The Courage and Wisdom to Make Peace

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

In 1919, Rabbi Benzion Uziel, then a young rabbi, spoke to a conference of rabbis in Jerusalem. He stated: "Israel, the nation of peace, does not want and never will want to be built on the ruins of others....Let all the nations hear our blessing of peace, and let them return to us a hand for true peace, so that they may be blessed with the blessing of peace." In 1939, when Rabbi Uziel became Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, he delivered his inaugural address in Hebrew, and then added words in Arabic. He appealed to the Arab community: "We reach our hands out to you in peace, pure and trustworthy....Make peace with us and we will make peace with you. Together all of us will benefit from the blessing of God on His land; with quiet and peace, with love and fellowship, with goodwill and pure heart we will find the way of peace."

At around the time that the State of Israel was being recognized by the United Nations, the Chief Rabbis of Israel wrote a letter in Arabic to the Arab world. The Sephardic Chief Rabbi Benzion Uziel, who was fluent in Arabic, likely wrote this letter that was signed by him and the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog. They wrote:

21 Kislev, 5708
"A Call to the Leaders of Islam for Peace and Brotherhood."

To the Heads of The Islamic Religion in the Land of Israel and throughout the Arab lands near and far, Shalom U'Vracha:

Brothers, at this hour, as the Jewish people have returned to its land and state, per the word of God and the prophets in the Holy Scriptures, and in accordance with the decision of the United Nations, we approach you in peace

and brotherhood, in the name of God's Torah and the Holy Scriptures, and we say to you:

Please remember the peaceful and friendly relations that existed between us when we lived together in Arab lands and under Islamic Rulers during the Golden Age, when together we developed brilliant intellectual insights of wisdom and science for all of humanity's benefit. Please remember the sacred words of the prophet Malachi, who said: "Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we break faith with one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?" (Malachi 2:10).

We were brothers, and we shall once again be brothers, working together in cordial and neighborly relations in this Holy Land, so that we will build it and make it flourish, for the benefit of all of its inhabitants, without discrimination against anyone. We shall do so in faithful and calm collaboration, so that we may all merit God's blessing on His land, from which there shall radiate the light of peace to the entire world.

Signed,
Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel
Yitschak Isaac Ha-Levi Herzog

The words of Rabbi Uziel and Rabbi Herzog reflected the wishes of the tiny Jewish community in the land of Israel in those times. Those words still reflect the wishes of the Jewish community of Israel today. Hawks and doves alike would like nothing better than genuine, secure peace. They would like Israeli society to be free and happy, without the specter of warfare and terrorism, without the constant threat and reality of Arab military, economic and political attacks. They would like to live in harmony with their Arab neighbors-and to trust that their Arab neighbors will want to live in harmony with them.

We applaud the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel for reaching the decision to establish full diplomatic relations. The President of the United States and his representatives played an important role in this historic peace-making process. We pray that other Arab nations will join the "circle of peace," by establishing peaceful, harmonious and productive relations with Israel.

It takes courage and wisdom to work for peace. It takes courage and wisdom to maintain an environment of peace and mutual respect. Israel and the United Arab Emirates have taken a giant step forward. May others follow their example.