



On Passover and Peace

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If a 2-year-old child has cavities everywhere, I look at his or her relationship to sweet food and drinks. If my young patients are personally troubled, I usually see troubled relationships at home or school. When my nurses and I need to resolve how we work together, we first sit down and carefully listen to one another. "Shema, hear," Judaism instructs us. Health and survival itself, experience tells us, depends on relationships.

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If we accept Abraham's profound insight that all is one, then we know that we are neighbors forever -- all the nations, races, religions, species. There is no independent survival any more. And in my life of working with others, especially adversaries, nothing replaces face-to-face dialogue.

We Jews and Arabs have a shared history, homeland and destiny. Yet we do not know each other. Rarely have we had meals or serious conversations together.

But there are some Jews and Arabs -- not enough -- who are beginning to get together with their "enemies." They talk in earnest and truly get to know one another, in Israel and also in America. They risk and create new models in dialogue, redefining what is possible. They prove that relationships make the difference.

Dr. Andrew Bard Schmookler, a Jew and a leading intellectual integrator of the 20th century, is concerned about the way we've been talking to each other in half-truths, shouting across a cultural chasm, perpetuating contempt for each other in a cultural war. He says we must challenge ourselves to talk to each other across the chasm. What can you teach me? What can I learn from

you?

Schmookler implores all sides to listen more carefully and seek the truth about the other's life experiences and perceptions. Together we can then seek a higher level of wisdom that brings together different pieces of the whole truth. We will then discover a better and more compelling way of living in respect and partnership.

At this Passover celebration of freedom, perhaps more than ever, we will feel the urgency to finally end the military occupation of another, fine people, and the terrorist killings of innocent civilians. This culture of war, fear, revenge and hopelessness is bondage for all.

"What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow men. The rest is merely commentary." This is the wisdom of Rabbi Hillel 2,000 years ago, when asked about the essence of Torah itself. To this the beloved Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph later instructed us, simply, "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Now, in the 20th century, with its own political realities, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook has given us a wonderful contemporary Kabbalah wisdom relevant to the "expanded identification" we all need to embody to bring the peace process to life forever. This brilliant scholar and mystic is remembered for his ability to bring together battling religious and social factions, making harmony out of seemingly irreconcilable differences. Born in 1865, he was Chief Rabbi of Palestine until his death in 1935. He has been called "Shepherd of Jerusalem."

Rabbi Kook's "Song of Songs" is an appeal for community, for inclusive citizens. It concludes, "There is one who ascends with all these songs in unison -- the song of the soul, the song of the nation, the song of humanity, the song of the cosmos -- resounding together, blending in harmony, circulating the sap of life, the sound of holy joy."

If we, and all humankind, allow Jewish wisdom to touch our minds and hearts, it can change us and give us the courage to approach our relationships differently and better. We can live our lives knowing that there is no individual survival. "We" means those living at our side, our Arab neighbors, with their own ancient traditions and wisdom. We must now have the courage to see them and meet them as people. What can I learn from you? What can we create together?

We have returned to the land of Israel. But spiritually we are not quite yet out of the wilderness. At Passover, it is well to recall how our courage and passion for freedom launched us out of Egypt, and how we were carried as "on eagles' wings" to freedom, for the sole purpose of being "a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." Priests, of course, bring people closer to the highest, the profound, God. We can do that. We can be an inspiration to the whole planet.

This Passover, let us determine to build bridges of understanding across personal and cultural chasms, turning strangers into neighbors, enemies into partners, finally freeing ourselves from the slavery and great costs of alienation. What is ancient and profound in Judaism is, after all, what really works in everyday life.

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