



Embracing Pluralism in Israel and Palestine

Howard W. Hallman

United Methodist; Peace and Justice Advocate

Abstract

Prospects for peace between Israel and Palestine can be greatly enhanced by embracing pluralism and seeking win-win solutions. As revealed by the Holy Scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all three faiths express belief in love of God and love of neighbor. In all three faiths love of neighbor extends to hospitality toward strangers following the example of Abraham, their common spiritual ancestor. In the Holy Land hospitality can gain practical expression in political systems that are pluralistic in nature. Israel can fulfill the commitment to “complete equality of social and political rights to all of its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex” found in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel (1948). Instead of being a divided city let Jerusalem be transformed into a unified international city with sovereignty by both Israel and Palestine and the capital for both nations. The future State of Palestine could allow some settlements to remain and offer the residents full citizenship in Palestine and full participation in civic life. To facilitate a peaceful transition there could be a truth and reconciliation commission that draws on the experience of 30 nations around the globe.

Keywords: *pluralism, hospitality, acceptance, reconciliation, and win-win*

Introduction

For many years the effort to achieve peace between Israel and Palestinians has been played out as a zero-sum game. If the Palestinians gain, Israel loses. If Israel gains, Palestinians lose. It's either-or.

A wiser approach, more likely to achieve lasting peace, would be to seek win-win solutions. It would be both-and. Both Israel and Palestine would benefit.

Religious Commonality

Significantly in a region where too often religion divides, peace can come about by recognizing and applying a commonality of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This congruence was pointed out in a 2007 statement entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You” that 138 Muslim scholars addressed to Pope Benedict XVI and other Christian leaders. It could have equally been addressed to Jewish leaders. The common word is “love of one God, love of neighbor.”

Thus, the Torah instructs, “Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). And also, “And you must love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus called these the Two Great Commandments (Mark 12:28-31).

Summarizing Islamic belief, the Muslim scholars in “A Common Word” (2007) explained: Of God’s Unity, God says in the Holy Qur’an: *Say, He is God, the One! / God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all!* (Al-Ikhlās, 121:2). Of the necessity of love for God, God says in the Holy Qur’an: *So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote himself to Him with a complete devotional* (Muzzammil, 73:8). Of the necessity of love for the neighbor, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: *None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself.*

Hospitality

In all three faiths love for neighbor extends to hospitality toward strangers. All three faiths honor Abraham (Ibrahim) who offered food and drink to three strangers who appeared at his tent. They turned out to be angels in disguise who told him that his wife Sarah, childless in old age, would bare a son, leading to a great nation (Genesis 18:1-15; Qur’an 51:24-27). The strangers went next to Sodom to the home of Lot (Lut), Abraham’s nephew, who took them in, fed them, and protected them from men of Sodom, who wanted to gang rape them. (Genesis 19:1-23; Qur’an 15:51-70). The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament summarizes this experience in a single verse: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware” (Hebrews 13:2).

As the Israelites were wandering in the Sinai wilderness, God had Moses instruct them: “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” Also translated, “stranger”, “foreigner,” “resident alien” (Exodus 22:21). Repeatedly the Israelites are told to care for widows, orphans, the poor, and sojourners. For instance, allow them to glean

for grain, to pick up fallen grapes and olives (Deuteronomy 24:20-21).

In Jesus' allegory of the Last Judgment persons who welcomed strangers gained a place of honor in the future kingdom, along with those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited the sick and prisoners (Matthew 25:31-46). In answering a question of "who is my neighbor," Jesus made a Samaritan the hero in a story about a man who showed mercy to a robbery victim along the road to Jericho (Luke 10:29-37).

The Qur'an includes travelers on lists of persons to support. For example: "In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, the Prophet told the people: Show kindness to parents and kindred, to orphans and to the destitute, to near and distant neighbors, to those that keep company with you, to the traveler in need, and to the slaves you own" (Al-Nisa 4:36).

Brought into the 21st century these teachings about hospitality can apply in the Holy Land where one-fourth the population of Israel consists of Arab citizens and other non-Jewish residents and 17 percent of the population of the West Bank is Jewish. Greater Jerusalem also has a mixed population. In these locales minorities are indeed "strangers" in the midst of a majority population who should be offered acceptance and hospitality as their religion requires.

Pluralism

Within governing systems pluralism gains application by accepting and honoring population diversity. It is a both-and solution.

In principle the idea of pluralism has been present in Israel since its founding in 1948. The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel (1948) stated that it was to be a homeland, "open for Jewish migration and for the ingathering of Exiles" (para. 14). But at the same time The Declaration made a commitment to "ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all of its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex" and to "guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture" (paragraph 14).

This ideal wasn't fully applied as large numbers of Palestinians were displaced. Nevertheless, in Israel today non-Jewish citizens have full citizenship, including the right to vote, form political parties, gain representation in the Knesset, serve as judges, hold other political offices, and be employed for government jobs. Although military service is not compulsory for Arab citizens, some from the Bedouin community volunteer and a few are high ranking officers.

Pluralism extends to the religious community where there are two chief rabbis, one from the Sephardic community, the other Ashkenazi.

Jerusalem

The principle of pluralism has particular relevance for the future of Jerusalem. Israel, after capturing Jerusalem in the 1967 war, considers Jerusalem as its undivided capital. Palestinians, however, want to regain control of East Jerusalem as their future capital. This is an either-or situation, a kind of zero-sum game.

A creative new approach would be to elevate a unified Jerusalem to the status of an international city with sovereignty by both Israel and Palestine. It would indeed be the capital for

both nations. The Israeli Knesset is already there. Palestine would construct a new capitol building. It would be both-and, a win-win situation.

In a unified Jerusalem, residents would have equal right to vote and elect a city council. Recognizing a dual constituency, there could be two mayors, one Jewish, one Palestinian (drawing on the experience of Israel with its two chief rabbis). Each mayor would have a veto on local legislation. They could share a common reception area with the hope that propinquity would enhance cooperation.

The municipal police department with both Jewish and Palestinian officers would perform ordinary police functions together, and they would be in a position to deal with any militants aiming to disrupt the public order.

As a further step to promote harmony and cooperation, there could be a citywide council of neighborhoods to bring residents together and allow them to work cooperatively on mutual concerns. This would create opportunities for communication between Israelis and Palestinians, between persons of different economic classes and stations in life. They would offer hospitality to one another. They would seek unity out of diversity. Together they would promote achievement of a glorious city, a New Jerusalem that provides for the well-being of all.

State of Palestine

Pluralism also can have application in a future State of Palestine. Presently 83 percent of the population of the West Bank is Palestinian, 17 Jewish, mostly living in Israeli settlements. The population of Gaza is 98 percent Palestinian.

The most common proposal for creation of a Palestinian State is to recognize that 70 to 80 percent of the settlers are concentrated relatively near the pre-1967 border between Israel and the West Bank. Therefore, a land swap should occur with Israel annexing this territory in exchange for a similar amount of territory elsewhere that it would cede to the new Palestinian state.

The question arises of what would happen to the 60,000 to 70,000 residents of Israeli settlements remaining in the West Bank. Although in 2005 Israel dismantled 21 settlements in Gaza and relocated the 7,000 residents, this approach seems impracticable in the West Bank for a number of reasons: resistance from the residents, challenge of finding alternative house in Israel proper, waste of resources in tearing down the settlements as was done in Gaza.

A win-win approach would be to let these Israeli settlers remain if they choose. They could be offered full citizenship in Palestine with voting rights, other civil rights, and representation in the Palestinian governing body just as Israel has Arab citizens. Short of that they could be given the status of permanent residents (an offer Israel made to Palestinians living in East Jerusalem after annexing that territory, an offer most of them declined). An alternative would allow the Israeli settlers to become dual citizens of Palestine, where they are living, and Israel, from which they have come.

This approach would require both sides to apply the principle of hospitality. Palestinians would need to accept the remaining settlements as established facts and welcome the residents into life in the Palestinian State. The Jewish residents who remain would need to graciously accept minority status in a Palestinian state with guarantee of full civil rights.

The result would be two multi-ethnic nations, one predominantly Jewish, the other predominantly Palestinian, living together side-by-side. This would reflect the facts on the ground that both states are pluralistic in population.

State of Israel

For Israel the greatest act of hospitality would be to facilitate the establishment of fully functioning, democratic Palestinian state. In reciprocity Palestine should recognize and accept the State of Israel and should prevent attacks on Israel from Palestinian territory. This could lead to recognition of Israel's sovereignty by surrounding Arab states in accordance with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Ultimately this would provide far more security for Israel than the separation wall and continued occupation of the West Bank. As peace occurs, the wall should be removed.

Internally Israel would need to carefully examine whether it is fulfilling the promise in The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel of "complete equality of social and political rights to all of its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex" and to take steps to remove any barriers to full equality.

Truth and Reconciliation

Embracing pluralism in the manner that I am suggesting would constitute enormous change from past decades of mistrust and conflict. Peaceful transition won't come easy. But fortunately, there is an abundance of experience with conflict transformation and peacebuilding to draw upon.

Approximately 30 nations around the globe have found it useful to establish truth and reconciliation commissions (by various names) to bring out the truth of past practices and grievances in a non-judicial setting and commence the process of reconciliation. The best known functioned in South Africa and dealt with grievances against both the apartheid state and liberation forces. Such a joint commission established by Israel and Palestine could foster healing and promote harmonious relations.

The challenge in Palestine will be to integrate residents of the retained Israeli settlements into the new pluralistic state. The new government could establish a community relations commission with this function. There is available a growing body of knowledge on mediation, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding, and also a variety of international organizations with expertise to draw upon.

On a smaller scale the new unified Jerusalem could have its own community relations commission to help Israelis and Palestinians resolve disputes and work together to achieve harmonious relationships in this new kind of international city.

This kind of pluralism can make a significant contribution to achieving lasting peace in Israel and Palestine.