

From the Ivory Tower to the Days of Sulha:

Parallel Concepts of Reconciliation in Judaism and Islam and Anecdotal Manifestations

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is perhaps one of the most intractably debated clashes facing the world today. In popular conceptions of the conflict, lay-persons and scholars alike have considered consider religion to be a primary cause of hostilities. There is a growing minority voice, however, that proposes a new role for religion as a solution rather than as an weapon in the seemingly timeless struggle. A principal event in the development of this chorus of religious peace-building is the *Sulha* Gathering, a three-day long annual peace conference that, in 2004, brought over 4,000 Israelis and Palestinians together for workshops and projects devoted to building relationships through a spiritual/religious framework. What sets the Sulha Project apart from other Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives is its emphasis on the use of religion, in this case Judaism and Islam, as the catalyst for deeper, more culturally authentic reconciliation.

As an observant Jew with deep connections to Israel, this author strongly believes in the potential of religious-based dialogue to act as a mechanism for unity, and counts herself among the many who have been long dismayed by the prevalence of both Muslim and Jewish extremists perpetuating violence in the region, and who have yearned to be involved with an organization that was delving into the depth of the essence of religion: its powerful relationship-building potential. Through the *Sulha* Gathering, participants got to see this potential manifested

firsthand. Though the *Sulha* itself is brief, the events witnessed are tremendously profound and teach a great deal about both the strength and hardship of religious peace work. This paper attempts to build on the experiences documented in Israel by analyzing two parallel concepts on which the Sulha Gathering was based, namely the understanding of *shalom/salaam* (peace) and *teshuvah/sulh* (reconciliation) in Judaism and Islam, respectively.

Despite popular conceptions of violence and extremism among traditionally observant Muslims and Jews both religions place a high value on peace in their theological foundations. At the root of these peace-oriented theological underpinnings lie the parallel concepts of *shalom/salaam*. While *shalom* and *salaam* should not be confused as inhabiting identical roles in their respective societies, they do, nevertheless, maintain strikingly similar positions with regard to inter-group relations within both religions. Language and symbol both play particularly important and nuanced roles in Jewish and Muslim cultures. The words and manners used in daily speech are arguably far more attuned to attitudes and perceptions of interactions than in other cultural paradigms. According to Rabbi Dr. Marc Gopin's observations of interfaith encounters with Muslims, "words such as 'brother,' 'cousin,' and 'father' emerge, usually at the end of the encounter, as if they formed a sacred capstone, a need for the parting encounter to embrace relationship, lost brotherhood, and a special kind of intimate peace that only family reconciliation truly embodies" (14). Noteworthy in this sense, are the standard Jewish and Muslim greetings, uttered between members of the two societies: "*shalom aleichem*," and "*salaam aleikem*;" "peace unto you," in Hebrew and Arabic, respectively. *Shalom* appears as a greeting in the Torah as early as Genesis 43:23, and Muslims derive this practice from the Koranic verse, "And their greeting therein shall be Peace" (10:10, qtd. in Abu-Nimer 45).

Jewish prayers and rituals are rich with mentions of *shalom*. One of the many names of God is *Adon HaShalom*, “Master of Peace.” Additionally, many central Jewish prayers said throughout the day include explicit entreaties for peace, including the *Amidah* meditation and Grace After Meals. Before the traditional Sabbath ritual of *Kiddush*, it is customary to wish peace to the angels heralding the holy day. *Shalom* is on the tongue of many as a byword of Jewish community. Elaborating on the centrality of *shalom* in Jewish prayer, Rabbi Dr. Marc Gopin states that, “After all the tough internal dynamics of Jewish traditional prayer have been exhausted, all the prayers end with peace, and, to some extent (reflected in the blessing *ve’hol ha’hayyim*, as well as *aleinu*), a vision of future unity of humanity (of course, on monotheistic terms)” (232).

In this vein, Ethics of the Fathers quotes Hillel the Elder as enjoining his disciples to “be among the disciples of Aaron—loving peace and pursuing peace” (1:12). As the original High Priest of the Temple, Aaron is contrasted throughout Rabbinic literature with Moses, his brother and the political/spiritual leader of the nascent Israelite nation. The Talmud in Sanhedrin elaborates on the dichotomy between the two in their approaches to local and national disputes, stating that while Moses personifies the quality of strict justice, Aaron is seen as the mitigating voice of arbitration, or “where peace abides” (Sanhedrin 6b, qtd. in Smith 395). As we will see below, the question of where *shalom* abides in Judaism in terms of practical application is a deeply complex matter.

The concept of *salaam* plays a strikingly similar role in traditional Islam, a fact which Mohammed Abu-Nimer discusses at length in his work entitled *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*. To begin with, according to Abu-Nimer the word *islam* itself is defined by scholars as “the making of peace” (45). The Koran defines a true Muslim as one who has “made

peace with God and man,” a definition which points to the significance of both submission to the divine will and social acts of kindness (ibid). While popular outsider conceptions of Islamic paradise center on a reward of 72 virgins for the holy faithful, Abu-Nimer emphasizes a World to Come of a different kind, wherein “they shall hear no vain or sinful talk, but only the saying, ‘Peace, Peace’” (56:25-26, qtd. ibid). Finally, in parallel to Judaism’s concept of *Adon HaShalom*, Allah is often referred to as *Dar al-Islam*, “Abode of Peace” (ibid).

Societal justice is of paramount importance in Islam, and all acts are evaluated in terms of their potential contributions to a universally applicable just social order. The term for service to God (*‘adl*) is synonymous with the pursuit of justice itself. Peace, therefore, cannot be achieved without justice. This suggests a fascinating contrast with the concept of justice in Judaism, which, as we’ve seen above, is a counterweight to peace in a balance that must be constantly maintained for society to function. They are not one and the same. In the Hebrew Bible, God is revealed at different times as *Elohim*, literally “Judge,” and the Tetragrammaton, a name which traditionally connotes mercy. The implication is that even on the divine level, maintaining peace and mercy as mitigating factors in the pursuit of strict justice is a concept that does not always readily apply.

This remarkable contrast between Judaism and Islam may explain a great deal in terms of practical application. When a Jew speaks of peace-making, it is likely that she is conceiving of a method in which disputants will each surrender at least partial commitment to self-interested strict justice in order to allow for reconciliation. An Islamic view of the incontrovertible synthesis of peace and justice, in contrast, would result in a resolution that would be much more difficult to broker between the complex claims of the disputants. Without the power of peace as an independent mitigating factor in judgment, it seems impossible for reconciliation to ever be

reached. In the discussion of *sulha*, however, we will see that often when it comes to practical manifestations of conflict resolution in Islamic society, peace often overrides justice.

In the move from the conceptual to the concrete, the centrality of *shalom* in Judaism as a facilitating force is complicated. While peace-making is often mentioned as a supreme value, the implication in most instances seems to be that it is of chief necessity only with fellow Jews. This ethnocentrism may be the result of the fact that since antiquity, the Jewish people have faced a myriad of enemies bent on their destruction, and through the generations have grown to see outsiders as threats to be dealt with through diplomacy and war, with notions of peace-making being dangerously irrelevant. When the Israelites first entered Canaan, the Book of Joshua recounts a ruse posed by the Gibeonites, who manipulated a peace treaty out of the Jewish nation based on chicanery, then went on to attack them soon after (9:1-26). The Jewish national consciousness seems to have been scarred early on from relations with other peoples, a phenomenon which has varied in degree throughout history but has nonetheless prevailed, especially during years of persecution and expulsion that forced Jews into the role of the “other” and prompted defensive national identity. The notion of peace doesn’t escape this development in Jewish consciousness, which may account for the scarcity of explicit mention of universal peace in Biblical and Rabbinic literature. The notable exceptions to this are the prophecies of future peace as a byproduct of the Messianic Age, which suggests that peace with non-Jews is a national ideal, but nonetheless an ideal which cannot be realized on Earth without extensive Divine intervention at the End of Days.

The social manifestation of *shalom* becomes considerably more complicated with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the politicized nature of peace. The 1993 Oslo Accords did much to foster the notion of a cogent political peace plan in the national consciousness, but then

eventually faded into oblivion, some argue, with the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin, an increase in Palestinian terrorism, and the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The region has witnessed dozens of failed political peace initiatives, most notably including the 2000 Camp David summit, which was followed immediately by the Second Intifada. The trend has been that every time political leaders on both sides schedule negotiations or propose a new plan, a terrorist bomb goes off somewhere in Israel and scores of civilians are killed. Additionally, many soldiers in the IDF are becoming weary of fighting a war of attrition with no conceivable end in sight. The majority of Israelis see that peace is the only answer, but differ considerably in interpreting the meaning of *shalom* and how it can be realized vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Peace initiatives are divided between politicized grassroots efforts which press for “Peace Now” and preach what is often a one-sided view of the conflict, and a rightist government which has now adopted a mixed policy of disengaging from Gaza while encouraging settlement expansion in the West Bank. Where is the possibility for *shalom* as a conceivable reality here?

The Palestinian side of the coin paints an even bleaker picture. As a people effectively abandoned by its fellow Arab nations and used for decades as a pawn against Israel, Palestinians live in a “dark tunnel,” lied to and manipulated by their elected officials while occupied by a foreign power. Although a number of moderates have continuously stressed the need for dialogue with Israel and a nonviolent end to the occupation, these voices have become increasingly marginalized, as an indirect effect of corrupt leadership and the harsh realities of living under occupation. Corruption leads to national poverty and degradation, as foreign aid money rests in the hands of the self-interested powerful, who, instead of providing for their people, deflect attention from their actions by mobilizing a downtrodden population against a collective enemy. Additionally, without government aid, many Palestinians turn to Hamas, a

terrorist group that provides health care, education, and food to the population in exchange for a fundamentalist anti-Israel ideology. Terrorism and military retaliation go head to head, resulting in more deaths and violence and a land that seems polarized beyond any solution. At this point, where is an outlet for peace and justice to prevail? What is the meaning of *salaam* for Palestinians that will have a real impact in improving their situation?

We've discussed the respective importance of peace traditions in Judaism and Islam and the challenges they face today in terms of practical application, given the harsh realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Admittedly, the concept of peace is broad and complex in both religions. For a deeper understanding of conflict resolution as it is manifested today, we now transition to the dual concepts of reconciliation, *teshuvah* and *sulha*, and their practical applications with regard to the conflict.

Gopin writes that, "*Teshuvah*, the capacity to transform oneself or a community, is considered to be one of the most sublime elements of faith in a good, forgiving God." (117) Related terms in Judaism include *mechilah*, "forgiveness," and *selicha* (the linguistic parallel to *sulha*), translated in Psalms 130:4 as "the power to forgive" (qtd. in Gopin 118). Traditionally, when Jews repent they are re-aligning themselves both with God and their true selves. This is the literal meaning of *teshuvah*—"to return." The Jewish calendar includes an annual six-week period of national repentance, beginning with the Hebrew month of Elul and culminating with *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Throughout this process, people reflect on their actions and seek reconciliation with members of the community.

Apart from national repentance, *teshuvah* can be engaged in on an individual level at any point in time. Maimonides spells out a step-by-step process of personal *teshuvah* that includes regret, confession to God, and most importantly, the act of *azivat hachet*, "leaving the sin." This

critical idea asserts that true *teshuvah* comes when one is again in the same situation where the initial transgression took place, and instead chooses to refrain from sin, reflecting an authentic change of heart (Gopin).

The potential for *teshuvah* to be used as a powerful healing tool in the conflict builds on a rabbinic assessment of *teshuvah* as a force that brings universal healing and social change, allowing humanity to regroup and build a new future (Gopin). Much of the source of this power is due to the anomalous nature of *teshuvah*. Why should God forgive our many sins? Why should we reconcile with one another? Concepts of strict justice would certainly dictate to the contrary, allowing for due process and punishment instead of broad, sweeping forgiveness which humanity cannot truly say it deserves. Clearly, the existence of *teshuvah* is based on the high value of peace, mitigating strict justice in order for society to function and people to move beyond conflict. This view of *teshuvah* has encouraged many people to seek resolutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through methods that build on religious and spiritual concepts of healing. *Teshuvah* doesn't make any political sense, but this very point has attracted people to the possibility of peace through radically different avenues.

The Middle-Eastern process of *sulha* is extremely delicate and nuanced. Traditionally, when a crime has been committed in the community, the family of the perpetrator convenes a delegation of elders (*jaha*) to arbitrate between them and the family of the victim. If the victim's family accepts the arbitration, then after a period of armistice (*atwa*) that allows them to deal with their loss, a highly ritualized *sulha* ceremony is conducted. Both families greet one another, with the perpetrators' holding a white flag that is then tied in several knots by community leaders, symbolizing the binding nature of the resolution. If the arbitration is accepted, both

families drink coffee together and eat a traditional meal, a sign of complete reconciliation (Smith).

The very existence of the *sulha* process implies that, in contrast to the discussion of peace and justice in Islam as described above, perhaps there is ample room for mercy as a mitigating factor in solving disputes. There is no strict justice in *sulha*, no litigation or reimbursement (sometimes money is given to the family of the victim, but this is a symbolic gesture—if received, arbitration can proceed—and not seen as an act of reparation). This seems to contradict our understanding of Islam’s idea of justice, but Muslim accounts of *sulha* ceremonies point to the contrary. According to an anonymous Palestinian interviewed by Daniel L. Smith in his 1987 study of *sulha*, the process is superior to civil justice because, “Somebody always loses in the court...A court cannot satisfy two sides, it can only satisfy one side. Making the Arab *Sulha* satisfies all parties...all are happy in the end” (qtd. pg 391). Perhaps, then, the understanding is rather that *justice* cannot occur without *peace*, a distinction that opens up the discussion to a myriad of new possibilities, and leads to a variety of manifestations of the process of *sulha*.

When asked about the potential to make *sulha* between Israelis and Palestinians, Smith’s Palestinian source was at first negative about the possibility, stating that Israelis would never find the process binding. Later in the interview, however, he makes a fascinating comment:

Let me state something unequivocally. We should not think that the Israeli-Arab conflict is going to be solved on the basis of traditional Sulha. We should not be naive—this is a very serious political issue...But—when people speak about the methodology of the Sulha as a method of conflict resolution of bigger issues...the most important thing is to learn the principles of Sulha. To apply these principles, and not the rituals, is the key...you have to restore rights and honour.

All [political] initiatives have failed. Why? Because these peace initiatives did not restore the rights and the honor of the sides....You cannot meet along and then say that we made peace, like Camp David...you cannot make peace on my behalf when I am absent...in this way, peace between families is the same as peace between nations.” (Field interview qtd. in Smith 1987)

Speaking as early as 1987, Smith’s interviewee articulated many of the points that led to the creation of the Sulha Peace Project. Founded by Israeli musician Gaby Meyer and Christian Arab cleric Elias Jabbour (head of the International House of Hope), the Project started as a Chanukah-Christmas-Ramadan ceremony of 150 Israeli Jews and Arabs in 2001. Its aim was to take the main points of the *sulha* process: restoring the rights and honour of both peoples, and connecting as families. These principles would be used to organize an annual Sulha Gathering of Israelis and Palestinians for reconciliation in a religious and cultural framework. Many people on both sides of the situation were beginning to realize that a political solution to the conflict, if left to the politicians, would be long in coming. The key was to bring people together at the grassroots level, and to pick up on a crucial aspect that both political leaders and NGOs had mostly ignored: the centrality of religion in the conflict, and therefore the potential of religion to be used as a basis for peace-building. Special care would be taken to incorporate both religions—while using an Arabic term, Jews would recognize the word *sulha* as a parallel to *selicha*, and the Gathering would be on the first of the Hebrew month of Elul, to coincide with the beginning of the traditional Jewish process of national reconciliation. Rabbis, sheykhs, and lay leaders from both sides would be invited to speak and lead workshops. Such an approach, it was argued, would be grounded in the notion of Judaism and Islam as shared Abrahamic faiths with legacies of commonality between the “cousins.” The Sulha Gathering would speak to a higher, spiritual awareness on either side of the shared Holy Land, allowing for the illogical, post-justice process

of *teshuvah/sulha* to transcend political realities and create a consciousness from which authentic peace could truly occur. If people were free to know one another as not only human beings, but godly beings, and hear one another's stories in a framework of shared Middle Eastern religious culture, the thinking was that a dam would burst, and, with time, peace would flow forth with tears of reunion.

After the initial Chanukah-Christmas-Ramadan prototype, organizers struggled in the following years to expand the Sulha Gathering into a truly revolutionary event. The 2002 Sulha was a daylong gathering of 600 Israeli Jews and Arabs, where participants sat in dialogue circles and shared their stories, culminating in powerful moments of connection between opposing communities. Sulha 2003 was expanded to include 1500 Israeli Jews and Arabs at a two-day event in Northern Israel, where efforts to include Palestinian Arabs were thwarted by bad planning and last-minute errors. Still not receiving much attention in the mainstream press, the Sulha was seen primarily as a gathering of hippies who were mostly preaching to the converted.

At the 2004 Sulha Gathering, they finally got it right. A team of over 25 Israeli and Palestinian organizers were delegated in early 2004, meeting on a bi-weekly basis. In addition to the usual inclusion of rabbis and sheykhs and the focus on dialogue circles, efforts were made from the outset to bring in a considerable number of West Bank Palestinians, to give women more of a voice in Sulha events, to have constant activities for children, to deepen the level of workshops to include meaty, controversial topics, and, most importantly, to include a Bereaved Parents Forum, for families who'd lost loved ones on both sides to freely share their stories and connect. In these ways, the Gathering would be a highly meaningful, revolutionary event sure to provide a framework for unprecedented strides in reconciliation.

The process was not entirely seamless, but was nonetheless extraordinary on a variety of levels. Firstly, Sulha organizers worked with Firas Yagi, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, to clear 300 Palestinians from Ramallah, Jenin, and Bethlehem for entry to the Sulha. Such a number was huge, and the presence of a PLC leader on the organizing team added strength and legitimacy to the Project. Additionally, the Israel Parks Authority offered Gaby Meyer free space at a national park in Binyamina, which he took happily before realizing that the space was none other than Jabotinsky Park, a memorial to the Etzel, an illegal pre-1948 Jewish militia that was responsible for the expulsion of hundreds of Arabs from their villages in northern Israel. Needless to say, this created a rift between outraged Palestinian organizers and their Israeli counterparts, who viewed the accidental location as a chance for even greater healing potential, an opportunity to transform the park from a place of pain to a place of reconciliation. Thankfully, this view won out.

The result was a Sulha Gathering attended by over 4,000 adults and 800 children over a span of three days. The event included an opening ceremony with speeches by politically and religiously influential leaders from both sides, as well as addresses from international visitors, who included a Sufi sheykh from Senegal, a Palestinian-born sheykh from England, a Zulu chief from South Africa, a Tibetan monk from India, and more. Workshops were given by representatives of peace organizations such as Rabbis for Human Rights and the Interfaith Encounter Association, discussing the significance of Jerusalem for both peoples, the concept of *sulha*, and more. A New Moon celebration was led by women on the second night of the festival, and women congregated daily in the Sarah-Hagar tent specifically reserved for their intimate encounters. Dialogue circles were held every morning, including several in the Bereaved Parents Forum tent. Groups of children painted murals with peace slogans and

symbols, and led parades around the site. Music and drum circles lasted well into the night, with throngs of Israeli and Palestinian youth dancing and singing together.

At the concluding ceremony of the 2004 Sulha Gathering, hardly an eye was dry out of the thousands of people in the park, holding hands and dedicating themselves to a different future. People on both sides spoke of coming to first realizations that a true partner for peace existed. The Gathering was covered by all of the main Israeli television networks, and most specially by Al-Jazeera, which broadcast footage of peace-building to over a billion people in the Arab world. Clearly, a significant impact had been made.

Two months after the Sulha Gathering, a manifestation of the ideals of *shalom/salaam* and *teshuvah/sulha*, the question becomes how far this impact will reach in the polarized reality where occupation and terrorism continue to occur. Some critics have said that by ignoring politics, the Gathering does a disservice to people living with injustice and fear, and that participants may not always make the leap to push for a change to the harsh political reality of occupation. Beyond the utopia created by the Sulha Gathering, critics state, there must be commitment to follow-up, lest the conference be considered a token “day of tolerance,” with participants on both sides patting themselves on the back while returning to their side of the checkpoint. Believers in the Project would argue that the Gathering transcends politics and allows people to see one another as partners for authentic peace. It is absolutely true that the Sulha Gathering needs to be balanced with direct grassroots initiatives to improve peoples’ lives, but this is exactly the point; the Sulha allows Israelis and Palestinians to work together in these grassroots efforts, building on connections made at the Gathering to work towards progressive social change engineered by the communities, not political leaders who may be acting in their own self-interests. In this way, the Sulha Gathering is a practical tool for deep social connection

that allows Jewish and Arab communities to join forces. The Gathering continues to grow, expanding this year to include bi-monthly teen educational events, and striving in its efforts to bring in more of the mainstream from both sides. Its unique approach synthesizes the central values of peace and reconciliation in Judaism and Islam, leading, God willing, to a Middle East where peace and justice can go hand in hand.

Works Cited

Abu-Nimer, Mohammed. *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*.

Florida: University Press of Florida, 2003.

Gopin, Marc. *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*. New

York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Smith, Daniel L. "The Rewards of Allah." *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Nov.,

1989), 385-398