



**From the Diary of a Rabbinic Peacemaker:
Case Study of a Traditional Jewish Process of Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution**

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Abstract

Judaism, like other ethnic and religious groups, preserves a rich lore of traditional systems for conflict resolution. This paper will explore a fascinating case study from eighteenth-century Italy preserved in the personal diary of Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulai. This case study is an important example of traditional Jewish peacemaking, as it presents a rare window into the inner thoughts of a highly respected, religious peacemaker as he engages in a long and grueling process of communal reconciliation and conflict resolution. The study also addresses several critical questions for scholars and practitioners interested in traditional systems of conflict resolution today. These include: How can a visiting third-party peacemaker establish trust and lasting peace in a local community conflict? How does a traditional peacemaker strike a healthy balance between his peacemaking efforts and his own spiritual and personal well-being? How can ritual space and sacred time be utilized in fostering peace? What should come first: *shalom*, the reconciliation of relationships; or *peshara*, the formal compromise agreement that addresses conflicting claims over tangible resources? This paper will also touch upon similarities and differences between this case study and other traditional systems of conflict resolution, in particular the Arab-Islamic *sulha* process. Finally, the author will share personal reflections on how this case study of a historical rabbinic peacemaker has been used in the training of rabbis today to serve as peacemakers.

Keywords: Judaism, reconciliation, conflict resolution, third party peacemaking, HIDA

Introduction

Judaism, like other ethnic and religious groups, enjoys a rich lore of traditional systems for conflict resolution, which have merited several scholarly studies in recent years (Gopin, 2000; Steinberg, 2008; Kaminsky, 2017; Roth, 2011; Roth 2018). This paper explores one particular case study of a conflict that took place in the eighteenth-century Jewish community of Ancona, Italy. The story, which was recorded in the personal diary of the third-party peacemaker to the conflict, Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulai (commonly known as the Hida, 1724–1806), contains within it a rich and detailed example of a traditional Jewish process of reconciliation and conflict resolution.

Born in Jerusalem, Rabbi Azulai, a great Jewish legal scholar, mystic, philosopher and prolific writer, was considered one of the greatest rabbis of his generation. He traveled widely, including to Tunisia, Italy, France, Germany, Holland and England, to raise money on behalf of the Jewish community of Hebron in the late eighteenth century, which was considered a very prestigious role. He believed that infighting and baseless hatred, which traditionally has been viewed as the cause of the destruction of the Second Temple, was also delaying the redemption of the Jewish people and the world. It was therefore of highest priority to constantly be pursuing peace: between communities, different factions within a community, families and even spouses (Benayahu, 1959; Cohen, 2016).

The source that sheds the most light on Rabbi Azulai's peacemaking efforts is his personal travel diary, *Ma'agal Tov*. In this diary he does not merely keep an account of his various fundraising efforts, he also describes his thoughts about the places he visited and the experiences he had. He shares numerous stories of the interactions he had with Jewish community leaders, as well as the many positive encounters he had with Christian scholars and noblemen (Azulai, 1934; Benayahu, 1959; Cohen: 2016). As part of these diary entries he also records several accounts of his peacemaking efforts in both marital and intra-communal conflicts. These are important examples of traditional Jewish peacemaking and offer a rare window into the inner thoughts of a highly respected, religious peacemaker. The particular focus of this paper is on the longest and most grueling case of Rabbi Azulai's peacemaking career.

This case study raises several critical questions for scholars and practitioners interested in traditional and religious systems of conflict resolution. The primary questions to be explored are: (1) How can a third-party peacemaking "outsider" establish trust and lasting peace in a local community conflict? (2) How does a religious peacemaker strike a healthy balance between his peacemaking efforts and his own spiritual and personal well-being? (3) How can ritual space and sacred time be utilized in fostering peace? (4) What should take precedence: *shalom*, the reconciliation of relationships; or *peshara*, the formal compromise agreement that resolves the conflicting claims over tangible resources? This last question is the most significant that this case raises.

The methodology for analyzing this case and addressing these questions is to first present the various steps Rabbi Azulai took in the peacemaking process, as portrayed in chronological order in his diary. The process begins with the moment he first heard of the conflict up until his departure from the community as a heroic peacemaker. After presenting the story, I will then compare and contrast it with the traditional Arab system of conflict resolution and reconciliation known as the *sulha* process, which has been well documented. I will conclude with a brief discussion of two practical implications of this case study. The first pertains to theories of religious peacebuilding today, in particular within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and the second to the practice of training rabbis to serve as peacemakers today.

The Case Study

Step 1: Defining the conflict as both financial and relational

On August 18, 1775, Rabbi Azulai arrived in Ancona, Italy, as part of his travels throughout Europe, staying at the home of the very wealthy Pinhas Coen within the gates of the ghetto. During his first weeks in Ancona he was raising money for the community of Hebron, which was, after all, his primary mission.

On September 17, Rabbi Azulai visited the home of David and Isaac, also known as Coen, who were the brothers of Pinhas' wife, apparently to solicit them. Upon his arrival, he discovered that Isaac and David, as well as David's wife, Rina, who was Pinhas' sister, had been in a major conflict with Pinhas, his wife, Judith, Pinhas' other sister, Sapira, and her husband, Samuel Kalai, for some twelve years. The conflict included a lawsuit entailing some 30,000 Italian *scudi* (as well as multiple land disputes and damages, as will become apparent later on in the story). Due to the family's social and economic status, rabbis, bishops and other senior Christian clergy had all tried to make peace between them but, as Rabbi Azulai notes in his diary, "to no avail, as the hatred between them was too great."

This did not deter Rabbi Azulai. On the contrary, he writes, "And a spirit came over my young self [to make peace]" (Azulai, 1934, p. 72). He immediately understood that the conflict was not only financial but also, or perhaps primarily, about the hatred and a breakdown in the relationship between the sides. His understanding of the two aspects of the conflict led him to advance two parallel tracks of peacemaking, as we will see: one of conflict resolution to bring the parties to a financial settlement and the other of reconciliation to heal the broken relationships of this deeply conflicted family.

Step 2: Taking the initiative to intervene

Upon hearing the details of the conflict, Rabbi Azulai immediately admonished David Coen to make peace (*shalom*) with everyone. He even persuaded him to cancel an upcoming trip to Venice he had already scheduled. He noted in his diary that David's brother Isaac, who was with them during this initial visit, assisted him in persuading David that they should make peace with the other side. However, both brothers insisted on two conditions: that the financial part of the conflict be decided upon by Rabbi Azulai and Rabbi Haim Avraham Israel of Rhodes, who had served as the local rabbi of Ancona since 1774; and that the decision of the rabbis be in accordance with the strict letter of Jewish law (*din*) and not through a compromise agreement (*peshara*) (Azulai, 1934).

Step 3: Establishing the third-party peacemakers and commitment of the sides to the process

Rabbi Azulai then went to the home of Rabbi Israel, who rejoiced upon hearing the news, and together they approached each side separately, having them swear to be committed to both the process and the ultimate ruling of the two rabbis. Rabbi Azulai describes the moment as a "great and awesome wonder." His decision to work closely with Rabbi Israel as his peacemaking partner in this process will prove to be critical, as he understood that it is imperative to have local third side who knows the personalities of the players in the dispute and the background of the conflict, and who will continue to accompany the sides after the peace process is completed.

Step 4: The reconciliation process (shalom)

A few days later, on September 22, Rabbi Azulai began the reconciliation process of healing the relationships, which he refers to simply as *shalom* (peace). Rabbi Azulai gathered together all the family members involved in the dispute, both the men and the women, at the local yeshiva (which also served as the synagogue), which apparently was jointly funded by their families and was located close to their homes. There, Rabbi Azulai writes, “*shalom* was made” (Azulai, 1934, p. 73). The family members would no longer be officially estranged from one another and normal relations would be renewed between the two sides – even though the financial dispute was still far from being resolved at this point. Unfortunately, Rabbi Azulai did not record any further details regarding how exactly he persuaded the sides to come together in the yeshiva and what exactly was done there.

Rabbi Azulai’s decision to gather the disputants together at this neutral, shared and holy ritual space was essential to his reestablishing their sense of common identity and familial relationship. This is similar to other traditional and religious systems of conflict resolution, as Lisa Schirch writes, “Creating a ritual space may help people feel more comfortable and open in a peacebuilding process. Peacebuilding planners should design physical and temporal spaces for peacebuilding that are liminal, safe spaces that symbolically support the desired transformation of perceptions and relationships” (Schirch, 2015, p. 529).

On the following day, September 23, which was the Sabbath, Rabbi Azulai walked with Pinhas to the synagogue, and after services walked with him to greet the other disputants, including David and Isaac. Then they all walked together to visit Samuel and Sapira Kalai’s home, and from there they went to the home of Pinhas and his wife, Judith – David’s and Isaac’s sister (Azulai, 1934). Rabbi Azulai was thus continuing the process of reestablishing normal relations between the parties by having them walk together around the community visiting each other’s homes – all the while being escorted by the highly respected rabbi on the sacred Sabbath. This was another step in the long journey of reconciling the relationship, and another example of Rabbi Azulai’s understanding of the importance of ritual in creating peace.

The next day, Sunday, September 24, was the eve of Rosh HaShana (the Jewish New Year). Rabbi Israel, the local rabbi, was eager to continue communal peacemaking efforts, this time between Samuel Kalai and Joseph Konsol, another respected member of the community. Rabbi Israel suggested Rabbi Azulai accompany him, but the latter turned down the offer, choosing instead to meditate in solitude at his temporary residence as part of his spiritual preparation for the holiday. Rabbi Israel’s peacemaking efforts were not successful that day; those involved felt it was because Rabbi Azulai was not present (Azulai, 1934). This is a powerful example of the peacemaker drawing boundaries around his own well-being and spiritual needs, choosing to focus on his inner peace even when it comes at the expense of the peacemaking process (Gopin, 2000).

Over the following months of October and November 1775, Rabbis Azulai and Israel examined together close to seventy different legal claims between the sides, which ranged from property damage to inheritance, and which were in addition to the financial dispute of the 30,000 *scudi*. Rabbi Azulai notes how he carefully balanced the amount of time he spent working with Rabbi Israel on the case with the amount of time he invested in writing his own book. He also describes the dynamics between the partners, writing, “and we had many arguments between us, but it was all with respect and great love” (Azulai, 1934, p. 73).

During this time of examining the legal aspects of the dispute, Rabbi Azulai recalls that sometime during November–December, a particular event occurred that was a testimony to the success of his peacemaking efforts. The niece of Pinhas, his sister Judith’s daughter Sarah, and her husband came from Pesaro to Ancona for a visit. The extended Coen family, who apparently all felt very close to her, decided to use this as an opportunity to throw a massive, lavish banquet full of liquor, singing, and general merriness. Over the course of the evening, several members of the family stood up and spoke, including Sapira, Pinhas and David, each one adding something great (presumably about) the previous speaker and doing so while apparently being slightly intoxicated. Rabbi Azulai describes this particular event as “causing *shalom* to further increase,” as he understood that the sides were becoming closer and closer to each other without his prodding.

It is worth mentioning that while Rabbi Azulai was very happy to see the warming of relations between the family members, he personally felt deeply awkward and out of place at such a lavish event, remarking that he stayed close to Rabbi Israel the whole evening, speaking only words of Torah and eating almost nothing (Azulai, 1934). This too adds to Rabbi Azulai’s heroism as a pursuer of peace. Despite his own discomfort with attending such an affair, he saw his presence as an important phase of his peacemaking efforts and a critical part of the evening’s success.

Step 5: The conflict resolution process: from strict law (din) to compromise (peshara)

Sometime between December 1775 and January 1776, Rabbi Azulai and Rabbi Israel finally concluded their legal investigation into the dispute and came up with their ruling in accordance with their understanding of the strict letter of the law (*din*), which the brothers David and Isaac Coen had insisted upon. But they felt that sharing their verdict with the parties in dispute would lead only to the dismantling of still-tenuous relations between family members and greater animosity. They therefore decided to change course and make a valiant effort to persuade the parties to come to a compromise agreement (*peshara*) in all aspects of the dispute, except for the 30,000 *scudi* which would be determined by their verdict (Azulai, 1934).

Rabbi Azulai writes that no words can describe how incredibly difficult this effort was, and it was only with God’s help that they had the wisdom, patience and creativity to succeed in convincing the sides to engage in a process of compromise as opposed to strict law. This process of bringing the sides to a compromise agreement would take Rabbi Azulai an additional several months of work (Azulai, 1934). His success likely had to do with the high regard in which both sides held him. On March 5, 1776, during the holiday of Purim, Rabbi Azulai writes that both sides gave him very generous gifts, as part of the holiday tradition. He interpreted this as a show of continued respect and trust (Azulai, 1934).

Step 6: Delivering the verdict

On March 21, Rabbis Azulai and Israel delivered their rulings: on the monetary dispute over the 30,000 *scudi*, which was in accordance with the strict letter of the law, and with regard to the compromise agreement which had been reached according to the will and opinions of the sides in conflict (Azulai, 1934). However, a few days later, on March 23, Rabbi Azulai learned that Isaac, and even more so David, were “extremely upset, and out of his mouth go burning torches” (Job 41, p. 11), apparently over the amount of money he ruled they were obligated to pay (Azulai, 1934). Six days later, Rabbi Azulai went to David’s home. He describes in his diary how he “spoke words of honesty and truth to [David’s] heart” (Azulai, 1934, p. 74). Isaac Coen then came to the house and assisted in calming his brother down until he accepted the ruling.

Step 7: The ceremonial taking of the oath

This left only the final stage in the process of resolving this complex and long conflict, namely the ceremonial taking of the oath by the two parties indicating that they accept the final ruling and compromise agreement (Azulai, 1934). This too was a major challenge, as the exact order, language and timing of the oath had to be just right and agreed upon by each party. Finally, on April 2, David and Isaac Coen and Pinhas Coen, after listening to the court scribe read off the oath, simultaneously swore to uphold it. Rabbi Azulai describes the moment as nothing short of a miracle (Azulai, 1934).

Step 8: The formal, legal signing in the papal court

On April 18, 1776, after the holiday of Passover, the agreement was brought before the official papal court scribe (Ancona was under direct jurisdiction of the pope at that time). The scribe, amazed and moved, recorded the agreement and added, according to Rabbi Azulai's diary, a note of his own on the document: "These many years there was fighting between the noblemen; the pope and the cardinal and the ministers labored but did not succeed, until one came from Jerusalem" (Azulai, 1934, p. 75). Rabbi Azulai describes this moment as the ultimate *kiddush Hashem*, the sanctification of God's Name, by means of casting the Jews, and therefore God, in a positive light in public by making peace.

On April 21, 1776, eight months after his arrival in Ancona, Rabbi Azulai finally left the city, with hundreds of residents bidding him farewell, and with Pinhas, Isaac and David escorting him together some eleven miles until he arrived at the next town (Azulai, 1934).

Comparing the Case Study to the Arab-Islamic Sulha Process

Reflecting back upon these eight steps of Rabbi Azulai's peacemaking process in Ancona, several aspects of his methods may now be delineated:

1. Rabbi Azulai, a well-respected, rabbinic "outsider," worked together with the less distinguished, local rabbinic "insider," who would serve together with him as a third-party peacemaker, thus contributing to Rabbi Azulai's goal of establishing trust and lasting peace within the community.
2. He initially met with each side separately, bringing them to commit to the process and its outcome, only after which he gathered them together in the ritual space of the synagogue, walked with the various sides on the sacred Sabbath and made a point of participating in their joint family gathering.
3. He sacrificed his time, extending his trip by seven months, as well as his personal comfort, such as when he participated in the family banquet. Yet he also protected his own spiritual needs by meditating before the Jewish New Year and writing his book.
4. He understood that the conflict was both financial and relational, and therefore distinguished between *shalom* (reconciling relationships), *din* (the strict letter of the law) and *peshara* (compromise). He also understood that the hatred between the parties was so great that reconciliation had to come first in order for the financial aspect of the conflict to be properly resolved.

The methods employed by Rabbi Azulai are reminiscent of other traditional methods of third-party peacemaking found in historical Jewish communities (Roth, 2018), and practiced still today as part of the Arab-Islamic *sulha* process. There too, the third-party peacemakers are well-respected, communal "insiders." Sometimes they are holy men, such as an imam or a sheikh, who possess important "moral

and spiritual legitimacy” (Kadayifci-Orellana et al., 2013). As these third parties are members of the community, they will therefore maintain long-lasting relationships with both sides. Like Rabbis Azulai and Israel, they will participate in “social events and celebrations, which involve many of the disputants that they have worked with” (Kadayifci-Orellana et al., 2013, p. 30). It is important that the third party have a great deal of patience, since the *sulha* process may take months, or even years, to complete (Ginat, 1997). These peacemakers also must embody humility and self-sacrifice as part of their peacemaking efforts (Roth, 2011).

The initiative to involve a third party in the *sulha* process generally comes from the side in the conflict considered to be the aggressor, although in certain circumstances it may come from the third-party peacemakers themselves, as was in the case of Rabbi Azulai (Pely, 2016). The third party meets with each side separately and brings them to the signing of what is called the *tafweeth*, which ensures that each side recognizes the authority of the third-party peacemakers and are committed to the process (Pely, 2016).

The third party then proceeds to negotiate between the two sides, first bringing them to a ceasefire and then ultimately to the *sulha* agreement, which determines the final financial verdict (Pely, 2016). Only after the *sulha* agreement has been reached is the *sulha* ceremony performed. This consists of both parties meeting and symbolically reconciling, first through gathering in a public ritual space and then each visiting the home of the other (Jabbour, 1996; Pely, 2016).

While there are numerous similarities here between the case of Rabbi Azulai and the *sulha* process, one significant difference should be highlighted. In the *sulha* process, the third party first brings about a resolution to the financial aspects of the conflict and only afterward do the two parties reconcile and reestablish normal relations. Indeed, it is generally considered inappropriate for the parties to have any normal interactions with each other until that final stage of the process (Jabbour, 1996; Ginat, 1997). In our case study, however, Rabbi Azulai first worked to reconcile the two sides and make peace between them, addressing the deep hatred each shared for the other, and then involved them in the process of resolving their financial dispute. Further research is needed to determine to what extent the difference between the story of Rabbi Azulai and the *sulha* process is in approach or simply in circumstance, as the former involved a heated family financial conflict while the latter quite often deals with a case of murder between families or clans. It is also important to note that in other cases of peacemaking Rabbi Azulai did work to resolve the financial conflict first and only afterward brought the sides together (Azulai, 1934).

Practical Implications for Today

This historical case study has important practical implications for traditional and religious peacemaking today. The first pertains to the theory of religious peacebuilding. Yvonne Wang, in her study of religious peacebuilding NGOs operating in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, makes an important distinction between “structural peacebuilding” and “cultural peacebuilding” (Wang, 2014). Structural peacebuilding organizations advocate for a just and amicable political peace agreement first, and only afterward encourage normalization and reconciliation between the two sides. Cultural peacebuilding organizations, on the other hand, promote strengthening social relations and mutual understanding, and reducing hatred between the two sides first; only then can political peace agreements become more attainable and sustainable.

Our case study is an example of cultural peacebuilding, as there was clearly a need to address the hatred between the sides and reconcile them before a compromise agreement could be reached. However, as noted above, in other cases Rabbi Azulai followed the sequence similar to that of the Arab *sulha* process, which supports resolution of the financial and structural conflict first, and only then reconciliation and normalization.

This distinction between cultural and structural peacebuilding, as noted by Wang (2014), has important ramifications for how best to build peace today, such as within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Scholars and practitioners would benefit from studying varying case studies, including traditional systems found throughout history, to better assess which may be most appropriate for such conflicts today.

The second practical implication is that Rabbi Azulai's peacemaking efforts in Ancona can serve as an important religious precedent and inspiration for rabbis and laypeople to serve as peacemakers today. I have personally used this story numerous times in such contexts, through workshops that I run. There, participants analyze the various diary entries in *havruta* (study in pairs), the customary practice of traditional Jewish text study. Throughout the twists and turns of this story, participants, and now readers of this article as well, are asked to contemplate upon reflexive questions such as: What would you have done if you were in Rabbi Azulai's situation? What can we learn from Rabbi Azulai's actions that we can apply to our own communal activism? Finally, what are some of the key lessons you learned from the diary of Rabbi Azulai that you would like to take with you in your own efforts to pursue peace today?

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