

The Imperative to Seek Peace

Rabbi Ron Kronish

The question of how we Reform Jews should deal with the need to pursue peace between Israelis and Palestinians is foremost in my mind and has been for a long time. I have written about it on my blogs for the *Times of Israel* for the past eleven years as well as in three books that I have published since retiring from the directorship of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel at the end of 2014 (after twenty-four years at the helm of this interfaith peace-building organization that I founded in 1991). In fact, in the last book, *Profiles in Peace* (published in September 2022), I addressed the question “Is Peace Possible?” in my afterword. I will come back to that later in this essay.

I want to begin by saying that it is extremely unfortunate that the recent governments of Israel—and of the Palestinian National Authority—have completely abandoned the current peace process. They have put it in the deep freezer, in the back of the freezer.

Why? Some blame it on the other side by saying that “we have no partner for peace” and therefore why waste our time?! Actually, the “no partner for peace” mantra has been going on for a long time, since the failure of the Camp David II peace talks in the hills of Maryland in July 2000. Since then, and then after the second intifada (2000–2005), trust between the two sides has completely broken down. Despite some efforts of American diplomats to resuscitate the political peace process from time to time, the two sides have not entered into any serious negotiations for peace for a very long time.

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Accordingly, we in Israel have been living with no real peace process for at least the last two decades. And life goes on in Israel, with all of its challenges and complexities. Moreover, it is unlikely that in the near future that the political peace process will be renewed unless some very big surprises occur in the region or in international diplomacy, especially American diplomacy.

How should Reform Jews be reacting to this? What can we do in the light of what I call “political despair” in Israel (i.e., that we have no political leaders who are interested in peace any more). In other words, at the moment, our leaders do not seem to be very interested in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. In the context of this rather bleak situation, what should we do?

First of all, just as we Reform Jews were active in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, so too now we should be joining protest movements for peace and for human rights in Israel. We should join those in Israel who are constantly protesting the illegal and immoral actions of the government of Israel within Israel and especially in the occupied territories—the inhumane and constant demolition of homes, the repeated attacks by “hilltop youth settlers” against innocent Palestinians, the vandalization of churches and mosques on a regular basis by young Jewish extremists, the daily humiliation of the Palestinians under our rule in the West Bank and in the Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. This is a moral as well as a political imperative that should flow directly from our understanding of Jewish ethics.

Secondly, we should be preaching and teaching about the importance of shalom, based on Jewish sources. In doing so, we will be keeping the vision of peace alive—as Isaiah and Micah and other biblical prophets did—which is necessary for Israel, for us and for the world. We cannot abandon the idea of peace between Israelis and Palestinians, as our politicians have done. Rather, we must be the ones that believe that it is possible, if not right now then in the not-too-distant future.

Is peace possible? I believe it is and I will explain why.

During my career of over thirty years in the field of interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding—which has included my lecturing at universities, synagogues, mosques, churches, and community centers as well as speaking at international conferences and seminars and briefing groups that came to visit in Israel and Palestine—I

was often asked: is peace possible between Israelis and Palestinians? My answer was always yes, although it became more difficult to say this over time.

During the hopeful decade of the 1990s—which was characterized by several peace agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as historic peace agreements between Israel and the Vatican (at the end of 1993) and Israel and Jordan (in October 1994)—it was much easier to say with confidence that peace was possible. After all, the Oslo Accords of the early 1990s had broken the ice and proved that reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians was in fact possible. Many peacebuilders whom I know and with whom I have worked remember the Oslo Peace Agreements fondly, even if some of them were disappointed by some aspects of these accords.

But after the second intifada, mutual trust between Palestinian leaders and Israeli leaders was deeply damaged, and even though there were some efforts to bring the two sides to the negotiating table during the presidency of Barak Obama, they did not succeed. In fact, the last diplomatic agreement between Israel and the Palestinians was made in 1998 (twenty-five years ago!) at the Wye River Plantation outside of Washington, DC, under the tutelage of President Bill Clinton, with Bibi Netanyahu and Yasser Arafat signing the document for each side. That's right—Netanyahu once signed a peace accord with the Palestinians when he was cajoled by a serious American administration to do so!

Nowadays, it is much harder to say that peace is possible, but I still think that it is correct. Why? First, we have learned from contemporary history that some seemingly intractable conflicts have actually come to an end. Who would have imagined back in 1977 that President Anwar Sadat of Egypt would come to speak in Israel's Knesset and announce his willingness to make peace with Israel? Egypt had been Israel's arch enemy since its establishment in 1948 and had fought several major wars with the young Jewish state! Who would have believed that Yasser Arafat, the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization—which had committed countless terrorist attacks against Israel for decades—would change course and announce his commitment to enter into negotiations with Israel in 1988, and then to actually do so in 1992 and 1993 with the historic Oslo back-channel negotiations and then the Oslo Accords?

Similarly, who could have thought that peace between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland was possible in 1998 after decades of horrifying terror and counterterror called “the Troubles”? And yet, in April 1998, a surprising peace agreement was reached between the conflicting sides, with American intervention, led by Senator George Mitchell, that has lasted to this day. Similarly, it was inconceivable that the oppression of the Black population in South Africa, which went on for decades, would ever end. But Nelson Mandela rose to the occasion, as did Fredrik de Klerk, who was the leader of white-ruled South Africa, and they made an historic agreement that ended the apartheid regime in that country, despite all the despair and lack of hope that was the conventional wisdom there for a very long time.

As a result, I do not accept the political determinism of many pundits in our region (and outside of it) who say that peace between the Palestinians and Israelis is impossible and that it will never happen. I do not agree with this. On the contrary, I believe that it can and must happen, for the mutual welfare of both peoples. And I know that many peacemakers and peacebuilders in Israel and Palestine and beyond share this belief despite all the challenges and obstacles they face continually.

Let me illustrate this idea with a story from my own experience as one who directed a peacebuilding organization for nearly twenty-five years. During my career as the founder and director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, I oversaw many programs that were devoted to dialogue and peace. Among the most important and effective programs, with which I was involved for eleven years, was a program called Face to Face/Faith to Faith. This international program, founded by a Jewish woman from Denver, Colorado, and a Christian woman minister from New York (originally from Louisville, Kentucky), brought together diverse teenagers (Black and white, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, Palestinian Arabs, and Israeli Jews) from four regions of the world (Israel/Palestine, South Africa, Northern Ireland, and the United States). The program included an intensive two-week summer camp experience at a facility run by the Presbyterian Church of the United States in Upstate New York. The program also included a year of dialogue sessions in each home country as well as projects to be implemented by the end of the year by the youth in their

home settings. After its initial years, the program was administered by Auburn Seminary in New York City under the leadership of Rev. Katharine Henderson, who became a trusted colleague and a good friend.

Each year, there was a fundraising event in New York City to raise money for the next year of the program. One year I attended one of these events, which took place in a beautiful venue in Manhattan and was attended by hundreds of people. As part of the program, a moderator interviewed six young graduates of the program who were on a large stage under a huge banner that read "Peace is Possible." It was an impressive and inspiring evening, which I have never forgotten. After the program, when I asked some of the young people what they thought of the banner, they told me that they agreed with its message. They said that they had just lived for two full weeks over the summer with their former enemies and they discovered that peaceful living was indeed possible with them through dialogue and sincere attempts at mutual understanding and cooperation.

I understood what these young people were telling me. They had experienced peaceful coexistence and they knew that it could work. In my work with hundreds of youth and young adults over many years, I repeatedly saw that their positive dialogue experiences with the "other," their perceived enemy, had made them optimistic about the possibilities of peace. This led me to appreciate the positive power of dialogue, which is all too often undervalued and considered less important than political negotiations. In addition, I learned from them, as well as many others in the field, that dialogue is not enough. Concrete actions are needed after the dialogue is over. Talk is not enough. Peacebuilders have to also walk the walk.

Loving Peace and Pursuing Peace

In the Jewish tradition, there is a famous saying from *Pirkei Avot* (the Ethics of the Fathers) that has guided me in my life and in my professional work in interreligious dialogue for peace for a long time. This text reads:

Hillel taught: be a disciple of Aaron: Loving peace and pursuing peace. Loving our fellow human beings and attracting them to the study of Torah. (Pirkei Avot 1:12)

I have always found it fascinating that this important Rabbinic Sage chose the biblical Aaron as a model Jewish leader because he loved peace and pursued it.

In an excellent comprehensive article in the journal *Conservative Judaism* (in 2000), Rabbi Reuven Hammer, the former professor of Rabbinic Literature at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, explained why and how the Rabbis elevated Aaron to the model Jewish leader, how Hillel painted such a glowing and warm portrait of Aaron when the Torah text is so critical of him and his actions. Despite the ambivalence of the Torah toward Aaron, especially after his role in the incident of the Golden Calf, Aaron becomes the high priest and therefore the leader of the priestly group. Rabbi Hammer wrote:

Hillel has given us a two-part description of the basic qualities of Aaron, which he calls upon his students to emulate. These basic qualities are (1) love of peace (shalom) and (2) the love of all human beings. Each of these “loves” has an operative definition, a way of translating the emotion of love into action. The love of peace is demonstrated by the pursuit of peace. The love of human beings is shown by bringing them closer to Torah, the teaching of God. It is important to note that Hillel speaks of the love of human beings and does not confine himself to the love of Jews.¹

Hillel made Aaron the archetype not only of the ideal Jew but the ideal Jewish leader, one who leads through love rather than fear, with persuasion rather than force.

In another work, *Third-Party Peacemakers in Judaism*, which focuses on Aaron as a peacebuilder, Rabbi Daniel Roth, director of the Religious Peace Initiative of Mosaica in Israel (who works with Rabbi Michael Melchior), teaches us about the importance of the archetype of Aaron in Jewish tradition. In so doing, he brings to bear the earliest Rabbinic commentary on this mishnah about being the disciples of Aaron in the post-Talmudic tractate *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, which states:

A lover of peace and a pursuer of peace: Even if you run after it from city to city, from district to district, from country to country, do not desist from making peace. For it is equal in weight to all the other mitzvot [commandments] in the Torah . . . and Scripture says, “Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue

it [Ps. 34:15].” Rabbi Yosei says: If a person sits in his house and does not go out to the marketplace, how will he make peace between people? Rather, by going to the marketplace, he sees people fighting and enters between them and effects a compromise between them.²

Rabbi Roth emphasizes that this commentary stresses that to be a *pursuer of peace* one must proactively go out to make peace wherever there is conflict. It is not enough to passively be a *lover of peace*. One must take the initiative, not simply wait for conflicts to come to you to be resolved, but rather one must participate in action programs, either individually or as a group.

All of the peacebuilders that I know and have worked with for more than thirty years are not just *lovers of peace*. They are active pursuers of this ideal through their persistent involvement in peace work over many decades; through their many important initiatives, which have brought thousands of people closer together; and through their visions for a better future, which continue to inspire us every day. In so doing, they bring us closer to the values that we hold dear: the love and dignity of every human being and the priority for shalom/salaam/peace to bring social, religious, and political harmony to this world, including in Israel and Palestine.

So, I come back to the original question: How should Reform Jews—especially Reform rabbis—be acting during this period of the absence of peace negotiations between the government of Israel and the government of Palestine?

Firstly, we should be *pursuers of peace* by keeping the vision of peace alive. In contrast to our politicians, who have put the peace process in the deep freeze, we should always believe and act as if peace is possible.

Secondly, we should be teaching about peace in our synagogues, universities, rabbinical schools, and other institutions. Not only should we be teaching about the sources of peace in our tradition, but we should also be learning about examples of peacemakers and peacebuilders who have made a difference in this world, and who are continuing to make a difference. These inspiring people should be invited to speak in our communities and at our conventions. They should meet with our youth when they come to Israel, and they should be brought to our camps to inspire our young people to seek peace and pursue it.

Lastly, when a new government is elected in Israel—to replace the extreme right one that we have now (or hopefully it will have been unseated before this article is printed)—Reform/Progressive/Liberal rabbis should be at the forefront of those people who will be urging the Israeli government to finally make peace with its neighbors, as envisioned in Israel's Declaration of Independence. As Prime Minister Rabin said at the signing ceremony on the White House Lawn on September 13, 1993, in a speech that sounded more like a sermon:

We have come from Jerusalem, the ancient and eternal capital of the Jewish people. We have come from an anguished and grieving land. We have come from a people, a home, a family, that has not known a single year not a single month in which mothers have not wept for their sons. We have come to try and put an end to the hostilities, so that our children, our children's children, will no longer experience the painful cost of war, violence, and terror. We have come to secure their lives and to ease the sorrow and the painful memories of the past to hope and pray for peace.

Let me say to you, the Palestinians: We are destined to live together on the same soil, in the same land. We, the soldiers who have returned from battle stained with blood, we who have seen our relatives and friends killed before our eyes, we who have attended their funerals and cannot look into the eyes of their parents, we who have come from a land where parents bury their children, we who have fought against you, the Palestinians—We say to you today in a loud and a clear voice: Enough of blood and tears. Enough. We have no desire for revenge. We harbor no hatred towards you. We, like you, are people who want to build a home, to plant a tree, to love, to live side by side with you in dignity, in empathy, as human beings, as free men. We are today giving peace a chance, and saying again to you: Enough. Let us pray that a day will come when we all will say: Farewell to the arms.

We need leaders like Rabin to appear on our horizon again, to be courageous and committed to peace. We need new leadership who will understand that peace is both an obligation and a necessity, which is in the interest of both the state of Israel and the Palestinians. And, we will need new leadership on the Palestinian side as well.

Reform Jewish leaders must keep a vision of peace for Israel alive, even in these difficult times. We should do it wherever we

can—in all of our institutions—and in the media. As we have learned from our tradition, we should be the ones who constantly seek peace and pursue it.

Notes

1. Reuven Hammer, “The Apotheosis of Aaron,” *Conservative Judaism* 53, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 20–33.
2. Daniel Roth, *Third-Party Peacemakers in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 42–43.