

Looking Back on Fifty Years as a Rabbi

Rabbi Ron Kronish

About two years ago, I was recognized with an *aliyah* to the Torah at the Shabbat morning service of the convention in Israel of the CCAR that took place at Bet Daniel in Tel Aviv. What was the occasion? I was honored, along with two other colleagues, for having served (or survived) for fifty years as a rabbi. It was a meaningful moment in my life, as we were given a standing ovation by the more than 250 rabbis and others in the audience and we were beautifully blessed by Rabbi Hara Person, the wonderful and welcoming CEO of the CCAR.

Since then, I have been reflecting on my jubilee year as a rabbi. What kind of rabbi have I been? What has been my method and my message?

My Rabbinic Career

First of all, I will say that I intentionally chose *not* to be become a congregational rabbi. I grew up in the business (my father, Rabbi Leon Kronish, of blessed memory, was a wonderful congregational rabbi at Temple Beth Sholom in Miami Beach for forty active years) but I knew it was not for me. It was not the kind of life that I wanted to lead and I knew that I wouldn't be good at it. I give a lot of credit to those rabbis who do it well, but I was not cut out for the congregational world. (Fortunately, I knew this early on!)

So, I debated between Hillel (working on a college campus) or Jewish education. After ordination in 1973, while I was studying for my doctorate in education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I worked as a Jewish educator in the Boston area in two

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places and did not love either one. I found supplementary Jewish education in the United States to be very weak and without much meaning or substance. At the same time, I served in Hillel at Clark University and at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Massachusetts for three years, where I did very much enjoy working with college students.

Three weeks after earning my doctorate in education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in June of 1979, my wife and I packed up our things and, together with two young daughters (a third was added in Jerusalem a few years later), we made *aliyah* to Israel. During my first two years in Jerusalem, I worked part-time as a lecturer and researcher at the Melton Center for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on Mount Scopus, and as a senior staff person at the Institutes for Jewish Zionist Education (later to be known as *Melitz*). I loved both jobs, which engaged me in meaningful educational projects and programs in Israel. But when I was asked by the dean of the School of Education of Hebrew University if I wanted to pursue an academic career, I decided that it was not for me, that I preferred an educational job in the field. So, I became a rabbi-educator and focused my energies for my first seven years in Israel (1979–1986) in informal education with the Institutes for Jewish Zionist Education, while teaching part-time at Tel Aviv University’s Department of Education for a few years.

When I sat down to write my personal/professional memoir several years ago, I recalled the time that I realized that I would devote my life to education in one form or another. It was during my years at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that I became an educator in my philosophy and in my practice, which shaped the rest of my life. I would say that since then, I have always seen the world—and especially my professional work—through the lens of an educator. I wrote my doctoral thesis on the influence of the American pragmatist philosopher of education, John Dewey, on Jewish education in America, which established me then as one of the foremost scholars of Dewey and of Jewish education in the 1970s. In those years, I spoke at conferences and wrote articles on this subject in many journals, and I became a progressive educator in thought and in deed. In later years, I taught courses on Dewey and education in the School of Education of Tel Aviv University.¹

1 Little did I know then that I was going to become not just a Jew-
2 ish educator but an interreligious one. But this developed later in
3 my life.
4

5 **Founding the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel**

6 In 1991, with the assistance of a few other people, I founded a new
7 organization in Israel, the Interreligious Coordinating Council in
8 Israel (ICCI), which I directed for twenty-four years until I retired
9 at the end of 2014. During all the years that I served as director of
10 ICCI—which was also the Israeli chapter of Religions for Peace
11 (and was for a while the Israel chapter of the International Council
12 of Christians and Jews, ICCJ)—I became one of Israel’s few experts
13 in the field of interreligious relations. As a result, local representa-
14 tives of the foreign press, as well as local journalists, would often
15 seek me out for quotes and background information about devel-
16 opments in this field in Israel.

17 Also, in my capacity as director of this organization for more
18 than two decades, I was invited to speak at conferences, seminars,
19 and workshops all over the world, from North America to the Far
20 East. These experiences brought me into contact with Jews, Chris-
21 tians, and Muslims (and others) who genuinely believe in and
22 practice interreligious dialogue and who actively work for peace
23 in their countries and regions, as well as internationally. In this
24 respect, I saw myself always engaged as an educator and a repre-
25 sentative of Reform/Humanistic/Liberal/Progressive Judaism to
26 the non-Jewish world.
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28 **Involvement in Vatican-Jewish Relations**

29 During the 1990s and early 2000s, I was intensely involved in
30 Vatican-Jewish relations and interreligious dialogue with Catholic
31 leaders as well as leaders from other religions via the Pontifical
32 Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the Pon-
33 tifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue. I participated in some
34 amazing encounters, dialogues, and conferences at the Vatican and
35 in Assisi, during which time I met Pope John Paul II three times.
36 In addition, I was deeply involved in the preparations for the his-
37 toric visit of this pope to Israel in March 2000, along with my good
38 friend of many years Monsignor Pietro Sambì, who was the papal
39 nuncio in Israel at that time,
40

Following this amazing week, I co-produced a film, together with my wife, Amy Kronish, with the assistance of a documentary film production company. The film was called *I Am Joseph Your Brother* and it told the story behind this groundbreaking visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel. The film was screened at film festivals, Catholic seminaries, synagogues, and universities where the history of Jewish-Christian relations is taught. The production and distribution of this film—and the accompanying guide book—was without doubt one of the highlights of my career in interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding. (The film is now available via YouTube on the internet.)

This historic visit of the pope to Israel—which was the first of its kind—came only seven years after the signing of the first Oslo Accord between Israel and the PLO in September 1993, as well as the signing of the Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel at the end of December in that same year, in which the Vatican finally decided to formally recognize the State of Israel and the State of Israel recognized the Vatican in return! I was privileged to be in the room at the Foreign Ministry of Israel when it was signed.

Looking back, one other highlight stands out for me in my career as a rabbi involved in interreligious dialogue as a method of peacebuilding for many years. In 1999, I was privileged to host the Dalai Lama in Israel twice—once for a small seminar with a group of Christians and Jews who came to Israel from San Francisco, to enter into dialogue with this great religious leader in an off-the-record, intimate setting. In addition, the sponsors of this seminar hosted a large reception at the iconic King David hotel one evening for members of the interreligious community in Israel. During this reception, I was given an award for my work in this field in Israel, in the presence of the Dalai Lama. On a second occasion that year, my organization co-hosted a conference for interreligious leaders in Israel and Palestine and from abroad, with the Dalai Lama, at the Bet Gavriel Conference Center on the southern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Both events were deeply meaningful and transformative in my life as a person of dialogue.

Teaching, Writing, and Mentoring

When I retired at the end of 2014, I decided to devote my time to educating a new generation of interreligious activists through

1 teaching, writing, and mentoring. I have mentored several young
2 people who have become leaders in the field. In addition, I have
3 taught Christian seminarians at Drew University's Theological
4 School in Madison, New Jersey (and on zoom) for the past five
5 years on the subject of interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding,
6 and I did this previously for five years for Brandeis University's
7 MA program in Conflict Resolution and Coexistence in their Heller
8 School for Social Policy and Management.

9 Moreover, during the past nine years, I have edited one book²
10 and written two others.³ Also, I have written over 200 posts for my
11 blog for *The Times of Israel* over the past twelve years on these and
12 other issues in Israeli society.

13 **My Method and Message**

14 What has been my rabbinic message and method in all of my
15 teaching, mentoring, and writing?

16 I once put it quite simply on a new website that we developed
17 for ICCI, the organization that I led for more than twenty years:
18 *Our goal is peaceful coexistence. Our methods are dialogue, education,*
19 *and activism.* In other words, I have been organizing, preaching,
20 and teaching about the importance of peaceful coexistence between
21 Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs in my region for many years, both
22 in my professional work and in my *divrei Torah* (words of Torah),
23 which I have written for my blog on the *Times of Israel* website and
24 in my articles for the *Jerusalem Report* and for other publications. I
25 believe that shalom is one of the central values in Judaism and that,
26 as it is written, we ought to seek peace and pursue it actively.

27 My methods have included dialogue, education, action, and
28 writing. I have described these methods, often in some detail, in
29 my books and blog posts and have taught them to young people
30 for many years. During all of my years in the field, I supervised
31 professional staff and many student interns in these methods and
32 messages, and I know that at least some of them are active in this
33 endeavor still today, which gives me great satisfaction.

34 If I had to sum it up, I would say that I have tried to be a dis-
35 ciple of the rabbinic image of Aaron, as depicted in the following
36 famous passage from *Pirkei Avot*:
37

38 Hillel says: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pur-
39 suing peace, loving human beings and bringing them closer to
40 Torah.

I have tried not to love peace simply “academically” or abstractly. Rather, I have actively pursued peace—especially between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs—via dialogue and education. In so doing, I learned that these methods are not as sexy or newsworthy as war and politics, and therefore I was not in the news very much, but more active behind the scenes.

Dialogue and education are not so popular because they require time and patience. Also, dialogue involves active listening and I have found that most people prefer to talk and give speeches rather than listen compassionately to try to truly understand one another. In Israel and Palestine, there is much more yelling at one another than listening to each other. Apparently, this is not only the case in the Middle East in recent years, but is also true of the United States, where politicians mostly just exude diatribe rather than dialogue.

Lessons Learned and Thoughts for the Future

What are the main lessons that I have learned from engaging in interreligious dialogue in Israel and Palestine for over three decades?

First, I have learned that interreligious dialogue, when it is done with good facilitation, careful planning, and persistent implementation, can be very helpful in building trust among people on the grassroots level of our ongoing conflict, including religious leaders, educators, youth, and young adults. I have also learned that dialogue is difficult. It must not only be learned but also practiced. In my career as a rabbi-educator-interreligious peacebuilder, I facilitated and observed many successful dialogue groups. Through these experiences, I learned that people, including myself, can undergo meaningful processes of personal transformation that can catalyze them into planning and implementing cooperative programs and projects for peaceful coexistence.

Second, I have discovered over and over again that there are in fact people to talk with on “the other side.” Many Palestinians—especially those who live in Israel and are citizens here—are eager to encounter their Jewish neighbors and to understand them better, toward the goal of learning to live together in peaceful coexistence within our country and within the region. I have encountered many Palestinians in Israel who have become my dialogue partners and even friends over the years. Not only has this enriched

1 my personal and professional life, but it has helped me to under-
 2 stand Palestinian positions and attitudes on many contemporary
 3 issues. I have entered into meaningful dialogue with these people
 4 both privately and in public—in Israel and abroad—which I have
 5 always felt enlightened many people as to the benefits of dialogue
 6 with “the other.”

7 Third, I have encountered moderate Muslims, both in Israel and
 8 around the world, who preach a version of Islam that is vastly dif-
 9 ferent from the one presented by the mainstream media. In my
 10 various writings—in books and in blog posts—I have highlighted
 11 the work of some of the most prominent Muslim coexistence activ-
 12 ists and peacebuilders, so that the outside world can know that
 13 these people exist and are doing amazing work, for which they
 14 don’t get enough credit or publicity.

15 Fourth, I have learned over and over again that Christians are
 16 no longer our enemy. As I have said and written many times,
 17 the Crusades are over! We are no longer at war with Christians
 18 or Christianity. On the contrary, we in our generation are in dia-
 19 logue with Christians and Christianity in more ways that was
 20 ever possible previously. For the past fifty-nine years—since the
 21 promulgation of the famous Vatican document known as “*Nostra*
 22 *Aetate*” (In Our Time), in October 1965—Jews and Christians at the
 23 highest levels and also on the grassroots have been engaged in an
 24 unprecedented ongoing dialogue, which has totally changed the
 25 relationships between Christians and Jews around the world. This
 26 dialogue has taken place in Israel and Palestine too.

27 Fifth, I have seen how interreligious and intercultural dialogue
 28 can be part of the solution, as opposed to part of the problem. Dia-
 29 logue that remains only ephemeral, intellectual, theological, or
 30 abstract is not the kind that we need in our region right now. Too
 31 much of this already goes on in many forums in Israel and abroad,
 32 as I have experienced this in many international conferences (some
 33 of which were a huge waste of time and money). I have too often
 34 listened to monologues on the importance of dialogue, rather than
 35 engaging in genuine dialogue. Indeed, I have felt for a long time
 36 that we need a dialogue that is connected to real life, one that will
 37 change the hearts and minds of the people and help them become
 38 aware of the benefits and opportunities inherent in genuine peace.

39 People engaged in interreligious dialogue will become irrelevant
 40 and out-of-date if they do not address themselves to the critical

issues of peace and justice in Israel/Palestine and in the world. Rather, the dialogue must be related to peacebuilding efforts—and attempts to ensure social justice—all over the world.

In the future, therefore, interreligious dialogue, education, and action for healing the world will be needed more than ever before. This will be a time not to divest of the possibilities of peace—as some Christian churches and some student protests have suggested in recent years—but to invest in peace, by developing systematic and substantive programs across borders and within societies, for the sake of all of God’s children, not just for those of just one tribe or religion or nationality.

I believe that in the future, the next generations of professionals and volunteers involved in interreligious dialogue in Israel and Palestine will have a major role to play in the essential long-range people-to-people peacebuilding processes. In addition, religious leaders—rabbis, priests, pastors, and imams—and their followers from abroad will be called upon to support these efforts, especially those who believe deeply in the benefits of peace for all people in our region.

Notes

1. For more details about this, see my *The Other Peace Process: Interreligious Dialogue a View from Jerusalem* (Hamilton Books, 2017).
2. *Coexistence and Reconciliation in Israel: Voices of Interreligious Dialogue* (Paulist Press, 2015).
3. *The Other Peace Process: Interreligious Dialogue, A View from Jerusalem* (Hamilton Books, 2017) and *Profiles for Peace: Voices of Peacebuilders in the Midst of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (2022).