

Chapter 6

Jewish–Arab

Interreligious Dialogue

and the Centrality

of Respect:

Empirical Perspectives Part III

ABSTRACT

This chapter is a continuation of chapters 4 and 5 and focuses on several themes. A discussion and analysis concerning the impact of an Israeli-Palestinian pioneering group by the name of “Roots” in the area of Gush Etzion/West Bank in which vitally important work with an interreligious orientation has been taking place between local Palestinians and members of the Jewish national religious community. These have also positively influenced the mutual appreciation of each side’s respective connection to the Land. This will be followed by a subsection on possible moderation in the religious discourse of both Muslim Arabs and Israeli Jews leading to the possibilities of according legitimacy towards “the other” in order to facilitate an effective peace process. Finally the chapter will conclude with a discussion on the centrality of respect in Jewish-Arab intercultural communication along other elements that can help facilitate mutual understanding.

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THE CASE OF “ROOTS” AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

“War can be avoided; Peace is inevitable.”

Menachem Begin

As a relevant continuation of the themes discussed in the previous two chapters; another interesting and important example of a project which has been buttressed by strong elements of Israeli-Palestinian Interreligious dialogue has been that of the “Roots” or “Judur” (in Arabic) Center. The venue of the Roots Center was established approximately in 2014 in the area of Gush Etzion, which is a burgeoning area of Jewish settlement with deep historical roots in both ancient Jewish history and Zionist pioneering in the 20th century. Gush Etzion is also adjacent to the Northern Hebron Region and a number of Arab villages such as Bet Ommar and is accessible to local Palestinians from the area between Bethlehem and Hebron. The group has worked to build bridges of understanding and solidarity between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jewish settlers, of the latter most of whom are (Jewish) religious. Both groups tend to see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as at base heavily rooted in their respective narratives and identities, which as we have emphasized are grounded in the respective traditions of Judaism and Islam.

The Palestinian initiators of the group were for the most part militant activists in the first intifada which began in 1987 many of whom had been arrested and incarcerated by the Israeli authorities. They had later however come to conclusion that violence moved neither side closer to peace and/or a political settlement that would further Palestinian interests. Their leadership also came to realize that it would be necessary to engage larger sectors of the Israeli public particularly those of strong religious conviction, of whom many lived in adjacent settlements in the Gush Etzion area such as from Efrat, Alon Shevut and Tekoa (Mollov and Lavie, 2019, 2020).

The core leaders on the Israeli Jewish side, primarily Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger and Shaul Judelson also realized that they were not living alone in the heartland of the Land of Israel as emphasized in the Bible and could not ignore their Palestinian neighbors. A number of Rabbis associated with this endeavor even came to focus on Jewish traditional sources, articulated by thinkers such as Rabbi Menachem Froman, Rav Yehuda Amital and Rav Yaakov Nagen upon which Jewish-Arab partnership on the Land could be supported in contrast to a completely exclusivist interpretation and outlook towards their Arab neighbors. In addition many of the Jewish religious settlers involved with Roots had been strongly influenced by the late **Menachem Froman who emphasized the view that religion could indeed serve as a bridge between Jews and Muslim Arabs on the Land** and in the larger region. As such he had even engaged members of Hamas who were highly dedicated Muslims who also saw Palestine in a parallel manner as an exclusive Muslim possession.

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