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## The Land of Israel in Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations

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**CONFERENCE PROCEEDING****The Land of Israel in Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations****Yehezkel Landau  
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Before conveying my views on Israel – people, land, and state – I want to share a bit of my personal journey, so that the reader will appreciate the perspective that I bring to the subject. I was born in Santiago de Chile in 1949, the child of Austrian Jewish refugees who managed to flee Vienna in time in March, 1938. Some of my cousins were not so fortunate and perished in the *Shoah*. After my family moved to New York, I attended public schools, then went to college and divinity school at Harvard, pursuing studies in psychology, theology, and education. Krister Stendahl, then the dean of Harvard Divinity School, became my mentor in New Testament studies, my “Christian *rebbe*.”<sup>1</sup> Two years after completing my MTS program, and then working in the administration of Bard College in upstate New York, I flew to Israel for the first time on April 5, 1978. I was the last member of my immediate family to visit Israel, and the only one who stayed. I lived and worked in Jerusalem for twenty-four years, became an Israeli citizen, and fathered a son who now serves in the Israeli Defense Forces. All of these choices were motivated by my religious convictions. My Judaism includes both a Zionist commitment to the security and wellbeing of Israel as a Jewish state, along with a spiritual commitment to justice and peace for all peoples.

My involvement in interfaith relations, which began at Harvard, deepened during my years in Israel. To live in Jerusalem is to experience directly the epicenter of Jewish-Christian-Muslim interactions worldwide, magnifying both the joy and the anguish that coexist in the heart of any sensitive Jew. The joy is over the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty in the Holy City and Land; the anguish is over the daily suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians locked in a prolonged, debilitating conflict.

My work in the past three decades has been in the overlapping fields of interfaith education and Jewish-Arab peacebuilding. While in Jerusalem, I served as Program Coordinator for the Israel Interfaith Association, then Executive Director of the Religious Zionist peace movement *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom* (*Strength and Peace/Paths of Peace*, derived from Psalms 29:11 and Proverbs 3:17), and finally as co-founder and co-director of the Open House Center for Jewish-Arab Coexistence and Reconciliation in Ramle, Israel. In all of these positions, I was able to engage in teaching, writing, administration, and peace activism. I returned to the United States in 2002 to become the first full-time Jewish professor at Hartford Seminary, a graduate school of religious studies with Protestant roots and known for its focus on Christian-Muslim relations. My work there has allowed me to intensify my contact with Islam and Muslims. The violent eruption of the second Intifada, followed by the atrocities of September 11, 2001, contributed to my decision to leave Jerusalem for Hartford. I felt that the political and spiritual pathologies afflicting the Middle East had grown dangerously contagious, spreading to other parts of the globe. After dec-

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<sup>1</sup> Together with many others, I mourn his recent passing. He left an extraordinary legacy in the hearts and minds of countless people throughout the world.

ades of involvement in Jewish-Christian relations, including teaching at different educational institutions in Israel (Nes Ammim, the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, St. George's College, and the Sisters of Sion program at Ecce Homo), I came to believe that we need tripartite or trialogical initiatives bringing together Jews, Christians, and Muslims in order to heal the wounds of our shared history. Bilateral relations in all three directions are necessary and valuable, but so are trilateral educational programs and frameworks for joint community service.

At Hartford Seminary I teach courses in Jewish tradition and spirituality, mainly for our Christian and Muslim students. In addition, I designed and direct a program called *Building Abrahamic Partnerships*, which draws adherents of the three traditions for one intensive week of academic study and experiential learning to develop sensitivities and skills in interfaith relations. I find that this micro-laboratory affords uncommon opportunities for developing and testing methodologies for mutual engagement. For the sake of better interfaith relations in America, the Middle East, and elsewhere, we need many more such initiatives to counter the destructive acts of religious extremists in all of our faith communities. In fact, we need ongoing efforts to transform both inter- and intra-faith dynamics around the challenges of living together in a pluralistic society.

David Smock, who directs the Religion and Peacemaking Initiative at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., wrote a *Special Report* in February, 2003, entitled "Building Interreligious Trust in a Climate of Fear." In that report he wrote:

The overarching question is how to develop interfaith trust in the prevailing atmosphere of fear and mutual suspicion. In situations of trauma, as experienced continuously in the Middle East and as experienced in the West since 9/11, people are likely to turn inward. Accordingly, they have great difficulty in reaching out to the religious 'Other.' The prevailing attitude is often that no one's suffering can compare to our own suffering. In this climate of victimhood, the Other – whether nation, ethnic group, or religious community – is often labeled simplistically and unhelpfully as either good or evil.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most contentious issues in Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations today, and in any bilateral encounter among the three, is the tragic conflict in the Middle East, centering on Israel/Palestine. This is often the "elephant in the room" that people prefer to avoid, yet it comes back to haunt us if we try to deny the pain and the passion evoked by this issue. It is a very difficult subject to engage fruitfully, since it involves both practical politics (issues of power, justice claims, and profound suffering) and mythic symbolism linking past, present, and future. Both dimensions impinge strongly on people's identities and loyalties.

I venture into this complex discussion as a traditional Jew who believes in the holiness of the Land and the transcendent promise of God's *shalom*. Some of my guiding questions as I search for answers are as follows:

- I affirm the covenantal link, from Abraham's day until now, between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel, established and sanctioned by God. Does that faith conviction necessarily privilege Jewish claims to ownership or sovereignty? Can it coexist with the faith convictions, sacred narratives, and territorial claims of Christians and Muslims, who view the holiness of the land differently?

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<sup>2</sup> David Smock, "Building Interreligious Trust in a Climate of Fear: An Abrahamic Trialogue," *Special Report 99* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, February 2003), p. 3.

- In practical terms, how can Jews share the holiness of the Land, and of Jerusalem, with Christians and Muslims in ways that mutually enhance each other's spiritualities and each other's lives, and that hold out the promise of a just peace for the generations to come?

These questions are necessarily in dialogue with the perspectives of others, and it is our collective wisdom that creates the context for productive reflection on these issues. This context can be summarized in this way:

- *Christians* in the West who engage this issue tend to divide into two theological and political camps (with theology and political ideology mutually reinforcing): a pro-Jewish/Zionist camp, led by Evangelical Protestants, and a pro-Palestinian camp led by liberal and liberationist Catholics and Protestants, often inspired by the testimonies of Palestinian Christians.
- *Muslims* are, for the most part, sympathetic to the Palestinian narrative and justice claims; and many dispute Jewish/Zionist historical or theological arguments.
- *Jews* are split among passionate Zionists, passionate universalists who endorse the human and political rights of Palestinians, a small number of religious or secular anti-Zionists, and a large number who take no public position on the issue, in some cases because of a nominal or weak Jewish affiliation.

My own position is a dialectical one: a Religious Zionist peace perspective, rather than a doctrinaire position favoring any one side exclusively. I believe in the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in a majority Jewish state within our ancestral homeland; at the same time, I recognize the parallel right of the Palestinian people to their own state within that same territory, which they claim as their homeland, too. Accommodating both rights and claims necessitates a political and territorial compromise, which will also ensure a stable Jewish majority in the State of Israel. My politics are determined by my spirituality and religious convictions. I see *the land as a Divinely chosen laboratory for consecration* by its inhabitants, primarily through acts of justice and lovingkindness (*mishpat* and *tsedakah*, as exemplified by Abraham – cf. Gn 18:19).

In what follows, I suggest a theological grounding for this position. To achieve this goal, I have generated a conceptual framework which constructs a parallel between the four-dimensional typology of rabbinic scriptural exegesis and the four “worlds” in kabbalistic thought.<sup>3</sup> The exegetical typology discerns four simultaneous dimensions of any Torah text: (1) *peshat*, the literal or plain meaning; (2) *remez*, an allusion within the text pointing to other text(s) in the Torah using similar words or phrasing; (3) *drash*, a homiletical dimension that emerges through allegorical parables; and (4) *sod*, the mystical or esoteric dimension that remains hidden unless the reader is graced with a special capacity of vision.

Traditional Jews believe that the Torah is God's blueprint, so to speak, for the creation. For Jewish mystics, there are four co-existing realms of creation, suggesting a parallel with the four levels or dimensions of the Torah: (a) *Olam HaAsiyah*, the world of material phenomena, including our body and its sensations, and of human action; (b) *Olam HaYetsirah*, the world of formation and shaping of both nature and history through Divine Providence; this includes the three major categories of Divine agency: creation, revelation, and redemption; (c) *Olam HaBriyah*, the world

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<sup>3</sup> In applying this four-dimensional typology to the challenge of sharing the holiness of *Erets Yisrael* with another nation and with non-Jewish faith communities, I am (as far as I know) entering uncharted intellectual and spiritual terrain. I welcome responses from others, in order to refine this framework and make it more effective, or else to supplant it with something more compelling.

of causal forces and energies beyond this material plane, including angelic messengers; and finally (d) *Olam HaAtsilut*, the world of pure spirit and the source of all the disparate manifestations of matter and energy, where all is unified in the oneness of God.

### ***Peshat and Olam HaAsiyah***

For Jews, our way of serving God and neighbor concretely connects the metaphysical with the physical, the spiritual with the material. We are commanded to consecrate space and time within this created world in very practical ways. The physicality of *Erets Yisrael*, as a medium of consecration, is an integral element of our identity as Jews and of our religious worldview. There are specific Torah commandments that can only be fulfilled by those residing in the land, tilling its soil, and regulating the social and economic life of the community there. These injunctions are called by our sages *hamitsvot hateluyot ba'arets*, the commandments contingent on being in the land. Among these religious acts are: pilgrimage to Jerusalem (*aliyah laregel*) for the three major festivals, *Pesah*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot* (Ex 23:14-17, Lv 23, Dt 16:16-17); offering animal or vegetable sacrifices (*korbanot*) in the Temple (as described in the book of Leviticus; see, also, Dt 12:5-7, 11, 13-14, 27 and Dt 27:6-7); tithing one's agricultural produce (*ma'aser* – Dt 12:6, 11, 17-18; Dt 14:22-29; Dt 26:12-14); leaving the corners of one's field ungleamed (*pe'ah* – Lv 19:9-10; Lv 23:22; Dt 24:19-22); letting farmland lie fallow and remitting debts every seventh, or sabbatical, year (*shemita* – Ex 23:10-11; Lv 25:2-7, 20-22; Dt 15:1-18); and, after seven sabbatical cycles, observing the jubilee year (*yovel* – Lv 25:8-19; Nm 36:4) by restoring ceded property to its original owners. Observing the Sabbatical rhythm of sevens, starting with the weekly Sabbath and extending to the *shemita* and *yovel* cycles, is a cardinal praxis for Jews. It brings us into sync with the liberating time code programmed by God into the Creation and allows us, through acts of renunciation and devotion, to consecrate both time and space.

On the physical, material level where our animal bodies live, we Jews have a sense of connection, *zikkah*, that is like the "territorial imperative" of other animals. *Erets Yisrael* is our "natural habitat," and we have a sense of exile, existential estrangement and a truncated Judaism, when in other places. We direct our thrice-daily prayers to Jerusalem and the Holy of Holies, praying for rain and material blessing for the land and its inhabitants. Rain at the appointed seasons is necessary in *Erets Yisrael* for crops to grow and for our bodies to receive nourishment, since there is no river system like the Nile or the Tigris and Euphrates. The spiritual and ethical corollary to this ecological reality, as the Bible states again and again, is that we will face drought, famine, and eventual forced exile (being "spewed out," according to the Torah's graphic language – cf. Lv 18:24-28) if we do not live up to the behavioral norms which God has taught us. In fact, the Babylonian exile is understood in our tradition as the consequence of our not keeping the sabbatical years (cf. 2 Chr 36:21, along with Lv 26:34-35, 43). Scripture and tradition teach us that if we follow the Torah, ethically and ritualistically, we will be blessed by a bountiful ecology, and if we do not we will suffer the wrenching consequence of exile from the Land. In other words, if we choose to live there, individually or collectively, we Jews need to remember that our residence is behaviorally contingent and not unconditionally guaranteed.

Since physical presence in the Land makes possible a deeper level of spiritual commitment and fulfillment, some Jews – particularly residents of Judea and Samaria – elevate the territory beyond its proper proportion in our "hierarchy of holiness" and make it into an end in itself rather than a means for consecration through holy acts. This excessive attachment, often justified by a messianic determinism, creates a need to possess and control. The tragic result of such an approach to the land is an ideology of superiority and domination, placing the physical above the metaphysical, mistaking means for ends. The political stance based on this self-centered religiosity has its parallel among militant Muslims. Its essence can be conveyed in these terms: "the

land is ours, it belongs to us, because it was bestowed upon us by God, and ruling over it is an integral part of our religious identity and vocation.”

The contemporary version of this religious ideology is represented by the religious settler movement *Gush Emunim*, the “Bloc of the Faithful.” This movement claims that we Jews will be messianically blessed by Divine victory and vindication if we impose our sovereign rule over the “Whole Land of Israel” (*Erets Yisrael Hasheleimah*), including the territories of Judea and Samaria. Citing authorities such as Nachmanides (Ramban), they assert that we are bound by the imperatives of conquering and populating the entire land (*kibbush* and *yishuv ha'arets*).<sup>4</sup> Their dogmatic, inflexible position favoring maximum boundaries and political control has oppressive consequences for the Palestinian people and threatens the physical and spiritual well-being of Israeli Jews. The “messianic” imperative aggressively promoted by *Gush Emunim* and its supporters compels Israelis to be oppressive occupiers, with all the negative consequences for Jewish morale and morality everywhere. Once the land becomes an end in itself justifying martyrdom, and its possession is elevated above justice or peace as a spiritual and moral imperative, then Jews, Muslims, or Christians who skew their religious priorities in this way turn the territory into an idol rather than a means of serving the Almighty. Land becomes holier than human life in such a worldview. I call this sinful choice “territorialotry.” For us Jews, this transgression is a spiritually retrogressive development, relating to the geography as a virtual “Canaan” – a land defiled by idolatry – rather than as sacred “Israel” – a land where Jews struggle with God and dilemmas of the human condition, while revering the Torah as a Tree of Life.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Remez and Olam Hayetsirah***

As we move to the next level, we need to emphasize that we Jews are always firmly grounded in this world. We are taught to pray with our two feet planted on the earth while our eyes and heart are turned toward heaven. The leader of a prayer quorum, the *sheliah tsibbur*, is expected to know the physical hardships of the community, so that the petitions offered to God on its behalf will reflect its true needs. In a similar vein, through their methods, Rashi and other medieval Bible commentators teach us that we should never ignore or bypass the *peshat* level of meaning as we search for more symbolic truths in a Torah text. To be fully Jewish, in an expansive rather than a narrow way, we also need to appreciate the deeper nuances, *remazim*, and the paradoxes in both sacred texts and sacred history. The Torah (written and oral) and the evolving human story are two complementary media of revelation. In our time, we are forced to confront new aspects of the truth revealed by new chapters in our history. In particular, the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state in the Land of Israel, coupled with a more constructive encounter with

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, spiritual mentor of *Gush Emunim*, claimed that holding onto the territories acquired in the 1967 Six-Day War was a fundamental religious imperative and nonnegotiable, comparable to the three cardinal commandments which one must never violate – murder, idolatry, and forbidden sexual relations – even at the cost of one’s own life. For a detailed examination of the halakhic issues involved in territorial compromise for the sake of peace, including the differing views of Nachmanides and Maimonides, see J. David Bleich, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, Vol. II (New York: Ktav Publishing House/Yeshiva University Press, 1983), Chapter VIII, “The Sanctity of the Liberated Territories,” pp. 169-188 and Chapter IX, “Judea and Samaria: Settlement and Return,” pp. 189-221.

<sup>5</sup> See Uriel Simon, “Territory and Morality from a Religious Zionist Perspective,” in *Voices from Jerusalem: Jews and Christians Reflect on the Holy Land*, David Burrell and Yehezkel Landau, eds. (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 107-117. As Simon writes, “...the holy land is not bestowed with an intrinsic, ontological holiness beyond other parts of the creation. Its holiness...is functional: it was chosen to be the seat of the ‘kingdom of priests’...the land is imprinted by the deeds of its inhabitants, and it is thus left to us to transform the land of Canaan into the land of Israel...it is our task to sanctify the land through our level of religious and moral commitment to Torah...No one, including the Jews, has an unconditional right to dwell in the holy land; everyone dwells here, so to speak, ‘on probation’.” (pp. 111-112)

other world religions, compels us to go beyond the conditioned notions and reflexes that characterized our life as minority communities in Christian or Muslim lands.

For centuries, we were comforted or consoled by a rather one-dimensional view of Divine promises and prophecies. This view was self-referencing, and it served to undergird our hope for ultimate redemption. That hope envisioned, and still envisions, our return to Zion as a free people, subservient to God alone and not subject to the rule of other nations. But now, the radically new political reality in which we live, with Israel as a Jewish state, stretches our minds, hearts, and imaginations. The painful contradiction between the messianic dreams of our ancestors and the tragic war in which we are presently enmeshed forces us to see Divine Providence in a less self-referencing and more inclusive way, neither privileging nor penalizing whole peoples.<sup>6</sup> Can we Jews understand the idea of election or chosenness as a distinctive, but not exclusive, characteristic of our people, or of any people? Looking more deeply, and less defensively, at the Israeli-Arab conflict, we need a spiritual “wide-angle” lens that helps us see beyond the polarized us versus them antagonism. For example, if more Jews understood Arabic and more Arabs understood Hebrew, the striking similarities in the two languages could help spark fruitful associations on the *remez* level of awareness. Then we could together view texts, history, and ourselves from a non-polarized vantage point.

From the perspective of *Olam HaYetsirah*, we might be able to see God’s agency in history – creation, revelation, and especially redemption – as pluriform. That is, we could acknowledge that the One God has created different peoples and faith communities, instructing them in different languages and calling them to unique paths of consecrating service. If we could affirm that these separate paths all promote the messianic redemption, we could broaden our notion of redemption – the fruit of God’s intentionality within history – into an inclusive vision of justice, peace, and reconciliation. We should be able to affirm God’s Oneness while celebrating cultural and spiritual diversity within the Divine plan.<sup>7</sup>

In Biblical terms, we can embrace Ishmael and his descendants as our half siblings, sharing Abraham/Ibrahim as a common father through different mothers. Just as Isaac and Ishmael were reunited at the burial of their father (Gn 25:9),<sup>8</sup> so we can find emotional common ground in the grief we suffer over the loss of our loved ones to the political conflict over a shared homeland. In both Judaism and Islam, saving a single human life is tantamount to saving all of humanity, and God’s merciful and gracious compassion is affirmed as a core theological principle, reinforced

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<sup>6</sup> The evil phenomenon represented by the Biblical Amalekites, Israel’s archenemy, presents a unique challenge, for even when we enter the Land we are commanded to remember Amalek and blot out his name (cf. Ex 17:8-16, Dt 25:17-19). Our tradition, overall, no longer understands Amalek’s perverse, wanton cruelty directed against our people as characteristic of any particular nation or group. Rather, the phenomenon of “*Amalekiut*,” or Amalek-ness, is conceived as a more generalized demonic phenomenon, perhaps grounded on a metaphysical plane as part of God’s Providential plan, and manifesting in this world as irrational Jew-hatred. The occasional attempts, in ultra-nationalist Jewish circles, to label Palestinian terrorists as “Amalekites” risks mythologizing a real-world conflict over territory and power. A danger in concretized messianism is the tendency towards a dualistic worldview pitting the forces of Light and Virtue against those of Darkness and Evil.

<sup>7</sup> The Qur’an (49:13) offers such an affirmation: “O humankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Truly the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah/God, is the most righteous of you.”

<sup>8</sup> Even before the burial, there are hints (*remazim*) in the Torah suggesting that Isaac had sought out Ishmael and Hagar following the death of his mother Sarah. There are three references to *Be’er LeHai Ro’i*, “the well of the Living One who sees me,” first seen by Hagar in Gn 16:13-14 and then mentioned in connection with Isaac in Gn 24:62 and 25:11. These *remazim* allow us to “connect the dots,” not only exegetically (seeing Isaac as a pro-active peacemaker within his own family), but also in terms of God’s agency behind the scenes (in *Olam HaYetsirah*), to bring Isaac and Ishmael back together for the good of their descendants.

through liturgical confession: *HaRaḥaman* in Hebrew and *Al-Raḥman/Al-Raḥim* in Arabic are almost identical terms for this Divine attribute, which we are instructed to emulate.

When the two traditions diverge, taking their adherents in different directions, our monotheistic loyalty to the Oneness of the Divine challenges us to see these disparate forms of religiosity as complementary rather than mutually exclusive, as is too often the case. The Creation story in Genesis reveals a binary complementarity programmed into the cosmos by God: heaven and earth, light and darkness, male and female, good and evil (in the Far East, the terms are *yin* and *yang*). If Jews call the Holy Land *Erets Yisrael* and Palestinian Arabs call it *al-Ard Filastin*, why can we not accept both terms as symbolic references to two separate and distinct subjective “maps” that can complement each other – much as the two Abraham/Ibrahim narratives in the Bible and Qur’an complement each other? These two interior maps, which give us our respective geographic and spiritual coordinates, need not be opposed. But to transcend the either/or dualism that undergirds the ongoing conflict, we need to accept complementarity as a Divinely intended dimension of creation, revelation, and redemption. Such an acceptance – would even say an embrace of Otherness – helps us avoid dualistic distortion and allows for the mutual correction and enrichment inherent in any constructive bilateral relationship.

In my understanding, *both peoples*, with the subjective categories that define their respective identities (Jew/Palestinian Arab, Jew/Muslim or Christian, Israel/Palestine), *belong to the land*, rather than the land belonging to either one of them. And using the lens of ethical contingency cited above, we can say that both peoples are being severely tested to adhere to moral principles of conduct, even as fear, anger, and nationalistic ideologies keep them locked in mortal combat. If Israeli Jews, in particular, aspire to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy people,” in the spirit of Ex 19:5-6, what does that mean today? To be a priestly community in our own time, instead of offering animal or vegetable sacrifices we are called – Israeli Jews and, I would say, Palestinian Arabs as well – to sacrifice territory, self-referencing attachments, exclusive claims to the land, and unilateral political power. Traditionally, the English word “sacrifice” means to “make holy” through renunciation, offering material benefits to God in exchange for spiritual blessings. In Hebrew, *hakravah* (offering a sacrifice, or *korban*) connotes a relationship of greater closeness to God, experienced by offering an animal or vegetable product that would ordinarily provide food for the body. In the Holy Land today, reciprocal acts of mutual renunciation need to be carried out in some kind of Truth and Reconciliation process. In religious terms, the resources of land and governmental authority need to be jointly consecrated by being shared, so that the higher ends of human life, freedom, and dignity can be served.

A territorial and political compromise is a religious and moral imperative, as advocated by *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom*, in contrast to *Gush Emunim*.<sup>9</sup> Instead of citing as a precedent the military conquest under Joshua, we find a better model for the Zionist homecoming in our time in the nonviolent return from Babylon of only part of the people to only part of the land (at the invitation of the non-Jewish ruler *Cyrus/Koresh*). But in practice, this sacrificial magnanimity and *tsim-tsum* (political and territorial self-contraction) is extremely difficult to do. It feels in the soul like a symbolic amputation, especially when one grieves over past or present losses, feels traumatized by ongoing conflict, and lives constantly with “animal” fear in the face of recurrent attacks.

At the most basic level, Jews in Israel (and, through vicarious identification, Jews everywhere) harbor an existential dread at the prospect of collective annihilation. After the Holocaust, Jews are understandably insecure when threats to Israel’s survival are proclaimed. Such poisonous

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<sup>9</sup> English-language materials from *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom* are available at P.O. Box 4433, Jerusalem, Israel 91043. They include a booklet entitled “Religious Zionism: Challenges and Choices” which I edited in 1981.

anti-Israel rhetoric must be denounced and combated. But we have to appreciate that Palestinians live with a similar fear of genocide, following their displacement and dispossession by Israel in the 1948 war and later massacres inflicted on them by other Arabs. Given the conditioned insecurities in both peoples, an emotional catharsis and healing are necessary for any negotiated peace agreement to “work.” Fear must be transformed to trust, anger to forgiveness, and grief to compassion for the suffering of others.<sup>10</sup> This is the demanding “priestly” work that must be done in addition to “prophetic” criticism of political abuses or violations of human rights. It entails sacrificing one’s “victim script” in favor of a more inclusive praxis of *mishpat* and *tsedakah*, justice and compassion. Isaiah 1:27 reads: *Tsion bemishpat tippadeh veshavehah bitsedakah*, “Zion will be redeemed through justice and those who return to her through compassion.” Justice means a single, inclusive standard of fairness (two states for two peoples and a shared Jerusalem), not double standards competing for validation.

If genuine Jewish-Arab reconciliation, based on inclusive justice and compassion, were to be achieved, it would be a redemptive blessing for all of humanity. In my faith understanding, from an *Olam HaYetsirah* perspective, it would also align the faith communities in God’s Holy Land with the messianic intentionality programmed into creation from the beginning.

### ***Drash and Olam Habriyah***

As we move to the level of *drash*, allegorical parable, our religious imaginations are challenged by the pressing need to tell our sacred stories in ways that do not exclude, marginalize, or (at worst) demonize others. Combining this with the perspective of *Olam HaBriyah*, we might glimpse some metaphysical or metahistorical forces at work even in the tragic suffering of Israelis and Palestinians. What both peoples need is a redemptive meta-midrash that embraces the particularistic narratives of exile and homecoming. A biblical foundation exists in the story of Noah and the covenant with all of creation established by God after the flood. This Noahide Covenant precedes both the covenant with Abraham, sealed through circumcision, and the later Sinai covenant with the People Israel. Symbolized by the rainbow, this universalistic covenant embraces all of humanity, with each monotheistic tradition and national/ethnic particularity as a distinct “color,” and with the full spectrum more beautiful than any one color. This is one midrashic lens for appreciating diversity or multiplicity within God’s plan.<sup>11</sup>

A contemporary meta-narrative offers a potential application of this ancient midrashic wisdom: Jews, Armenians, and Palestinians, peoples of the three Abrahamic faiths, are all “suffering servants.” All have been present in Jerusalem for centuries. Each testifies, in its very existence, to a transcendent, redemptive possibility within God’s Creation, a foundation for shared hope. The three peoples have all survived horrific massacres in recent times, in two cases genocidal. They have also suffered exile from their homelands, an assault to the collective body and spirit.<sup>12</sup> At

<sup>10</sup>Two practical initiatives that try to effect such a transformation are *Parents’ Circle*, the network of bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost loved ones during the course of the conflict, the subject of Ronit Avni’s documentary film *Encounter Point*; and *Open House*, the center for Jewish-Arab coexistence and reconciliation in Ramle, whose symbolic story is chronicled in Sandy Tolan’s book *The Lemon Tree*. See, also, the Web sites [www.theparentscircle.com](http://www.theparentscircle.com) and [www.friendsofopenhouse.org](http://www.friendsofopenhouse.org).

<sup>11</sup>A similar midrashic message emerges from the word *Makhpelah*, the name of the sacred cave in Hebron/Al-Khalil which Abraham purchased from Ephron the Hittite (Gn 23), and in which Abraham was later buried by Isaac and Ishmael (Gn 25:9). The Hebrew name means “multiplicity.” Encoded in that name is a multiple holiness that Jews and Arabs could jointly affirm and share.

<sup>12</sup>We Jews have a profound understanding of exile, given our historical experience, reflected biblically in Psalms 137 and 126. Today we are once again “like dreamers” as we celebrate our homecoming to Zion. But that homecoming dream has turned into a living nightmare for the Palestinians. As we sing the joyous songs of our amazed ancestors, how do we ensure that our children and grandchildren will enjoy a safe and healthy future full of song?

this historical moment, the three national communities find each other in adjacent quarters of our common Mother City, Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> The three communities are segregated, each consoled by its own faith tradition and vision of redemption. My conviction is that the God of history is calling all of us to see the Divine hand in each other's sacred stories, to recognize the Divine image in each others' faces, and thus to bear witness to a redemptive future for all.

The prototype for this transformation of perception and spirit is the patriarch Jacob. Upon his return to the Land after a twenty-year exile, and following a nocturnal struggle with a mysterious being which left him permanently wounded, his identity was transformed from Jacob to "Israel," to a survivor who prevailed in the struggle with the Divine and the human. After this costly transformation, Jacob could encounter his estranged brother Esau and declare to him, "I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God." (Gn 33:10) We need a broader spiritual view of history that incorporates sacred mystery and points to a shared human destiny. If we are to transform our present condition of conflict into one of spiritual partnership, we will need such a vision to inspire our efforts. And for the three monotheistic faith communities, Jerusalem remains the holy epicenter of global transformation. As Isaiah prophesies in 56:7, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

### ***Sod and Olam HaAtsilut***

The context for the verse just cited, chapter 56 of Isaiah, is a vision of the Sabbath as a universal, all-inclusive means of accessing the Divine and experiencing God's love and blessing. In this text, spatial dispensations or benefits follow references to the cosmic covenantal dimension of *Shabbat*. The prophetic vision reaffirms the sabbatical "code of sevens" programmed into Creation, with holiness in time preceding and conditioning holiness in space.<sup>14</sup> Jerusalem, with its Holy of Holies, becomes the reconciling center-point in sacred geography as well as the *alpha* and *omega* point of sacred history.<sup>15</sup> Using a contemporary metaphor, one might call it the centerpiece of "God's Home Page" on the cosmic Web site. In messianic or eschatological terms, humankind can re-enter the Garden, reversing the primordial exile from Eden and eating from the Tree of Life, if we can transcend our self-centered narratives, especially our "victim scripts," and forge together a meta-narrative that is God-centered.

Even if our subjective religious "lenses" are not able to penetrate the veils that keep us from direct encounter with the Divine at the *sod* or esoteric level, we might still have enough revealed knowledge, amplified by our experiences in interfaith relations, to discern a higher unity behind and within our fragmented human condition. If we can direct our prayers, messianic longings, and actions toward the *En Sof* – the Infinite beyond the finite, the Eternal beyond the temporal and temporary – we may be graced with better understanding, from the perspective of *Olam HaAtsilut*, the realm of Pure Spirit, of how our antagonistic identities can be reconciled. Such a messianic transformation requires a paradigm shift in consciousness, a healing of our wounded and fearful hearts, and an opening to God's love in the depths of our souls.

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<sup>13</sup> In Ps 87:5-7, we learn that Jerusalem, chosen and graced by God, has given birth to more than one child, and that singers and dancers (of different faiths) will joyously proclaim about her that "all my wellsprings are in you."

<sup>14</sup> This is the central message in Abraham Joshua Heschel's modern classic, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> The Jewish mystics see the Holy of Holies on the Temple Mount, with its Foundation Stone (*Even Hashetiyah*) as the *aleph* or origin point of the cosmos. In their view, its primordial and cosmic sanctity explains why the two Temples were built there and why Jewish prayers are directed there until today. This is also why the messianic transformation of history at the End of Days is envisioned as happening there.

For Jews, this means, in part, a multi-dimensional spirituality that affirms both the particular and the universal, as reflected in Isaiah 1:27: there is a Divine promise of return to the Land (*shivat Tzion*), linked to the inner return (*teshuvah*) of the people. That demographic shift from Diaspora to Zion has to be accompanied by a spiritual and ethical transformation lived out in acts of *mishpat*/justice and *tsedakah*/compassion. The unprecedented challenges of our present historical moment stretch our hearts and minds beyond our own people, *Am Yisrael*, to include the other nations, starting with our Arab neighbors in the Middle East. All peoples are invited to come “up” to Jerusalem to worship, study, and join in *tikkun olam*, transforming the weapons of war into implements of peace and security, by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, liberating the captives, and reconciling neighbors.<sup>16</sup>

The late Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Chief Rabbi in the Land of Israel under the British Mandate, had a religious Zionist vision that integrated the particularistic and universalistic dimensions of Judaism. In his mystical understanding, he saw the Zionist homecoming as part of a global transformation that will ultimately bring healing to all of humanity.<sup>17</sup> For Rabbi Kook, that messianic transformation includes reconciliation among the Abrahamic faith communities. In a letter from Jaffa in 1908, he wrote:

The brotherly love of Esau and Jacob [Christians and Jews in Rabbinic midrashic typology], of Isaac and Ishmael [Jews and Muslims], will assert itself above all the confusion that the evil brought on by our bodily nature [in *Olam HaAsiyah*] has engendered. It will overcome them and transform them to eternal light and compassion. This broad concept, sweetened by the enlightenment of the true teaching of the Torah, must be our guide on all our ways in the end of days, to seal our understanding of the Torah with the imprint of the Messiah by turning the bitter to sweet, and darkness to light.<sup>18</sup>

The vision of Rabbi Kook, reflecting the *sod* or mystical level of Torah and history, can inspire us as we struggle to achieve genuine reconciliation among religious communities and nations, especially in God’s Holy Land.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Isaiah 2 and Micah 4; also Isaiah 61, reiterated by Jesus in Luke 4.

<sup>17</sup>“The renewal of the desire in the people as a whole to return to its land, to its essence, to its spirit and way of life – in truth, there is a light of *teshuvah* [repentance/return] in all this. Truly this comes to expression in the Torah: “And you shall return to the Lord your God” (Dt 30:2); “When you return to the Lord your God” (Dt 30:10). [Between these two verses are others which speak of restoring the people to the land, as in verse 5: “and the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your forefathers inherited, and you will inherit it...”] The *teshuvah* spoken of is always an inner *teshuvah*, but it is covered over by many screens. No impediment or lack of completion can keep the higher light from reaching us...Let the bud come forth, let the flower bloom, let the fruit ripen, and the whole world will know that the holy spirit is speaking in the community of Israel, in all the manifestations of its spirit. All this will culminate in a *teshuvah* that will bring healing and redemption to the world.” From *The Lights of Penitence* [*Orot HaTeshuvah* – first edition 1925], Chapter 17, in *Abraham Isaac Kook – The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters and Poems*, trans. and introduction by Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 126-7. In this citation I have used the Hebrew “*teshuvah*” in place of the English “penitence.”

<sup>18</sup> From a letter written in 1908/5678, trans. by Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook*, p. 339.

<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Kook had his own four-dimensional typology for defining Jewish spirituality and identity. He poetically described a “fourfold song” comprising the song of the self, the song of the people, the song of all humanity, and the song of the cosmos. In his idealistic conception of the religious soul, especially for Jews, these four songs “merge in him at all times, in every hour. And this full comprehensiveness rises to become the song of holiness, the song of God, the song of Israel, in its full strength and beauty, in its full authenticity and greatness...It is a simple song, a twofold song, a threefold song and a fourfold song. It is the Song of Songs of Solomon, *shlomo*, which means peace or wholeness. It is the song of the King in whom is wholeness.” *Ibid.*, pp. 228-9.

## Conclusion

What are the practical implications of these thoughts for Jewish-Christian relations today? Five points stem from this reflection:

1. The Land is a laboratory for holy living, a testing ground for faithfully practicing justice and compassion, among Jews, Christians, and Muslims (with help from Druse, Baha'is and others). Bilateral dialogue between us on these matters is not sufficient; we must invite our Muslim neighbors into the conversation.
2. The spiritual and the political can not be separated, since there are fundamental ethical principles at stake which need to be upheld in public affairs, not only by individuals.
3. Nationalism and territorialism are idolatries. They must be challenged on Biblical and Qur'anic grounds. The national and territorial dimensions of identity, which are integral realities for Jews and Muslims (and some Christians, like Armenians), need to be defined more inclusively. Christians can help, so long as they do not choose sides and can demonstrate solidarity with both Jews and Muslims.
4. We live in a radically new era of Christian-Jewish relations, symbolized by the Holy See's recognition of the State of Israel in 1993 and by Pope John Paul II's Jubilee trip to Israel/Palestine in March, 2000.<sup>20</sup> Toward the end of his trip, when he placed his prayer of contrition over Christian persecution of Jews inside a crack in the Western Wall (*Kotel*), it was a meta-historical moment, an act of sincere *teshuvah* or *metanoia* on the part of a global Christian leader. It acknowledged that Christians are in need of forgiveness, from Jews and from God. Jews are called to acknowledge such acts of sincere *teshuvah* and to reciprocate through their own acts of transformative love.
5. Christians are called to help Jews and Muslims – worldwide and especially in the Land we all call Holy – to achieve justice and reconciliation, in the spirit of the Beatitude calling peacemakers “children of God.” (Mt 5:9) This requires a dual solidarity based on an inclusive vision of justice and an inclusive praxis of loving care – sacrificial service that combines fraternal *philia* and gracious *agape*. A small number of saintly souls might demonstrate the highest of Christian virtues, self-emptying love. For the majority of Christians, acts of sympathy and overtures of welcome to Jewish neighbors will help those Jews overcome any conditioned suspicions of Christian motives. Once trust is established, Jews and Christians can be partners in promoting “*tikkun olam bemalkhut Shaddai*” (from the *Aleinu* prayer), the transformation of our broken, suffering world into the messianic kingdom of God. Praying together for the peace of Jerusalem, and working as allies together with Muslims to make those prayers real, are crucial requirements of that joint commitment.

Hopefully the four-fold song in this reflection (to use Rabbi Kook's poetic metaphor in fn. 19) is a rubric that can help us find a way out of the present deadly conflict in Israel/Palestine, which has negative repercussions worldwide. We need new angles of vision, and frameworks for collective action, that will engage our full souls, tapping wisdom from our critical intellects, our devotional hearts, and the depths of our being where we experience ecstatic rapture in communion with the

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<sup>20</sup>See my essay, “Pope John Paul II's Holy Land Pilgrimage: A Jewish Appraisal,” in *John Paul II in the Holy Land: In His Own Words* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2005), pp. 129-156.

Divine. For too long we aspired to attain these sacred ends as segregated communities living in mutual ignorance. In our time, we see the tragic price we have all paid, and continue to pay, because of the mutual estrangement and antagonism forged over centuries. We have the opportunity to transform this history of pain into a future of shared blessing. But we can not do this alone. We need one another, as Abrahamic siblings and partners, in order to realize God's promise for each and every one of us.