

ABRAHAMIC FAITHS PEACEMAKING INITIATIVE

American Clergy And Religious Activists Who Advocate Peacemaking

Peacemaking from the Heart of Judaism – Excerpts & Discussion Questions

Excerpt A:

“Although Jewish sources do legitimize violence and justify war under certain conditions, the Torah and the Rabbis unmistakably articulate the core principle of *shalom*, peace, which encompasses the inviolability of life and the cultivation of compassion, dignity, justice and love. On the surface these competing strains of thought might appear inherently contradictory, but the rabbinic response to this seeming contradiction – and to all seeming contradictions in our tradition – is twofold: interpretation and context.”

For all: What do the authors mean by “interpretation and context”? Do you think that the application of “interpretation and context” to sacred texts is valid? Can you suggest specific scriptural references where “interpretation and context” have altered the way you understand religious teaching?

For Jews: Is the application of “interpretation and context” a valid means of explaining or reconciling scriptural contradictions?

For Christians & Muslims: Does your tradition also employ the lenses of interpretation and context in understanding scripture? How does your faith’s approach to understanding sacred texts coincide with or differ from Judaism’s?

Excerpt B:

“The Talmud, our most respected and authoritative commentary, is itself a conversation spanning hundreds of years among rabbis who disagree on points of law and the meaning of

the Torah. From their different perspectives, they often come to very different conclusions, but it is their model of conversation and willingness to continue engaging that assure the vibrancy of the Jewish faith. Indeed, Jewish thought fosters a culture of *mahloket*, debate and disputation in the name of illumination. It is this embrace of the *mahloket* that keeps at bay absolutism and hubristic certainty in matters known only to the Divine. To be Jewish is to question; to question Jewishly is to be open-minded, rational and skeptical of dogmatic thinking.”

For all: *Together, excerpts A & B suggest that Judaism is comfortable with multiple interpretations and unanswered questions – are you?*

For Jews: *Do you agree with the authors’ final assessment of what it means “to question Jewishly”? Why or why not? How is the “embrace of the mahloket” a hindrance and/or a help to Jews?*

For Christians and Muslims: *Does your tradition embrace “debate and disputation in the name of illumination” as the authors assert Judaism does? If so, how does this method help or hinder your understanding of your faith? If not, do you think that your faith would benefit from such an indefinite approach?*

Excerpt C:

“In our tradition, the most effective and most righteous path to peace is the path of justice, and this intimate and symbiotic relationship between peace and justice compels us to be righteous in all relations in order to establish peace – at home and when we travel, with our families, with our neighbors, and even with our enemies... When we fail to recognize and value the holiness inherent in another by acting violently or dismissively, the Torah suggests that the consequences are dire for us and our

descendants because in negating or minimizing another's sacredness and dignity, we necessarily negate or minimize our own."

For all: *Specifically how does your tradition teach about the "intimate and symbiotic relationship between peace and justice"? How is the sacredness of the human being related to justice and peace?*

For Jews: *When the authors say, "...the Torah suggests that the consequences are dire for us and our descendents," to what are they referring? Do you agree with this interpretation of the Torah text?*

For Christians and Muslims: *Do your own sacred texts suggest certain consequences for certain types of actions? Are the consequences specific, or are they open to interpretation?*

What does your faith teach about the sacredness of humanity? How does this teaching impact your understanding of peace and justice?

Excerpt D:

"Jewish history includes several accounts of Jews in heroic battles for righteous causes, such as the Maccabees. In 1936, future Prime Minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion said, "These days, it is not right but might which prevails. It is more important to have force than justice on one's side." Even God is called an *ish milhamah*, a man of war, in the Torah. As Jews, we should not ignore these elements of our tradition; rather, we should follow our sages, from antiquity through modernity, in testing and reworking violent tendencies that are so radically discordant with our understanding of God's call to the Jewish people and with our conception of God as merciful and compassionate, *El rahum ve-hanun*. We must continue to challenge aspects of our tradition that seem to condone violence, warfare and fear of the other. By doing so, we

are in accordance with the ancient rabbis, for whom the onset of war was regarded as a failure.

For all: *Is the onset of war a failure? Are the times when Ben-Gurion is right that “it is more important to have force than justice on one’s side”?*

For Jews: *Are you comfortable with a God that is both an ish milhamah, a man of war, and El rahum ve-hanun, a God of mercy and compassion? How does this relate to the idea of humans being created be-tselem Elohim, in the image of God?*

How might the story of the Maccabees relate to a contemporary time and place? What parts of the story should serve as models for contemporary behavior and what parts of the story might be minimized in importance?

For Christians and Muslims: *Review the occasions of warfare in your own history that are traditionally viewed as righteous or heroic (akin to the Maccabees for the Jews). What makes these occasions different or similar from conditions in your community today? What parts of the story should serve as models for behavior today, and what parts of the story might be minimized in importance?*

Does your faith’s conception of God incorporate disparate images, like a man of war and a God of mercy and compassion? Does this make God more accessible to you, or less?

Excerpt E:

“Even when we seek to defend ourselves – as Jews and/or as Americans – by violent means against a violent attack, we must simultaneously be pursuing peace if we are conducting ourselves in an authentically Jewish manner. It is the immense difficulty of this task – the pursuit of peace and justice when war, violence and injustice are all around us – that necessitates constant self evaluation, a *heshbon ha-nefesh* (literally, an accounting of the soul).

In our daily liturgy, as well as annually on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we recognize the effects that our *yetser ha-ra'* [evil inclination] inevitably has on our actions. In asking God to forgive our trespasses using the ancient prayers, we also remind ourselves of our best nature, our *yetser ha-tov* [good inclination]... As American Jews, we must resist the temptation to sublimate our Jewish values in favor of mainstream American values that all too frequently support warfare and inequity, whether by active choice or by complacency. We are obligated to be vocal and active in pursuit of peace in the real world of our communities and our nation; it is not enough to talk of *shalom* [peace] and *tsedek* [justice] in our synagogues; it is not enough to sing “*oseh shalom bimromav*, God who brings peace to the universe.” We must pursue *shalom* and *tsedek* in tangible ways if we are to honor our Jewish heritage.”

For Jews: *Do you agree that authentic Judaism demands that one must pursue peace even when defending one’s self in war? How, in real terms, might this be accomplished?*

How does the concept of heshbon ha-nefesh apply communally?

Do you feel that American Jews “sublimate our Jewish values... whether by active choice or by complacency”?

For Christians and Muslims: *Does your tradition have a similar view of human nature (ie, balance of good and bad inclinations)? If so, how does your faith teach you to strengthen the good?*

Are your faith’s teachings about justice, peace and accountability aligned with or in opposition to American values? What are the consequences for your community?

How do the words of your regular liturgy prompt your faith community to remain true to its values?