

Religion: Divine motivation

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Last Tuesday was the third time in the past year Rabbi Menahem Froman paid a respectful visit to a vandalized West Bank mosque, allegedly damaged by Jewish arsonists.



Photo by: Marc Israel Sellem

To extend apologies and deliver new Korans in the place of those damaged by the flames in the Beit Fajar mosque, Froman also brought two of nearby Gush Etzion's most important rabbis, Alon Shvut resident and head of the Har Etzion Yeshiva Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, and Efrat's Chief Rabbi Shlomo Riskin.

For Froman, a longtime resident of Tekoa and indefatigable peace advocate and activist, the source of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict is religious. Therefore, its resolution can only be reached through believers, spiritual leaders, rabbis and imams.

"We've seen the efficacy of the Western thesis that what is going on here is a territorial dispute that can be solved through exchange of territory," he recently told *The Jerusalem Post*, noting the floundering peace talks revolving around land issues and how the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip only distanced peace by winning Hamas more power and influence.

"The root of the dispute is religion. The West doesn't give enough respect to Islam; it just doesn't grasp it," he said.

"A fundamental given in the conflict here is that in the perspective of the Muslim world, founding the State of Israel in the heart of the Arab world is an expression of Western hubris, a means of humiliation. Establishing a flourishing Western country is tantamount to them to sticking a finger in the eye of the Arab world, to show the power and advantages of the West."

And to that mind-set, Froman said, Israel is also a secular entity, led by nonbelievers who lack understanding of and respect for religion. Froman cites the late Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who told him that the two of them could reach a peace arrangement in five minutes. For the likes of Yassin, the Oslo Accords were an example of “our infidels and yours reaching an agreement to eliminate religion,” Froman quoted.

Contacts like Yassin and late Palestinian Authority chairman Yasser Arafat, both of whom were behind murderous terror attacks against Israelis and Jews, have caused Froman to become ostracized by many within the settlement movement, but as he noted, “I am one of the founders of Gush Emunim, not somebody who just moved out here.”

To Froman, the settlements not only should not be removed to promote an arrangement, but can be the hands extended in peace to the Arabs.

So if it is a clash of civilizations that is perpetuating Israel’s bleeding gridlock with the Arab and Muslim world, what can one say of its northern neighbor, the small beautiful country so torn by inner strife? Many Lebanese cheered long and loud when Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir visited Druse leader Walid Jumblatt in the mountainous Chouf area on August 8, 2001. That long awaited visit was historic, marking the reconciliation between the Druse and Christian communities after the bloody “War of the Mountains” during which scores were massacred and many more forced to leave their homes. By 2010, many Christians had returned to their villages and rebuilt them.

Lebanon also hailed the February 18, 2010 ministerial council declaration of “Annunciation Day” (the event on March 25 marking the moment the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would become the mother of Jesus) as a common Christian-Muslim national holiday.

All hopes were that such a decision would “helps in bringing hearts together,” as the Maronite Catholic Council of Bishops said.

But with the same ease Lebanese are open to all forms of dialogue, they can easily put aside friendly ties and coexistence, and turn weapons against each other. Hence they are always prepared for war, be it with Israel or of a fratricidal nature.

Tawfik lives in Beirut’s Chayah neighborhood, the seam between Muslim and Christian populaces famous for being the starting point of the Lebanese civil war. “Interfaith dialogue is meaningless when coming from above. It’s a discussion among elites that leads to nothing. When politics are involved, it hinders everything,” he said.

“True dialogue should happen among the people. When people here realize that what unites them is bigger than what separates them, this is what is called a dialogue. For God’s sake, they share the same poverty, the same problems and the same discrimination from the government.”

One can argue against comparing between the nature of the conflicts on the respective sides of the Israeli- Lebanese border, but Tawfik's statement regarding the impeding effect of politics on reconciliatory efforts is shared by Froman, who believes that the religious imperative of seeking peace is hampered in Israel by its politicians, who he says are stricken by "religious blindness."

"If they had any sense in them, they'd send religious leaders to conduct talks for them," he said. "You simply cannot ignore religion in the Holy Land."

Religious leaders in Israel do actively seek peace, Froman said, noting the efforts of both Chief Sephardi Rabbi Shlomo Amar and Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yona Metzger, who is promoting the forming of a "religion United Nations," based on his belief and experience regarding the vast common grounds people of faith have, regardless of their nationality.

It is impossible to underestimate the significance of Froman's ongoing dialogue with the Muslim world. Only two days after Gaza-bound Mavi Marmara flotilla was intercepted in a clash that left nine dead and stoked the flames between Ankara and Jerusalem to unprecedented heights, Turkish Prime Minister Recip Tayyip Erdogan met with Froman, a result of an ongoing correspondence with one of Erdogan's close aides. The two discussed peace, the relations between the countries, Turkey's Jewish community and the captive IDF soldier Gilad Schalit.

Froman hoped that Erdogan's ties with Iran, Syria and Hamas could help promote Schalit's release from Hamas captivity in Gaza.

Froman is also in dialogue with the US administration, which he had hoped would be a harbinger of change in the West's perception of and attitude toward Islam, due to President Barack Obama's unique background and upbringing. Till that happens, Froman is trudging ahead in his Sisyphean journey to live the concluding passage of the talmudic tractate Brachot, which is part of the daily prayers: "Torah scholars increase peace in the world."