

Peacemaking in the Middle East Urgently Requires a Religious Dimension

Rabbi Shmuel Jakobovits

The narrative of the century-old Mideast conflict is not only geo-political or even ethnic; it also involves a distinctly ideological and supra-historical dimension. Here the contest is not, essentially, between Jew and Arab, or, as some fringes would misleadingly have us believe, between Judaism and Islam – but rather between religion and secularism, faith and agnosticism, divinely-ordained morals and “moral relativism” (i.e., permissiveness). For neither Judaism nor Islam, in their fullness, can accept either outright secularism or the neo-Christian notion that religion and secularism can reside in the same hearts.

Accordingly, and as bitter experience has shown, purely secular peace-making does not work in the Middle East. The very concept, for instance, of a New Middle East, with blurred boundaries between our peoples and placing the striving for economic prosperity above all else, is antithetical to authentic Judeo-Islamic sensibilities. Attempts to impose agreements based on concepts such as this – even if they are proposed jointly by Jews, Arabs, the US, the UN and the EU – serve merely to exacerbate the conflict, because they ignore its deeper religious components.

So long as the powers that be insist on cultivating secularist “moderates” as peace partners while continuing to treat unbending religionists as the intractable enemy, peace must continue to elude the region. Most urgently needed, therefore, is a peace initiative that will reach also the religious players, speak in their language, think in their terms and address their concerns and sensitivities. This requires fundamentally new visions, broad and systematic planning and resolute positive action.

As religious leaders, we must, of course, extol the merits of peace and decry the terrible wrongs of violence. But we must do that within a comprehensive context that is vastly more than that. We must see to it that faith and religiously-inspired living regain the moral high ground in a world that is steadily undermining the stature of man and sliding toward moral chaos and spiritual decadence. In today’s

circumstances, this can only be achieved with benevolence: religious force desecrates the name of G-d and distances people from Him.

As an important step forward, let us issue a call to all involved governments and international agencies to recognize and respect the religious dimensions of the Mideast conflict and to incorporate distinctly religious elements at all levels of their peace-making efforts. And let us ourselves take up the momentous, historic challenge of setting in motion a religiously-oriented peace initiative, which alone, with Heaven's help, may finally bring relief from the endless bloodshed, pain and suffering of all the peoples in the area. This will also be of incalculable global significance in sanctifying the name of G-d and rehabilitating the soiled honour of religion.

Ultimately, peace must be secured through meriting it in the eyes of Heaven, for peace is not a natural state but a divinely-bestowed one. But we must do our part. If we fulfill that condition, then we may look forward to the fulfillment of our most fervent prayers that "He Who makes peace among the celestial bodies above, He will make peace among us as well." Amen.