

A Blessing for all the Peoples on Earth

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“And Abraham will surely be a great and mighty people and all the peoples on earth shall be blessed through him” (Gen.18 v.18).

In what way are Abraham’s descendants meant to be a blessing to humankind?

The answer is given in the next verse:

“For I have chosen him that he will instruct his children and his household after him and they will observe the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice.”

At the heart of the Abrahamic blessing therefore is the impact of living and pursuing a life of justice and righteousness. The obligation to do so is a reflection of the Abrahamic understanding of the Divine character itself as reflecting righteous judgment. (Gen.18 v.25)

The Hebrew Biblical view of the character of God, however, is not only one of justice and righteousness but also of forgiveness, loving-kindness, of mercy and compassion, as articulated in the thirteen Attributes in Exodus. (34 v.6&7)

Accordingly, the injunction to walk in God’s Ways (Deuteronomy 11 v.22), and to cleave to Him (Deut.11 v.22; 10 v.12 and 13 v.4+5), are understood to require us to emulate these Divine qualities.

Elaborating upon these injunctions, the Talmud (BT Sotah 14a) declares “Just as He clothes the naked as He did with Adam, so you clothe the naked; just as He visits the sick as He did with Abraham, so you visit the sick; just as He comforts the bereaved as He did with Isaac, so you comfort the bereaved; just as He buries the dead as He did with Moses, so you bury the dead.” Similarly in the Midrash (Mechilta, Canticles, 3) we are told by the sage Abba Shaul, “Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so you be gracious and compassionate.”

Of course these injunctions are also predicated upon our recognition that all persons are created in the Divine Image (Genesis 1 v.27), which leads not only to the commandment in Leviticus (19 v.18) to love one’s neighbor as oneself, but also to love the stranger as oneself, (19 v.34)

While the Biblical Creation story presents all species of beings as created male and female, the human being is created singly. Our ancient sages interpreted the reason for this as being in order to emphasize that each person is a world in him or herself and each person is unique. Therefore to destroy one life is to destroy a whole world and to save one life is to save a whole world. (Sanhedrin, Mishnah 3-4) In addition, the fact that the human person is created in the Image of God leads them to emphasize that any act of disrespect, let alone violence, against another human being is in fact an act of disrespect or violence towards God Himself (Genesis Rabbah, 24) and thus the ultimate sacrilege.

However, in addition to respect for universal human dignity, we find in the Hebrew Bible an acknowledgement that the Divine Presence was to be found and recognized beyond the Community of Israel. This appears to be implicit in references such as that regarding Malkizedek the Priest to the Most High (Gen.14 v.18-20) and more so in Joseph's reassurance to his brothers (who had not recognized him in his position as Pharaoh's right hand man) that they take him at his word, because "I fear God" (Gen. 42 v.18).

Even more explicit is the prophetic passage in Malachi, "For from sunrise to its setting, my Name is great among the gentiles and in every place incense is offered to my Name" (Ch.1 v.11). Perhaps even the prophet Micah's plea for religious toleration also implies the recognition of some legitimacy in other religious paths: "For all the nations shall go each in the name of his God and we will go in the name of the Lord our God for ever" (Ch.11 v.5).

Of course Biblical prophetic literature precisely affirms a universalist vision – the messianic ideal – in which nations and cultures do not disappear, but share certain fundamental affirmations of faith and ethical principles and conduct (e.g. Isaiah 2 v.2-3, Micah 4 v.2&3, Zechariah 14 & 16), and among the universalist passages in the Bible one which is particularly pertinent for our troubled times is the vision in Psalm 87 of Jerusalem as place and vehicle for international harmony, recognizing the profound attachment of many nations to the city of Zion.

Furthermore Rabbinic teaching understood all humankind as being covenanted with God in "the Covenant with the children of Noah" (based on Genesis 9 v.9), which is a charter of basic universal religious morality.

However generally speaking, our Scriptures do not paint a very positive picture of the other nations and seek to separate the Children of Israel from them, keeping them apart as much as possible. This of course was due to the idolatrousness of the all the nations around at the time. But evidently the Biblical concern is not simply with theological error, but precisely because of "the abominations of these nations" (Deut. 18.9, Lev. 18 v.27) – the perverse immoralities ranging from human sacrifice to sexual depravity, that were part and parcel of these idolatries.

Thus from Judaism's inception, it was one long tirade against the idolatrous degeneracy that surrounded it. Accordingly the world at large was seen as overwhelmingly hostile – consciously or otherwise – to Judaism's message and purpose. Even when Jews encountered and lived in Christian and Muslim societies, facilitating the recognition of the religious and ethical value of these faiths, this original alienation from the world at large, was compounded by the experiences of exile and the hostility Jews encountered as a vulnerable minority. This was of course especially the case in so-called Christian lands where theology served not only to intensify the scapegoating of the Jew, but also to demonize him. While the Jewish experience was incomparably better in Muslim lands, there is often a tendency to over-romanticize that experience.

Thus while there were some notable exceptional periods of interfaith cooperation, e.g. during the period known as the Golden Age of Spain, generally the negative

experiences and compounding of past trauma obliterated their impact on general Jewish consciousness.

The effects of long term historical alienation of one kind or another can be very profound. Lamentably, relations between all our different religions down the ages have of course been typified more by alienation than embrace. One might even see the Jewish experience as paradigmatic in this regard.

By definition, getting beyond such alienation requires not only a degree of respective self-confidence in our relationships, but a level of comfort within the wider society of which we are a part – and there's the rub. All too often those who are most deeply rooted in their particular religious heritage do not feel comfortable in the world at large. All too often the attitude of the wider society is indeed hostile and we witness a vicious cycle of mutual alienation.

Paradoxically, both the need to embrace one another and the resistance to doing so are greatest in time of conflict. The result is that misrepresentation and even demonization take place precisely at the time that the imperative for mutual understanding and cooperation is greatest. The Middle East, where I live, is a classic manifestation of this.

In fact the very idea of interfaith encounter has been foreign to the majority of adherents and religious leaders in our part of the world, where most are alienated from or at least fearful of one another – while at the same time the need for such has become increasingly imperative. In particular, the last bloody four years have seen a most dangerous development in which religion has appeared to compound the conflict.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in essence a territorial conflict of two nationalisms. As a territorial conflict, where there is the vision, will and courage, it can be resolved through territorial compromise. However, if the conflict is perceived as a religious conflict – a religious war – between the Godly and the demonic, then prospects for a peaceful resolution are bleak indeed. The Palestinian uprising of these last years was significantly named the Al Aksa Intifada, referring to the sacred Muslim shrine which was portrayed as threatened by Jewish malevolent intent. Increasingly, the conflict is being painted in religious terms on both sides.

At the same time all polls show an overwhelming majority of Israelis and Palestinians willing and even eager for a territorial compromise and an end to conflict. However, aside from the problems of leadership, the last four years of violence have destroyed virtually any mutual trust that was built up in the previous years. We thus face a serious crisis of trust.

It was for both reasons that we initiated the meeting of religious leaders of the Holy Land in Alexandria two and a half years ago.

It is in fact the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, whom we have to thank for this initiative, which brought together, for the first time in history, leadership from the three faith communities in the Holy Land: from the Chief Rabbinate, the Patriarchates and the Ulema of Palestine.

In the Middle East, the religious authorities of the respective faiths are generally appointed by the political authorities and are beholden to them. They thus rarely assume a prophetic role of challenging political authority and of course the vulnerability of minority faiths tends to prevent them from doing so as well. However this negative aspect of institutional religion is a plus when there is a political will to enlist religion for a positive purpose – indeed to be true to its métier. Undoubtedly the wake of the tragedy of September 11 2001 played a part here in the desire of respective political leaders to be seen to be supporting religion as a vehicle for peace rather than conflict.

Despite the manifold hurdles, we succeeded in bringing fifteen leaders from the three faith communities in the Holy Land together in Alexandria to sign a historic document condemning violence against innocents in the name of religion as being the desecration of religion itself. It called for an end to all violence as well as occupation; and for a return to the negotiating table of the parties to bring an end to suffering and injustice and the promotion of peace and security. Beyond a plea for respecting the holy sites and religious attachments of other faiths, the document called above all for the promotion of respect among the religions and their adherents.

This meeting and its declaration had significant impact upon perceptions in our region. Lamentably, the prevailing political impasse and continued vicious cycle of violence prevented it from being as significant as we had hoped. Nevertheless, the event, the text and the ongoing meetings between the religious leaders serve as a most important testimony. More than that, they offer not only hope but potential for the future, as it has become even more patently clear than ever that if we do not want religion to be part of the problem, then it must be included in any peace process – whether on track one or two – as part of the solution.

Nevertheless the testimony itself is still not something to be taken lightly. I would even presume to suggest that our interreligious encounter is itself at the heart of our Abrahamic responsibility. Of course in any conflict there are human issues that relate to justice and righteousness that we have to do our very best to address if we are true children of Abraham. However Abraham offers us a model of reaching out beyond social divides; of breaking through the barrier of alienation. This model in a word is “hospitality” – a quality all our traditions associate with Abraham. Genesis 18 v.1 describes Abraham as “sitting at the entry to his tent in the heat of the day” looking out for wayfarers to offer hospitality, when “he lifts up his eyes and sees and behold three men are standing before him.” A Hassidic master raised the question why these angels are referred to as just “men,” especially when the next chapter of Genesis begins with the words “and the two angels came to Sodom and Lot saw them and got up to meet them” The rabbi’s answer was that there was no need for the angels to reveal themselves as such, for Abraham saw the angel in every person.

Hospitality expresses a reaching out, by which we initiate a welcome to the other. This of course especially means being able to respond to the pain and pleas for justice and security of the other. Reaching out as people of faith and in the name of our faith is especially important. It is thereby that we can overcome the mutual

alienation that bedevils us, and be true to the values and example of Abraham our common Father. In the beautiful words of Pope John Paul II, “we Christians, Jews and Muslims as the children of Abraham are called to be a blessing to the world. In order to be such, we must first be a blessing to one another.”

Indeed, God is presented by the prophet Isaiah (41 v.8) as describing the Patriarch as “Abraham who loves me” (a more correct translation than the more common “Abraham my friend”).

True love of God is manifest in the Abrahamic model - living “the way of the Lord, to do justice and righteousness,” while reaching out in hospitality to all.