



## Interfaith Dialogue: Making Religion Part of Israel's Middle East Peace

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### A Conversation with Rabbi Dr. Yakov Nagen.

How did Rabbi Dr. Yakov Nagen, an unassuming, boyish-looking 55-year-old Talmudic scholar from Otniel, a small settlement south of Hebron, become involved in interfaith activities, meet with Muslim religious leaders, and travel throughout the world, spreading a message of peace, love and tolerance between Muslims and Jews?

»I love people,« answers Nagen, smiling broadly. »I made an ideology and theology of it.« After meeting with Nagen for the better part of an hour on a recent Jerusalem morning, I cannot dispute this statement. He sincerely loves humanity.

### A love for humanity and a calling for interfaith work

Another important factor in his gravitating to interfaith work was his close friendship with Rabbi Menachem Froman (1945 –2013), chief rabbi of Tekoa, who was known for promoting and leading interfaith dialogue between Jews and Arabs. »One of the great insights of Rabbi Froman« says Nagen, was: »If religion is part of the problem, it has to be part of the solution.«

Expanding further on religion's ability to divide or unite, as expressed by his mentor, Nagen says, »If I believe that my religion is a true religion and that my God is a true God, and you are following the false religion or the false god, our identities could set us against each other. »But if I believe the same God that I believe in, that I love, that I pray to, and I believe loves me, is the same God that loves you – that you are serving and to whom you are praying – this allows us to have a point of connection. Do our identities set us against each other or do our identities connect each other?«

Nagen was born in Manhattan and studied at *Yeshiva University*, where he received rabbinic ordination in 1993. He made aliyah that same year, studied at Yeshivat Har Etzion, and joined the faculty at the hesder yeshiva in Otniel in 1997. For 25 years, he taught *Talmud* and *Halacha* (Jewish law) there. Nagen received his PhD from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and has written six books and numerous articles on Jewish spirituality, *Talmud* and interfaith relations.

While he still teaches at Otniel on a part-time basis, today Nagen devotes most of his attention to improving interfaith relations. In 2020, he was appointed director of *Ohr Torah Stone's Blickle Institute for Interfaith Dialogue and head of the Beit Midrash for Judaism and Humanity*.

As director of the *Blickle Institute*, Nagen focuses primarily on Jewish-Muslim relations. In his view, there are three concentric views of existential significance: how the State of Israel relates to non-Jewish minorities living in Israel; the Israeli- Palestinian conflict; and Israel's place in the Middle East.

»For 2,000 years,« says Nagen, »the Jewish people were in a type of survival mode. Part of the reality of being dispersed in the world is building big walls to protect ourselves. At some point, we have to go from survival mode to vision mode.«

Nagen suggests that this shift in emphasis requires that the Jewish people consider its multiple relations with the world. »If Zionism is saying that the Jewish people should take an active role in building our future, and part of the future for the Jewish people is the return to Zion, then part of the vision for the Jewish people is also healing our relations with the world and building partnerships in our religious identities with humanity.«

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The *Blickle Institute* is training individuals who can help bring about changes in Jewish-Muslim relations. Each year, the institute selects a cohort of six men and six women – leading educators and rabbinic figures in the Jewish community – who meet and discuss interfaith issues regularly. In addition, they encounter the Islamic and Christian communities in Israel, as well as other groups.

Says Nagen, »We spend a full day in Kafr Kassem, the birthplace of the Islamic movement. We go into the schools and mosques and meet the leaders. We also spend a full day in Rahat, the largest Muslim Bedouin city, seeing the school, meeting the children and local leaders to get a perspective and understanding of the complexities.«

As part of his duties at the *Blickle Center*, Nagen delivers lectures throughout the country and networks with other organizations.

The *Ohr Torah Stone Beit Midrash for Judaism and Humanity*, explains Nagen, develops new thinking and paradigms for developing approaches to relations between Jews and non-Jews.

The *Beit Midrash*, which is located on the Israel Henry Beren campus, includes Nagen; Rabbi Sarel Rosenblatt; Dr. Asaf Malach; and Rabbanit Michal Tikochinsky. The first work issued by the *beit midrash*, »And His Name Will Be One – Healing Judaism's Relations with World Religions«, which analyzes the relationship of Judaism to other religions, was published in 2022. The members of the *Beit Midrash* are currently preparing a second volume, which will discuss how the State of Israel should relate to non-Jewish minorities living in the country. These two volumes were written in Hebrew, and English-language versions are planned.

For Nagen, the word »healing« in the book's title had a particular personal significance. Around the time of the book's release, he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage after returning home from a trip abroad. His wife rushed him to Hadassah University Medical Center in Jerusalem's Ein Kerem, where emergency surgery was performed. Prayers were said on his behalf throughout the Jewish world in Israel and the Diaspora. Nagen says, »Throughout the world, not only my Jewish brothers and sisters prayed, but my wife reached out to the Muslim and Christian worlds. They rendered a moving and overwhelming response of prayers, which were ultimately accepted.«

Nagen has fully recovered from his illness, and he is seeking to engage with the Muslim world, using religion to unite people. He envisions a type of rapprochement between Judaism and Islam similar to *Nostra aetate* (»In Our Time«), the 1965 declaration of the Second Vatican Council in Rome, which stated that Jews were not to blame for the death of Jesus, condemned antisemitism, and condemned any Catholic teaching that would encourage those beliefs. *Nostra aetate* has greatly contributed to the improvement in Jewish-Catholic relations since its issuance.

»My big dream,« says Nagen, »is in the same way that the Catholic Church led to rethinking its relations to Judaism; we need a Jewish-Muslim parallel.«

## Rethinking Islam's relations to Judaism

When Nagen received an invitation to participate in the Indonesia Religion Forum in Bali, he jumped at the opportunity.

Indonesia is the world's fourth-largest country and the largest Muslim country in the world. The forum was held in conjunction with the G20 Conference, a major intergovernmental forum comprising 19 countries and the European Union, which was also held in Indonesia two weeks later.

The Indonesia Religion Forum was hosted by Nahdlatul Ulama, an Islamic religious organization in Indonesia that numbers close to 100 million members, together with the Muslim World League, which is based in Saudi Arabia.

Nagen was pleasantly surprised by the friendly reception he received at the conference.

»Indonesia's motto is ›Unity within diversity‹, and I felt that they practice what they preach,« he says. »I encountered warmth and friendliness wherever I went. It was unparalleled from what I've seen elsewhere.«

Four hundred religious leaders attended the conference, which had a major focus on Islam but also included leaders of other religions. Three Jews were in attendance – Nagen; Prof. Alan Brill, a well-known interfaith scholar; and Rabbi Silvina Chemen, a Conservative female rabbi from Argentina. Nagen was the only person at the conference from Israel. As Israel does not have diplomatic relations with Indonesia, he entered the country with his US passport.

Nagen was asked to suggest a Palestinian participant for the conference, and he recommended his close friend Mohammed Dajani, a peace activist and former professor at Al-Quds University. He is best known for bringing the first group of Palestinian students to visit the museum at Auschwitz in order to better understand the meaning of the Holocaust.

Nagen reports that the dialogue at the conference was sincere and at a high level. »I felt that they were taking real responsibility for problems in their midst, with a real acknowledgment of diversity in the world, which, since it comes from God, we have to learn how to accept.«

He was particularly impressed by the comments of Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Issa, secretary-general of the Muslim World League. He said that people must forgive in order to have tolerance; otherwise, they will hold on to their anger.

Shabbat-observant Jews attending professional conferences held on the Sabbath occasionally encounter awkward moments. Nagen recounts an amusing though ultimately meaningful episode that occurred on Shabbat in Indonesia.

Out of respect, he decided to attend the sessions on Shabbat but kept a low profile. During one of the sessions, which was attended by hundreds of people in a large ballroom, one of the speakers called him to the podium, saying, »Rabbi Nagen, please share our conversation that we had together. « Nagen had no choice but to take the stage and speak. He shouted his words, as he did not use the microphone because it was Shabbat.

»Shouting my words made a big impression,« he recalls. »One of the Muslim leaders got up and said, ›I am so moved to see a rabbi on the one hand who is so deeply rooted in tradition but open on the other.‹«

What was the subject of the memorable conversation that Nagen had to repeat that Shabbat? He

explains: »What they asked me to say was that when we say that we have to rethink our traditions, I would not use the words ›to reform‹ because ›reformation‹ implies that we are rejecting what we hold sacred. Part of the challenge is re-sourcing, contextualizing and looking with new eyes. These are the tools that we should be using to rethink our traditions, to keep our loyalty and sacred words, but using new eyes and new ears, hearing the voice of God speaking to us to create bridges and connections and mutual respect that we all realize that this is the will of God.«

One example of a novel reexamination of the tradition can be found in an article by Nagen that recently appeared in the Shabbat supplement of the Hebrew-language *Makor Rishon* newspaper. In it, Nagen analyzed the approach of Jewish law in permitting the violation of the laws of the Sabbath in order to save the life of a non-Jew.

While Jewish law allows this, most authorities do so under the rubric of *eiva*, to avoid enmity and hostility from non-Jews. In a lengthy analysis, Nagen ultimately concludes that the reason it is permitted to violate the Sabbath in order to save the life of a gentile stems from the fact that human life – Jewish or non-Jewish – is equally precious in the eyes of God.

During his visit to Indonesia, Nagen, as a rabbi and as the only Israeli in attendance, was the subject of a significant amount of media attention. Throughout his interviews, he espoused the opinion that Indonesia should join the list of countries that have signed the Abraham Accords. While some feel that signing the Accords would indicate that a country is choosing the Israeli side over the Palestinian side, Nagen says that is not the case.

»We have a conflict, and both sides are suffering, « he says. »Joining the Abraham Accords will help bring an atmosphere of peace that will benefit both sides.«

To prove his point, Nagen mentioned an Emirati friend who visited east Jerusalem after the Accords were signed and convinced UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to make a \$ 25 million donation in support of a Palestinian hospital in east Jerusalem.

Repeating his mantra about religion becoming part of the solution, Nagen adds, »The Abraham Accords are based on shared identity. Religion must be part of the solution, and part of the solution is respecting each other and going back to parts of our shared heritage. Indonesia can play a role in this.«

Soon after returning from Indonesia, Nagen was on the move once again, this time traveling to Rabat, Morocco, for the N7 Initiative in early December. It convened Israeli and Arab experts on education and cultural exchange for the first in a series of conferences aimed at strengthening regional cooperation between Israel and the signatories of the Abraham Accords.

Nagen explains that he was invited to the conference to prepare the interfaith component of the working paper on education and coexistence that was presented to the foreign ministries of the seven countries. He wore a kippah throughout the conference in the streets of Rabat and says that people greeted him warmly from their windows with cries of »Shalom«.

In Morocco, Nagen experienced what he calls his »Martin Luther King – I have a dream« moment. After leaving Indonesia with a new-found respect for the country and the brand of Islam practiced there, he addressed those assembled and said, »I have a dream that Morocco can be a place where all sides – Jews and Muslims – will feel comfortable. Perhaps Morocco, in partnership with Indonesia, could be a venue to make a historical breakthrough between Jews and Muslims and experience a historic healing of Jewish-Muslim relations.«

An interfaith reconciliation between Muslims and Jews, adds Nagen, cannot be accomplished only between men. Women also need to be involved. He points out that women are an integral part of

the *Blickle Institute*, mentioning that Tikochinsky is one of the scholars in the beit midrash, and Rabbanit Devorah Evron is the facilitator of the fellows in the *Blickle Institute*, half of whom are women.

In Morocco, Sarah Cohen, the adviser to the chief rabbi of the Jewish Council of the Emirates, stated that people always mention the Abraham Accords. Perhaps they should also be called the Sarah and Hagar Accords, she suggested, after the wives of Abraham. »In the path ahead of us,« says Nagen, »we can't do it alone. We need the powerful symbols of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, Sarah and Hagar. With these symbols together, perhaps we can change the world.«

Throughout our interview, one nagging point has been lurking beneath the surface, and Nagen is fully aware of the quandary: How does one reconcile his views of love and harmony with the numerous terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists that have resulted in the deaths of so many Jews, as well as acts of violence perpetrated by Jews against Arabs?

In recent years, Otniel has experienced its share of tragic terrorist attacks. In December 2002, two Palestinians murdered four students on kitchen duty during the Friday night meal at the yeshiva. In January 2016, Dafna Meir, a nurse and mother of six, was murdered in her home by a Palestinian. And in July of that same year, Rabbi Miki Mark, the director of the yeshiva in Otniel, was murdered in a drive-by shooting. Nagen is in charge of the memorial services that are held annually at the yeshiva in Otniel.

At the same time, Nagen has spoken out against acts of violence perpetrated by Jewish vigilantes against Arabs. In 2015, he helped lead a joint Jewish and Arab prayer vigil at Gush Etzion Junction after the Molotov cocktail attack in the Arab village of Duma, which killed 18-month-old Ali Saad Dawabsha and left his parents and brother in critical condition.

Nagen is fully cognizant of the complexities of the issue and says, »I am the last to claim that all reality is rosy. Naivete is when we take a complex reality and see only one dimension. The challenge for Israeli society is a problem of naivete, but the problem is not the naivete of seeing the positive in a complex reality but in seeing the negative. I am responsible to try to push the world in a better direction. The relevant question is: What can I do to help transform the world to take a step to make reality a little bit better? The world is broken and sick. What can we do to help it heal? Realizing that even a little bit is progress.«

Within these complexities, says Nagen, people can't ignore the negatives and ignore the problems but need to consider the possibilities and the positive outcomes of connecting to others. Otherwise, he says, »we will be in a dead-end situation with no future and no hope.«

Nagen does not discount the realities of the world. »There's terror in the world, there is antisemitism in the world, there is hatred in the world – all of this is true. But what can we do to change things, to solve the problems? We have to deal with the problems.«

He was moved by the opening words of every session at the conference in Indonesia, when the moderator intoned in three languages, »Welcome. Salaam Aleikum. Shalom.« For Nagen, that shows that the world is deeply interested in the Jewish people.

»Yes, there is a side that has hatred and antisemitism, but part of this obsession with the Jewish people has a positive side. If we feel that we are not part of the world and we can shut them out and everyone is against us, we are missing opportunities.«

As our conversation comes to a close, Nagen mentions that Jacob prepared for meeting his brother Esau in three ways – by praying, readying for war, and preparing a gift as a form of reconciliation. »He didn't let his guard down,« says Nagen, but ultimately it was the aspect of

reconciliation that led to the moving meeting with Esau. Smiling, he concludes, »I get guidance from my namesake, Yakov.«

**Alan Rosenbaum** covers a wide variety of stories for the Jerusalem Post, ranging from the popular Veterans/New Arrivals column in the Friday Magazine, to feature particles, promotional pieces, and coverage of Jpost Conferences. Before embarking on his journalism career, Alan was vice president of the Davka Corporation for 30 years, which pioneered the development of Hebrew and Judaic software. Alan holds a bachelors' degree in political science from Northeastern Illinois University, a master's degree in administration from Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership, and received rabbinic ordination from the Hebrew Theological College in

Skokie, Illinois. Born and raised in Chicago, he has lived in Israel since 1996.

**Rabbi Dr. Yakov Nagen** is the Director of Ohr Torah Stone's Blicke Institute for Interfaith Dialogue and the Beit Midrash for Judaism and Humanity and an important figure in interfaith peace initiatives between Jews and Muslims in Israel. He is also a Rabbi at the Yeshiva of Otniel. His book »Be, Become, Bless – Jewish Spirituality between East and West« was recently published by Maggid.

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