



Shalom in the Era of the Coronavirus Crisis

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During the last 10 days, I have gone for a walk a few times with some members of my family (while observing the proper “social distance” of 2 meters or 6 feet) in the “Peace Forest” (Ya’ar Hashalom) below the neighborhood of Abu Tor in Jerusalem. As of today, however, I will be forced to forgo these walks, due to the fact that driving in the car more than 100 meters from my home will be prohibited by the authorities.

On these walks, I was mindful of the beautiful trees, including olive trees, the spectacular scenery, and the special serenity I felt there, since there were very few people out walking. Apparently, most people in Jerusalem are hunkered down in their homes, as opposed to thousands of “free-thinkers” in Tel Aviv who are walking or running in twos—and then inadvertently in crowds—on the promenade by the beach and at some of the major parks, despite all the directives of the Ministry of Health. Here, in this forest, I felt a very peaceful feeling of harmony with nature and with family members.

On the one hand, I was aware of the fact that there is no political peace between Israelis and Palestinians, despite the existence of this Peace Forest in the heart of Jerusalem. On the other hand, it is amazing to note that all of a sudden, in the age of this corona crisis, wars and violence have come to a halt! So has the pollution of the environment, with almost no one on the roads, and almost no airplanes in the skies. In contrast to our previous lives, there is a great sense here that everyone is in this together. What began in China a few months ago has affected the whole world. In our region, both Israelis and Palestinians—like most of humanity these days—are hunkered down in some form of quarantine, self-imposed or imposed by our governments, concerned with doing whatever is possible, separately and together, to prevent the spread of this virus in our region to catastrophic proportions.

There is a famous passage in the Talmud which says: “He who saves a single life is as one who has saved the entire world.” Many years ago, I learned in one of my interreligious dialogue sessions, that Islam has the very same verse in its Tradition. Our medical teams in Israel—with Jews and Arabs working side by side, as they always do in our hospitals and clinics, but now under emergency conditions—are doing the best they can to try to save every human life possible, without reference to one’s religion or nationality. Politics is set aside in our medical system, even if political arguments continue to rage in the Knesset and in Israeli society, due to the threats to our democracy by the current ruling parties (which is the subject for another post, not for this one).

The Hebrew word “shalom” does not only mean “peace”. It also has the meaning of “harmony” or “fullness”, close to the contemporary concept of “wellness”. We are all worried about the health of people in our families and among our friends. At the same time, we are worried about the harmony of our societies, about the social fabric, about how the recession will affect not only so many people but our societies as a whole, not to mention the whole world. There is a great sense of interconnectedness in the world right now, but will it last or will most countries go back to fending for themselves. For example, we are all waiting with baited breath, for some researchers anywhere in the world to come up with medicines to treat this virus or vaccines to prevent it for the future, and we don’t care whether these new discoveries come from China, Japan, Germany, the USA, or anywhere else.

The city of Jerusalem is meant to be a city of shalom—of harmony, fullness and peace—as I relearned at a seminar that I attended recently in Jerusalem, at the Dormition Abbey, on “the Vocation of Jerusalem”, which was co-sponsored by the [Focolare Movement](#) (a very special Christian and interfaith movement with headquarters in Italy and chapters in 180 countries around the world), with which I have cooperated in interreligious dialogue for several decades. This seminar took place on the last day that I had personal interaction with other human beings, except my family, and it was a meaningful day of learning and inspiration, with Jewish and Christian colleagues from Jerusalem, as well as from Germany, Italy and the USA, via video technology. Reading some of the inspirational texts from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles reminded me of why I have chosen to live in Jerusalem during the past forty years.

During the current corona crisis, I have been using the zoom app to connect with family and friends in Israel and New York and other places in the world. And on this past Sunday evening, I attended my first zoom lecture, by Dr. David Bernstein of the [Pardes Institute](#) for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, and attended by Pardes graduates and friends from all over the world. The theme of the lecture was “Living with Uncertainty—Light and Redemption in Uncertain Times.” Dr. Bernstein brought many texts to the discussion, especially texts which dealt with gratitude, such as “Spotlight on Gratitude” by Shari Swanson (from the “Daily Good” newsletter, Nov. 24, 2016), which ended with this idea: “reach into your heart to count your blessings and let the abundance you feel spill over into your own unique expression of gratitude.”

When this corona crisis is over, I will go back to the Peace Forest once again on walks with family and friends. It is a beautiful place, in the heart of our city. In the meantime, I will just take walks in my neighborhood, either alone or with loved ones (some of whom will be separated by 6 feet, according to current regulations). During these walks, I am grateful for the blessings that I have in my life, especially for a wonderful family and good friends, as well as for the privilege and blessings of living in Jerusalem, which I still like to envision as a City of peace, harmony and fullness.

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