



Rabbi Michael Melchior and his Religious Peace Initiative

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Rabbi Michael Melchior is without doubt the leading interreligious peacebuilder in Israel. For many years now, he has been bringing religious leaders together from within Israel and the region, as well as internationally, and in recent years he has been witness to significant results and much positive progress.

I have had the privilege of personally knowing Rabbi Melchior for many years. He often spoke out passionately for peace at conferences and seminars that I organized during the 25 years that I served as director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI) and he wrote an excellent essay in a book of essays that I published upon my retirement at the end of 2015 entitled “Establishing a Religious Peace” in *Coexistence and Reconciliation: Voices for Interreligious Dialogue* (Paulist Press, 2015). Since I am writing this series of posts on serious and significant peacebuilders in Israel, it is only natural that he was one of the first persons I should interview for this purpose.

Rabbi Melchior is an internationally known Jewish leader, thinker and activist. He has taken leadership roles both in government and in the non-profit sector in efforts to create better education in Israel, to develop good relations among Arabs and Jews in this country, to safeguard the environment and to establish bold and groundbreaking interreligious peace initiatives.

A descendant of seven generations of rabbis in Denmark, Rabbi Michael Melchior was born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1954. He studied at Yeshivat Hakotel in Jerusalem and received rabbinic ordination from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. Soon afterwards, he returned to Scandinavia to serve as Rabbi of Oslo and later as the Chief Rabbi of Norway. In 1986 he immigrated to Israel and settled down with his family in Jerusalem, where he serves until present day as the rabbi of an Orthodox synagogue, while still holding the title of Chief Rabbi of Norway.

In 1999, Rabbi Melchior was elected to the Knesset. For the following 10 years, he served as a legislator and a government minister. Among his government positions he served as first ever cabinet Minister for Social Affairs and World Jewry, Deputy Minister of Education and Culture, and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs under Shimon Peres.

Since leaving government, Rabbi Melchior has been serving as the chairman of several organizations that work to facilitate social change for a shared and sustainable democratic society in Israel. While all of them are important, for me, his most important project is his Religious Peace Initiative.

I have been following his groundbreaking work in interreligious peacebuilding since he catalyzed the publication of the famous Alexandria Declaration in January 2002, at the height of the first intifada (Palestinian uprising). I even served as an observer on behalf of the international interreligious peace organization known as Religions for Peace on the implementation committee for the Alexandria Declaration which met throughout that year. And, in recent years I have followed closely the new proclamations that he and his group of distinguished religious leaders have issued, especially their Madrid Declaration which was published in Spain at the end of 2016,

and brought to the UN Alliance of Civilizations for international approval in July 2017. Through this unique coalition, Rabbi Melchior has brought together an influential group of Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious leaders not only to dialogue for peace but to act for peace.

In addition to the various interreligious peace summits which Rabbi Melchior has planned and implemented successfully with vision and vitality, he told me in my interview with him last week in his modest office in Jerusalem that he and his colleagues are also being asked to help resolve hot issues, especially concerning tensions on Temple Mount/Haram El Sharif. In recent years, they have been successful in preventing crises to developing into violent confrontation. They are able to be effective, in his opinion, because they have developed a high level of trust among important religious leaders.

I asked Rabbi Melchior what motivates him to continue to act for peace, despite all the obstacles and challenges. His response was immediate:

"As a religious person, I believe that we have a purpose in life. We cannot give up. Who has given us the right to give up? For the sake of our children, and our neighbors' children."

Perhaps Rabbi Melchior's greatest contribution in the field of interreligious peacebuilding has been his outreach to Muslims in Israel and worldwide. He was a great friend and partner to Sheikh Abdullah Nimr Darwish, the legendary founder and spiritual leaders for decades of the Islamic Movement, so much so that he even spoke at his funeral last May in Israel. According to Rabbi Melchior, Sheikh Abdullah became a religious partner for peace while remaining loyal to Islam, as he remains loyal to Judaism. And, he continues to work closely with his successor Sheikh Rayid Badir, the current spiritual leader of the Islamic Movement in Israel, who is based in the Israeli Arab village of Kafr Kassem.

Rabbi Melchior insists that there is an immense change taking place in the Muslim world towards peace with Israel. Eventually he believes that this will influence Israeli politicians. In his view, a paradigm shift is taking place religious Jews and Muslims are now bringing their identity to the peace table.

"The Tent of Peace is opening. It cannot be restricted to the peacemakers of the 1990's. We are saving lives."

Is Rabbi Melchior optimistic about peace? Yes, for sure. If peace can be made between Judaism and Islam, then a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians is possible. In his view, people want to finish the conflict but they don't know how. He and his colleagues are demonstrating how this can be done by their unprecedented efforts at reconciliation between Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians.

His optimism comes from his father, Rabbi Bent Melchior, who at age 89 is still involved in interreligious dialogue in Copenhagen, Denmark, where he lives, and all over Europe. Indeed our interview ends on an optimistic note with a saying he inherited from his father:

"If we don't see the light at the end of the tunnel, it is not because the light is not there, but rather it is because the light is not straightforward, and people have to look around the corner."

Rabbi Melchior brings much light and inspiration to people in Israel and around the world by his unwavering efforts to promote religious peace among Jews, Christians and Muslims in the land which is holy to all of them. May he go from strength to strength with his holy work for peace, for all of God's children.

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