

Abrahamic Partnerships in Pursuit of Peace

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In June, 2002, I spent six days at a place that is holy for me: the Community of Grandchamp, a convent of Protestant nuns in Areuse, Switzerland. It may seem odd that a deeply committed Jew finds a Christian monastic community a sacred place. But I have found it beneficial, both spiritually and practically, to occasionally join my Christian sisters and brothers in prayer, meditation, contemplative silence, and conversation about the state of God's world. On this occasion, I was at Grandchamp for a six-day "discernment retreat" on my way from Israel to the United States.

I was at a professional crossroads. My religious peacemaking efforts in Israel/Palestine were being challenged by the horrific violence unleashed by the second Intifada. Compounding the political pathologies rampant in the Holy Land, the heinous atrocities of September 11, 2001, indicated to me that the toxic energies overwhelming the spirits of both Israelis and Palestinians were festering in many other places. Humanity needs spiritual remedies for its political ailments, which means that religious leaders have to be more pro-active in demonstrating how to foster trust where there is fear, mutual acceptance and forgiveness where there is destructive anger, and compassion where there is self-absorbed grief.

I had immigrated to Israel from the United States in 1978 and later became an Israeli citizen, retaining my American identity and citizenship as well. Israel became my spiritual home, and when I married Dalia Eshkenazi (now Landau) in 1979 I felt welcomed into her Bulgarian-Israeli family. Our son Raphael was born in 1988, and we made a home for ourselves in the southwest corner of the Holy City.

I came to Israel with aspirations to be a peacemaker, deeply disturbed by the violent images broadcast from the Holy Land to the far corners of the earth. I was inspired by

Isaiah's vision (2:3): "For out of Zion shall go forth Torah (Divine teaching), and the Word of the Eternal from Jerusalem." I wanted to contribute my efforts to make Judaism, especially in Israel/Palestine, a force for peace, justice, and human fulfillment. I was incensed to see my sacred tradition, called a Tree of Life, turned into a weapon of war. Over the next twenty-four years, I worked for three religiously-based peace organizations: the Israel Interfaith Association, the *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom* religious Zionist peace movement, and then Open House, a Jewish-Arab coexistence and reconciliation center in Ramle, Israel, that Dalia and I co-founded with Palestinian Muslim and Christian partners.

The symbolic story behind Open House has reverberated worldwide. It is the subject of a compelling book by Sandy Tolan called *The Lemon Tree*.¹ Dalia and Bashir al-Khayri are the main protagonists, since their respective families have called the same Ramle house "home" before and after 1948. That house is now the site of a unique experiment in peace education, for children and adults from both national communities. From its founding in 1991 until 2003, I served as the Jewish co-director responsible for fundraising and fiscal administration. Our two major programs have been an affirmative action nursery school for Arab toddlers and a summer peace camp for Jewish and Arab youth. We have also worked with parents, teachers, community leaders, journalists, and visitors from many countries who saw in this story, and the network of relationships it spawned, a sign of hope and promise for a more peaceful Middle East.²

The God of the Bible proclaims in Exodus 19:5-6 that "all the Land is Mine, and you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy people." That statement teaches that God is the Land-Lord, and all who dwell in Israel/Palestine are tenants and servants, not proprietors. They are called to be priestly agents of holiness and redemption, sacrificing—as the priests of ancient Israel did—material benefits in exchange for spiritual blessings. When the two Temples stood in Jerusalem, animals were offered as

¹ Sandy Tolan, *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East*, (New York: Bloomsbury USA), 2006.

² Although Dalia and I are no longer married, we remain partners in promoting Open House and its vision. See www.friendsofopenhouse.org for details on our programs and activities.

sacrifices; today, both Jews and Palestinians are called to sacrifice the exclusive territorial attachments that our animal bodies crave for security, as well as the partisan narratives that nurture our collective identities. These transformations of mind and heart require vision, dedication, and sacrificial courage on the part of religious leaders, educators, and activists.

In this collective endeavor our faith communities need each other, in order to heal the wounds of history and build a common future. This brings me back to my connection with the Grandchamp Community. My relationship with these sisters extends back to the early 1980's, when I first met Sister Maatje Dekker standing in line at a Jerusalem post office. I was waiting to mail some promotional materials from the *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom* peace movement, which I was then directing. Sr. Maatje, originally from Holland, had heard of our movement and recognized my name. When she saw the return address on the envelopes I was carrying, she introduced herself. That initial conversation led to years of blessed interaction with her and her community, both in Israel and in Switzerland.

The Grandchamp sisters, established as a female counterpart to the brothers of Taize in France, are an ecumenical community based in Areuse, with small groups of nuns living in Algeria and Israel (and, for a time, in Lebanon) in spiritual solidarity with both Muslims and Jews. Their liturgical devotions center on the Psalms, which they sing in French. I have had many opportunities to join them in prayer and song, and to share simple meals with them either in silence or spiritual conversation. After my original contact with the community through Sr. Maatje, I paid many visits to the contemplative center where she and one or two other sisters lived, just outside the Jerusalem neighborhood of Ein Karem. Sometimes I spent a day or two on retreat in one of their simple guest rooms, enjoying the beauty of the Judean Hills as I journeyed inward in search of a deeper connection with God. On trips to Switzerland over the years, I had the opportunity to share in the spiritual life of the whole community and to engage these God-centered women in conversations about the Holy Land and the tragic conflict there.

It is my conviction that Christians, both in Israel/Palestine and throughout the world, have a Divinely-sanctioned role to play in healing the conflict pitting Israeli Jews against Palestinian Muslims. Even though the ongoing war is not, in essence, a religious conflict, Judaism and Islam are often invoked to bolster the opposing nationalisms. Given the bloody history of Christendom in centuries past, especially the Crusader conquests, Christians today can be priestly peacemakers if they cultivate a penitential stance of dual solidarity toward Jews and Muslims. The Grandchamp sisters have done that, which is why I feel privileged to know them and to be in reciprocal solidarity with them. When I taught at various ecumenical institutes in Jerusalem and the Galilee throughout the 1980's and 1990's, I often recommended to visiting Christian groups that they visit the Grandchamp sisters to see how a community of Christians can be both physically *in* the land and spiritually *with* its war-weary inhabitants.

For much of the twenty-four years I lived in Jerusalem, I traveled to Europe and North America on speaking and fundraising trips in support of the peace organizations I worked for. My visit to Switzerland in June, 2002, began with a conference on religion, conflict, and peacemaking sponsored by the World Conference of Churches at its Bossey Ecumenical Institute north of Geneva. Among those taking part was Dr. Heidi Hadsell, a Christian ethicist who had directed the Bossey institute before becoming the president of Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. I visited that seminary in the 1980's to give a presentation on my peace work in Israel/Palestine, and I knew that it specialized in promoting Christian-Muslim understanding. Dr. Hadsell had become its president only a year before we met at Bossey. We had a friendly conversation during the conference, and I mentioned to her that I was hoping to be in the United States, engaged in research on religious peacemaking, during the next academic year. I asked if I could come to Hartford during that time to deliver some lectures at her seminary, and she welcomed the idea.

When the Bossey conference ended, I traveled to Grandchamp. I had made arrangements to spend six days at the convent before flying to the U.S. to spend the rest of the summer with my family. I felt I needed to devote my time with the sisters to

discerning where God wanted me to be and how to best serve the larger cause of interreligious peacebuilding. Over those six days I prayed with the sisters, took long silent walks in the surrounding woods and fields, and meditated on the next chapter of my life. I recall one encounter, when I was standing near the Areuse River that flows by the convent, feeling the tranquility of the place and time. A woman walked by with her dog and said to me, “*C’est la paix ici, n’est-ce pas?*” (“There is real peace here, isn’t there?”) I replied, “*Oui, vraiment*” (“Yes, truly”), sharing a deep sense of *shalom* with a total stranger.

The high point of my retreat came on *Shabbat*, Friday evening and Saturday. At the Bossey conference I had reconnected with a Christian spiritual brother from Jerusalem, Tom Getman, who had just finished a five-year stint as head of the World Vision office in the Holy City. He was now working in the Geneva office of that evangelical organization engaged in humanitarian work worldwide. Tom and his wife Karen had become close friends³; and since Karen was away in the U.S., I invited Tom to spend *Shabbat* with me at Grandchamp. He readily consented, since he had heard of the convent and wanted to explore the possibility of bringing his World Vision colleagues there for a retreat. When Tom arrived on Friday evening, we joined a group of sisters for an interfaith *Shabbat* evening meal, including Jewish benedictions over the wine and bread.

The next afternoon Tom and I sat in the beautiful garden at Grandchamp, finding a shady place to talk. Birds, butterflies, warm sunshine, and lush greenery made for a perfect *Shabbat* experience, peaceful and open to the Transcendent. We both had our hearts directed toward Jerusalem as we focused our conversation on how to mobilize a Jewish-Christian-Muslim alliance in North America for the healing of the Holy Land. Just as we began our conversation, someone entered the garden and walked in our direction. I looked up and was amazed to see another spiritual brother from Jerusalem, arriving as if on cue: Mustafa Abu Sway, a Palestinian Muslim professor at Al-Quds

³ See the article which Tom and I co-authored: “Division and Conflict in Israel: A Jewish-Christian Exchange,” in *The Christian Century*, August 26-September 2, 1998, pp. 786-788.

University, with whom I developed a fraternal relationship that included several international speaking trips together. I had called Mustafa just two weeks earlier, before I left Jerusalem for Switzerland. We both mentioned imminent trips to America, but neither of us mentioned plans to visit Switzerland. Mustafa had a Swiss friend who knew the Grandchamp community well, and she brought him there that Saturday for a visit.

When I saw Mustafa approach us, I said to him, “*Ahlan* (Welcome), Mustafa. Grab a chair and complete the Abrahamic triangle.” As he joined the conversation, I realized that Mustafa and Tom did not know each other. I was the “bridge” between my Christian and Muslim brothers. And at that moment I knew that I needed to integrate the Islamic dimension of religious peacebuilding into my work more intentionally. That is what Mustafa’s sudden appearance signified to me. And I knew that our relationship was exceptional—very few Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims get the opportunity to befriend each other because of the political obstacles. As I reflected on the uncanny synchronicity of this interfaith encounter, I sensed a buzz of commotion around us as Grandchamp sisters were talking with each other about the three Abrahamic visitors chatting in their garden. And then a clear thought entered my mind: “Hartford Seminary!” Spending time there would allow me to learn Islam from Muslims and contribute to forging better relations among the three Abrahamic faiths.

Once this insight came to me, the next steps were relatively easy. Through Sister Tina, a tech-savvy member of the Grandchamp Community, I got online and e-mailed Heidi Hadsell at Hartford Seminary. I asked her whether it was worth discussing a possible position at her seminary for the coming year. She e-mailed me an encouraging response, suggesting that we meet for lunch in New York City the following week. We did, and over that lunch she told me that the seminary had been hoping to hire a Jewish faculty member and that she was prepared to appoint me as a faculty associate for a one-year trial period. Here was a providential convergence: a Christian seminary engaging Muslims and looking for a Jewish teacher, and I, an Israeli-American Jew, seeking professional opportunities at a seminary in the United States, close to my aging mother and sister.

I joined the seminary's faculty in October, 2002, teaching courses on Jewish tradition and interfaith relations and forging friendships with faculty, staff, board members, and students. I also began building a network of Jewish colleagues in the greater Hartford area, while deepening relations with Jews, Christians, and Muslims from Washington to Boston. In addition, I started to lay the groundwork for what would become my principal contribution to the seminary curriculum: a unique training program for Jews, Christians, and Muslims called *Building Abrahamic Partnerships (BAP)*. The introductory course, team-taught over eight intensive days with opportunities to experience worship in mosques, synagogues, and churches, has been offered thirteen times since June, 2004. A five-day advanced training, focusing on developing skills for interfaith leadership, was offered in 2007, 2008, and 2009. Participants have reported that the *BAP* experience—which aims at a holistic integration of the intellect, imagination, heart, and spirit—is “transformative” and valuable in very practical ways, both personal and professional.⁴

In March, 2003, Heidi told me that the Henry Luce Foundation had agreed to grant Hartford Seminary funds to help underwrite my position for another three years, and that she and the rest of the faculty wanted me to stay on. (The seminary contributed its own funds to make this possible, and the Luce grant was subsequently extended for an additional three years). When I heard this, I had further confirmation that I had been led to Hartford Seminary in order to teach, conduct research, share my perspective on interreligious peacebuilding with a wider public through my writing⁵, and mentor younger colleagues in the field of religious peacemaking. I also continue my work for

⁴ See my case study of the *BAP* program: “Building Abrahamic Partnerships: A Model Interfaith Program at Hartford Seminary,” in *Changing the Way Seminaries Teach: Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue*, David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell, eds., Hartford: Hartford Seminary, 2009 (online at www.hartsem.edu), pp. 87-123; reprinted in *Sharing Values: A Hermeneutics for Global Ethics*, Ariane Hentsch Cisneros and Shanta Premawardhana, eds., Geneva: Globalethics.net, 2011, pp.177-206.

⁵ See, in particular, *Healing the Holy Land: Interreligious Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, *Peaceworks* monographs No. 51, September 2003, accessible at www.usip.org/files/resources/pwks51.pdf, and “The Land of Israel in Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations,” an essay that applies a kabbalistic typology to transforming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*,” (Boston College e-journal, Vol. 3, Issue 1, article 17, CP1-12), 2008, accessible at <http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol3>

the healing of the Holy Land, both in the U.S. and in Israel/Palestine, together with Jews, Christians, and Muslims who share a vision of inclusive justice and peace.

None of this would have been possible without the kindness and inspiration of the sisters of Grandchamp, Dalia and Heidi, Tom and Mustafa, and the countless other committed activists and teachers I have encountered on my journey as an interfaith peacemaker.