



We Must Save Peace

Peace, peace, . . . but there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11).

Shlomo Elbaz, Ph.D.

Professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Cofounder of the Movement “East for Peace”

It is as if the more we speak of peace, the more this goal seems as fleeting and vital as ourselves. Indeed, we have never so much reasoned about peace, dreamed of peace, discussed peace, as we have since the famous, historic handshake of September 13, 1993, on the lawn of the White House.

On that day, a wall (Joshua! O Jericho!) fell down, a wall of hatred and of misunderstanding between two peoples, two brothers who had become enemies since less than a century ago. Then we were at the edge of irrational euphoria; every hope seemed possible, hopes of the same intensity as the conflict itself, hopes saturated with tears of joy. On that day, Palestinians and Muslims hugged each other, congratulated each other in eastern Jerusalem, in the midst of a sea of Palestinian flags which had come out of nowhere, under the indulgent eyes of Israeli policemen. We thought we were dreaming. We, who were totally committed to fight for peace, on that day felt our hearts swell with pride because we had believed in spite of all the unbelievers and the deniers; because we had militated towards this moment of mutual recognition and of solemn engagement to implement the accord of Oslo.

The Impasse

Six months later, we sink into end-

less discussions knowing we must react promptly to the enemies of the process of peace who band together to undermine it. Since then, acts of war against peace have been perpetuated against Israelis, as well as the monstrous massacre of Hebron on Friday, March 6, 1994, a day twice sacred (Purim and Ramadan). What an irony! Abominable crimes committed in the very Cave of the Patriarchs,

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a most holy place for both communities. Abraham-Ibrahim, our common father, must have shuddered in his tomb which was located right beneath the place of the crime; he must have shed tears of fire at the fate of his offspring. In ancient days, his son Ishmael had been saved from thirst, thanks to the miraculous spring; likewise, his other son Isaac escaped the holocaust thanks to the miraculous ram. But their descendants, for want of miracles, are absurdly, tragically, stabbing and shooting each other.

Politicians, observers, and mass media cannot make “head or tail” of

it. Instead, the Middle East conflict displays such a complexity, such an embroilment of mythical as much as political factors, that it challenges the most rational and objective analysis. Raw events are just the thin exterior layer which hides a thick and opaque reality, a reality full of surprises for those who limit their observation to the surface.

Not Just a Political Conflict

Unless we refer to the past, to history and to the ancient texts, we will not be able to understand much about this reality. Both the Bible and the Koran are needed in this enquiry. The mad massacre of Hebron would then become the cruel and absurd illustration of the power of the irrational and uncontrollable element—some kind of sardonic laughter from this other mystical reality (overlooked by the analysts and the mass media) which erupts into the daily life. And this irrational reality sometimes comes with its “heavenly” face and sometimes with its infernal face such as at Hebron.

But in this sensitive space, the so-called “Holy Land,” Hebron is not the only place which triggers passion and violence. There are many other sites laden with high emotional significance. Mount Moriah, for instance, especially with its Dome of the Rock and the El-Aqsa Mosque close to the Holy Sepulcher, breaks all records of

connotations, nostalgia, obsessions, and collective aspirations; one cannot imagine a more explosive and powerful bomb. The agnostic philosopher Andre Gloksman, whose works focus on the perverse nature of the human being, while recently visiting our country made this astonishing prediction: "If a third world war should break out, it shall be caused by the fate of Jerusalem; indeed, for Jerusalem and Jerusalem only, a billion men are ready to die and to kill." "Hence," he added, "the need of an urgent solution, however weak it may be." Indeed, Jerusalem is not a place, it is a concept, a value, a symbol, a metaphysical entity which is being equally (but differently) claimed by the three monotheistic religions. But Judaism is perhaps the one more than any other group which invests Jerusalem with its fantasies, its ideals, and its past and future destiny.

People talk much about Israeli settlements in Judea and Samaria. Beth-el, to cite only one of them, is viewed as a mere "colonialist" enterprise. It is not so if we could penetrate the strayed souls of these fanatical Jews. For them, the name of Beth-el arouses a cluster of historical and eschatological associations which abolishes time and creates a link between the biblical past and the messianic future. These time bombs also exist on the other side. This reality is, indeed, disturbing, but there is no use avoiding it; one must face it and take it into account.

The Middle East conflict does not just concern territories; it is not just a national struggle between two ethnic groups. It is so much more. It is the confrontation between two ideologies, two cultures, deeply rooted in immemorial myths. And these groups are all the more distrustful and violently hostile to each other as they are relatives (around the monotheistic Abrahamic idea). History is rich with Judeo-Christian and Islam-Christian conflicts. Are we now entering the era of the Judeo-Moslem conflict? This possibility is so frightening that it is occulted at the expense of the politico-territorial view. Now, anyone who wants to get acquainted with this nest of vipers cannot ignore deep and ata-

vistic dimensions of these conflicts. Unfortunately, the political leaders and the experts in political sciences are locked in their rational Western approach and overlook the cultural dimension and its irrational setting.

To Get Out of the Fix

Undoubtedly this is the source of misunderstandings and surprises but also of the failures awaiting those who lead the process of peace on the basis of the accords of Oslo. We are merely marking time; we split hairs about insignificant details: a few meters more or less at the border, a thousand more policemen, etc. But we do not hit the heart of the problem, namely, the religious sensitivities, the mystical trends, the mysterious force of the myths embodied in a name, a ritual, a prayer, and also, of course, a place. In this setting, metaphors and symbols possess a real status, as concrete

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as the holy Scroll or the voice of the muezzin. Here, the five senses and the spirit mingle to create meaning. In this perspective, poetry is more sure and pertinent for the quest of truth than political analysis.

What is missing then in the political reflection about the Middle East question is the Spirit in its broader sense, beyond any theological reference. Those who live on this volcano may well pay dearly for this deficiency, a price which they already pay for the shortsightedness of leaders, experts, and mediators of all sides.

It would be, however, naive to believe that the mere disclosing of the mystical roots of the conflict would be enough to bring it to its end. This step is necessary, but it is not enough. We should then become more specific and explain to the parties that with all due respect to their historical rights and their dreams of restoration to past greatness, they should now take into account the present context and the

sociological, economical, and political realities. The latter oblige them to respect each other and to assume the unavoidable necessity of compromises and concessions without which fanaticism, inherent to all religions, will flood over us all.

When passions speak, reason is silent; when fanaticism strikes, ethics die. In any religion, these two contradictory potentials exist. On the one hand, moral value; on the other hand, the ugly face of tyranny, *auto-da-fés*, holy wars, intolerance, and exclusion. In the name of love—divine and human—how many crimes, including the killing at Hebron, have been committed! What the Bible says about bribery and corruption would better apply to fanaticism, which always "blinds the eyes even of the wise and twists the words even of the just" (Deuteronomy 16:19, NAB).

Ethics and Politics

We hope that someday religious authorities of the three monotheistic confessions will call loudly for the true reconciliation between humans; reconciliation according to the spirit of their common ethical values; otherwise, the dark face of those very religions may well drive away what is left of vivid and humanistic compulsions.

In the meantime, the representative leaders who are presently working on the peace process should pay special attention to the cultural element, while pursuing their efforts toward a pragmatic solution. In this perspective, the Arabs would then be able to recognize the cultural and spiritual sources of the Zionist movement, instead of seeing in it a mere symptom of European colonialism. Likewise, Israel would at last assure itself of its Mediterranean destiny and integrate itself into the Middle Eastern cultural space, thereby denying the accusation of being a foreign element. The Jews of Israel, just as the Palestinian Arabs, are rightly and historically at home on this piece of holy land, of promised land. They have no choice but to agree on practical modalities for the sharing of sovereignty. And this union, in any case, will affect the love both peoples would continue to devote for their common "fatherland of the heart."