

## **Jewish Religion and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

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### **Hard and Soft Religions**

Religion and politics have much in common. Both systems are hierarchical and enforce rules over individual and collective minds and practices. From early history until today, they are interrelated and indivisible. To the great disappointment and frustration of radical secular and social theorists of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, religion did not disappear with modernity. However, in modern societies, their status changed. Whereas in conservative societies religion dominates politics, in modern states it is the other way around. In our modern world, wars do not aim at achieving religious domination or eliminating rival religions, but rather aim to preserve national independence or realize freedom and self-determination. However, this does not mean that religion has dropped out of the picture. In our time, politics overrides religion without ignoring it. No modern political system is justified nor its operation legitimized without religious blessing. When rivals negotiate peace either secretly or publicly, religious issues and arguments are part of the debate – all the more so, if sovereignty over holy sites is a major cause of disagreement, as is the case in the Israeli – Palestinian conflict regarding the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

But what do we actually mean by religion? Religion is more than a set of divine commands that Jewish or Muslim believers are expected to practice, or a dogma that Catholics should accept. I

suggest calling these expressions hard religion. Hard religion in our regular discourse is the opposite of a secular worldview. This binary approach, I suggest, is not accurate. Indeed, next to hard religion, soft religion exists, bridging the two ends of the religious – secular dichotomy. Soft religion encompasses historical narratives, offers powerful collective identity, legitimizes social institutions and provides a sense of belonging that protects individuals from the inevitable outcome of modernity and mass society: alienation. Soft religion also empowers individuals and communities with deep historical roots and shapes their collective memories. Consider the social status of the Quranic story in which the Prophet Muhammad journeys to al-Aqsa Mosque for Muslims or the biblical stories about the Jewish exodus from Egypt, King David's Jerusalem, and King Solomon's Temple for Jews. These narratives have tremendous cultural, and therefore political, power for wide swaths of the population. In other words, satisfying here-and-now concerns that politics offers is not enough to pacify human beings' desire to belong and lead a meaningful life. A person who does not practice Jewish or Islamic laws or does not take Christian dogma seriously is not detached from other aspects of his or her soft religion. Israel – Palestine peacemaking, hence, should not exclude or underestimate those roles within the three religions involved.

Ultimately, religion is part of the problem, as it is utilized by specific actors and movements to initiate or support wars and violence. Religion should therefore be part of the solution. Beyond involving religious authorities in discussing issues related to management of holy sites, in particular those that are holy to more than one religion, e.g. the Temple Mount and the Cave of the Patriarchs, they have a role in public debates, since many people are attuned to them. In order to be effective, secular politicians, public intellectuals and peace activists should include soft religious arguments in their campaign for peace.

While raising religious arguments and involving religious authorities and institutions in peacemaking, it is important not to ignore the following points:

First, religious institutions, authorities and communities are by definition conservative and cautious, whereas ending a long and bitter conflict like the Israeli – Palestinian one is a dramatic shift. Beyond defending their conflict-time status and interests, religious leaders face difficulties in switching views. Their great religious authorities and texts belong to the past. Peacemakers, therefore, should help them make the transition by relying on Jewish tradition and historical precedents. Changes in the present state of affairs should be justified by integrating them into a narrative of the past rather than by cutting ties with it. Indeed, Jewish texts support exclusive Jewish rule over the Holy Land. Based on living for two thousand years in uncertain exile during which Jews experienced discrimination, deportation or massacres, many texts express deep mistrust of non-Jews. Alternative Jewish approaches can gain traction, but it is important to understand the authoritative standing of those particular conservative texts and interpretations. Ignoring them, or attempting to rewrite them entirely, will only discredit the arguments and claims of peace-builders attempting to change the discourse in the eyes of those who value the mainstream texts.

Second, each of the Middle East religions is older than the Israeli or the Palestinian national movement. Every religion has a rich collection of authoritative texts that do not necessarily agree with each other. Debates and different views characterize religions. Therefore, it would be almost impossible to reach a consensus on peace making within each of the relevant religious groups. The rich textual tradition in Judaism can help give voice to views that the mainstream religious community has silenced. For instance, there is a Biblical account that King Solomon transferred land to the King of Tyre in exchange for wood and work force. In addition, many

national-religious Jews in Israel argue that sovereignty over the Holy Land of Israel overrides all Jewish obligations therefore land for peace deal is forbidden religiously, even if Israel's security is guaranteed. Opposite to this territorial principle the imperative to preserve Jews' life and safety exist. . Thus, instead of giving up hope of integrating religion into peace making and adopting the approach of silencing religious opposition or undermining their concerns as irrelevant to the present day, national authorities should encourage religious debates within an agreed-upon framework. Incorporating each side's religion into the peace process should include an agreed code of conduct between each government and its relevant religious representatives. This will clarify what is allowed and what is forbidden in the public debate, how the people would be involved in the decision on the proposed peace deal, and how to relate or react to those who reject the decision as religiously illegitimate.

### **Israeli Judaism and World Jewry**

A historical overview of the development of Judaism leads to two conclusions. First, contemporary Judaism was composed and formed mostly outside of the Land of Israel. Second, it was created by a people and for a people that did not have sovereignty but rather at most different sorts of communal autonomy. In other words, the establishment of the State of Israel on the biblical Land of Israel created new challenges for historical Judaism, let alone the challenge presented by the fact that the father-founders of Zionism were secular or Jews endorsing exclusively soft religion. Among the variety of responses to these challenges, one is relevant to this paper. A new messianic political theology emerged following the 1967 war that supports Israeli expansion into the Palestinian occupied territories. Combining old messianic expectation,

theologies of a chosen people and the holy land with extreme nationalism, this new approach aims to replace classical Zionism. Like any theology, its hardcore adherents are few. However, many Israelis subscribe to its “soft” elements. An Israeli scholar, Prof. Amnon Raz-Karkotzkin from Ben Gurion University, defined this attitude well: “God is dead but He promised us the land.” These soft-version followers join forces with security hawks, neoconservatives and hardcore or romantic nationalists. Together they form the Israeli Right that, since the failure of Camp David 2000 and the second Intifada, has gained mass support. This mix of soft and hard religious elements with right wing nationalism is expressed in the growing popularity of the Jewish Temple movements’ drive to let Jews pray at the Temple Mount. The Temple movements downplay their ultimate goal, building the third Temple at Haram al-Sharif, in order to gain mainstream support. They argue on behalf of historical attachment to the place and freedom of worship. Hence, the public debate falls within the extremely influential soft religion arena. Peacemakers and promoters should not abandon it.

In about two thirds of a century, historical Judaism changed dramatically. Instead of having many local communities dispersed throughout the diaspora, each with its own customs, authorities and differences, two major versions of Judaism emerged, each with its own sub-types: Israeli Orthodox nationalist and North American and European Progressive. Demographically, each part includes about half of those who are registered in Israel or outside as Jews. In addition to debates on issues relating to hard-core Judaism such as gender equality in religious ceremonies or modern education that started with the foundation of the liberal and reform communities in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Orthodox and Progressive Jews debate whether Jewish values support making peace in exchange for land. It should be noted that for both sides, the state of Israel is indivisible from their Jewish identity and values i.e. soft religion. Moreover, ultra-

orthodox Jews who until the 1980s were a-Zionist, increasingly incorporate Jewish nationalism into their identity to the extent that in some cases it borders on ethno-centric racism. On the other end, relying on Jewish texts and liberal values, progressive groups criticize Israel's occupation and support peace. Therefore, it is suggested that Israeli peace camp will join forces with progressive Jews in running peace campaigns within the boundaries of soft religion. Soft religion is the spectrum in which a peace deal will be determined, and the Israeli peace camp will be stronger with the help of progressive Jews, who can help reshape a discourse advocating peace and a political solution within the framework of Jewish texts, interpretations, and values. The peace camp can create a more inclusive and effective message for Israeli society by incorporating "soft" religious elements into its approach, thereby developing a positive narrative about the peace process that embraces elements of identity, history, and culture that have been hitherto neglected.