

Religions and Violence

I have had the privilege of participating in several conferences organized by the Sant'Egidio community, and there is no question of their significant contribution to awareness and understanding among religions and to the advancement of world peace, through productive dialogue and individual face-to-face meetings between leaders of the various religions.

The very existence of this important conference, expresses the desire that we all share to bring about a good, exalted and better

world, in which the spirit has the upper hand –
and violence, aggression and force have no part.

Before and beyond the desire for a better world
that is free from violence, there is a common
denominator that unifies us gathered here
today, and that is: the belief in one G-d, and the
knowledge that man is not an independent,
unrestrained creature, one that is free of
limitations and criticism. Not at all !!

Lets look into our roots and see together what
essential lessons we can derive from them .

The Mishna and the Gemara in tractate Sanhedrin teach us the truth in this context: "Man was created as a single individual to teach us that anyone who destroys a single life is as though he destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a single life is as though he saved an entire world," since the entire world were created from Adam, who was a single individual.

"And also for the sake of peace among mankind, so that no person should say to another, 'My father was greater than your father' – since everyone is descended from Adam and Eva.

"A single man was created to show the greatness of G-d, for a man stamps many coins from a single mold, and they are all alike, but the King of Kings has stamped every man from the mold of Adam, yet not one of them is like his fellow. Just as their faces differ, so do their opinions – and all are made by the Creator and are his children."

These description of humanity's origin is of tremendous importance, with implications for man's obligation as a human being to behave in a manner that dignifies the image and spirit of G-D within him, and the image and spirit of G-

D in his fellow man. Whatever his religion and his opinions, whatever his nationality, man is first and foremost a human being, and must treat his fellow humans accordingly.

Moreover, the Bible also shows us how important the actions of a religious leader can be in the influence he have on his flock, his generation or even the entire world.

Abraham, the father of modern human civilization, was a man of charity, faith, vision and action, whose tent was always open in all four directions to feed the hungry and needy, regardless of their religion or views, thereby

was able to succeed to draw all people closer to their Father in heaven.

This is apparently the reason that the Almighty decided to choose Abraham to lead forth all of humanity.

One of the central causes of violence in our world is the attempt to force others to adopt beliefs and opinions by means of brutal physical force. Without a spiritual commitment and an willingness to accept belief or religion, no worship of G-d is possible, and there is no sense in forcing him or her to accept something that they doesn't believe in - of their own free will.

We must emphasize that the use of violence and aggression on the part of a believer is in clear and absolute contradiction to the ways of G-d.

We do not seek for cooperation that is based on fear, the fear of unbridled terror that attacks innocent men, women and children, seemingly carried out in G-d's name; or fear of extremist leaders that have the capability to attain nuclear power with which they can threaten to destroy anyone in the world that does not agree with them.

One of the most important resolutions with major historic and moral importance that we

took during our dialogue with the Vatican representatives was as follow:

"As religious leaders of faith communities, we have an extraordinary responsibility for the education of our communities and particularly the younger generation to respect the holiness of human life. We should not permit any killing in the name of G-d who commands, "Thou shall not murder". Fanaticism and violence are an abuse of religion and they contradict faith in G-d, the creator of man, who cares for humankind and created it. No religious leader should condone terrorism anywhere in the world. We should all unite our energies towards

the construction of a better world for life, brotherhood, justice, peace and love among all"

The role of people of faith and especially religious leaders is to be the moral compass and conscience of the world, to emphasize the sublime value of life and awaken mankind with an outcry at any killings, injustice or evil, not to allow political and national leaders to sink into apathy; they must condemn terrorists who in the name of G-d or religion murder innocents and undermine the divine order in the world. Only a firm, immediate and unequivocal response will

deter these people from carrying out their cruel plans.

It is very important to remember that rapprochement is the torch that we must carry proudly and fearlessly. It is no secret that on all sides there is strong resistance to rapprochement and dialogue between religious and spiritual leaders, which in extreme cases is accompanied by threats or attempts to boycott and removal from the camp and the consensus. How can we condemn these phenomena and deal with them?

Religious leaders and their views are of unique importance and strongly influence the inter-religious mosaic. At many events we have found that where politicians and statesmen have failed, religious leaders have succeeded in inflaming or calming down various groups. If there is great danger in the strengthening of fundamentalism it is the danger of being dragged into a religious war whose end cannot be foreseen.

There is a wonderful essay by the late Rabbi Kook, the founder of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, on the subject of peace. The main idea expressed there is that just as the beauty of the

melody in a choir or an orchestra does not come from identical voices but from the dissimilar and varied voices that join in harmony together – in the same way universal truth and peace will be constructed from diverse thoughts and perspectives, from varying opinions and methods, all of which have a place and importance in the harmony of life. And it is this very uniting of forces, contrasts and opposites that endows peace with added strength, beauty and perfection. Those who favor dialogue and peace should respond positively to any idea, opinion or emotion without arrogance and negating the other.

They see the good and positive in every person, nation and ethnic group.

Darkness and violence cannot be chased away with sticks, certainly not with knives and guns.

A little light repels much darkness! The light of faith and the light of positive action on the part of religious leaders, as a living and dignified personal example, will help chase away the darkness and the evil in our world.

We are committed to cooperating in fostering common religious values, peace with truth and love.

If the message to the world that emerges from here today is the vital need for dialogue and

mutual understanding, it will be of tremendous value. If we preserve and safeguard the image of G-D Within us.

If we remember that “we are all the children of one man”, and if “each person will help his fellow man and strengthen his brother,” then the prophecy of Isaiah will be fulfilled “they shall beat their swords into plowshare, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”. Thank you.

Oded Wiener