada. A few weeks before, I had received a letter from President Clinton, which supported the work of religion and conflict resolution. He also instructed the National Security Council to follow up with my colleagues and me. This never happened. I understood that it would take a lot of effort and resources —financial ones— before some agencies took our proposal seriously. Therefore, I was left only with Clinton’s letter. I faxed it to the West Bank. Arafat—who was impressed with the letter— decided to read it before the Palestinian Assembly. He then announced that they were going to engage in a religious peace treaty called *hudna*. *Hudna* means “religious cease-fire” and evokes a posture that Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, had offered to his enemies. It does not mean “peace” but it was a cessation of war. Nevertheless, some *hudnas* have historically been maintained for generations. Consequently, this important legal category, within the Islamic approach to war, opens a possibility for a change in relationship. Some argued that Arafat did not have the authority to declare a *hudna*. Apparently, the powerful authorities in Egypt, such as Tantawi, were the only ones empowered to do so. I felt that the Israeli official decision to not respond to Arafat’s gesture because a *hudna* from him was not religiously significant was a terrible mistake because it missed the more important power of symbol. It missed the potential of symbol to spawn positive symbolic reactions and to create a spiral of good will that captures ambivalent, even violent, leaders and movements inside a web of their own rhetoric. It missed the opportunity to offer the Palestinians authentic Jewish gestures, and to create a spiral of ethical gestures that could set the stage for a better negotiating atmosphere.

Once more, rationalist choices of power failed to understand the importance of the bilateral symbol between enemies that we were trying to create.

After this attempt failed and once the Intifada had reached terrible proportions (but before the barrage of suicide bombings), I again found myself on the West Bank looking into Arafat's eyes. Searched everything in me to come up with the right words. I said to him, "I am a rabbi and in my tradition it is obligatory for me to comfort people that are mourning." I expressed my sorrow for the people who had already died. This stunned them and moved them. We had spoken as a group for some time, but no one had brought up the bloody reality outside the room. Nobody had made reference to the dead. Men often will engage in this way.

The conversation stopped because of what I had said, and I continued speaking directly to Arafat about some words in the Talmud, the ancient and foundational book of rabbinic Judaism. I said to him, "The Talmud says that the world survives only because of three things: justice, truth, and peace." I was seated right next to him (the letter from Clinton had given me some undeserved prominence). I leaned close to him, looked directly into his eyes, and continued slowly, word after deliberate word, "And a wise rabbi adds, where there is no justice there will never be peace, but where there is no peace there can never be justice." By the piercing look he shot at me I understood that he knew that, with the first part of my statement, I was agreeing with him as the leader of a people unjustly treated. I understood that we needed to focus the negotiations more on justice, since the negotiations were always about peace. But, in the second part, I was letting him know that his methods of resistance will never work because they are not based on peace. Arafat—who seemed astonished and had been silent most of the time—commented on the importance of what I was saying. He continued to stare at me as the conversation shifted to other things. Then quite

unexpectedly he volunteered, “As a boy I used to pray at the Western Wall with the old Jewish men. They would say their prayers and I would say mine.” In that instant he was letting me know that he did not buy all that nonsense he had spouted at Camp David about Jews having no historical relationship to the Temple Mount. I think that he was offering me something, a religious gesture of acknowledgement and honor, just as I had honored him by mourning his dead and acknowledging the importance of justice in this conflict.

The next day Arafat announced, for the first time after six months of the Intifada, that there should be no killing of civilians. This gesture was a moment that was eventually rolled over and buried by violent action, counter-action, revenge, retaliation, and punishment. The moment we had created inter-religiously, inter-culturally was gone, dead and buried. But what we proved with it is that the moments are possible, that they can be multiplied many times. Moments like these represent one step of a whole intercultural process that should slowly allow for a new vision to take place if there are wise third parties to stimulate this. This would be especially powerful if this could happen through mediation between the two leaders behind closed doors.

It would be difficult to go through all the lessons that we have learned. In *Holy War, Holy Peace*, I present a series of cultural de-escalation measures, well beyond the examples I have given here. [\[12\]](#) I argue that both sides should be encouraged to take these practical measures so that they can arrive to a different cultural space and a different moment of opportunity. Once the sides have gone through this first step, the other stages —the rational processes of de-escalation— might prove successful.

I have already emphasized some cultural de-escalation measures like mourning, shared study, symbolic shared deeds that both sides consider righteous. Among those righteous deeds are visiting the sick, caring for the land, helping the poor. All of these

things have to be bilateral and done in a deeply cultural way. These acts are part of a slow and steady process that should precede and accompany any other formal negotiation. There should never again be another Oslo that is just about building industrial parks and making sure that there are twenty police forces. The latter stands for a waste of history and a waste of human lives. Instead, there should be a process that includes weekly gestures and projects of cultural change, social change, and psychological change. These changes should include the highest leaders that are willing to be part of this. Only then will there be a possibility of uprooting Hamas and of uprooting the most brutal behavior by all military actors in this conflict on both sides.

A powerful middle that understands the intricacies of culture and symbols as well as the power of the ethical deed will be the sole way in which we will be able to withstand the pressures for destruction. One should keep in mind that those pressures for destruction are concentrated in places like Jerusalem or the Temple Mount. I believe we are beginning to discover the central importance of ethics and culture, the centrality of honor, humiliation, and the devastating effects of cheapening human life through random violence. Nevertheless we need to go through a cultural revolution for some of these answers to begin working in our favor.

Those people who see themselves as outside the conflict have to reframe their own perceptions and the way they can intervene. All of us should understand our own attitudes towards the importance and power of religious symbols, of cultural institutions, of the emotional side of human existence, and of the transformative power of ethical deeds. More importantly, we should understand the power that people have to change their hearts in a way that yields practical programs of safety, security, and restoration of lost honor. This is the place in which religious values and

symbols can play a pivotal role in creating or restoring national homelands that are not built on the misery of others.

[1] See Marc Ross, *The Management of Conflict: Interpretations and Interests in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) Also see Kevin Avruch, *Culture and Conflict Resolution* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1998); and Kevin Avruch, Peter Black, and Joseph Scimecca eds. *Conflict Resolution: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1991).

[2] See William Ury, *The Third Way* (New York and London, Penguin Books, 2000), who has a more subtle and impressive message in recent writings. The classics in this field include Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating an Agreement Without Giving In* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1981); Roger Fisher and Scott Brown, *Getting Together: Building a Relationship that Gets to Yes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988); and Roger Fisher ed. *International Conflict and Behavioral Science* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1964).

[3] See Vamik Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies* (New Jersey and London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1988); and Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).

[4] See R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of The Sacred* (New York and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000); Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[5] See Exodus 23:4 and 20:13.

[6] See Deuteronomy 20:1-17.

[7] *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Fathers Series, 1977).

[8] Mohammed Atta, translated letter available on line <http://www.fpp.co.uk/online/01/11/WTC_Atta_Letter.html>

[9] Marc Ross, "Psychocultural and Psychodynamic Interpretations: Identity and Ethnic Politics," *Political Psychology* 22(2001), 157-178.

[10] See John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995); and John Paul Lederach and Cynthia Sampson, *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[11] For example, there are certain methods of dialogue through provocation of confrontation that I cannot support. I have seen this method in several places and it always seems to do more harm than good. It also becomes quite manipulative of raw emotions. Constructive conflict engagement is essential and should be managed wisely but not manipulated for methodological purposes.

[12] Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to The Middle East* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).