



**Exploring the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict from Religious Perspectives**

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### Abstract

Judaism and Islam are world's most important religions with adherents consisting of approximately half of the global population (Phipps, 1996, p. 11). The cultural conflict between the Israelis and Muslims in Israel and Palestine is deeply embedded in their histories and religions. This paper analyzes the historical influences of Judaism and Islam, and explores the fundamental beliefs of the two religions that encourage people to be kind and respectful to others. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of positive thinking between the two faiths and help people build trust by promoting positive communication. The paper attempts to enhance religious understanding by examining how Judaism and Islam can foster peaceful communication between Israelis and Muslims.

**Keywords:** Judaism, Islam, Israel, Palestine, social identity theory, cooperation, mutual understanding, kindheartedness

## Historical Background

Populations in Israel are facing a difficult situation with religious conflict among the Israelis and Muslims. In 1949, Jerusalem was divided into two, with the western half belonging to Israel and the eastern half to Jordan. In the whole country, there were around 650,000 Jews (Goldscheider, 2002). “Historically, in the late nineteenth century, some European Jews decided to renew Jewish settlements in the region known as Palestine and to establish a refuge for Jews across the world” (Coward & Smith, 2004). A political movement aimed at reestablishing the Jewish community in Palestine dissatisfied the Muslims and caused intermittent conflicts.

Jerusalem is a city with a history of 6,000 years and enjoys a rich cultural diversity (Goldscheider, 2002). Jerusalem has experienced reconstruction, re-establishment, and renaissance throughout centuries of conflicts. Since ancient times, Jerusalem has been a focal point for many faiths. With the coexistence of different cultures and religions, it makes sense as to why there would be conflict. The chaos will be resolved when the people most affected are willing to work toward peace instead of allowing more wars to determine their future. This may be difficult because both Jews and Muslims in Israel and Palestine claim that Jerusalem should be their eternal capital (Goldscheider, 2002).

On May 14, 1948, the Jewish state of Israel was established. Shortly after, five large-scale wars took place between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries. As a result of these conflicts, thousands of Muslims were permanently displaced from their homes and became refugees. This displacement of large numbers of Muslims has been the source of one of the most significant grievances of the Palestinian people against Israel (Goldscheider, 2002).

Mutual mistrust and religious misunderstandings increase the conflicts between Jews and Muslims. A recent study of Muslim voting patterns found that two-thirds of the Muslim public in Israel mistrust Jews. The Jews also mistrust their Muslim neighbors: 41% of the Jews regard Muslims as a real danger to national security, and 66% feel that it is impossible to trust them (Smootha, 1989). Historians have pointed out that religions can play a constructive role in promoting peace between Israelis and Muslims as “it is clear that religions or primordial identity need to provide adequate orientations to changing the confrontations” (Goldscheider, 2002). Through a positive understanding of the origins and cultural traditions of Judaism and Islam, people might find a peaceful way to foster smooth communication and to build trust between the two groups.

## Islam and Judaism

### *Social Identity*

Social identity theory helps to explain the differences between different religions and people’s identities. It looks into how group members categorize and identify themselves from other group members (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). This theory provides a better understanding of the relationship between Islam and Judaism. Social identity theory links individuals within groups. This theory proposes that individuals can exist in a certain social category that represents relative power and status relationship (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). People from different religions will have to positively consider how their religions can guide the doctrine and the rule of law of the country or the community.

Social identity theory provides insight into the relationship between self-concept and social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Jewish people and Muslims consider themselves to hold different

views and cultural beliefs. Religious in-group members might be more likely to support their own group members. Also, in-group members might act violently to discriminate or serge conflicts against out-group members in order to ensure the uniqueness and sovereignty of their own religion. It can represent power and reputation of a faithful person, and this person will be honored within that group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The religious leadership is associated with religious standards and rules. Also, religious members are asked to pray and act in specific ways, according to the Torah or Quran.

Social identity theory explains why group members support their religious and sociopolitical systems, which are related to individuals' collaborative ideology (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). People with a specific religious belief might feel threatened by others who are from different cultural and religious backgrounds. One might think they are better than another and use religious doctrine to teach their group members the importance of preserving their religious or ethical identities. For example, according to Judaism, unfaithfulness and dishonesty to their religion will be considered idolatry and sin (Miller, 2004).

Group members might also have missions to serve and teach people in order to shape individuals' religious beliefs and behaviors. However, group members might want to enhance self-esteem and dominance through propaganda or political hegemony (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Islam has ethical guidelines and moral rules. Religious and political leaders might encourage people to follow Islamic rules and fundamental principles according to the Quran (Haleem, 2004). For example, the first pillar is the *Shahada*, which means that when a person declares and becomes a Muslim, he or she needs to commit to Islam in their entire life (Haleem, 2004). In addition, Islamic religion plays a vital role in the lives of Muslims who live in Western Europe. According to research, 74% of Muslim participants indicated that their religion is very important in their lives, and around 20% believed that religion is important. Moreover, there were 80% of Muslims who said that they visited mosques once a week or more (Verkuyten, 2007).

Social identity and religious belief can guide people on how to serve a leader (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Religion can play an important role in politics. Establishing a positive cognitive knowledge towards different religions will be helpful to promote mutual understanding and share common interests. Group members might want to accomplish goals by taking political actions and media propaganda.

Furthermore, the Jewish people who live in Israel might have a strong sense of belongingness and be proud of their national identity because they believe that their ancestors have inherited God's wisdom and prosperity (Miller, 2008). Also, the Jewish people might be territorial and self-defensive when they feel threatened by another group with a different faith. For example, religious Israelis usually teach their children about the rule of law and moral regulations (Miller, 2008). The Islamic people also teach their children how to eat and dress, and the importance of respecting God and their tradition according to the Quran (Ali, 2001).

The positive knowledge and understanding of the two faiths will encourage groups to learn cultures and histories from the historical contexts. When two religious groups live in the same community, conflicts might occur. However, the researcher aims to find the similarities and positive meanings in the Quran and Torah for people to erase misunderstanding. Additionally, people can cultivate collective ideas and shared knowledge for living together peacefully. The two faiths come from the same ancestor Abraham, who played a critical role in the relationship between humans and God. The positive understanding from a historical perspective will help people to reconcile and develop prosperity together. Besides, for religious minorities, sharing religious beliefs will encourage them to understand and support each other spiritually.

*Violence in Religions*

Many contemporary people might exercise personal choices to interpret the Quran or the Torah according to their moral preconceptions about justifiable violence. However, the author will not only explain the facts but also reveal the truth from a positive perspective. Since the time of Prophet Muhammad, Islam has considered warfare to be a legitimate expression of being faithful to Islam. The Quran contains more than 100 verses, which proposes conflicts toward nonbelievers (Haleem, 2004). The Islamic military ruling class evolved following the interpretations of the Quran. The key theme in the religious contexts was the justness of war. For example, the Quran indicates the “eye for an eye” concept, “O you who have believed, prescribed for you is legal retribution for those murdered, the free for the free, the slave for the slave, and the female for the female... whoever transgresses after that will have a painful punishment (Ali, 2001). Also, the Quran said, “Fighting is prescribed for you, and ye dislike it. But it is possible that ye dislike a thing which is good for you, and that ye love a thing which is bad for you. However, Allah knoweth, and ye know not” (Qur’an, n.d.). This provides an idea about when they should defend themselves and take actions against their enemies. Religious Muslims also believe that if they refuse to join the fight with nonbelievers of the Quran, they will be called hypocrites.

Moreover, the Quran indicates, “As to those who reject faith, I will punish them with terrible agony in this world and in Hereafter, nor will they have anyone to help.” In addition, the Quran explains how unbelievers should be judged: “Soon shall We cast terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers, for that they joined companions with Allah, for which He had sent no authority. “ The Quran also illustrates that «Those who believe fight in the cause of Allah, and those who disbelieve... So fight you against the friends of Shaitan (Satan)» (Qur’an, n.d.). Moreover, some religious Muslims might believe that the Quran established the idea of who is the Messiah and why Jews should be condemned. As it indicates, “The Jews say: Ezra is the son of Allah; and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah; these are the words of their mouths; they imitate the saying of those who disbelieved before; may Allah destroy them; how they are turned away” (Qur’an, n.d.).

In addition, the Torah also mentioned how the Jewish God, Hashem, has punished and destroyed other people by sending flood, raining fire, and brimstone according to people’s sins, such as adultery and idol worship against God (Miller, 2008). Therefore, violence has theological consequences in the discussion of the Torah and the Quran. For example, the Torah indicates in the book of Exodus that after the Israelites escaped from Egypt, Jewish people wandered in the desert for forty years and have suffered hardships, as well as they had to run away from their enemy. At the same time, the Torah shows how Hashem (God of Jewish people) has saved the Jewish people’s lives and guided their way (Miller, 2004).

*Jews in Israel*

Historically, Israelis have had a deep emotional tie to the land of Israel. According to Jewish beliefs, God gave the land of Canaan to them in ancient times, a territory that included Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan (Miller, 2004). According to the Jewish Bible, if people heed God’s command, the Lord will provide them a prosperous life in the Land of Israel. “Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the world, from there the Lord will gather you and bring you to the land that your father possessed, and make you more prosperous and more numerous than your fathers” (Berlin & Brettler, 1999).

### *Muslims in Palestine*

Israel is located in western Asia, near the Mediterranean coast, and adjacent to many predominantly Muslim countries. The Islamic culture of the region has a rich and ancient history. Many Muslims believe in Islam. They have Sunni, Shia, and other religious sects. Some Muslims reject sharing the land with the Jews. Following Islamic law, every Muslim in the world must fight for the liberation of the occupied land (Borg & Henten, 2010). The Quran is a source of motivation for Muslims to support the Muslims since it encourages people to fight for the weak and against aggression.

Islamic ethical teaching reflects Muslim culture, such as cooperation with the other inhabitants of countries where Muslims live. However, Muslims also believe that the Israeli territory should belong to Palestine based on the Quran. Muslims define themselves as different from Jews, and some of them do not want to share the land and live with Jews. By discovering the deep meanings of the two religions and finding the similarities between them, it is possible to understand that the two religions prioritize maintaining regional peace over religious conflict and prejudice.

## **Relations between Judaism and Islam**

Judaism and Islam both advocate virtuous behaviors and promote ethnic equality. Islam attaches great importance to the doctrine of contrition and expiation. The ideas in Islam have similarities with Judaism (Shuzhi, 1997). According to the Jewish Bible, God created humans because He wants to continue training people's souls and teaches them to do good things in order to purify their original sins (Berlin & Brettler, 1999). By studying the fundamental principles of their religions, Muslims and Jews can enhance mutual understanding and build trust through effective communication and the elimination of prejudice.

Judaism and Islam encourage freedom of expression and being respectful to others. Both religions espouse the concepts of kindness, honesty, and cooperation. Religious beliefs can produce profound effects on people's thoughts and behaviors. The essence of faith in Islam and Judaism is to encourage people to reconnect and communicate with God.

### *Essences of Judaism and Islam*

Religion gives guidance to human civilization, and it aims to provide a deep cultural foundation for their adherents, which will guide behaviors spiritually (Chopra, 2005). Judaism and Islam imply that love represents forgiveness and nonviolent interaction. By understanding the deep meaning of human love, to be honest about human behaviors and language, societies will maintain fairness and peace between Muslims and the Jewish people.

### *Kindheartedness*

Judaism and Islam emphasize morality and humanity. The two faiths also encourage people to resolve conflicts in a peaceful way, which implies murder and stealing is a sin (Chopra, 2005). Based on the Torah, human beings are all God's children and should be considered equal. People need to erase their sins by praying and asking for forgiveness from God. In Judaism, it is believed that there will be time for the final judgment of God towards the human spirits regarding whether people treat each other with dignity and respect (Chopra, 2005).

Moreover, according to the Hebrew Bible, liberty and equality are essential to the Jewish society. Judaism believes that humans have the right to choose to be kind-hearted. The Book of Exodus in the Torah suggests that God is merciful and not easily angered. He would like to bring mercy and truth to people (Berlin & Brettler, 1999). God always shows love and compassion to everyone, and He wants people to respect and love him in return (Brown, 2012).

Judaism instructs people to give compassion to both humans and animals. It is strictly forbidden in the Old Testament to give unnecessary pain to people and animals. The Old Testament remarks that Moses represents the shepherd of Israel by giving love to the slaves and saving their lives in Egypt. The implication of the “womb” actually was originated in the idea of either motherly love or sibling love. Jews believe it is God’s compassionate gift to Israel (Hosea, 6:6). Thus, “we are to love kindness” (Mic, 6:8), and exhibit God’s kindness and mercy” (Luke, 6:35-36).

Islam also encourages people to show affection and love to each other. Islam calls for peace in order to foster life in love (Haleem, 2004). In Islam, God loves the pure and clean human spirit. Muslims want to take the advantages of modernism and democracy to their sincere goodwill. Greetings for love and kindness between ordinary Muslims are a symbol of blessing for peace (Haleem, 2004). The Quran also advocates tolerance and regards it as a virtue. Tolerance and kindheartedness are the main characteristics of the Islamic faith (Haleem, 2004). In the Quran, it suggests that people should be kind and show sympathy to each other. Even if the enemy treats people by speaking rudely and exerting pressure, people should still be kind and tolerant. For example, Quran indicates that “Mothers tenderly love their children, animals’ world also has love, and they know how to live with each other harmoniously. When a pony has mare’s milk, their mother always lifts one leg to avoid hitting against the pony by accident” (Haleem, 2004).

### *Honesty*

The Jewish and Islamic traditions both encourage people to be honest and loyal. According to the Old Testament, honesty is a sign of a righteous person (Hebrews, 6:18). For example, if a person knows the truth without telling the truth, he is called a liar. The Old Testament notes that “because you speak falsehood and lies, I will deal with you. My hand will be against who said falsehood, and they shall not remain my people and shall not be inscribed in the lists of the House of Israel” (Holy Bible, 2013). An honest person should cultivate the capability of love, not only by an obsession with relaying accurate information (Holy Bible, 2013). An honest person should also make accurate and trustworthy statements to themselves, others, and the Lord.

Honesty is an essential quality of individuals, and it is a fundamental guarantee leading to spiritual success. The Quran indicates that honesty is the root foundation of developing a family and career (Haleem, 2004). Also, the Quran suggests that “Do not ask for things that belong to others. When you sell food, you should use a good scale to balance goods” (Haleem, 2004). This indicates that honesty is an important principle in Islam. In addition, Prophet Muhammad exhorted Muslims to be scrupulously honest in all their dealings, “O you who believe! Fear God, and be with those who are true (in word and deeds)” (Haleem, 2004). An essential ingredient of the Muslim culture includes being truthful to oneself and adhering to God’s laws. This means that there should be no deceiving, cheating, falsifying, or withholding of information (Haleem, 2004).

### *Cooperation*

Judaism and Islam illustrate that mature love can improve people's inner hearts to cooperate and to achieve peace with one another. For example, the two faiths both suggest that connecting people from different cultures can end isolation. Neighboring countries should show respect to people from other cultures and communicate effectively with them (Chopra, 2005). The Jewish people and Muslims should cultivate sincere friendship and mutual trust to cooperate and negotiate when there is a conflict.

Moreover, both religions emphasize protecting vulnerable social groups. Judaism teaches people to respect each other and not to force ideas on other people. It indicates that "When a stranger resides in your land, you shall not mistreat him. You shall love him as you love yourself" (Chopra, 2005). It encourages people to love their neighboring countries as they love themselves, and to learn how to coexist in a peaceful environment.

The commandments in the Old Testament are essential to traditional Jewish education. By listening and acting appropriately and obeying Jewish law, God will provide a good life. For example, the Old Testament notes that cooperating in free markets and building a harmonious civil society with sharing love is essential (Chopra, 2005). It suggests that people can improve cooperation by donating money to peace organizations and helping the poor.

Also, the Quran emphasizes strengthening individual's moral standards and improving ethical consciousness. It encourages people to build unity and friendship, as well as forgive the enemy and take initiative to support others. In spiritual terms, the Quran and the Old Testament intended to heal separation (Chopra, 2005). Both texts guide people on how to tolerate differences while seeking coexistence.

The Quran suggests that Muslims need to help other people and have concern for their needs. "You follow the public, Allah's hands with the masses, who ignore others, the one will be isolated" (Haleem, 2004), which means that cooperation is the opposite of forcing views on others and being egoistic. In addition, the Quran states that "When you see the evil behaviors, you should use your hands to stop it; If you cannot do it, then using your tongue to stop it; If you still cannot stop bad behaviors, you might reflectively think your heart and behaviors" (Haleem, 2004). Cooperation is essential to preserve peace and harmony. Religious study will help in improving wisdom and emotional intelligence, as well as assisting people in maintaining open relationship in a secure and friendly environment.

### **Conclusion**

The uniqueness of the two faiths brings a positive meaning for promoting mutual understanding and well-being. The two groups can live differently according to their faiths, as well as preserve morality and altruistic behaviors. Peaceful cooperation and honest communication between individuals will promote civilization and social development, as well as satisfy the needs for belongingness. The destinies of Israelis and Muslims require people to maintain open communication and respect so that the conflict between Israelis and Muslims can be decreased and resolved in a humanistic way. Moreover, reconstructing a harmonious and altruistic society depends on people's actions and the way they communicate. Judaism and Islam both advocate love and coexistence. The progress of establishing a developed human society requires people to work together while maintaining cultural diversity.

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