



Ascending towards God

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Address of Rabbi David Rosen, KSG, CBE, International Director of Interreligious Affairs, AJC, October 27, 2011, in Assisi

By definition, a pilgrimage is much more than a journey. The Hebrew words for pilgrimage are, "aliyah la'regel", which translate as ascending for the foot-festival.

The Biblical concept of ascent was both literal and spiritual. It was literal because one came up the Judean mountains to Jerusalem, to the Holy Temple.

However, the physical symbolism sought to imbue a state of mind in the pilgrim's consciousness, of spiritual ascent, of being even closer to God; and consequently to be in accord with the Divine Will and commandments.

This vision of pilgrimage, of ascent, is central to the prophetic vision of the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth – the messianic vision of universal peace.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah (2: 3&4) "... And many peoples shall go forth and say 'let us go up to the mountain of the Lord to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths; for out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem'.

He shall judge between the nations and discern for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation and they shall not learn war any more"

and the prophet continues (11: 6-9) ...

"the wolf shall dwell with the lamb; and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the lion and the fatling together ; and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze together their children shall lie down; and the lion shall eat straw like the cattle. A baby shall play on a snake hole and a child shall put his hand on an adder's den. They shall not harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge

of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

There is a very well known comment of the great rabbi Meir Simcha of Dwinsk, who lived a hundred years ago. He observed that this vision of peace had already taken place in the religious history of humankind – in Noah's ark. Already there, predatory animals had to live a vegetarian existence and their potential prey could live in peace.

However he points out that the profound difference between the situation in Noah's ark and Isaiah's vision, is that in Noah's ark there was no choice. This was the only option available for the animals in order to survive the flood.

Isaiah's vision however, is born out of "the knowledge of the Lord" ; it is a vision that emanates from the deepest spiritual understanding and volition.

For many in our world, peace is a pragmatic necessity as indeed it is, and we must not diminish in any way from the blessing for our world from such pragmatism. However what men and women of faith seek and for which they strive "to ascend to the mountain of the Lord", is the appreciation of peace as the sublime expression of Divine Will and the Divine Image in which every human person is created.

For demonstrating this aspiration in such a visible manner already in Assisi twenty five years ago, we owe a debt of gratitude to the memory of blessed John Paul II and we must give profound thanks to his successor Pope Benedict XVI for continuing in this path.

The sages of the Talmud teach us that not only is peace the name of God (Shabbat 10b – see Judges 6:24), but it is the essential prerequisite for redemption, as it is written (Isaiah 52:7) "He announces peace... He announces salvation" (Deuteronomy Rabbah 20:10).

Furthermore our sages point out that there is no other value that we are obliged to go out of our way to pursue as we are for peace, as it is written (Psalm 34:15) "seek peace and pursue it".

May this gathering today reinvigorate all men and women of faith and good will to redound our efforts to make this goal a reality, the reality that brings true blessing and healing to humanity, as it is written " peace, peace, to the far and to the near and I shall heal him " (Isaiah 57:19)