

Psalms and Suras, Shields and Swords in the Holy Land THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

I. Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies at the center of unrest in the Middle East. While intra-Arab and inter-country wars flare up from time to time, ever since the establishment of Israel the region has been in a heightened state of turmoil. Over fifty years and half a dozen wars later, there is still no tenable peace between the Israeli and Palestinian communities and cultures. This paper examines the role that religion has played in causing and shaping this conflict. A historical context is provided to aid in understanding, followed by an investigation of the function of religion in the Israeli and Palestinian communities. Finally, the question of whether religion can help find a way to peace is posed and possible solutions are explored.

II. Historical Context

Before one can begin to understand the modern conflict in the Middle East, one must have some background knowledge of the principal actors in this conflict, namely the Jews, the Palestinians and Arabs, and the land. Their respective religions of Judaism and Islam must also be framed in an historical context because of the key role this plays. We begin with the land, the hills and coastal plain that stretches from the river Jordan to the Mediterranean sea, from the Sinai desert in the south to the rocky Golan Heights in the North. This land has changed hands amidst tribes and nations several times over nearly 6,000 years of history. The earliest known people were the Canaanites in 4000 BCE, but by 1500 BCE the Egyptians ruled over the land. The history of the Jewish tribe begins soon after, as Moses led his people out into the Sinai desert and later received the Torah, a core text of Judaism, and the Arc of the Covenant on Mt. Sinai. Beginning around 1000 BCE, the Jews dominated the area until they were expelled by the Babylonians. Their Jewish Temple in the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, but re-built under Persian rule in 516 BCE. While the Jews would have sporadic influence in the area, when the Romans conquered the land in the first century CE they were permanently sent into exile. Arabs, as Muslims in particular, would arrive on the scene in the 7th century CE. The religion of Islam, meaning “submission to the will of Allah”, began as a movement against the polytheistic idol

worship practiced by the Arab tribes in the city of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula. Its prophet was Muhammad, a merchant who in 610 CE began to receive a divine revelation from God through the angel Gabriel. After Muhammad's death in 632 CE, this rigidly monotheistic religion spread rapidly through the entire Arab continent and later into northern Africa. One must recognize that Islam developed 600 years after the rise of Christianity and well after Judaism. The Koran, which is the direct revelation that Muhammad received and considered the literal 'Word of God' by Muslims, acknowledges Jewish and Christian prophets like Moses and Jesus Christ, and states that their Bible was an earlier valid revelation of God. Muhammad is viewed to be the last of the Prophets and brings the final revelation that supercedes all others. Jews and Christians are considered to be 'People of the Book'. In Jerusalem, the *Haram al-Sharif* or 'noble sanctuary' was constructed on ruins where the old Jewish temple stood (the Temple Mount), and on it the al-Aqsa Mosque was consecrated. A few hundred yards away the Dome of the Rock shrine was dedicated over the rock where the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. By the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire ruled over this land and did so for 500 years until Britain took over the land following the end of World War I, during which the Ottoman Empire found itself on the losing side and eventually had its empire carved up by the colonial European powers.

For the nearly 2000 years they had been exiled from the ancient Canaan, the Jews underwent the Diaspora, or great dispersal throughout the world. Some remained in other Arab lands, while many went to Europe. However, their story would be one of continual suffering and hardship. Christianity, itself a reform movement of Judaism by Jesus Christ, a Jew, found its followers persecuted until a dramatic conversion of Constantine of the Byzantine Empire. Christianity, under the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, would soon come to practically dominate all life in Europe and the Near East. The Jews became a target for Christians for rejecting the teachings of Christ and supposedly killing him. The Church saw the expulsion of the Jews from the Holy Land as God's punishment for rejecting the message of Christ. They were often treated as second-class citizens, persecuted against, had pogroms launched against them. Despite some instances where Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in equality with a multicultural spirit, such as in Spain during the 12th and 13th centuries, for the most part the Jews were relegated to small Jewish quarters of a city, never fully accepted into mainstream society. In the early 1900s, a secular Jew named Theodore Herzl began circulating an idea of Jews returning to their homeland, an idea that grew into the Zionist movement. When the British Mandate in Palestine began after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I, Jews began to immigrate there in small numbers. The trend of persecution against Jews reached

an abominable climax in the Holocaust during World War II, where six million European Jews were systematically rounded up and exterminated for simply being Jewish. As the world reeled in shock at the supreme injustice done to the Jewish people, the Allied powers convened and created the state of Israel out of the land of Palestine, thus advancing in a significant way Herzl's movement, which had been progressing slowly during the first half of the 20th century. This new country was intended to be a Jewish state which all Jews could call their home. As expected, this led to considerable dissent among the Arab nations. Many of the Arabs living in Palestine left to the neighboring country of Jordan, which held the West Bank at the time. Just after Israel declared its statehood, the Arab countries tried to crush it but Israel emerged from the war victorious. Originally, the borders of Israel did not include the old city of Jerusalem or what the Bible calls Judea and Samaria, what is today known as the West Bank. That all changed in 1967, when Israel launched a pre-emptive strike against the surrounding Arab countries that were threatening to attack. The war was over in six days, and resulted in a spectacular victory for Israel and a humiliating defeat for the Arab countries. Israel had captured the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank all the way to the Jordan River from Jordan, and the Golan Heights that bordered Lebanon and Syria. Critically, this meant Israel had at long last the entire city of Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount. In 1979, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat negotiated a peace treaty with Israel in return for the Sinai Peninsula. Israel agreed, and today the borders of the state of Israel remain basically as they are.

II. Religion for Israeli Jews

This section examines Israeli Jews, an important distinction because to be an Israeli does not also mean one is a Jew. Roughly 20% of the Israeli population is Arab, and of those nearly 80% are Muslim.²⁴ Often there is debate as to who is a 'Jew'. The label does not have a purely religious denotation, as 'Christian' or 'Muslim' has, but rather goes further to describe cultural and ethnic heritage. On these grounds, one finds a wide variety of Jews in Israel hailing from Europe, America, the Arabian Gulf, and the Orient. When one focuses on the religious aspect of the Jewish population, great divisions in Israeli society can be seen, and these divisions have changed the dynamics of Israel's policy and actions since the state's inception. Since 1995, the largest group of Jews is the secular, or *chiloni*, Jews, consisting of approximately 45% of the population. Casual observers of Judaism, or the *masorti*, in which they choose parts to follow, make up about 35%, while the remaining 20% are *dati*, or actively practicing.²⁵ One also finds divisions within the practicing group. Most known of these is likely the Orthodox *haredim*, or "those filled with the awe of God," who wear the black hats and long beards. The *haredim* rigidly

follow *halakab*, or Judaic law, and exert control over the neighborhoods in which they live to conform to these rules, which in some cases has led to shutting down streets on the Sabbath and strictly following kosher guidelines. The *haredim* deeply believe in the holiness of Jerusalem, which is described by Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Nota Schiller that “to throw garbage on the streets of Jerusalem is a spiritual transgression, not just a municipal violation”¹ (301). The *haredim* does not openly favor the secular government of Israel either or are avid supporters of Zionist ideology. To them the real state of Israel has no secular foundation and should be first and foremost a Jewish state ruled with Jewish law. In contrast, there are a group of Jews who are both ultra-Orthodox and strong supports of the Zionist movement. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, and later his son, propagated a fusion of Judaism and Zionism that has galvanized Israeli radicals to actively settle the West Bank. This framework is noteworthy because Zionism in its original form, and as practiced by the founding fathers of the state of Israel, was an entirely secular movement. The Gush Emunim (“block of the faithful”) movement is aligned with this religious Zionist ideology and took center stage when its followers, led by Rabbi Moshe Levinger, rented a hotel room in the Palestinian West Bank city of Hebron for Passover holiday in 1968. They refused to leave, and have defiantly continued to live in Hebron. Their claim of Jewish holiness stands mostly without debate: the Cave of Machpelah is considered the burial place for the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people, and it is believed by some that the Messiah will first go to the Cave and raise them from the dead. Abraham lived in Hebron, and is said to have purchased the land in the Bible.⁸ Rabbi Eliezer Waldman, one of Levinger’s followers who later spearheaded the West Bank settlement movement, justifies his doctrine with “it is a commandment of God to the Jewish people that we settle all the land of Israel. That means that as long as we don’t have all the land, we are not going to be complete spiritually and total redemption will not be possible.”¹(310). It is important to note that active followers of Gush Emunim make up an extremely small percentage of the Israeli Jewish population. However, their views and enthusiasm have been used by Israeli politicians to boost support in the conservative bloc and to legitimize Israel’s presence in the occupied territories. The Israeli government has supported and at times openly encouraged them to settle the West Bank, which is considered to be *the* physical homeland of the Jewish people. The stories of the Jewish Bible take place among the hills and valleys in Judea and Samaria. It is the religious Zionists who hold reverence, awe, holiness in the *Land* of Israel. It was the 1967 Six Day War that ignited them, because they did not see the outcome of the war in a secular light. A religious Zionist’s view of the events is tinted with Messianic prophecies and mystical overtones. It must be said that for practically all Jews, the fact that the entire city of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount came into Israeli hands during

the Six Day War was nothing short of euphoria. The Temple Mount, under which the foundations of the First and Second Temples lay, is revered as *the center* of the Jewish experience. 2000 years of exile and suffering, of every year saying “next year in Jerusalem” only served to amplify and enhance the longing for Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. This feeling is not purely religious – the former Temples were the center of Jewish social life and community and today remains a powerful symbol of Jewish identity and heritage. What is disturbing to many of the secular and reform minded Jews though is the emphasis and focus placed on the land of Judea and Samaria. Rabbi David Hartman, one of the leading advocates of a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians, provides a counter to the religious Zionist rhetoric by working to improve the way Judaism as a religion interacts with the reality of today. While Rabbi Waldman believes that without the land the Jewish people will never be spiritually whole, Hartman says “[T]he holiness of the people precedes the holiness of the land. There is no mystical significance to land. There is only significance to what human beings do. Holiness in Judaism does not come from stones or books. It comes from...how we live here and now.”¹(321).

Understanding the deep religious divides within Israel is crucial to understanding how religion has contributed to the Israeli side of the conflict. The most immediate effect is the nature of the West Bank settlers (Israel forced the settlers in the Gaza strip to withdraw in 2005). The question of land lies at the heart of the Palestinian people – both the land they were displaced from when the state of Israel was formed, and for the next generation, the land that came under Israeli occupation after 1967. The settlements are the most immediate and physical sign of Israel’s occupation. The settlers in the West Bank have also been known to intentionally provoke and harass the Palestinians. Hebron is a contentious flashpoint. In 2001, 70,000 Palestinian Arabs lived in Hebron, and 5,000 Israeli Jews lived in the nearby community of Kiryat-Arba. In the heart of Hebron, 450 defiant members of the Gush Eminent make their stand. The most chilling instance occurred in 1994, when a Kach radicalized American Jew named Baruch Goldstein entered the Muslim prayer hall above the Cave of the Patriarchs and opened fire into the crowd, killing 29 Muslims.²⁵ A series of reprisals from Palestinian militant groups followed, yet today amongst the Jews in Hebron, Goldstein is seen as a hero, a martyr. It is important to note, however, that Goldstein’s actions are condemned by the majority of Israelis. One does not even have to commit murder to instigate violence. In 1997, a Jewish woman distributed fliers in Hebron depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a pig. The response was a thousands-strong demonstration in Nablus organized by Hamas and violence that included throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers.²² Beyond the provocation by the settlers

themselves, the very presence of them in the West Bank territory fractures and hinders life for the Palestinians in the occupied territories. The Israeli army is obligated to provide security for them, which requires holding key routes and regions under Israeli control. This leads to intrusive and disruptive incursions by the Israeli Army whenever there is violence. From an administrative view, this situation has led to a complex hierarchy of regions which are under varying levels of control by the Palestinian Authority.²⁶ Thus practical governance is more elusive than what a contiguous region would offer. The secular Israeli Jews are becoming increasingly irritated at having to support these subsidized settlements when they provide such little practical benefits in return. The radical followers of movements such as the Gush Eminent and those inspired by Rabbi Meir Kahane's right-wing Kach Party (which was later declared as a terrorist organization by the U.S.) have made repeated attempts to destroy the *Haram al-Sharif* and to kill Muslim worshippers there, causing skirmishes to flare up that affect not just the lives of these radicals, but that of ordinary non-violent Jews as well. Strongly religious groups in Israel lobby the government to bolster the Jewish character of the state, resulting in politicians resorting to religious overtones in their declarations. Most famous is calling Jerusalem the 'eternal and undivided capital of Israel', which is a reference to the holy role that Jerusalem plays in both the Jewish history and Messianic future that the groups believe lies ahead. In a reference to the religiously-influenced torturous past and abandonment felt by the Jews throughout their history, Rabbi David Hartman believes one failure of Judaism is that it cannot simply rely on sacred texts and ancient traditions for the reality of today. He asks, "Can Judaism stop living its biblical, self-enclosed dialogue with the world? The Bible doesn't give me a model for that...[it gives] Judaism in alienation from the world...so finally when Judaism does meet the world, what happens?"²⁴(133). We will return to how Judaism can be used to move towards peace, but first we must examine the other side: what role does religion play in the Palestinian people?

III. Religion for the Palestinians

If one views the Palestinians through the lens of Western mass media, one might assume that all the Palestinians practice a sort of radical militant Islam. This view, however, is flatly incorrect and unsubstantiated. The religiousness of the Palestinians is just as diverse and varied as the Israeli Jews. First, approximately 20% of Palestinians are Christian, with a substantial numbers in cities like Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Ramallah. And while the rest are Muslim, there are not all deeply conservative. In 1985, Thomas Weaver published a report which analyzed the belief systems of Palestinians in the occupied territories. Concerning the attitudes of Palestinians toward the role of religion in society and government, he discovered numbers that are very

similar to how the Israeli Jewish community is divided. Half of the Palestinians were secular, while a quarter of them were either a moderate or conservative.²³ As mentioned briefly above, the source of the conflict for the Palestinians is mainly attributed to a territorial dispute; first they left their homes in what is today Israel in 1948, then later Israel occupied the Gaza strip and West Bank in 1967. The political concerns involving displacement and territorial acquisition also exists, as there are nearly 600,000 Palestinian refugees living in other Arab countries and even around the world who want the right of return to their homes and land. It is also clear that there are legitimate Islamic claims to the holiness of the land. Muslims consider Ibrahim, through his son Is'mail, to be the patriarch of the Arab people (Abraham and Ishmael, respectively); some go as far as saying that Abraham was a Muslim. Thus, the places where Ibrahim lived are revered. The Prophet Muhammad and his followers initially prayed facing Jerusalem, until the Jews in Medina had rejected his message and he turned to Mecca instead. In the famous Night Journey, the Prophet Muhammad flew to Jerusalem then ascended to heaven from the rocks of the Temple Mount to gain a glimpse of heaven and paradise. Thus the Dome of the Rock shrine was established to remember this sacred event. The adjacent al-Aqsa Mosque is one of the top three religious places for Muslims.¹⁶ For the Palestinian Christians, the land is sacred because it is where Jesus was born, lived, and died. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is a testament to the importance Jerusalem has for Christians.

Before a discussion on how religion is used a means for violence in the Palestinian population, words must be said regarding the leadership of the Palestinians, because it has lacked the stable foundation found in Israel. The 1947 UN partition plan of the British Mandate included a Palestinian Arab state, but the Arab countries tried in 1948 to destroy the newly formed state of Israel. Their attempt failed spectacularly, and though Israel was not defeated, Egypt occupied the Gaza strip and Jordan occupied the West Bank. The Palestinians would not have an easy time integrating into the states they found themselves under. In 1964, the Palestinian Liberation Organization was established by the Arab nations and five years later, the commander of the al-Fatah guerrilla group of the name of Yasir Arafat became its chairman.¹ al-Fatah was a secular Palestinian nationalist movement, and though Arafat was a Muslim, he did not encourage a move to turn Palestine into an Islamist state. Despite not always physically being in the Palestinian territories, such during the second Lebanese Civil War, the PLO became accepted as the 'sole and legitimate representative' of the Palestinian people, while Arafat became their champion and voice on the global stage.¹ It was not the only force working to liberate the Palestinian people however. Inspired and heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood

operating out of Egypt, Islamic Jihad was a movement that began in the 1970s with the goal of fighting the occupation by the Israelis. Another group, Hamas (in Arabic, *Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah*, or Islamic Resistance Movement), also gained strength in the 1970s. During the first *intifada* (or ‘uprising’) in 1988-1989, Hamas released a charter declaring its objective, which is that “in the struggle against the Jewish occupation of Palestine, the banner of *jihad* must be raised.”¹⁷ Both of these groups played a small role during the first *intifada*, but in a broad sense that uprising was more a political and social act of solidarity and rejection of the Israeli occupation, with which the Palestinian had been assimilating into ever since 1967.¹ The most widespread form of violent protest involved throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at the Israeli soldiers and tanks. Important to note is that Islamic entities were not the only ones that showed solidarity with the Palestinian *intifada*. Christian churches held demonstrations against the conduct of the Israeli troops, and an Episcopalian priest was even badly beaten by Israeli soldiers following a procession.⁶ Only after the first Gulf War did Hamas become a major player for the Palestinians. Arafat, having also sided with Saddam Hussein and suffered the consequences of Iraq’s loss, was heavily criticized for finally recognizing the state of Israel in 1988. However, religion was not the key factor for Hamas’ rise. Dr. Iyad Barghouti, professor of sociology at the al-Najah University in Nablus, said in 1993 that this rise “is not because the Palestinian people are more willing to turn to religion per se, but because the current situation in the occupied territories has led more and more people to see Hamas as a ‘nationalist’ alternative.”¹⁰ In contrast with the militant-focused Islamic Jihad, the Hamas organization also works to develop social institutions like hospitals and food shelters which have won them support from mainstream Palestinians.

In a sign of things to come, the first suicide bombing in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict took place in 1993.¹¹ In her article ‘An Arsenal of Believers’, Nasra Hassan provides a detailed illumination of the most prominent way that religion has played a role on the Palestinian side of the conflict. Exploiting a weak sense of national identity and frustration with the current situation, splinter religious movements led by extreme fundamentalist clerics use manipulated and highly selective interpretations of Islam as a mechanism to radicalize Palestinians into committing heinous acts of terrorism. This is done with promises that those who die a martyr’s death in the name of *jihad* will ascend immediately to Paradise. One Imam teaches that “the first drop of blood shed by a martyr during *jihad* washes away his sins instantaneously. On the Day of Judgment, he will face no reckoning.”¹¹ Martyrs in return are turned into heroes by supporters of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and this publicity coupled with the financial incentives offered to the families further idealizes the role of a martyr. It is difficult to gauge the extent that the

Palestinians support the suicide bombings and militant activity as grounded in Islamic expressionism. As Professor Barghouti acknowledges, Palestinians are willing to throw their tacit support behind any group that tries to bring about political and nationalist change, but how much it might disturb them to see Islam used in such a way is not entirely clear. Recent events have only served to thrust religion into the spotlight. In September of 1996, a riot broke out over a dispute concerning a tunnel that was constructed that ran alongside the Western Wall (one of the holiest sites for Jewish worship). Seeing this as an attempt to weaken the structure of the *Haram al-Sharif*, the Palestinians became increasingly agitated. Arafat spoke the next day, exploiting religious verses, such as “to the believers who fight for Allah, kill and are killed, heaven is promised.”⁴(158). This is in contrast to the more secular Arafat of the 1980s and early 1990s. In September 2000, Likud party leader Ariel Sharon made a well publicized visit to the Temple Mount with a police escort numbering near a hundred, where he declared that the site would forever be in Israel’s hands. A new wave of violence erupted and ultimately became known as the second *intifada*, but more specifically in this case, the *al-Aqsa Intifada* because of the mosque that stands on the Temple Mount. A militia spun out from Arafat’s al-Fatah organization calls itself the *al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades*, a name with clear religious inspirations. More recently, religion also has provided a history that is often attacked to undermine Jewish claims to the land. Yasir Arafat, Egypt’s Mubarek, and other Muslim leaders in Jerusalem in 2001 went so far as to deny the existence of a Jewish temple on the site of the Temple Mount. This is a rather surprising claim, because this is contradictory to the Qu’ran’s reverence to the text of the Bible!⁴ (158). In 2004, an Israeli air-strike killed Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, but the cycle of violence still continues.

IV. Religion as a Means to Peace

It is evident that religion influences and shapes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; it offers a unique lens to the issue that reveals more factors and motivations than if one views this matter with simply a political or historical lens. Rabbi Marc Gopin says “to understand [this group conflict] we cannot suppress the roots of that human being, or group of human beings, in the historical cultures and religions from which they have emerged.”²(6) Despite religion’s role in exacerbating this clash of cultures, can it also be a mechanism towards a lasting, meaningful peace? There are four key areas in which religion can function in this role.

First, both religions can find common ground and new understanding in their backgrounds, an idea that is a focus of Gopin’s work ‘Holy War, Holy Peace’. Both Judaism and Islam are Abrahamic faiths, because each can trace its roots to Abraham, who is considered to

be the first man to believe in one God. The two sons of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, are considered to be the patriarchs of the Jewish and Arab peoples, respectively. The Hebrew Bible and the Qu'ran both address the story of Abraham, though in different ways. Both interpretations are useful lessons in the tragedy when sons fight for the love of their father and the suffering of exile.² One can sometimes hear references of 'cousin' or 'brother' among Arab-Jewish relations in the Middle East, a subtle but encouraging reference to the mythology of the family of Abraham.⁴

Secondly, deep and difficult introspection must be done by the religious leaders of both Judaism, Islam, and even Christianity. There must be progress into moving the ideological and emotional cores of each faith towards a point where respecting the 'other' is essential. Dr. Charles Kimball describes in his work 'When Religions Become Evil' that "[w]hen individual believers abdicate personal responsibility and yield to the authority of a charismatic leader or become enslaved to a particular idea or teaching, religion can easily become the framework for violence and destruction."³(72). Rabbi Hartman is an example of one making slow but immensely important strides into shaping Orthodox Judaism from a religion of the exiled to a religion of the settled, thus bringing essential elements of the Jewish identity to reality of the Jewish situation today.⁴ The state of Israel must also take steps to become more inclusive of the forms of Judaism it accepts. Reform and Conservative interpretations, more liberal forms of Judaism which are popular in the World Jewry, enjoy nowhere near the same level of involvement and recognition with the Israeli government than Orthodox Judaism. In the 1980s, a marriage performed by a Reform rabbi in the United States was not recognized in Israel!¹ Such divisions only serve to further polarize and cause tensions in the community. Also, Reform and Conservative Judaism bring ideas and teachings which can heal some of the rifts between the Israeli and Palestinian communities. Similar reform in the Islamic community, however, faces difficult challenges. The weakness of the political entity in the Palestinian areas results in a significant weakness in the protection of law and security. Complicated politics, traditions, and a system of morality based on long-standing tribal traditions add to this condition. People with thoughts or ideas that run counter to the beliefs of fundamentalist hardliners are immediately threatened with death and violence, often forcing those to go into hiding or fleeing their homes. This is the obstacle that many scholars who wish to reform Islam face. Professor Abu Zaid has been a victim of this suppression of new approaches. When he examined the Qu'ran as a literary text, which was viewed by some as blasphemous to the belief that the Qu'ran is the 'literal Word of God', he was declared an apostate then ordered to divorce his wife, at which point they fled Egypt to Holland.²⁸ Several examples can be found of this behavior on religious, political, and

social bases. Sari Nusseibeh, a prominent Palestinian moderate and Muslim scholar who works towards peace with Israel, when comparing Rabbi Hartman's attempts at rejuvenating Judaism for today's world, says that "in Islam this doesn't exist. We still have not touched the sanctity of the text and of the myth. There's a kind of fear to delve into this, and until people do, then I'm not sure you will have a proper debate and exchange between men of different religions."⁴(162).

The third step involves overcoming rigidly exclusive claims to the holiness and ownership of the land. As described above, the extremist Jewish viewpoint is that not only is the land of Israel holy in the Jewish faith and tradition (which is valid), but that only the Jews have a right to the land. Such rhetoric entirely avoids dialogue concerning the Islamic history of the land, and communication and discussion is what is needed to move forward. Rabbi Gopin, when reflecting on what fundamentalist Jewish claims to the land has brought to Israel, says "for me, the holiness of the Land of Israel was turned into an idolatry to which all other Jewish moral values were sacrificed."²(43). While for the majority of Palestinians the issue regarding the land is political, one cannot deny that important events in Islam have occurred in Canaan valley and in particular, Jerusalem. Whether it is convenient to acknowledge it or not, the reality of the situation is that for over a thousand years Arabs have been living in the Canaan valley with a variety of reasons and lifestyles. Lately, claims that the land is under a holy *waqf*, or religious holding, by Islamic fundamentalist groups further tries to obscure progress towards a mutual understanding. Nusseibeh wisely observes from a Muslim perspective that the problem is that "our claims are exclusive...if the Muslims are able to reach the point where they can say 'I recognize the uniqueness of this spot to the Jewish people...and I will refrain from defiling it', I hope the Jews and Israel recognize our history and deep affiliation."⁴(160). Jerusalem, in particular, symbolizes the importance of this struggle for each side. The issue of Jerusalem is a bridge that has never been crossed at any of the peace talks or negotiations because of its sensitivity in both communities. Reconciling the schisms between the historical backgrounds and religions of the two cultures should help in bridging this key issue.

Lastly, the current leaders and parents in Israel and Palestine owe it to their children to properly educate them on the full scope of the conflict that has embroiled their life for so many of these years. The current slate of leaders carry with them too much historical, emotional, and personal baggage for any significant move towards peace to happen. Grudges and bitterness do not diminish quickly in a land that has already absorbed so much blood. A strong and recurring theme in David Shipler's landmark book, 'Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land', is the state of education for Palestinian and Israeli children. During the time Shipler was stationed in Jerusalem as a New York Times correspondent in the 1980s, he gathered a wealth of

information on what resources and means were being used in Palestinian and Israeli schools. What he reveals in 'Arab and Jew' is not encouraging. In Israel, children are often taught glorified versions of their country's history with substantial glossing over of the displacement and suffering that the Palestinians have endured as a result of the creation of Israel. The 'New Historians' of Israel have yet to make any real inroads into the primary education of children. Even the teaching of Islam was found to be distorted with mostly the negative aspects being presented. The problem is the same in the Palestinian areas, which is further complicated because for a period they used Jordanians resources and now the educational materials must be approved by an Israeli commission. The anti-Jewish, zealous, and fiery lessons are usually found in the refugee camps scattered throughout the Palestinian territories, which are the hotbeds for anti-Israeli feelings. A banned Jordanian teacher's manual on first grade Islamic studies includes the following instruction: "Deepening the hatred of racism and imperialism, and especially Zionist racism, in the souls of the students has become a compulsory command for every teacher...he will instill the spirit of *jihad* in the souls of the pupils."⁴(149). Because Islam arose in the 7th century and the Prophet Muhammed had interactions with Jews during his revelatory period, the Qu'ran has several suras and phrases concerning the Jews. Some are positive, some are negative, and many examples can be made for both. People must be educated in understanding the fine line between the two and to find a reasonable and practical path with which to proceed. Efforts by the Anglican Church in managing schools and curriculum should be looked at for inspiration and ideas. A striking observation made by Shipler is that an unusually high number of Palestinians and Jews alike who held deep-seated hostilities towards the other side had never actually physically met their perceived 'enemy'. Volunteers, such as those of Interns for Peace, are making important strides at improving Israeli-Palestinian relations among children through summer camps, meetings, and exchanges.⁴(499). A typical outcome at the end of these sessions is that the participants leave with the realization that the 'other' is a human being and a person, sharing similarities to themselves. This is a promising step towards reversing decades-long negative stereotypes. The burden of forging peace between Israel and Palestine will fall to the next generation, and they must be more aware and conscious of the other side than their elders for real progress to be made.

V. Conclusion

This paper has been a brief overview into the role that religion plays in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While it does not serve as the primary source of hostilities between the two communities, religion aids in framing the issue to certain ends and as a mechanism by which

people are radicalized and motivated into acts of violence and aggression. In order to more fully view the crisis, one must use the lens of religion in addition to that of politics and history. In a land that is holy to three of the world's major religions, religion and politics are eternally intertwined. An understanding of the role religion plays is crucial in establishing peace. As Rabbi Marc Gopin states it, "it is the height of absurdity that, in conflicts where religious people on both sides are playing every bit as damaging role in undermining peace... these religious actors are consistently eliminated by the sphere of diplomacy."²(46) Will there be a day when psalms and suras are recited alongside each other in peace, where metaphorical shields and swords are no longer necessary? That is a question to be answered by not just Israelis and the Palestinians, but by us all.

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Lectures

25. "Hebron." 31 Oct. 2005. Lund University. Professor Johan Åberg.
26. "The Peace Process: Early 1990s to the Collapse in 2000." 28 Nov. 2005. Lund University. Professor Karen Agathon, Director for Peace & Conflict Studies.
27. "Arab and Islamic Relations with Israel." 24 Oct. 2005. Lund University. Professor Torsten Janson.
28. "Islam and the Qu'ran." 03 Oct. 2005. Lund University. Professor Torsten Janson. With Reference to Lester, Toby. "What is the Koran." Atlantic Monthly, January 1999.