

# ABRAHAMIC FAITHS PEACEMAKING INITIATIVE

American Clergy And Religious Activists Who Advocate Peacemaking

## Peacemaking from the Heart of Judaism

As Jews, we engage in an ongoing effort to interpret the received narrative and laws of our tradition. Central to that tradition is the principle of peace, along with the impulse to resist the ever present danger of injustice in our own lives and in the world. Jews are explicitly required to value every human life equally because the Torah teaches that human beings are created in the image of God; at the same time, we are keenly aware of our own shortcomings and are constantly prompted by our tradition to address them. It is true that Judaism's sacred texts supply ample evidence of warfare and violence in our history, but we must use our interpretive tradition to situate arguments in favor of war in the proper context; we must also be mindful that in the same interpretive tradition, peace and justice are defining mandates of our faith, anchored by the belief in the holiness of every human life.

### ***Judaism's Interpretive Imperative***

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 thousands of years, Jews have venerated the Torah as the cornerstone of our faith and our civilization; we have been flexible enough to react to each era's challenges, as well as remain

steadfastly devoted to the (sometimes life threatening) continuation of Torah study. At several points in our history, military defeat and ensuing chaos have forced some of our most inspired leaders to a new understanding of our relationship to Torah in the name of survival. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai asked of the Roman Emperor not for a restoration of the destroyed Holy Temple in Jerusalem, but for a center of Torah learning to be established in the city of Yavneh; Jews in medieval Spain studied Torah in secret to avoid Inquisitors; Jewish villagers in Eastern Europe buried Torahs under floorboards to protect them during pogroms; and fighters in the Warsaw ghetto entrusted Torahs to righteous gentiles for safe-keeping. Just as Jews have found creative ways to preserve the sacred Torah scrolls in every age, so we have found new ways of understanding the wisdom of the Torah. In this way, we have kept our tradition dynamic and relevant through the centuries despite the hatred and violence we have so often faced.

We are taught by our sages to “turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it” (Pirke Avot 5:24) because we are required to persist in arriving at a renewed understanding of the Torah’s teachings. Indeed, even in ancient and medieval times, interpretation of the Torah’s message was an integral part of the Jewish experience. 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. To be Jewish is to question; to question Jewishly is to be open-minded and skeptical of dogmatic thinking.

Because dialogue and interpretation are essential to the ongoing vitality of Torah, we cannot rest on the presumed literal meaning of the Torah (*pshat*). Nor, for that matter, can we rely entirely on the interpretative paths of the past without considering the impact of our own contemporary state of affairs. It is our responsibility as Torah-centered Jews to extend those venerable paths into the present day and beyond, employing all the tools of the current age in concert with the teachings of our sages.

### ***The Centrality of Shalom***

Many are the expressions of peace in the Torah:

May the Lord bestow favor upon you and grant you peace (Numbers 6:27)

I will grant peace to the land, and you shall lie down to sleep with no one to terrorize you (Leviticus 26:26)

For the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness, calm and confidence forever (Isaiah 32:17)

Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it (Psalm 34:14).

Jews invoke the blessing of peace several times a day in our liturgy, in the Priestly Blessing we recite over our children, in the greetings we offer to one another upon meeting or parting, and on our holiest day, Shabbat. However, “peace” is not a full translation of the Hebrew word *shalom*, the root of which evokes wholeness and completion, which in turn echoes our understanding of God as One. In Judaism, *shalom* is a complete peace – contentment, security, tranquility, justice, wholeness and holiness.

For Jews, humans are both vessels of holiness and reflections of the divine. “God created humankind in His image, in the image of God did He create it; male and female did He create them” (Genesis 1:27). Because the Torah teaches that God created humanity *be-tselem Elohim*, in God’s own image, we value every human life as holy and strive to recognize God’s presence in every human face; as a result, to take even one human life is to diminish God’s presence in the world. “Whoever sheds the blood of a human being, by human beings shall his blood be shed, for in the divine image did God make humanity” (Genesis 9:6). The rabbis elaborate on this point: when one destroys a single individual, it is as if that person destroyed the whole world (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). Moreover, the great twentieth-century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote, “To meet a human being is an opportunity to sense the image of God, the *presence* of God. According to a rabbinical interpretation, the Holy One said to Moses: ‘Wherever you see the trace of a human being there I stand before you...’”<sup>1</sup>

The Torah extols us to revere the holiness not only within others, but also to cultivate the holiness within ourselves: **“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2)**. The Talmud further underscores the necessity for Jews to emulate God’s holiness in our actions:

Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina taught: The verse says, ‘You shall follow Adonai your God’ (Deuteronomy 13:5). Is it possible for humans to follow God? ... It means that people must imitate the divine attributes of the Holy One. Even as God clothes the naked, so shall you do likewise; even as God visits the sick, so shall you; even as God comforts mourners, so shall you (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 14a).

As God acts, so must we.

It is not an accident that the most commonly quoted verse regarding justice – *tsedek, tsedek tirdof*, “justice, justice you must pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20) – and the above-quoted *bakesh shalom*

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<sup>1</sup> “No Religion Is An Island” in *Spiritual Grandeur* p. 239-240

*ve-rodfehu* (“seek peace and pursue it,” Psalm 34:15) – both utilize the Hebrew root *R-D-F*, meaning “pursue.” *Shalom* is not passive; we are obliged to work for *shalom* actively and consistently. “Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel taught: The world rests on three things – on Justice, on Truth, [and] on Peace, as it is written [in Zech 8:16], ‘With truth, justice and peace shall you judge in your gates’” (Pirke Avot 1:18). 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. There is a strain of halakhic reasoning exemplified by the thought of Rabbi Menahem haMeiri of Provence (1249-1315) that affirms the humanity of all God-believers, Jews and non-Jews. For its time, it is an embrace of the human that is a remarkable expression of inclusion.

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. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, has written, “Jews were summoned by God to many things: to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, to be God’s witnesses and the medium through which His light is refracted to the world. Not least of these challenges, however, was to be different and at the same time a blessing to humanity as a whole: to be a voice for peace when ‘ignorant armies clash at night...’”<sup>2</sup>

### ***Judaism and War***

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<sup>2</sup> “Difference, Anti-Semitism and the Clash of Civilizations,” *The Dignity of Difference*.

We stand on a razor's edge. It is so easy to hurt, to destroy, to insult, to kill. Giving birth to one child is a mystery; bringing death to millions is but a skill. It is not quite within the power of the human will to generate life; it is quite within the power of the will to destroy life.<sup>3</sup>

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.

It is written in Ecclesiastes that there is "a time for war and a time for peace" (3:8). For that reason, there are ample guidelines for waging war in the Torah, and the Talmud expands on these by creating two legal categories of permitted warfare – *milhemet mitsvah*, obligatory war, and *milhemet reshut*, discretionary war.<sup>4</sup> The basic principles of these *halakhot*, laws, are: we must exhaust all possible attempts to avoid violent conflict; we must allow civilians who wish to flee or surrender to do so before or during an attack; we must honor treaties and agreements; we must safeguard the moral character of our own soldiers; we must preserve the natural environment, even in the midst of

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<sup>3</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Wisdom of Heschel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Historically, these halakhic categories have applied only in the land of Israel. And although the ethics behind the *halakha* may be applied in a contemporary context, it can be strongly argued that the practicalities of these laws directly reflect the circumstances of ancient life and are therefore no longer applicable.

battle; and perhaps most poignantly, we must preserve the humanity of our enemy. For example, when a Jewish army is victorious, soldiers are not permitted to rejoice. Jewish soldiers can be happy that the war is over and they have not lost their lives, but they are not allowed to celebrate the deaths of other human beings. We are reminded of this ethos every year at our *Pesah* seders when we remove drops of wine as we recite the ten plagues so that our joy is diminished in response to the suffering of our oppressors, the Egyptians. As General Yitzhak Rabin said in the immediate aftermath of the Six Day War:

The elation of victory had seized the whole nation. Yet among the soldiers themselves a curious phenomenon is to be observed. They cannot rejoice wholeheartedly. Their triumph is marred by grief and shock, and there are some who cannot rejoice at all. The men in the front lines saw with their own eyes not only the glory of victory, but also its cost, their comrades fallen beside them soaked in blood. And I know that the terrible price the enemy paid has also deeply moved many of our men.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the laws guiding Jews in warfare are specifically designed around the particulars of ancient Jewish life, such as attacking walled cities or creating slaves out of captives, not dissimilar to the lengthy talmudic discussions of how to properly conduct sacrifices in the ancient Temple. Given that contemporary warfare is as different from ancient warfare as today's synagogue prayer services are different from animal sacrifice, many of the laws regarding warfare are simply inapplicable. Furthermore, the realities of contemporary warfare – for example, the uncontrollable and devastating violence of cluster bombs, toxic chemical-filled rockets and radioactive depleted-uranium ammunition – make adhering to the dictates of the Torah and the talmudic rabbis impossible; the use of the term “collateral damage” to desensitize us to the loss of innocent life is deeply unsettling; ultimately, nuclear weapons make the entire category of “permitted war” absurd. It is impossible to

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<sup>5</sup> Speech at the Hebrew University.

protect the environment or safeguard noncombatants when using such indiscriminate and overwhelming armaments.

The book of Joshua's account of entering the ancient land of Israel in many ways reflects the brutality of the biblical era while simultaneously sanitizing the bloodshed. In talmudic times, the discussion of war was entirely theoretical, as Jews did not have sovereignty over their own land but lived as the subjects of others, occasionally welcomed but more often tolerated or tormented. Today, however, for the first time in almost two thousand years, the ethics of warfare is again a concrete and vital topic for Jews. With the rebirth of Jewish statehood and the power Jews have amassed in American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we are now called upon to find a balance between the presence of war and our obligation to pursue peace in the context of modern geopolitics. Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, former Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Yaffo, articulated this clearly in 1985: "...[T]he great moral to be derived by every government among the people Israel is that it possesses an obligation to conduct itself towards its minorities and those who are strangers in its midst with integrity and fairness. In so doing, it will sanctify the Name of Heaven and the name of Israel in the world."<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Heschel wrote during the Vietnam War that "the most basic way in which all men may be divided is between those who believe that war is unnecessary and those who believe that war is inevitable..."<sup>7</sup> To insist that war is inevitable is contrary to the body of Jewish thought and to our commitment to be an *am kadosh*, a holy nation, that values, above all, the divine in every human.

### **Heshbon Ha-nefesh – *Self-Examination***

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<sup>6</sup> "The Governmental Obligation for the Support of its Citizens: The Governmental Obligation to Act with National Integrity."

<sup>7</sup> "A Prayer for Peace." *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. ed. Susannah Heschel. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1996. 231.

Man cannot escape the eye of God, but in trying to hide from [God], he is hiding from himself... The decisive heart-searching is the beginning of the way in man's life; it is, again and again, the beginning of a human way.<sup>8</sup>

Humans are frail instruments who are not always successful doing God's work of seeking justice and pursuing peace. We are sometimes thwarted by our *yetser ha-ra'*, humanity's inherent "evil inclination," an impulse that Judaism has always acknowledged in recognizing the complicated nature of human experience and history. Unfortunately and paradoxically, it has sometimes been our own struggle for self-determination, justice and peace that has shaped some Jews into supporters of war. Some proudly carry the mantle of religious or national Jewish assertion but do not balance their deeply-held commitments with the tradition's mandate for peacemaking. Some bear in their lives the burden of having suffered in the Jewish struggle to survive, either in the Holocaust, in Israel's fight for independence, or in any of the other numerous scenarios in which Jews have been persecuted or attacked. Some are intoxicated by the novel assumption of power, wielding it inexpertly and sometimes unjustly.<sup>9</sup> To acknowledge shortcomings is to strengthen our *yetser ha-tov*, our inclination toward goodness.

"Whosoever possesses these three qualities belongs to the disciples of Abraham, our father: a generous eye, a humble spirit, and a modest soul. But he who possesses the three opposite qualities – a grudging eye, an arrogant spirit, and a haughty soul – is of the disciples of Balaam the wicked" (Pirke Avot 5:21). Regardless of the justifications our tradition may supply for limited war or violence, and regardless of the claims we may have to explain our *yetser ha-ra'*, we are nonetheless

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<sup>8</sup> Buber, Martin. The Way of Man: According to the Teaching of Hasidism. Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1966. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Standing in the ruins of Europe following World War I, Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi [chief rabbi](#) of the British Mandate for Palestine and a renowned [Torah](#) scholar, warned against the perils of unbridled nationalism that is insensitive to the humanity and rights of others: "It is not worthwhile for Jacob [i.e. the Jewish people] to engage in nationhood at a time when it must be a bloody business, at a time when it demands the skills of the evil arts." ("War." [Orot](#))

called by the Torah and by God to pursue peace. This command is not conditional; the instruction to “seek peace and pursue it” applies at all times and in all situations. 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*’ 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*. The daily *Amidah*, the foundation of every Jewish prayer service, brings several aspects of right action to our attention:

Grant us knowledge, discernment and wisdom.

Our King, draw us near to your service.

Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned; pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed.

The rabbis who compiled our liturgy wanted us to make these statements three times daily not only because they believed that these messages are what God wants to hear; they also knew that these are the messages that we *need* to hear to bolster our *yetser ha-tov*. If we behave violently, or condone violence, or fail to challenge a government that does so, our liturgy reminds us that, as Jews, our commitment to honor holiness in the world and in every human being requires that we re-examine our positions when they are incongruous with Judaism’s fundamental precepts.

For an individual cannot but sin and err, either through ignorance...or else because he is overcome by desire or anger. If then the individual believed that this fracture can never be remedied, he would persist in his error and sometimes perhaps disobey even more because of the fact that no stratagem remains at his disposal. If, however, he believes in repentance, he can correct himself and return to a better and more perfect state than the one he was in before he sinned. (Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III:36)

If we, indeed, strive to fulfill our role as an *am kadosh*, a holy people, then we need to be self-reflective enough to recognize when we are less than holy in our actions or our attitudes. Rabbi Heschel explains that “even before Israel was told in the Ten Commandments what to do, it was told what *to be*: a holy people... [T]he goal is that man be *transformed*; to worship the Holy is to be holy.”<sup>10</sup> For our own sake and for the sake of the communities we live in and interact with, we must be self-aware so that we can successfully cultivate our own holiness by emulating God’s. Not only will our enemies benefit from our compassion and mercy towards them, not only will the world’s victims be uplifted by our work on behalf of justice for all, but we will be transformed, our collective spirit and our *yetser ha-tov* will be uplifted. “For the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness, calm and confidence forever” (Isaiah 32:17).

“Our rabbis taught: ‘The sword comes into the world because of justice delayed and justice denied’” (Pirke Avot 5:8). 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* and *tsedek* 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.

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<sup>10</sup> The Wisdom of Heschel. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1975.

The origin of all conflict between me and my fellow-men is that I do not say what I mean, and that I do not do what I say... By our contradiction, our lie, we foster conflict-situations and give them power over us until they enslave us. From here, there is no way out but by the crucial realization: Everything depends on myself, and the crucial decision: I will straighten myself out (Buber, *The Way of Man*, 29).

When we return the Torah to its ark after chanting from the scroll on Shabbat, we sing, “its ways are pleasantness, and all its paths are peace. Help us turn to You, and we shall return.” Despite the fact that God is presented in the Torah as sometimes loving and sometimes vengeful, the essence of Torah and God’s most sincere blessing for us is peace, and we must act according to the teachings that we have defended for thousands of years in order to fulfill our role in creation and effect *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. To believe that God is One is not to believe that God is monolithic. Every human being, every point of view, every impulse based in righteousness and compassion is representative of God’s *shelemut*, completeness. By embracing the multiplicity inherent in true unity, by evaluating our own beliefs and actions in accordance with Torah values, by seeing God in the face of every other person, we create the conditions for justice and peace to flourish. Throughout our cyclical history of unimaginable suffering, near destruction and miraculous recovery, we have been called to passionately seek justice and pursue peace. It is precisely because of our history of suffering and deliverance that we are uniquely qualified to do so.