Israel's Many Friends

View PDF



Rabbi Dr. Yakov Nagen is the head of Ohr Torah Stone's Blickle Institute for Interfaith Dialogue and Beit Midrash for Judaism and Humanity, as well as the Executive Director of the Ohr Torah Interfaith Center. He is a Rabbi at the Yeshiva of Otniel and has written ten books about Jewish Spirituality, Talmud and Interfaith.

"Together we will be victorious ." This slogan, which emerged in Israel in the wake of October 7, printed on signs all over the country, tacked on to the end of ordinary TV advertisements, and stated constantly by government officials, is less ubiquitous today as the war drags on and internal disagreements deepen. But we must still embrace this slogan. It encapsulates a profound truth: our success lies not only in military strength but in the unity of Israeli society. In the face of relentless enemies seeking our destruction, our most potent weapon is cohesion. Victory demands that we build bridges, not barricades, beyond our immediate circles, even beyond the Jewish people.

This war transcends Israel's physical borders, extending into the global arena. That means that we absolutely cannot afford to isolate ourselves, to be "a people dwelling alone," as the wicked prophet Balaam characterized the children of Israel in the Bible. Our path forward must include partnerships with other peoples. The ancient vision of the prophets, one of human fraternity including Jews and other nations, is more relevant than ever. In this era of

heightened hatred and division, we are called to forge alliances, not withdraw into the dangerous assumption that the world is uniformly against us. Isolation only strengthens our enemies, who seek to broaden their own coalitions while we retreat.

Identifying our enemies, and also finding allies, is essential. Despite the global level of pervasive evil and rising hostility towards Israel, we must resist the dangerous narrative that “everyone is against us.” This, after all, is the story Hamas wishes to promote, a portrayal of themselves as leaders of a global religious war of Islam against Judaism.

Countless meetings with non-Jewish allies confirm that this dangerous narrative, one that is fed by Iran’s axis of evil through its support of Hamas and by certain parts of the global neo-Marxist left, is simply not true. As the alliance between parts of the global left with these terrorist groups seems more and more shocking and paradoxical, we must remember the unlikely partnership once formed between Hitler and Stalin. What binds these forces together, then as now, is a shared devotion to totalitarianism and a desire to uproot basic fundamental religious and human values, even while claiming to champion those the very values they trample upon.

This was poignantly illustrated during a deeply emotional gathering in Jerusalem shortly after the war began. A group of African Christian religious leaders had come to express their solidarity with Israel. As Rachel Goldberg-Polin shared the heart-wrenching story of her son Hersh, who had been kidnapped on Oct. 7, the room fell silent. When she finished, I recited verses from Jeremiah, describing Rachel weeping for her children and holding on to the hope for their return, a hope that did not materialize for Hersh who was brutally murdered by Hamas last month. The leaders, moved to tears, promised to continue to stand with Israel. They offered a powerful insight: “We ask ourselves why there is so much antisemitism from such disparate quarters. At its core, we believe this hatred is directed at God, and the Jewish people, as God’s representatives, bear the brunt of it.”

A Muslim fatwa against Hamas

The notion of an inherent conflict between Islam and Judaism is far from reality as many Muslims will attest. For instance, the Islamic Fatwa Council in Iraq issued a religious ruling well before October 7th, explicitly forbidding any support for Hamas, comparing them to ISIS, and condemning them and their crimes as a desecration of Islam. After the horrific attacks on October 7th, this council and many other Islamic groups have denounced Hamas.

Another indisputable fact stands out: the Abraham Accords, the 2020 agreements opening Israeli diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, have endured through nearly a year of the war. When asked about the impact of the war on these historic agreements, Dr. Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi, chairman of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the United Arab Emirates, was unequivocal: “We want everyone to acknowledge and accept that Israel is there to exist and that the roots of Jews and Christians are not in New York or Paris but here in our region. They are part of our history and they should be part of our future”.

The Abraham Accords and the war with Hamas represent two opposing poles in Israel's relationship with the Muslim world. This contrast calls to mind Israeli peace activist Rabbi Menachem Froman's insight that if religion is part of the problem in the conflict, it must also be part of the solution. Religious identity, though often a source of friction, can also foster connection and brotherhood. Indeed, respect and coexistence have always existed alongside criticism and violence in Islam's relationship with Judaism.

The Quran refers to Jews as "the People of the Book" and contains verses praising Israel as a blessed nation. Yet, just as the Bible criticizes some actions of the Israelites, such as their worship of the golden calf, the Quran also includes criticism of Jews. A key question in Islamic-Jewish relations is how scriptures are interpreted. For example, the Quran describes the Jewish people's return to the land of Israel:

We said thereafter unto the Children of Israel, 'Dwell in the land. And when the promise of the Hereafter comes to pass, We shall bring you as a mixed assembly.'(17:104)

The simple meaning of this verse is a promise of ingathering in the end of days. Yet, Hamas distorts this teaching, claiming it to be a prophecy of Israel's destruction.

Religious discourse can either amplify such distortions or promote the true meaning of these texts. It is our responsibility to advocate for the latter. Just as in the second half of the 20th century, there were profound positive developments in relations between Christianity and Judaism, a parallel and complementary process must now develop between Islam and Judaism. This is the mission I've taken up, working to build Jewish-Muslim religious fraternity across the Middle East and beyond.

For Jews, engaging with broader humanity is not only a social and political imperative, it is a spiritual one. I see this as part of my duty to serve God and work towards the vision of redemption. The Jewish people should not be passive bystanders in this prophetic vision. We must act to bring it to fruition. Central to this mission is a call for global fraternity and shared service of nations to God.

In the local and global arenas**,** together we will be victorious, for the sake of the Jewish people and for the sake of humanity.