

# ABRAHAMIC FAITHS PEACEMAKING INITIATIVE

American Clergy And Religious Activists Who Advocate Peacemaking

## **War and Peace**

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One of my favorite stories for this time of year is about a Jew who has her tallit cleaned just before the High Holy Days by the same drycleaners - owned by a Mr. Goldberg. One year she brings her tallit to the cleaners only to find the establishment has been sold to a new owner, a Mr. Wu, who promises her that he will do as good a job cleaning her tallit if not a better job than the previous owner. When she comes back for her cleaned and pressed tallit, Mr. Wu shows it to her, smiles and says, "You see! What a beautiful job I did! Also, I took care of all of those knots that Goldberg never untied!"

Of course, ignorance of someone else's cultural or religious customs can sometimes be an advantage. A legend says that several centuries ago, the Pope decided that all the Jews had to leave Rome. Naturally there was a big uproar from the Jewish community. So the Pope made a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. If the Jew won, the Jews could stay. If the Pope won, the Jews would leave. The Jews realized that they had no choice. So they picked a man named Moishe to represent them. Reb Moishe's Latin wasn't very good - in fact, he knew very little--but he was well respected in the Jewish community. The Pope agreed to debate Moishe. What could be easier than a silent debate? The day of the

great debate came. Moishe and the Pope sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. Moishe looked back at him and raised one finger. The Pope waved his fingers in a circle around his head. Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat. The Pope pulled out a wafer and a glass of wine. Moishe pulled out an apple. The Pope stood up and said, "I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay." An hour later, the cardinals were all around the Pope asking him what happened. The Pope said: "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to tell me that there is only one God. Then I waved my fingers around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground emphasizing, given that we were debating about whether or not the Jews should leave Rome, that God was right here with us in this city. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us from our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community had crowded around Moishe. "What happened?" they asked. "Well," said Moishe, "First he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I told him that not one of us was leaving. Then he told me that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I let him know that we were staying right here." "And then?" asked a woman. "I don't know," said Moishe. "He took out his lunch and I took out mine."

Lack of knowledge about customs, ceremonies, and the social and geographical contexts of other nations has, throughout history, certainly been the cause for diplomatic faux pas, in the very least, and has even led to war. The fragile nature of inter-cultural exchanges was certainly on our

minds when Toby and I traveled with some friends to Morocco last fall. Suffice it to say, it was an amazing trip. Just before we left, I saw a report on the TV news about how our US troops were greeted upon first arriving in Iraq and Afghanistan. The video showed pictures of people lining the streets as American troops came into a given town. The locals were smiling and lifting their hands in the air in a two thumbs up sign which was being enthusiastically returned by our soldiers. However, the report said that in the Middle East, particularly in countries with an Arab or Muslim population, the thumb thrust up in the air is akin to a middle finger on the hand in America being similarly raised. Honestly, in all the excitement that led up to our departure, we pretty much forgot about that gesture and its local meaning.

In Morocco, we very dependent on our guide, Mohammed, and were especially impressed with our driver. Many of the journeys were long and our driver's stamina, concentration and skill were admired and appreciated by all. Along the way, Mohammed would give us options as to where we might go and what we might do next. There usually wasn't too much discussion but when we all made a decision, Mohammed smiled and we gave a double thumbs up! That's when we remembered the news story! After recounting what we had learned about hand signals in the Arab world, Mohammed shyly said that we were correct, but he also told us not to worry. And we didn't although we regularly caught ourselves putting our thumbs up and we quickly tried to correct ourselves by switching to a thumb and first finger OK circle – and Mohammed smiled. That's how things went, one of those quirky little bad inside jokes of a trip that was only funny to the people

ON the trip until one day we were driving along on one of those long, long drives between major sites and we were suddenly, and dangerously, cut off by another vehicle. As our driver compensated for the inconsiderateness of the person behind the wheel of the other car, both he and Mohammed, with a look of anger we had never seen, thrust their thumbs at the offending driver. Our little inside joke took on new meaning!

Before we left for Morocco many people asked Toby and me how we felt about going to an Arab country. Frankly, we felt fine about being in an Arab country. What I've always believed about people turned out to be true about our trip to Morocco: most people just want to go about their daily lives, take care of themselves and their families and have a little success and some measure of happiness. To some of the children we met in Morocco, success and happiness were chocolate and crayons. To some of their parents, it was making a sale. To others, it was making music or meeting a friend at the communal bakery or watching soccer on TV at a coffee shop. I was not threatened by these people and they were not threatened by me. They are not terrorists or suspected enemy combatants. I cannot imagine going to war against them. They're not that different than I, except for which finger of the hand delivers an insult.

Some of us are old enough to remember a bumper sticker from the 60's that asked: "What if they gave a war and no one came?" I have learned since those heady days of protest that am not a pacifist but I am very much anti-war and I am tired of and completely opposed to this country and others coming out for wars as if they make sense and will really accomplish anything.

I am convinced that violence and war ultimately are futile and the perfect example of that wonderful definition of insanity that some attribute to Albert Einstein: “Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” Every outbreak of human destructiveness upon other humans is followed by a false sense of security and a feeling of permanent peace. Neither of these feelings is true because resorting to war ALWAYS means that those who used it MUST be prepared to use it again and again in order to defend any momentary and fragile cessation of violence they might have achieved. In essence, we are fighting the same war that we have fought since the beginning of massive human conflict.

This is not only true for the current war that we Americans are fighting in Iraq; it is true for all wars fought by this country and all others. Still, the current war in Iraq can serve as a helpful barometer as to how our Jewish values are applied to the insanity of war. Listen to these values, these MANDATES!, from Jewish tradition used to strengthen resolutions made this year against the war in Iraq by my local Reform rabbinic association and by the Executive Committee of the Union for Reform Judaism. The values include:

- The obligation to vigorously pursue peaceful options before the use of force can be justified (*Deut. 20; Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Melachim 6:1*), peaceful options that cannot include sanctions that ultimately starve innocent civilians because we are also commanded: “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat. And if she is thirsty, give her water to drink” (*Proverbs 25:21*).

- Additionally, Jewish tradition is unequivocal in its command to protect civilians (*MT Melachim 6:7*), the obligation to defend innocents [*derived from the duty to rescue (Lev. 19:16: “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor;” BT Sanhedrin 74a, Baba Kama 28a, Shulchan Aruch Hoshen Mishpat 425)*] as well as the obligation to provide for the protection of environmental and economic infrastructures that would allow civilian life to resume as soon as possible after warfare [*derived from the rules of bal tashchit (do not waste), Deut. 20:19-20; Ibn Ezra commentary on Deut. 20:19; MT Melachim 6:10*].

To go to war and ensure that these values are being upheld in ALL instances and in EVERY endeavor by EVERY soldier in the field, EVERY guard watching prisoners and EVERY civilian administrator makes it nearly impossible to go to war in the first place! None of these principles, we now know, were included in the plans for the current war with Iraq, and they are rarely in the plans for most wars. We can all recite the atrocities carried out against us by the many enemies of Americans and Jews, but we should be as quick to see our own values-violations in war by bringing to mind such examples as the firebombing of Dresden, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the defoliation of Vietnam, the strafing of villages with Napalm, and the destruction of electrical and other infrastructures as a standard policy of Israeli incursions into Gaza and Lebanon.

All of this has brought us nowhere. We are no safer now than we have ever been. Further, war robs societies of the means to fulfill their daily

obligations, to say nothing of any goals they might have for the future. The current war is obscenely expensive. Its costs can be measured in many ways. One website, [www.costofwar.com](http://www.costofwar.com), enables one to visit a locality such as...Santa Monica and see just how many federal dollars have been diverted from a small city like ours and what those dollars could have purchased. The site estimates this city has lost over \$150 million (so far and increasing at the rate of \$1 per second) that could have placed over 19,000 children in Head Start; insured over 87,000 children for one year; hired over 2,500 teachers; built over 1,300 units of affordable housing; or offered over 7,000 high school seniors scholarships to attend a public university for four years.

All of these would have been worthwhile investments in ourselves, but such self-serving investments are not the kind of expenditures that would PREVENT wars from happening in the future. Those would be investments in others and not ones that are made altruistically either. These investments would be for the very self-serving purpose of making friends out of current or potential enemies and sowing the seeds for peace.

As most of you know my son, Hart, graduated Brandeis University a year ago this past May. The commencement speaker was Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan. He is, by any measure, a visionary. Honestly, at the time, I was very inspired, but I think I must have considered him too much of an idealist until now because I did not share his thoughts with you. Today, his words do not feel like lofty dreams. In light of current realities, they are the strongest and most practical ideas I believe I have heard.

Prince ibn Talal said to this wonderful gathering of students and proud families:

“I am a Marxist — of the Groucho kind. Groucho Marx once said that ‘military intelligence is a contradiction in terms,’ and with no disrespect to anyone, we do have to think beyond solving our security issues militarily. To address conflict intelligently, we must identify the complex nature of the risks we face.

“This is what has rightly been called ‘smart power’ — the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion. The United States possesses not only the most powerful armed forces in the world, but also, far more importantly, thanks to its ideals of liberty and justice, it possesses more smart power than any other country. And coming from where I do,” said the Prince, “the heart of the Middle East, I am aware of just how vital it is for our human coexistence that you reach out and use this smart power. That is what wins hearts and minds, and reminds the world what makes America great.”

Prince ibn Talal also commented that “difference and diversity are worth more than just our tolerance.” Citing Aldous Huxley who described nationalism as “a common misunderstanding of history and a common hatred for your neighbor,” the Prince said, “in an interdependent era we have to go beyond narrow ideas and build a partnership in humanity.” He noted that his friend, Professor Shimon Shamir of Tel Aviv University, talks not about a “grudging acceptance of the other, but of a genuine belief in his power to enrich our human existence. Interdependence means committing to live with each other, not despite each other.” Speaking specifically to Muslims and Jews, the Prince said that while it is crucial to work against

“Semiticophobia, against Islamophobia, and all forms of intolerance, we must also see the need to work *for* something...”

There are people in Morocco who live as they have for centuries, in buildings made out of mud that is scooped up from the rivulets that give birth to the oases along which they live. Some years the water that sustains them comes in overwhelming quantities, reducing their homes back to the mud whence they came. The government of Morocco is slowly addressing this situation and other societal needs. What would happen if the United States expended some of its “smart power” about which Prince Hassan ibn Talal spoke at my son’s graduation? What if the United States helped to build some permanent housing for the mud-wall dwellers of Morocco? What if the United States spent \$1 per second making friendly overtures to a whole host of nations that are in need and could use our expertise and experience? What if Israel did the same in Gaza and the West Bank? What if instead of destroying infrastructures Israel and the United States built them up? What if we lived up to some of the values mandated by Jewish tradition and offered peace to those who are not yet enemies and even those who are?

Leonard Cohen wrote an amazing *midrash*, an interpretation of this morning’s Torah portion about the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. In it, he gives voice to Isaac who, in the portion itself, says hardly anything. Leonard Cohen’s Isaac suffers from a unique form of post-traumatic stress disorder that gives him a one-of-a-kind perspective on the human condition. Part madman and part prophet, Isaac admonishes us, saying that we have no right to deem ourselves to be latter day-Abrahams. Isaac says:

You who build these altars now  
To sacrifice these children,  
You must not do it anymore.  
A scheme is not a vision  
And you never have been tempted  
By a demon or a god.

The Torah says that Abraham was “put to the test” when he was commanded to sacrifice Isaac. The test was not to see whether he would obey, but whether would *disobey*! He failed his test. Thus far, we have failed our test, as well. If Abraham was supposed to *disobey* the command of **God**, then it is our moral obligation to *disobey* ***flesh and blood leaders*** who keep telling us that the only way to peace is to keep sacrificing our children on the altar of war. “Bring it on!” It doesn’t make sense.

Beating swords into plowshares isn’t a metaphor. It’s industrial and philosophical retooling. Beating spears into pruning hooks isn’t a pipe dream. It’s applied technology that promotes peace. Moroccan Muslims in their homes made of mud watch American tourists driving by in air conditioned vans and they want a little bit of that for themselves and their children. They don’t want to terrorize us...yet.