

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PEACEMAKING

by Yehezkel Landau, D. Min.

Politicians and diplomats who try to resolve armed conflicts usually focus their efforts on achieving a pragmatic exchange of benefits between the warring parties. They aim for a compromise on the tangible issues in dispute, whether territory or resources or political power. Such a straightforward approach to conflict resolution is understandable, but it often fails because deeper aspects of the conflict—psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions—are ignored or downplayed.

At the same time, many peace movements attempting to transform violent conflicts into constructive partnerships also fail in their efforts because they focus most of their energy and rhetoric on protesting against injustices or abuses of power. This “prophetic” stance of decrying misguided policies is a natural and even necessary approach to peacemaking—but it is far from sufficient to shift the underlying dynamics in longstanding conflicts.

A more holistic approach to peacebuilding, one that takes more time but holds more promise for ultimate success, addresses various dimensions simultaneously:

On the **pragmatic** political level, compromises need to be negotiated on the disputed issues. These usually require tangible concessions on both sides, and political leaders need to acknowledge that these renunciations entail painful sacrifices for the different parties. Culturally appropriate symbolic expressions of collective grief have to be used while implementing the terms of the agreement. Economic incentives are usually a vital part of peace treaties, so that ordinary citizens experience some “peace dividend” that improves their quality of life. This aspect of peacemaking is the one normally adopted by diplomats and politicians. But to focus only on this dimension of any conflict risks an outcome that is politically expedient but not truly transformative or healing. The agreement may easily unravel when political circumstances change—for example, new leaders come to power—if the populations in conflict do not experience some cathartic, therapeutic shift in attitudes and feelings. Hence the need to incorporate the other dimensions of peacemaking outlined here.

On the **cognitive** level, new thought patterns need to be encouraged among the opposing parties. In prolonged conflicts, attitudes crystallize into ideologies that become integral to the identities on all sides. Victim scripts are often constructed to justify belligerent views of self and other, and the need for a defined “enemy” perceived as a threat hardens over time into an “us vs. them” worldview. The capacity for **moral discernment**, or conscience, becomes skewed to the point where two double standards of justice are adopted, rather than one inclusive understanding of justice encompassing both ends and means. Typically, the other side’s position is viewed as illegitimate and its militant actions are considered aggression or terrorism, while one’s own side’s position is considered righteous and its actions are deemed necessary acts of self-defense. To shift from this dualistic and antagonistic frame of mind, role playing or simulation exercises that encourage people to take the adversary’s perspective can help them gradually develop a dual- or multi-narrative perspective. If competing historical narratives are held in tension rather than seen as mutually exclusive, a combatant on either side may reach the point where s/he can think and say, “If I were on the other side, I would be fighting me, too.” This is one

crucial element in developing empathy, but it still lacks the necessary element of “emotional intelligence,” the subject of the next section.

On the **emotional** level, intense feelings that keep both parties locked in what I call “antagonistic interdependence” need to be transformed if the conflict is to be truly healed and closure achieved. This is the “pastoral” or “priestly” approach to peacebuilding that needs to complement the “prophetic” critique of official policies. This approach aims at achieving a cathartic transformation of the emotional matrix that fuels the conflict at its deepest level, for individuals and for collectives. Here are what I consider the essential challenges confronting the emotionally intelligent peacemaker: How can we transform **fear** to **trust**, especially in situations of ongoing insecurity? How can we help people work through their feelings of **anger**, even rage, to the point where they can forgive the other side and ask for **forgiveness** in return? And how can people who are crippled by **grief** be helped to extend that emotional response to include **compassion** for the suffering on the other side, too? Fear, anger, and grief are the powerful forces driving most conflicts. They are irrational in nature and so not susceptible to reasoned arguments, which is why peacemakers need some basic psychological training or at least the ability to ally with mental health professionals.

Finally, on the **spiritual level**, a different understanding of holiness has to be cultivated, and here religious leaders and educators need to set an example. In the monotheistic traditions, God is viewed as sovereign over all Creation, thereby relativizing all claims to territory and power. In the context of Israel/Palestine, for example, that means that no one nation can claim exclusive sovereignty over the whole land; instead, the land belongs to God, and by the grace of God and under certain moral conditions both peoples belong to the land. This spiritual truth is obscured by competing nationalisms, which are, by definition, self-referencing and self-preferencing. To transcend such narrow partisanship, a shared vision of what it means to be partners in consecration (of both time and territory) has to be developed and articulated by religious leaders. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druse, and others in the land called holy are hungry for an inclusive experience of genuine holiness. On such a spiritual foundation a new and liberating politics could be fashioned.

In closing, I invite you to visit the website for the **OPEN HOUSE** peace center in Ramle, Israel, which I helped to found in 1991: www.friendsofopenhouse.co.il OPEN HOUSE is a micro-laboratory that has been trying to develop a praxis of peacebuilding based on the holistic approach outlined here. Its programs for Jewish and Arab children, teens, and adults are based on 3 A's: **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT** of the harm done to the other side (a shift in cognitive awareness and conscience), sincere **APOLOGY** for that harm (the moral and spiritual act of repentance), and practical **AMENDS** for the suffering caused (active compassion and restorative justice). If this model of peacemaking at the grassroots level were translated to the macro-political level, perhaps Israelis and Palestinians would experience unimagined breakthroughs in their relationship that would usher in a new era of mutual solidarity and cooperation.

For more information on holistic peacemaking and training workshops grounded in this approach, please contact **Yehezkel Landau** at yehezkel@landau-interfaith.com or by phone at **860-944-4504**.



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