JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

RELIGION IN ISRAEL'S QUEST FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION IN ITS LAND RIGHTS CONFLICTS

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INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL APPROACHES TO RESOLVING LAND CONFLICTS

Seventy-one years on from its establishment, Israel continues to be in conflict over land with the Negev Bedouin and the Palestinians. During these past seven decades there have been signs of a reduction in the level and intensity of these conflicts. In the case of the Negev Bedouin, the first serious attempt at addressing this issue was seen in the work of the Goldberg Commission, set up by the Israeli government in 2007 during the Prime Ministership of Ehud Olmert. The Goldberg Commission, chaired by retired Supreme Court Justice, Eliezer Goldberg, had eight members, including two Bedouin representatives. The starting point for Goldberg was to acknowledge that there had been a number of government committees tasked to propose further strategies for Negev Bedouin resettlement and to find a compromise over land, "Most of these committees have had no serious impact on the issues they were set up to deal with" (Goldberg 2011: 22). At the beginning of the Commission's Report it states that seeing the Bedouin as the "other" has to be changed, "The approach of 'us' and 'them' is not acceptable to us, and it will not advance a solution, but rather drive it further away"

(Goldberg 2011: 5). This approach is also a fundamental obstacle to resolving Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. As of the time of writing (September 2019), there has been no significant improvement to the Negev Bedouin's land struggle with the Israeli state.

Attempts at finding ways to resolve the situation with the Palestinians have been evident amongst some political leaders since the 1970s from the two main parties—Likud and Labour. There are two key examples of this. The first under the leadership of Menachem Begin with a proposal for “Home Rule” for Palestinians in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza in the late 1970s. This became part of the discussions at the Camp David Accords aimed to facilitate dialogue between Israel and Egypt through the offices of the American President Jimmy Carter. The peace framework agreed at Camp David proposed that a self-governing authority for Palestinians in the West Bank would be set up; Israeli troops are to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza after an election of a Palestinian self-governing authority to replace Israel's military government. This has only been partially realized. The second example is the Oslo Accords in 1993 signed by Yasar Arafat, Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. In summary, The Declaration of Principles deemed it essential to begin the process of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unfortunately, by 1996 these accords had stalled and eventually collapsed due to a variety of factors on both sides, including the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister Rabin at a Peace Rally in Tel Aviv by Yigal Amir, an Israeli Jew who opposed the Rabin's overall peace plan on religious grounds. As with many enlightened moments in human history the full expression of making the necessary changes to deep conflict is not quickly and easily implemented. Since the mid-1990s, conflict over Palestinian rights to the land and their call for independent statehood has either continued to stagnate or has actually deteriorated.

RELIGION IN THE SEARCH FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION: CAN RELIGION HELP?

Overcoming the viewpoint that Bedouin and Palestinians are the “other” requires more than passing policies and legislation. In a state that claims to have a secular and religious identity, what can religion

do to assist in developing, enhancing, and sustaining a society which gives justice and fairness to all?

In the Jewish tradition, the key resources that I would consider to be an essential tool in helping to resolve Israel's land conflicts is the Jewish ethical approach to the just treatment of the "other" or "stranger". The Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen makes an important observation relevant to the discussion here. He considers the biblical injunction to treat the stranger as one's own citizen is an attempt to overcome prejudice by evoking sympathy which he believes can make an important contribution. But he argues that if the appeal to love employed by religion is the primary foundation of the ethical command to care for the stranger, then, on the basis of the hostility to strangers, which he witnessed in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century, this had made little impact on humanity. His approach is to disqualify love as a basis for ethical action and instead promotes a reinterpretation of love of the other (stranger, neighbor) in terms of the law (Cohen 1907: 216). However, trying to construct an ethics of the love of the stranger only through legal requirements and enforcement does not necessarily nurture human attributes of compassion, love, respect, mutual understanding, and empathy. It is not only about adhering to a legal instruction but it is given in the context that the values of compassion, justice, and peace are essential aspects of being human and that such values are also a necessary part of establishing and maintaining human relations that seek to enable the well-being of all people.

Can Judaism contribute to resolving Israel's conflict over land with the Palestinians and its Arab citizens? In considering this question there follows a brief overview of key Jewish teachings relevant to practicing constructive attitudes and behavior towards others which are essential in reducing conflict and promoting understanding and reconciliation. We will consider the work of two Israeli organizations/groups, namely: *Wahat al-Salam*—*Neve Shalom* (Oasis of Peace), a community of people living together, and Rabbis for Human Rights.

NORMATIVE CONCEPTS AND VALUES: RELIGION AS A SET OF TEACHINGS, RELIGION AS PRACTICE

The values of *Va'ahavtem et ha-Ger* (love of stranger) and *Ve'ahabhath le-Re'akha* (love of neighbor), as contained in the Hebrew scriptures,

are an extremely important and significant set of teachings in this discussion. This duty of love of stranger is spoken about 36 times in the Hebrew scriptures, the best known of these teachings is in the Book of Leviticus:

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.

(Lev. 19:33–34)

This teaching clearly states that if a non-Jew has come to live and work in a Jewish land then they are to be treated equally, without discrimination; they are to be treated as an equal citizen. Further reference to treating the stranger as one of your own citizens is present in the later teaching of Leviticus: “You shall have one standard of law for the stranger and the citizen alike” (Lev. 24:22), and in Numbers 15:16, which is referring specifically to the stranger who wishes to present a fire offering to God, it states, “There shall be one law for you and the resident stranger; it shall be a law for all time throughout the ages”, and the basis of this teaching is that, “You and the stranger shall be alike before the Lord” (Numbers 15:15). The underpinning principle in this teaching is justice. The importance of not oppressing the stranger and practicing justice towards them appears in various places in Deuteronomy.

As with the treatment of the stranger, numerous teachings appear in the Hebrew scriptures of both a legal and ethical nature, aimed at providing a code of behavior covering all aspects of relations between neighbors. While there is not sufficient space to deal with this in depth here, it is worth considering key aspects of these teachings. The emphasis on being truthful, fair treatment, and not thinking or practicing evil against a neighbor is found in a number of the texts, including in the Book of Zechariah (Zech. 8:16–17). These teachings are considered to be encapsulated in the command: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18). Both Rabbi Hillel (110 BCE–10 CE) and Rabbi Akiba (40–137 CE) taught that the fundamental principle of the Torah is the Leviticus commandment: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Ginzberg 1906: 1034; Finkelstein 1936: 210). Ben Azzai, a

student of Akiba, commented on the same commandment emphasizing the importance of love for all humankind because “all human beings are descended from Adam, a common ancestor which means being bound together by the kinship of a common origin” (Cohen 2008: 225). More recent articulation of Akiba’s understanding is seen in the writings of 18th-century Rabbi and Kabbalist, Pinchas Elijah Hurwitz, who argues that the core essence of love of neighbor consists of loving all of humankind because of their identical humanity (Hurwitz 1818). During the 20th century a number of Jewish thinkers also argued that the command concerning love of neighbor must apply to non-Jews (Cohen 1907; Buber 1958; Katz 1961).

Even if the Palestinians and Negev Bedouin are considered as strangers—then, surely the admonishment “you shall not wrong the stranger who lives alongside you” means they should be accorded fair treatment, including recognizing where possible land claims or adequate financial/land reparations on a level that would be given to any Jewish citizens. Unfortunately, there continue to be those within the current Jewish establishment in Israel that certainly do not agree with this approach. An example was witnessed in 2010 with the views of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the former Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel and then current Head of the Council of Torah Sages and spiritual leader of Israel’s ultra-orthodox Shas party. In a Saturday night sermon, some of which was audio recorded and later broadcast on Israel’s Channel 10, Yosef said in relation to the issues of what work non-Jews can perform on the Sabbath, “Goyim (non-Jews) were born only to serve us. Without that, they have no place in the world; only to serve the People of Israel” (Oyster 2010: 1). Challenges to such views of Rabbi Yosef in religious circles come mostly from the Reform and Liberal religious communities in Israel. The next sections discuss how the Jewish values of love and care for stranger and neighbor are being promoted and actioned by various religious groups in Israel by focusing on the work of Rabbis for Human Rights, founded in 1988, consisting of Israeli rabbis and rabbinical students, and the community *Wahat al-Salam*—*Neve Shalom*, jointly established by Jewish and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel in the 1970s, located between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

TRUST: RELIGION AS COMMUNITY, RELIGION AS DISCOURSE

During the early stages of the first Palestinian Intifada, a small group of Israeli rabbis founded the organization, Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR). It consists of Israeli rabbis and rabbinical students from different streams of Judaism. RHR states: “We derive our authority from our Jewish tradition and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Our mission is to inform the Israeli public about human rights violations, and to pressure the state institutions to redress these injustices” (RHR 2019: 1). The work of this organization is identified as being located in the traditional Jewish responsibility of caring for and protecting the stranger, the poor, the weak, and the convert. In the run-up to voting in the 2015 Israeli election campaign, RHR released several public statements identifying these Jewish responsibilities as an essential aspect to voting. Rabbi Arik Ascherman referred to Torah teachings that condemn oppression and mistreatment of the “stranger”. The overall message was about “Encouraging citizens to vote and reminding them to bring the values of human rights work and the honouring of God’s Image along with them into the voting booth” (RHR 2015: 1).

There are six main areas of RHR’s work, three of these are concerned specifically with Palestinian rights in the occupied territories and rights of Bedouin communities located in the Negev and Jahalin Bedouin communities situated on the outskirts of Jerusalem. In the occupied territories, human rights work, legal advocacy/ intervention regarding land and other socio-economic rights, and aiming to protect agricultural access for Palestinian farmers is the core of their work. Their work with the Bedouin is advocating and petitioning against their forced displacement from land, resolving outstanding land claims, and in the Jahalin Bedouin community they provide children with afterschool and summer school activities. The three other areas of RHR’s work involve providing advice and legal representation for any Israeli citizens with regard to socio-economic and welfare rights; human rights education workshops for post-secondary and university students to learn and understand about the importance of human rights in the Jewish tradition and interfaith work to “harness the teachings and values of our region’s faiths as a means of reconciliation & understanding” (RHR 2019: 1).

NETWORKS, SERVICES, AND ADVOCACY: RELIGION AS INSTITUTION AND PRACTICE

RHR's work in the occupied territories involves trying to prevent and reverse the taking of Palestinian land by the Israeli state for Jewish settlers or other government projects; intervention to maintain road access for small Palestinian communities in Hebron, and protection of Palestinian rights who live amongst the large, growing Jewish settlements in parts of Hebron. Sometimes members of RHR's engage in nonviolent activism to reinforce the Jewish message of caring for and protecting all people. A recent example of this is seen in early 2019 in the Israeli-administered H2 area of Hebron, with a solidarity walk organized by RHR to speak with Palestinians, the Israeli military, and Jewish settlers about the growing harassment which Palestinians and their civilian international accompaniers have been facing from settlers and soldiers. Although there have been some signs hinting at a reduction in the level of harassment, RHR members continue to visit this area and aim to promote dialogue and understanding between the various communities by appealing to key Jewish ethical teachings in human relations. The work of RHR regarding the land rights and displacement of Negev Bedouin and the Jahalin Bedouin is done in collaboration with the Regional Council of Unrecognized Bedouin Villages and the Negev Coexistence Forum. It involves legal advice and advocacy, petitioning government to address and resolve these land injustices, public statements, organizing non-violent activist events, and visiting these communities to show solidarity. A key focus of RHR's work since 2012 is ongoing public critique of the failure of government to implement the more positive elements of the Goldberg Commission's Report. Instead, they continue to block land arrangements for the majority of Bedouin land claims which total 590,000 dunams, refuse to give building permits even in recognized Bedouin villages, continue demolition of some villages, and there is a new development of Jewish towns on existing Bedouin land where Bedouins already live. Overall, the central message taken from the Jewish tradition in all RHR work is the sanctity of all human life, sanctifying the name of God through respect and care for all humanity, behaving ethically, and pursuing justice and peace.

IDENTITY, RELATIONSHIPS, AND HEALING: RELIGION AS COMMUNITY, RELIGION AS SPIRITUALITY

In an area between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv is located *Wahat al-Salam—Neve Shalom*, a community jointly established by Jewish and Palestinian Arab (Muslim and Christian) citizens of Israel. It was established in 1970 by Bruno Hussar, who was born in Egypt in 1911 to non-practicing Jewish parents. His early years were spent in Hungary, Italy, and Paris where, at the age of 39, having earlier converted to Christianity, he was ordained in 1950 as a Catholic Priest of the Dominican Order. Fr. Bruno Hassar never lost sense of his Jewish origins and in 1953 he went to live as a Dominican Priest in Israel. Here, over the next few years, after witnessing the growing fear and hatred between Jews and Arabs, he negotiated to have the *Wahat al-Salam—Neve Shalom* (WASNS) community established in 1970 on land belonging to the Latrun Monastery. This community of Jews, Christians, and Muslims live together and are dedicated to building justice, peace, and equality for all people in Israel and the wider region. Most of those living in the community regard religious belief as a personal matter, a part of cultural identity. In 2019 there are 70 families living in the community and it is expected to grow over the new few years to around 150 families (WASNS 2019a).

This community endeavors to provide “a model of equality, mutual respect and partnership that challenges existing patterns of racism and discrimination as well as the continued conflict” and many of its members work on peace, justice, and reconciliation projects in wider Israeli and Palestinian societies (WASNS 2019b: 1). To promote, nurture, and embed the key ideals and behavior of justice, peace, and equality for all people within its community and to take this to the wider society, the *Wahat al-Salam—Neve Shalom* community has its own kindergarten and primary school, both of which have a bilingual and multi-cultural curriculum (which includes religion). There has been increasing interest from some parents in the surrounding Gezer region who in 2018 “waged a struggle, including a protest with a one day hunger strike” to get the mayor of the Gezer region to allow their children to attend the WASNS kindergarten for their compulsory kindergarten year. Permission was eventually given and children and parents from outside experienced WASNS work and

aims (WASNS 2018: 1). Teachers at the kindergarten and school receive ongoing additional training and guidance to support their work in delivering a bilingual and multi-cultural curriculum.

SERVICES, NETWORKS, AND TRUST BUILDING: RELIGION AS PRACTICE, RELIGION AS COMMUNITY

WASNS has a School of Peace (SFP) providing opportunities for adults from both within as well as outside the community to experience various forms of educational and practical projects. One of these is the Mixed Cities Program designed to focus on the challenges of the ongoing conflict between Israel and its Arab population and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2018 there were 22 participants from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian backgrounds working on five joint projects which they would continue to work together on back in their own respective communities. The Peace School also offers a new programme of seminars to facilitate dialogue and work between academic researchers and leaders of NGOs. In 2018, over 70 people attended this new programme, who aim to promote peace activism and the development of a shared society, particularly amongst students and young people back in the communities where they live and work (WASNS 2018: 2). Each year workshops are run for non-WASNS teachers designed to develop inter-group dialogue and negotiation skills. In 2018, over 30 participants attended the summer workshops coming from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian backgrounds and from other parts of the region around Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Some of those who attended spoke of learning to realize that: “We are almost identical in everything: pain, feelings, emotions, we understand everything when we open up and hear the experiences of others” (WASNS 2018: 2). The encounter which the workshops enable between educationalists is spoken of as providing hope and optimism for the future, “that in another 70 years our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will sing a common anthem” (WASNS 2018: 2). Overall, the workshops show the importance of education as a tool to assist in building inclusive societies and remove barriers, “Even if we are not the ones in power, we are an essential part of society and everything starts with education and from educators” (WASNS 2018: 2). Other SFP work

includes providing three-day youth encounter programmes for Arab and Jewish students from schools around the area; the Massa-Masar programme, started in 2015, bringing together Jewish, Muslim, and Christian teenagers over a four-day period. Through seminars and workshops that involve outdoor environmental activities and cultural encounters, participants can explore self and identity in relation to issues of religion, identity, and Jewish-Arab relations. One of the participants reflected what many of those who attended felt: “This Journey changed me. I will always ask questions. I will try to help everyone. I don’t promise but I will listen and try. It is important to hear before you judge” (WASNS 2015: 3).

CONCLUSION

Principles of justice and peace are an essential part of the Jewish prophetic tradition and its ethical and legal frameworks. The living out of these values is identified in the Torah as central to the covenantal relationship between God and his chosen people. The context in which these commandments are given is of a people who have fled from slavery in Egypt and are on a journey to a land which God is said to have given them (Deut. 4:14, NIV). But going into a land that is already the land of other people who then are driven out or slaughtered, apparently on the command of God, raises somewhat of a dilemma in the current discussion of the land issues in contemporary Israel. It is therefore essential to recognize the diversity of the Jewish system of values and that interpreting and implementing these needs to be contextualized in the socio-political-historical moment of human life and experience (Jacobs 1960: 8–9). Therefore, can Judaism contribute to resolving Israel’s conflict over land with the Palestinians and its Arab citizens? I would suggest that the Jewish tradition, as expressed and understood in the examples of the organizations discussed above, does have an important role and contribution to make. It will not be an easy task challenging the political and religious mindsets who believe that Israel has a right to rule the occupied territories, to oppress Palestinians, and continue to pursue an assimilation policy to homogenize Israel’s non-Jewish citizens. But the Jewish tradition has evolved over the centuries through the dialogue, disagreement, and debate by Rabbis and scholars over interpretation of Jewish

ethical and legal traditions in the context of their day. The challenge is to continue this process so that the Jewish ethical teachings of love and care for all humankind will be reasserted over the “nationalist and isolationist understanding of Jewish tradition” that dominates Israeli society (RHR 2019: 1).

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