

Religion's place in the Middle East peace process

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When *The CJN* asked me to comment on the role of religion in Israel in the last 50 years, with specific reference to peace, territories and the settler movement, I decided to interview a true expert, Rabbi Michael Melchior, who is currently the president of the Religious Peace Initiative and the Mosaica Center, working with Jewish and Muslim religious leaders to promote peace between Israel and its neighbours.

Rabbi Melchior made aliyah in the 1980s. An internationally renowned Jewish leader and activist, he is the descendant of seven generations of rabbis in Denmark.

After Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a religious Jew in 1995, Rabbi Melchior decided to enter national politics. Elected to the Knesset in 1999, he was a productive legislator and government minister for the following 10 years. He served in many government positions, including Minister for Social Affairs and World Jewry, Deputy Minister of Education and Culture, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and chair of the Knesset caucus for Jewish-Arab relations.

Aside from his role in the Mosaica Center, Rabbi Melchior is the founder and chair of several organizations that work to facilitate social change for a shared and sustainable democratic society in Israel, including Meitarim, a network of pluralistic Jewish schools and commun-



Rabbi Michael Melchior FLASH 90 PHOTO

ities in Israel, and the Citizens' Accord Forum, which builds bridges of coexistence and justice between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. He also serves as rabbi of a small but dynamic Orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem.

I asked Rabbi Melchior about the role of religion in Israel since the Six Day War. He insisted the answer begin with the role religion played before that.

"Even though the main Zionist move-

ments were not religious and some leading personalities were anti-religious, religion still played a major role in the ethos that created the state. David Ben-Gurion famously justified the Zionist movement by saying, 'The Bible is our *kushan*' (land title deed, in Turkish). The founding fathers, including Berl Katznelson, Ben-Gurion's rebbe, felt that Zionism must be based on Jewish values like Shabbat," he said.

Did attitudes change after the Six Day War?

In the Diaspora, especially in the Soviet Union, the Jewish awakening after the Six Day War was much more immediate. What happened in Israel was a slower process. It started in what was then a very small yeshiva, Mercaz HaRav Kook, under the leadership of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the son of the legendary Ashkenazi first chief rabbi, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. As early as 1965, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda, building on his father's theology, spoke publicly about how we in Israel were on a path leading us directly to messianic redemption. In a sense, he predicted the events of 1967 before they happened. The political leadership of Israel, on the other hand, did not want the Six Day War and certainly did not want to go into the Old City and redeem the Temple Mount. The ones who most strongly did not want it were the government members from the National Religious Party. They opposed entering Jerusalem and the annexation of east Jerusalem. They were the real pragmatic ones then.

What happened after the war?

There was, of course, excitement, relief and religious gratitude. The relief was because of the tremendous anxiety; the state had even prepared mass graves in case they would be needed. But there wasn't an ecstatic messianic feeling. People felt that this victory had to be used as a way to make peace.

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How did things change?

Rabbi Zvi Yehuda, with a small group of students, promoted a theology where everything, not just the events of the Six Day War, but even the Shoah, was understood as part of the unfolding messianic process. They taught that since we were now on a ride to the ultimate station, there was no turning back. Even if some Israeli parties wanted to turn back, God would provide for us and the Arabs would always say no.

Who were the first settlers?

They were truly idealistic people who gave up a lot to make this dream come true. Their fervour reminded the governing Labor party leaders of the pioneering spirit that had helped them start the State of Israel. Many young people were attracted to this movement as a rebellion against the bourgeois nature of city life and against the values of parents who they saw as insufficiently religious. In its earliest stage, this movement was truly admirable and it slowly took over religious Zionism. Additionally, many students from yeshivot like Mercaz HaRav were idealistically willing to go into poorly paid jobs in Jewish education, and thus they took over key positions in Israeli religious education.

When did the settler movement really take off?

In 1977, when Menachem Begin came to power. Around that same time, too, politicians more inclined to the settler movement took over the National Religious Party. Begin said that he would have settlements everywhere. "Not one Elon Moreh (one of the first settlements), but many Elonei Moreh all over Samaria and Judea." But Begin also did something else.

He made peace with Egypt! Suddenly the whole theory of Mercaz HaRav that there could be no retraction of land collapsed. Various books written in Mercaz HaRav circles before 1977 were emended afterwards as they had claimed that, based on their knowledge of the divine plan, the Arabs would never agree to any peace agreement. The first Likud government with the support of the National Religious Party made the first peace agreement, not only giving up the Sinai and the settlements there, but also committing to autonomy for Palestinians. For the first time, the Palestinians were recognized. Suddenly the divine plan was not unfolding the way it was supposed to. Later, the withdrawal from Gush Katif was also negotiated by a right-wing government. Some religious leaders had said that God would never allow this disengagement to happen. When you make predictions like this and they are not fulfilled, a religious crisis results. While a small hard core still speaks in messianic terms, most of the pro-settler people now speak in religious or security terms.

How did people adjust to this setback (as they saw it)?

They turned to new directions, some of them quite dangerous. The Temple Mount became a focus of Jewish religious attention only after the disappointment of the disengagement. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda had taught that the Temple Mount was off-limits to Jews. He argued angrily with students who felt otherwise. Those who today vigorously promote returning to the Temple Mount are doing this primarily as part of a national and religious struggle with the Palestinians and the Muslim world.

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Raising the flag



ISRAELI GOVERNMENT NATIONAL PHOTO COLLECTION

Israeli paratroopers put up the national flag on an iron fence above the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

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How do changes in religious approaches affect the movement for peace?

Religion has always played a great role and is now playing an even greater role in public life in Israel and in the identity of its inhabitants. Accordingly, the attempt to make peace, the attempt to do anything while ignoring the role of religion can never be successful. Rabin understood this. He said publicly that he would never have signed the Oslo accord without the support of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the most influential Israeli religious leader of the last generation. But many of the other proponents of peace on our side and on the Palestinian side saw peace as part of a greater process of secularization, of taking God out of society.

Accordingly, religious Muslims felt that proponents of peace were promoting a cheap westernization of Muslim society. Religious Jews thought that proponents of peace sought "normalization" (meaning secularization) of Israeli society. Sadly, this forced people to choose between their own religious identities and a peace that did not look very peaceful (because of the intifada of the early '90s). When the options were presented this way, there is no doubt what people chose.

When outsiders promote this kind of peace, it's like driving down a blind alley

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with four flat tires. This is what happened with the last attempt of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. Even if they had signed something, peace would not have materialized. Religion has such a strong influence on both sides that politicians cannot make peace without the backing of the religious constituencies.

So what can be done?

(My organizations) are trying to address this precise problem. We are rallying the most respected and influential religious leaders to support a peace initiative. This was never attempted before, involving religious leaders in shaping and forming the contents of a future peace. (This is not to exclude the political leadership which ultimately will be the ones who make a deal, but to introduce into the equation the religious identities which have been excluded

until now.) All the people-to-people work done in the '90s was with left-wing Israelis and left-wing Palestinians, both preaching to the choir. It didn't affect anything or change anyone. For a number of years now, we have been doing the hard work and we see that it is possible to rally the hardcore religious leadership on both sides, including radical religious leaders, not only to dialogue about peace, but to promote peace. This is the real sensation. And I believe if this succeeds we can really have peace here.

Is there evidence that this is possible?

We are living here in the wonderful city of Jerusalem, where 40 per cent of the population is Muslim. If every Muslim were a terrorist or potential terrorist, we could not survive here for even one day. We have to learn about the exciting thinking that is going on today in the circles of radical Islam, including thinking about democracy. There are even *fatwas* (Muslim religious rulings) from radical circles that it is legitimate to have peace with the State of Israel. Not just an armistice, but *salaam* (peace). What I hear from many important Muslim leaders is the same as what I heard years ago from many Christian leaders who understood that changes in the relationship between Christendom and the Jews were necessary. And we have seen these changes materialize. Likewise, a whole group of young

Muslim leaders in Israel and the Palestinian territories are teaching a new approach. This is why there is hope.

What should Canadian Jews do when they encounter anti-Israel or anti-occupation forces?

I know all of Israel's faults and sins, but I argue that we are, let's say, 80 per cent right. But my Palestinian counterparts argue that they are 80 per cent right. What's the point of such arguments? We need to realize that two peoples live here and will continue to live here. We are not going anywhere else. This is our land. We have the rights to it. Our rights have been accepted by the international community. But another people lives here and they also have the right to self-determination. If we Jews believe that by divine will we are back in our homeland, that prophecies are now being fulfilled, then can we call it a divine mistake that another people also lives here? Pointing out which side has more faults, who didn't sign, who didn't come ... is wasted energy. We need to recognize the two peoples and three religions here. Then we must say that you can't make peace if you are going to boycott one of the sides. That's off the table – boycotting Israel or boycotting the Palestinians. To make peace, you have to engage more, not disengage, you have to care more, you have to love more.

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What do you say about proponents of BDS?

They are not for the Arabs, they are not for the Palestinians. They don't care, they don't engage. When thousands of Palestinians are killed and raped in Syria, they don't even want to hear about it.

Do you have anything further to say to Canadian Jews?

Canada has been on the forefront of legislation about anti-Semitism for years. My very good friend Irwin Cotler has been successful in this initiative because he is a fighter for universal human rights. The founder of the "Islamic Movement" here in Israel, the recently deceased Sheik Abdullah Nimar Darwish (who partnered with Rabbi Melchior in religious peace efforts) said to me years ago: "You've been speaking out about anti-Semitism and I have been speaking out about hatred of Muslims. Let's make a deal. You will only speak about hatred of Muslims and I will only speak about anti-Semitism." And he did this! He promoted peace and spoke out against anti-Semitism. And I go to the world and I speak out against Islamophobia. This way we can change the world. If the Jewish fight against anti-Semitism is not connected to the fight against other forms of hatred, then it is just self-interest.

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Should we be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War?

As mentioned above, the feeling of gratitude for the miracle of the Six Day War and of Jewish survival is something to remember and cherish. Additionally, Jerusalem is now one city and I hope it will remain that way, without a wall separating its neighbourhoods. I also see Judea and Samaria as part of the land of Israel.

In my opinion, we can achieve a peace that will be different from the situation before the Six Day War. I personally believe that the solution should be two states, each with its capital in Jerusalem. Just as we will have Arabs living in the State of Israel, so there should be Jews living in Judea and Samaria in a Palestinian state. We are now in a better place.

The majority of the Jews and the majority of the Palestinians want a settlement.

The Arab world wants a settlement and has proposed a peace plan, something unheard of before or just after the Six Day War. Fifty-seven Arab and Muslim states are ready to open embassies here if we reach a peace deal.

I learned much wisdom from my father. He taught me that if you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, it is not necessarily because there is no light there. It may be because the tunnel isn't straight. We don't know how to look around corners. But the solution may be close. So many of the political and religious leaders on both sides have a tremendous will to end this conflict. The Muslim world is tired of it and wants it to end. The world wants it to end. And we Israelis want it to end. We just don't know exactly how to do it.

Sadly, both sides don't believe that there is a partner on the other side and each side blames it on the other side's religion. If we can just reveal a little bit about the positive developments on the other side, people will see that it is actually possible and close. It is in our hands to do this. In that sense, the Six Day War can be used as leverage to bring us to a better place than we were before. This is something to celebrate. "See the good in Jerusalem" (Psalms 128:5) means recognizing the good news. Then it is possible to see peace around the corner. ■

Kidron memorial



COHEN FRITZ PHOTO

War memorial at the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem for members of the 80th Brigade who died in the Six Day War.