

RELIGION AS DESTROYER AND CREATOR OF PEACE: A POST-MORTEM ON FAILED PEACE PROCESSES

©Marc Gopin
January 26, 2002

Religion and conflict are sufficiently intertwined at this stage of the Arab/Israeli conflict that it behooves us to reflect on what went wrong with peace processes that ignored the vital role of religion. We should pursue this analysis both in terms of diagnosis of a conflict situation as well as in terms of recommendations for management and resolution.

The pervasive support of the settlements and its effect on Israeli policy is clearly driven in strong measure by religious constituencies. By contrast, Islamicist impact on the continuing demand for all of historic Palestine is plainly apparent, as is cultural and religious permission to pursue ever deadlier forms of assault on innocent civilians. Both sides' religious communities have contributed to making the Temple Mount a central crux of the conflict. Thus, religion is not the only factor of the conflict but it has definitely contributed in no small measure to its perpetuation and escalation.

What the study of religion had to teach us and what the Oslo process needed was a much deeper understanding of religious negotiables and non-negotiables. Religion, especially in monotheistic cultures, carries ancient instincts and values. Those who orchestrated the Oslo process on all sides tended to hold these ancient instincts and values in disdain. That is why they wanted issues of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount to be left for last, as if they could be swept into a done deal at the last minute. And that is one of the reasons that they were so roundly defeated by this issue in those last tragic months of negotiation. There is no question that the issue of refugees and the right of return played an equally important role at Camp David.

The destructive impact of religious symbols was two-fold: 1. Religiously contested spaces and symbols are inherently connected to the deepest of human emotions, even very often for members of a cultural or ethnic group who are not otherwise religious, 2. The deliberate covering up of these issues until the last months implied a disdain of religious values that already encouraged rejectionism on the part of religious constituencies. In an insidious way, unresolved and un-addressed emotional symbols, such as contested religious spaces, are accidents waiting to happen. They are there to be exploited by anyone who wants to destroy a peacemaking process.

That is what happened. I remember speaking on the phone with someone who was intimately familiar with the Camp David talks in the summer months before the Intifada started. He never said much, but, uncharacteristically, he said to me curtly, “Does someone know how to explain to them that there actually was a Jewish presence on this Temple Mount thousands of years ago?” I sensed in that phone call the exasperation, the sad unpreparedness for this most delicate and hurtful phase of the negotiations. Later I would learn that Arafat had hardly said anything for two weeks, despite the honest hard work and rather pitiful enthusiasm of his advisors. But Arafat did manage to pointedly remark that there was never a Jewish temple on the Temple Mount, the most holy site of the Jewish community for two thousand years. What better torpedo?

I cannot help but wonder whether, in addition to the parochial political motivations of Sharon to stroll on the Temple Mount later in that fateful year of the beginning of the Al Aqsa Intifada, that he did not also consider his walk on the Temple Mount, with dozens of police, as a reply to Arafat. In many ways both acted characteristically, one with feigned ignorance and denial, and the other with overwhelming force.

There is another piece to the story that is less commonly known. Arafat, as some have recounted recently, is a man of split personality, able to orchestrate two conversations and two intentionalities simultaneously. That dishonesty has been his favorite mode of survival, but it has

also been the deepest source of his alienation from most American administrations. American leaders understand men of violence, and anyone familiar with American foreign policy knows that they are willing to work with them. But they cannot abide perpetual liars. It seems to drive them crazy, especially the current President Bush. Seasoned diplomats are used to dealing with deception, but Arafat takes this to a level that has alienated him from most leaders.

But what of this other side of Arafat, the side that deals amicably with rabbis and many other Jews? Why did he waste political capital putting me and other rabbis on Palestinian television, for example, right in the middle of the Intifadeh? He volunteered to me, after a powerful session of inter-religious exchanges, in the presence of many people, Jews, Christians and Muslims, that he used to pray as a child with the old Jewish men at the Western Wall, thus implicitly honoring and acknowledging it as a Jewish holy site? Why did he say this to us in April and then in August at Camp David deny any Jewish sacred presence on the Temple Mount? Arafat had said these things to us at the same time that his Mufti in Jerusalem was denying any historic Jewish existence on the Temple Mount. The entire issue is absurd in light of Islamic sources themselves that refer to the Temple Mount as Bais al-Miqdas in numerous *hadith*, as we will outline below. These are enigmas that devolve into questions of split personality, as well as political and emotional manipulation. But it is the manipulation of religion that is important.

We see several political strains of behavior that pave the way for the cynical manipulation of religious emotions in the absence of a serious attempt to treat religion as a part of the conflict and a part of its resolution. Damage to honor, humiliation, denial of existence, are key weapons of war, especially civil wars. Just as Jewish attachment to Israel has been denied in the Arab world for over a century, the attachment relegated to the manipulation of European Zionists, so too the very existence of the Palestinian people as such is denied by much right wing Jewish propaganda.

The heart of the heart of these denials comes to full fruition on the Temple Mount. It is the locus of ultimate denial and injury. It always will be until the religions involved and the history of the peoples molded by those religions are given their due position of honor and respect in processes of resolution.

I should not be misinterpreted in this regard. I do not speak of empowering religious political parties, terror groups, or manipulative religious leaders and political appointees. Clergy can be part of the solution but it will only be worsened by privileging reactionary parties or religious leaders. The key is for the sensibilities of religious people to be heard. The voice of the people is what was missing from the peace process as a whole. The projection of that voice, negatively speaking, could have prognosticated the dangers and inadequacies of Oslo formulae on both sides. Positively, the voice of the people could have been instrumental in devising steps that would actually have been effective in combating extremism and empowering moderates, secular and religious alike. The goal would not have been to supplant secular, progressive elites with religious elites in peace processes. That could have been equally disastrous. The key was for peace processes to be based on authentic methods of listening to all of the ugliness in popular attitudes as well as their basic human needs, for protection, for dignity, for jobs, for the preservation of their religious lives and sacred spaces. We would have known what we were up against, but also how to engage a much broader process of peace and justice making.

Many had blamed this course of events that shifted the conflict to central religious symbols on Ariel Sharon's visit with hundreds of troops to the Temple Mount. It is true that it was the match that lit the Al-Aqsa Intifadeh. But many others argue it was the killing of the stone throwers by Israeli riot police on the holy ground the day afterward.

This ignores completely, however, the deeper reason that the Temple Mount came to embody the struggle. As of January 2001, the major rabbis of Israel were declaring that Israel could not give up sovereignty on the Temple Mount. The New York Times reported:

The rabbis had said that “the Temple Mount is the holiest place to the Jewish people,” and that there is, “...a religious, sovereign, moral and historical right of the Jewish people to this mount,” that predates the birth of other religions. [\[i\]](#)

Note the principal need of the rabbis to emphasize the earlier date of Judaism, because a major source of Jewish collective injury that is unstated is the building of the mosques on top of the holiest site in Jewish life, which embodies messianic dreams of the future.

For their part, the key Islamic leaders had echoed parallel viewpoints. Sheikh Sabri, the Mufti of Jerusalem, declared, “We cannot permit any non-Muslim sovereignty over the entire area of Al Aksa, either above or below ground.” [\[ii\]](#) But the same article went on to inform that over 100 rabbis had expressed their interest in shared sovereignty. Indeed there were more and more rabbinic voices in the Jewish community for shared sovereignty, including my own. [\[iii\]](#)

There was no parallel movement in the Islamic community. Furthermore, the Sheikh’s comments were meant to specifically disallow one compromise that negotiators had worked on, namely, Jewish sovereignty below ground, where the sacred ruins of the Jewish temples lie, and Palestinian sovereignty above, where the mosques had been built on top of the ruins.

All of these positions of intransigence, reflecting a willingness to perpetuate and provoke the bloodiest stage of Israeli-Arab relations, all for the sake of this piece of land, are actually bitter fruits. They are the fruits of the complete diplomatic, secular neglect of religious communities and religious leaders in the decades of the Oslo peace process. The Temple Mount/Haram was a symbol waiting to be plucked for use by rejectionists.

This was a startling testimony to the consequences of exclusion from peacemaking of those on all sides. This includes the American negotiators who uttered the word ‘peace’ so often and did not make an iota of effort to create parallel religious processes of negotiation, trust building, acknowledgment of the past, apologies, healing, and a shared understanding of history.

It reached the absurd level of countless indications from the negotiators that no one had even been prepared to understand that this Temple Mount actually housed the oldest core of Jewish identity, or that the Noble Sanctuary would become the core issue of rejectionism in the rest of the Arab world. The Palestinian negotiators seemed to not have a clue of its importance for Jews, and that seemed to be both a result of no shared understanding of history, delusional denial, but also a willful neglect of this subject for years by third parties, and by secular, Israeli peacemakers who had never faced their own ambivalent identities as Jews—until, of course, it mattered, and came out at the worst possible moment for peace. I was astonished to learn from unofficial but very senior Palestinian intellectuals who met for years with Jews, even rabbis, and were led to believe that because traditional Jewish law forbids going on to the Temple Mount that its sovereignty would not be a major stumbling block. This was serious miscommunication over many years that was a complicated combination of denial and neglect of the central importance of ancient religious symbols and sacred spaces.

There were so many foolish mistakes that ignited the Al-Aqsa Intifadeh, but this willful disregard of religious and cultural identity was an important factor. In general, the misunderstanding of the deep cultural contest over space, defined in ethno-nationalist terms or in religious terms, or both, was a principal deterrent to any peace deal, especially because the ceaseless building of settlements was designed to scuttle a deal over space, in fact to make a separate Palestinian space impossible.

At the same time the lack of cultural preparedness on the Arab/Islamic side for even the notion of shared sovereignty over space that was sacred to both religions for millennia, is an essential part of this tragedy. There is no other way to say it. Islamic sources themselves refer repeatedly to this spot as *bait al maqdis* [\[iv\]](#), the Hebrew name used for thousands of years by ancient Judaism for Jewish Temples that are buried beneath this spot. Mohammed himself

referred to it this way, and prayed towards it for a considerable time, according to Islam's own stories.

To deny in the contemporary framework the sacredness of the Temple Mount to Jews suggests a desperate need to deny history, even Islam's own sacred historical records. It is to deny the need to right historical wrongs. It cannot be separated from the Palestinians' own sense of betrayal and disappointment at not being able to right the historical wrongs perpetrated on them. Sacred history and mythology becomes a football of competing injuries.

Sharing the Temple Mount religious was (and perhaps still is) an opportunity to heal history. Sacred places built on the ruins of other people's sacred spaces, as a sign of victory, is one of the great and intractable tragedies of religious history, one of the most important ways in which religions are responsible for bloodshed. This is certainly true in India with mosques built on top of Hindu holy sites. In point of fact, Jerusalem embodies one long history of this kind of conquest, going back to the Canaanites.

But Camp David was the opportunity to right a historical wrong, to develop a new stage of sharing sacred space that was lost due to lack of preparation and psychological denial. The future of diplomacy cannot repeat this. Sharing is the only possible answer for descendants, for those who have inherited the bad decisions of previous generations of believers.

Some will argue that this was impossible in the hermeneutics of each tradition. It is and was possible. I spoke to many religious people on both sides, quite knowledgeable, who felt it was eminently possible. But many were afraid of extremists in their midst. The most important point is that all of this intransigence could have been mollified and attenuated with years of careful relationship building, the righting of other social wrongs, and with leaders who felt that their people were ready, had been made ready, for some compromises. Then the compromise, the

carefully considered, hermeneutically developed religious solutions, would have fallen to the earth like a ripe apple. But it was not to be.

Let us continue, however, with the concrete hermeneutic ways in which this compromise must ultimately occur. And it involves, among other paths that we have discussed, a prioritizing of moral behavior over ownership in the definition of sacredness, in the conceptualization of what it means to occupy sacred space.

There is no question that each religious community deserves its own independent spaces of sacredness on these holy spots, such as the Temple Mount or the Cave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Hebron. [\[v\]](#) Some spaces on the Temple Mount need to be exclusive. There can and should be ways in which all of those spaces, however, collectively come under the rubric of moral rules that all agree should govern sacred space. This would bind everyone together ethically and mythically even as it recognizes separate spaces.

How could we accomplish this feat? One way involves a return to that original home of sacralization in the monotheistic prophets, namely the moral pre-conditions governing the entrance to sacred ground. [\[vi\]](#) In other words, all groups would, for example, participate in the aid to the poor, to those who suffer, as a part of the occupation of sacred ground. All would agree in that space to respectful and honorable modes of greeting and moral/spiritual etiquette that has roots in all three Abrahamic traditions. All would agree to special treatment of animal and plant life in the sacred spaces, rules that all the religions have embedded, and that could be utilized as the basis of healing cooperation. All would have attitudes of respect for property of the other, and especially lost property, fundamental contractual and legal assumptions of Exodus, as well as the other Books of Moses.

There were specific ancient psalms specifically governing entry rights to the Temple Mount, which asked the rhetorical question, ‘Who is allowed to go up to the mountain of

God?'. [\[vii\]](#) Honesty is one of the primary characteristics of such a person, and therefore agreed upon rules of honesty in speech and practice would also become a part of the sacralization of space in the Old City and especially the Temple Mount. There are also laws governing respectful speech, and, last but not least, the respectful treatment of elders.

Muslims have in their cultural repertoire the notion of *dar al-Islam* which, as I have just noted about sacred space, can be interpreted exclusively in terms of ownership and domination. Or it can be defined ethically in terms of agreed upon ethical practices, and agreed upon systems of respect for the religion. Similarly, the Jewish concept of *eretz ha-kodesh*, the Holy Land, can be interpreted exclusively, even racially, in terms of who will own what, and who is allowed to be there. This is the holiness of space defined, in both traditions, in terms of political domination and exclusive rights to the space.

There are many rules of interpersonal life that will never be agreed upon between the secular and religious communities of the Middle East. They cannot form the basis of a social contract. But there are many other rules that can be the basis of a social contract. These sacred rules of interpersonal engagement should have their counterparts in secular constructs and contracts that all would agree to abide by on sacred ground, with religious obligations having their counterpart in secular formulations of civil rights. One group would see job training and employment programs, for example, as a civil right and others as a social/spiritual obligation.

This contractual commitment to sacred space could form the basis for a multi-religious treaty and secular-religious treaty on the long-term hopes for and commitment toward the governing of the entire Holy Land region as sacred space. Now this would not satisfy those for whom its sacredness is only vouchsafed by exclusive ownership, nor those who want to go further in disallowing any behavior contrary to traditional Jewish law or Islamic Shari'ah, as they interpret these laws. In other words, it will not satisfy those with messianic anticipation of theocracy and absolute control. But it will go a very long way toward creating a new and

integrated culture of the region that will do the one thing that rejectionist religious parties to the conflict need. It will acknowledge their claims as at least partially acceptable, it will give them the dignity of participation in the construction of public, civil society, and it could bring healing and strength to those who are caught in the middle of these cultural struggles.

This will also require a re-visioning among utopian visionaries in all camps for whom exclusive or coercive future visions take precedence over ethics. What I am suggesting involves a vision that will not appeal to everyone but will include enough religious people on all sides to sideline a violent monotheistic posture. It will offer an alternative vision of sacred space that does not require exclusive ownership to be religiously fulfilling.

The re-visioning of sacred space is only one challenge of the peacemaking process regarding land. The struggle for the same space for living is less symbolic but far more at the heart the conflict that has led to enormous injuries and losses on both sides. These losses suffered by struggle over land are complexified by imbalances and complications in the losses. Palestinians in the tens of thousands lost their actual homes. Jews were the clear victors over land. Jewish losses of home and family in Europe, with 90% of European Jewry annihilated, cannot be blamed on Palestinians. And yet those losses are part and parcel of the struggle. These unfair asymmetries are a feature of countless inter-ethnic wars around the world, where one party pays for the injustices done to another by yet a third party, such as Bosnian Muslims paying the price, as the most defenseless and stateless party, for the destructions wrought on Serbians by others.

Thousands of years of determined independence from Christians cost the Jewish people very dearly in the final paroxysm of European anti-Semitism. A key element of that independence was the dream of returning to the land of Israel in the Messianic Era. Those losses make the need for land acute in the minds of millions of Jews. There are losses and needs here on all sides. Sephardi Jewry has a different set of losses that are related in a complicated way to an

Arab world that was good to them in some ways and awful in others, as well as to the indignities of a biased Ashkenazi superstructure to Zionism and the State. Every group's losses here are tied to idealization of, nostalgia for or memory of land. None of these losses admit of easy ways to overcome necessary losses through compromise.

Actual loss of life at specific locations is one critical way to think about the use of land to heal the past rather than perpetually mourn over it. Museums and memorials are critical to a community's capacity to cope with its past. Mourning over lost life is very related to lost land because for many people the land and life on the land are inextricably related. But land is so contested in this conflict that each and every effort at memorialization will be the subject of controversy. Nevertheless it is better that it be pursued anyway. The controversy could be utilized for constructive purposes.

I want to suggest that we consider the following if and when there is a respite from the current stage of violent war. Burying the dead, memorializing the dead, and mourning, are gestures that are inherent in Abrahamic traditions. I suggest that religious people, leaders or lay people, jointly experiment with ways to lead their communities into an extended period of memorial and mourning over, very simply, the loss of life due to violence in this century that was experienced by each religious community for whatever reason, but especially when it was at the hands of the other groups.

This must be done in a way that each community shares in the memorialization with the other communities. There need to be numerous spaces created to remember, to acknowledge, to mourn, and to commit to a different path.

How would this be done? Key places that Palestinians have died violently at the hands of Jews, for whatever reason and without judgment or blame, that place would become a place of joint mourning, memorial and future commitments. It would be a place and a ritual in which the

religious/cultural underpinnings of repentance and apology, such as are expressed by the institutions of *sulh* and *teshuva*, could be put into practice. Key places that Jews have died at the hands of Palestinians, for whatever reason and in whatever circumstances, would become a place of joint mourning, memorial and future commitments.

These key places could include: Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem, for example, Ben Yehuda street, Netanya, Ma'a lot, Deir Yassin, the corridor of the forced march from Ramallah, Hebron's burial place of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, *meor'at ha-makhpelah*, as well as the site of the Hebron Yeshiva in 1929, major places of battle in the wars, Al Aqsa Mosque, key checkpoints, locations in Gaza, and numerous other locations in which either Jews or Palestinians died violently.

This process would have to occur over an extended period of time, and it would have to have an extensive bilateral basis. In other words, memorialization would have to take place in close bilateral proximity wherever possible, both in terms of time and space. It would be best if memorials that were close geographically were joined by simultaneous or near simultaneous ceremonies. Cemeteries where the victims are buried would be an equally suitable space of ceremony. The emotions will run high in these places, and we should be very prepared as to how to manage this well, and make this part of healing not an impediment.

To the degree to which each community is capable of expressing remorse for at least some of its actions, apology or requests for forgiveness at these sites where death occurred would be a major contribution to the healing process and the shift in relationship. However, my experience and that of others has suggested that this not be *de jure* or expected, but rather come naturally for those communities or individuals who are ready to do this.

The rituals and/or statements or prayers that would be appropriate in these places would have to depend completely on the parties themselves and what they deem appropriate.

Minimally, however, there would have to be expressions of regret, if not acceptance of responsibility, as well as a commitment to a different future.

It is clearly the case that this process will invite or provoke backlash in a number of forms for which anyone in this work must be prepared. First of all, the actual violation of this sacred space and time by rejectionists will become a critical need of theirs, a way of remaining true to the dead. Memorials are or become contested spaces, as Jewish memorials in Europe have become, and, therefore, subject to desecration. Jewish graves around the world are periodically subject to desecration, for the mere memorials dedicated to the Jewish dead becomes an affront to anti-Semites or to those who, for religious reasons, feel that Jews should simply not exist. The dead have a way of heightening our conceptualization of life, and that is why cemeteries are such beautiful but vulnerable places.

A constructive approach to conflict resolution utilizes all pain and provocation to further the process of reconciliation. One of the more insidious causes of conflict is the illusion of non-conflict, and the burial of crime. Memorials bring all of this into sharp relief, both symbolically and historically. The very backlash against these memorializations is a good reminder to those who would become complacent and fall into the illusion that the work of peace, justice, reparation, and repentance, is over simply because there is no overt violence.

Clearly readers who are used to conflict resolution as rationally determined processes of negotiation will be deeply uncomfortable with these suggestions. But their methods of approaching the conflict at hand have completely failed. It is not that negotiations are not crucial. It is rather that they are inadequate in terms of bringing the people to the point of trust and acceptance of peaceful solutions and necessary negotiations.

To do this one has to concentrate on deep human needs. It is hard, for example, for an outsider to understand that for many religious Jews, who have been rejectionists of the peace

process, all hatred of Jews at the hands of Romans, Crusaders, Nazis, and Palestinians blurs into one bad dream to which they answer with the power of military might. In the case of *haredim*, they respond with the power of a supernatural narrative of history in which the gentiles will be punished collectively for their sins against God's people. This means that forging a relationship with gentiles in some new fashion must mean addressing all the deepest injuries of this century, and then some. There is no way around this. The same is true of many other conflicts, no matter how irrational this appears to outsiders. And it requires great patience from enemies for the obsessions and narcissisms of each group.

To Jews the excesses of Islamic extremism sweeping the globe are indicators of an enemy who can only be destroyed with brute force. It is certainly the case that many extremists in history could only be resisted with force. But it is also the case that millions join extremist, simple alternatives when they have nothing to lose, when they feel like committing suicide anyway. It is amazing how many reports I receive from the field confirm those sentiments, especially among the young. Can this be combated successfully only through force, without any acknowledgement of legitimate grievances? By contrast, can it be effectively combated only in Oslo or Camp David? Did all the Palestinians who supported the bombers believe that they could prove to Israelis that they are not Nazis but merely fighting for their rights by turning Jewish children into charcoal at bus stops? None of this is rational, and much of it is suicidal. And it is only by focusing with a laser on human emotions, and the needs they express, that one can deter and discourage human insanity. To be sure, both sides have successfully proven with violence that they are here to stay. And negotiators have proven that there are formulae that may very well work. But no one has faced up to the overwhelming power of human emotions, to the way in which religion can intensify those emotions in astonishing ways, and that any way out of the current hell must seek to direct those emotions toward life and away from death.

A central strategy of this redirection of emotions is the language and frame of reference of familiar religious and cultural values. Whereas humiliation is a fundamental element of this dynamic of enemies, the range of practices in Judaism and Islam designed to affirm the dignity of the other should be utilized as a symbolic means of communication, as a way of counteracting the effects of repeated Arab defeats and daily humiliations. In parallel fashion, the way in which land has come to be seen as the only means of protection of life, and the only way to justify the death of loved ones, can be countered by shared mourning practices of both communities. These can provide religiously significant ways to deal with death other than through further killing or valuing land so much that it prevents rational problem solving and the division of scarce resources.

None of this implies that there are not very legitimate fears, grievances and injustices. But it does suggest that that deep emotional way in which we human beings deal with such things can sometimes become maladaptive and self-destructive. Religious traditions know this well and deal with it not by suppressing human emotions through rationalistic pretense but by giving them healthy outlets through ethics and symbolic gestures and rituals. The combination of these practices, guided by wise students of religious traditions, together with future negotiation processes will, at the very least, make it harder to hijack religion to destroy rational negotiations. At best religion may provide creative middle positions of trust building, evidence of transformation, and interim pro-social measures that will grease the wheels of rational diplomacy, in addition to giving religious communities the respect that they deserve and need as their communities make fateful decisions.

If there is ever to be a two-state solution, with two democracies living side by side, it will not be because there is an end to religious fervor or strong emotions of attachment to the land. That is the sad fantasy of liberals. It will be because enough people on both sides have learned how to negotiate their religious dreams and emotions in new ways. It will be because they have

come to value democracy among themselves and among their enemies as a reliable means to further the religious valuation of human life, for example, or of justice. It will be because they will adjust themselves to an intense love of the whole land that combines uneasily but necessarily with the religious pursuit of justice, compassion, and the abhorrence of the cardinal sins of the Biblical and Koranic stories, murder and theft.

Liberals will negotiate new realities in their way, businessmen in another, and military analysts in still other ways. All ways are necessary for a durable peace. But the encouragement by all interested leaderships of pro-social gestures and behaviors that resonate emotionally with religious traditions is the only way that a large portion of the voting constituencies on either side of this conflict will trust a transition to two states or the equality of all citizens in Israel. They will have to witness and participate in this grand enterprise. I can think of no better forecasting mechanism than this enterprise to determine the status of future agreements as reality or fantasy.

[i] *The New York Times*, January 5, 2001, A6

[ii] *ibid.*

[iii] Marc Gopin, "Share Jerusalem or Battle Forever," *The Boston Sunday Globe*, Focus Section, September 24, 2000.

[iv] See *Sahih Bukhari*, Book 2: 39, "Narrated by Al-Bara' (bin 'Azib): When the Prophet came to Medina, he stayed first with his grandfathers or maternal uncles from Ansar. He offered his prayers facing Baitul-Maqdis (Jerusalem) for sixteen or seventeen months, but he wished that he could pray facing the Ka'ba (at Mecca)." See also Book 4:147. Jerusalem is sometimes referred to as *Ilya*, the ancient Roman name, and sometimes as *bait al maqdis*, depending on the context. Most important is that sometimes it is referred to both as Temple and *bait maqdis*. See *Sahi*

Muslim, Book 1: 0309, “It is narrated on the authority of Anas b. Malik that the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: I was brought al-Buraq Who is an animal white and long, larger than a donkey but smaller than a mule, who would place his hoof a distance equal to the range of vision. I mounted it and came to the Temple (Bait Maqdis in Jerusalem), then tethered it to the ring used by the prophets. I entered the mosque and prayed two rak'ahs in it, and then came out and Gabriel brought me a vessel of wine and a vessel of milk. I chose the milk, and Gabriel said: You have chosen the natural thing. Then he took me to heaven.” The ancient Jewish word for the two temples, one destroyed in 586 BCE and the second destroyed in 70 CE, is *bet ha-miqdash*, which is the exact cognate of the term used in the *hadith*. It means literally ‘the house of holiness,’ or ‘the sanctified house’. There is no doubt that Mohammed, at least according to the classical Islamic sources, made a clear connection between this sacred spot and its Jewish spiritual origins. This is one more example of how the politicization of religion, or the modern fundamentalist turn in religion, is only sometimes a return to original, intolerant sources. Often it is a distortion of classical sources for contemporary political agendas.

[v] The latter, by the way, does not require Jewish residence in Hebron, though it would be wonderful and restorative if the original Jewish community, destroyed by the 1929 riots, were welcomed back as honored guests, as opposed to the belligerent force of radicals there now. The key to inter-religious peace ultimately must be access and respect, not domination by one party or the other. Similarly, the impossibility of all Palestinian refugees returning to Israel is evident to both sides. But many restorative gestures and welcomes home for some of them are possible. It would be a wonderful opportunity for bilateral healing, if on the same day that the Hebron Palestinian community made gestures to the survivors of the 1929 Jewish community that a Jewish community inside Israel welcomed back the survivors of original residents of a nearby Palestinian community. It would be especially effective if it were accompanied by gestures at the Cave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, which was in parallel to a rededication of a mosque inside Israel. These are not pipe dreams. They do require long periods of cultivation, extensive financial support so that talented people can work on this exclusively, and support from leaders who at least get out of the way of these developing relationships.

[vi] Psalm 15, for example. Clearly this would involve building moral sources and precedents from all the Abrahamic traditions, but, in terms of the Temple Mount, Judaism and Islam. In Islam, there are laws governing

sacred spaces as well. See, for example, *Sahih Muslim Book 7: Kitab al-hajj*, #3153-3154, which involve the declaration of Mecca and Medina as sacred, and the prohibition against cutting trees there or killing the animals.

[\[vii\]](#) Psalms 15:1.