

## **A War for Peace: the Arab-Israeli Conflict**

The greeting 'shalom' is Hebrew for peace. In Yiddish it is 'sholem'. The word refers to a state of affairs, one of well being, tranquillity, prosperity, and security. When Israelis are asked, "Why is sholem used for both 'hello' and 'good-bye'?" They say, "Because, we have so many problems that half the time we don't know whether we are coming or going." This describes the mood of many Israelis as they seek peaceful solutions for the seemingly endless conflict with the Palestinians. The key to the lack of shalom is the very existence of the state of Israel. Geographically it is only a small sliver of land. Yet, the Middle East was never the same again after the birth of Israel. Why? Because we are not dealing only with political issues, but also with profound theological questions. Since they are so extremely complex, I will focus only on four defining issues, which block the path to peace.

### **Holocaust**

The Holocaust is Israel's key defining reason for existence. The savage slaughter of six million Jews by the German Nazi regime swept all doubt aside about the necessity of a homeland when the United Nations in 1947 created the state of Israel by ballot rather than by guns. It gave Zionism an unprecedented stimulus to return to the land of promise. Although the gruesome evidence is overwhelming, many Arabs have questioned whether the Holocaust really happened and insisted that the stories are nothing more than propaganda designed to create sympathy for the Jews. In 1961 a headline in a Saudi newspaper "Capture of Eichmann, who had the honour of killing five million Jews," was, in the words of a commentator, "a fairly typical response." Recently a lengthy article in the official Syrian publication, *The Syria Times*, labelled the Holocaust "Israel's most famous myth." The article made the preposterous charge that Jewish leaders collaborated with the Nazis, that no one was killed in the gas chambers and that since Jews invented the term Holocaust, "they have been living on it and blackmailing the world." Some even approve of the Holocaust. Anyone who doubts the Holocaust should take off his/her blinders and visit the centre in Jerusalem established in 1953 by the Israeli Knesset to commemorate the Holocaust. This complex is called Yad Vashem ("Martyrs" and "Heroes" Remembrance Hall, from (Isaiah 56: 5). My wife and I found the visit to Yad Vashem an incredibly moving experience. On display are Nazi diaries, photographs of death camps, scores of personal testimonies, and statistical records of the Holocaust.

### **Anti-Semitism**

In the Arab world, the belief in a world wide Zionist conspiracy is widespread. German Nazi propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s helped to spread anti-Semitism in Arab nations. Many Arabs were Nazi sympathizers. In 1939, Khalid Bey al-Qarqani, envoy of King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia, met Hitler to hear him praise the Arab struggle in Palestine and declare that he would drive every Jew out of Germany. The envoy supported Hitler's actions and replied that this had been the Prophet Muhammad's policy with Jews in Arabia. During the Second World War many Arabs backed the Germans. In 1942, when the German army was only sixty miles west of Egypt's Alexandria, pro-Nazi slogans were daubed on the walls and students in the street

shouted "Forward, Rommel!" There were also frequent contacts between the Nazis and several prominent Arab leaders, the most notorious was the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hazdj Amin Al-Husseini, a collaborator with Hitler and the Nazi leadership. After the Second World War many German Nazis fled to Egypt and Syria. Some served as advisors to Egyptian and Syrian information departments.

Spokesmen for Arab governments usually deny that anti-Semitism is found among them as they themselves are Semites. But they are anti-Semitic, as anti-Semitism refers specifically to anti-Jewish feelings, doctrines and practices. Although Arab governments distinguish between "Zionists" and Jews, they made it miserable for Jews whenever the Arab-Israel conflict erupted into new crises. After 1948-49, Jews left Arab countries; many went to Europe and the US, but most to Israel. The principle motive for this modern exodus was the deterioration of their social, political, and economic security, and in some cases the oppressive measures taken by Arab governments or actual expulsion. By the 1980s Jews had nearly disappeared from Arab nations. Yet Al-Hajj Muhammad, a Moroccan street-trader, betrayed current enmity towards the Jews when he said, "Whenever I work for a Christian or a Jew, I feel dirty and I go to the hamman [public bath]." And he added, "There is nothing worse than the Jews. The Jew is only happy when he has cheated a Muslim." These strong Arabic anti-Semitic sentiments demonstrate how difficult it is for Arabs and Jews to come to a peaceful settlement in Israel.

In 1994, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yassar Arafat, won the Nobel peace prize. But in 1997, the same Arafat encouraged the murder of any Palestinian who sold land to a Jew - "...a policy reminiscent of the dark ages and the Nazi Nuremberg laws," wrote Rabbi Hier in his protest to the Nobel Committee. Arafat also uses the educational system for his political gain. The systematic poisoning of relations between Palestinians and Jews already begins in the classrooms. According to a recent report in the *Washington Post*, new Palestinian textbooks are no exception. "Maps in a sixth grade civics textbook depict a long, dagger-like green shape separating the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but do not say that the shape is known to most of the world as Israel. Nor does the map include Tel Aviv although it does pinpoint other Israeli cities with large past or current Arab populations," reports the *Post*. The Israelis are treated more like enemies than as the new peace partners. No attempt is made to show the students that Israel exists as a state. The rhetoric of the civic textbook does not foster a spirit of understanding. It says, "The Palestinian people were expelled from their land as a result of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and have been subjected to massacres and banishment from their land to neighbouring countries."

## **Refugees**

When Palestine was partitioned by the United Nations and both sides prepared for war, many Arabs fled their homes. Whether the flight of some 200,000 Arabs eastward came from the panic caused by the wiping out of the whole population of 250 of the Arab village of Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948 or, from the advice the leaders gave to the Palestinian Arabs to get out of the way of the Arab armies that would soon "drive the Jews to the sea," is a matter of dispute. Whatever the case, the expulsion of the Palestinians remains a dark chapter in Israeli and Arab history.

On December 11, 1948, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution, which said that

Refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours" should be allowed to do so, and that "compensation should be paid for the property which... should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.

Many have charged that the Jews were the chief violators of the UN resolution because they failed to protect the local Palestinians or to help return the refugees to their homes in Israel after the war. But there is also another side to this story. Their Arab leaders forced many homeless to remain in squalled refugee camps. The latter used the refugees as pawns for their own anti-Israel policies. Arab policy dictated the deplorable living conditions in the sixty-one refugee camps. The Arabs wanted these camps as "Exhibit A" of Israeli injustice and encouraged the Palestinians to become martyrs. They rejected outright all Israel's offers to alleviate the wretched plight of the refugees. Even proposals to build modern housing outside the camps were scorned. Edward W. Said, former member of the Palestine National Council, remarked that countries that make the loudest noises in support of Palestine treat the Palestinians the worst. Why? The Arab leaders never wanted a Jewish state in the Middle East. In a recent *National Post* article Barbara Amiel points out that the Arabs have never disguised this sentiment in their own publications and speeches to one another. And she observes, "They want Jerusalem as their capital, a return to the borders of pre-1967 Israel, and they want a right of return for all Palestinian refugees to Israel proper...The number of Palestinian refugees is now estimated by the Palestinian Authority at about 3-4 million." But to demand the return of the refugees and their descendants to their former homes in Israel is unrealistic; it would mean the end of the Jewish State of Israel. The unfortunate refugees cannot go back. A home and a means to earn a living should be found in the Arab countries where they are camped.

### **War a means to peace**

One of the great ironies of history is the attempt to reach a peace settlement by waging war. The famous Dutch author Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932) once told a story about peace ants who were always out to destroy the war ants in order to have peace. In the Middle East the peace ants and the war ants are busy fighting. "Sometimes there are wars that are necessary to obtain peace," declared Yael Dayan, a novelist and the daughter of the late Israeli war hero Moshe Dayan. In 1987 the resentment against Israel exploded into an uprising, dubbed the intifada, in urban and rural Palestinian neighbourhoods. It took the form of a "children's crusade." And today too, the media reports focus on the intifada. Stones are thrown, shots are fired, soldiers and children die. Markets are targeted by suicide bombers for the sake of peace. In 1994 Shimon Peres proposed a plan for a Middle East common market. The reaction of the Arabs? "The Arab world," one Arab official commented, "is not in need of an institution or a development bank in which Israel participates." The divisions within the PLO also contribute to the Arab-Israeli conflict. There is a constant power struggle within the movement. The ongoing strife, as the mainstream PLO moved toward negotiations with the Israeli government, the Muslim Brotherhood's Hamas challenged it for the loyalty of the Palestinians. The engagement of the Israeli government in negotiations generated protests and violence from extremist groups in Israel. In this adversarial atmosphere

peace making is a seemingly impossible task.

## **Conclusion**

What can the current peace efforts and deals achieve in the Middle East? Perfect peace and happiness can never be obtained in this world. In his major work *The Clash of Civilizations and the remaking of the world order* Samuel P. Huntington claims that it is human to hate. "For self-definition and motivation people need enemies: competitors in business, rivals in achievement, opponents in politics. They naturally distrust and see as threats those who are different and have the capability to harm them. The resolution of one conflict and the disappearance of one enemy generate personal, social, and political forces that give rise to new ones." Huntington is right! His description of human nature fits the confession, "I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbour." (Heidelberg Catechism L.D. 2, Q.A.5) We pray for peace in the Middle East. But any peace deal will only mean absence of war, a reprieve from the intifada and all the suffering it entails. We long for the shalom God the Father will give to His people when the Lord of glory returns to establish a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem, promised to all who fear Him.

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