

United Nations General Assembly special event for World Interfaith Harmony Week.

Address of Rabbi David Rosen, AJC International Director of Interreligious Affairs

"Blessed be ye who come in the name of the Lord, we bless you from the house of the Lord" – blessings from Jerusalem.

Mr. President; representatives of the U.N.'s member states, related agencies and NGOs ; distinguished colleagues and representatives of world religions; ladies and gentlemen.

Promoting interfaith harmony and common action is a relatively simple matter in healthy pluralistic societies where differences are respected and even celebrated. It is much harder to advance interfaith harmony and collaboration in contexts of conflict, especially where religion is used and abused to advance one position against another.

This is the case where I am privileged to live, in the holy land and in the city that is holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims. And yet we boast a plethora of grassroots interfaith activity. The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, the local constituent of Religions for Peace, is an umbrella for some seventy organizations and institutions promoting interfaith cooperation between the different religions in the land.

However I would like to focus on the relatively new and remarkable collaboration between the official Israeli and Palestinian religious leadership, Jews, Christians and Muslims, and its potential importance for genuine harmony in the Holy Land.

While I do not believe that religious leaders in our part of the world are in a position to bring about the necessary political resolution for which most of us hope and dream, they certainly have the capacity either to make the situation all the more intractable, or to make it all the more soluble by creating a context of greater mutual respect, and resultant harmony.

Moreover if we don't want religion to be "part of the problem", the answer cannot be to ignore it, as political leaders seeking a solution to the conflict have often done in the past. On the contrary, such an approach encourages extremist elements to take center stage and just weakens the most responsible religious voices. If one does not want religion to be "part of the problem", then one must empower the religiously responsible voices and ensure that "religion is part of the solution" advancing a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect.

To this end a remarkable gathering took place in Alexandria in 2002 convened by the then Archbishop of Canterbury and the late Grand Imam of Al Azhar bringing religious leaders of the main three Abrahamic faiths from the Holy land together for the first time in history. This led in time to the establishment of the Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, which my organization AJC helped and helps facilitate together with others, and this Holy Land Council is part of the MENA regional council of Religions for Peace.

The Holy Land Council is made up of the Ministry of Waqf/Religious Affairs of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian supreme sharia court, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and the Christian Patriarchates and Bishops of the Holy Land; and the Council's three main purposes are:-

To keep open avenues of communication between the Israeli and Palestinian institutional religious leadership, and to "trouble shoot" where necessary;
to collaborate in combatting all violence incitement and disrespect against any one of the religions and their holy places;
and last but not least, to support efforts to bring about an end to the conflict, so that two nations and three faith communities can live in peace and harmony and flourish.

In the first respects the Council has been a modest success. For example, the members have taken strong stands together against attacks on places of worship; on occasions gathering together in solidarity at the site of such deplorable violence. Moreover the council has sponsored a comprehensive academic review that is currently under way, regarding how the different religious communities and their traditions are portrayed in both Palestinian and Israeli text books.

However the Council earnestly hopes that there will be greater interest than there has been so far, in availing of its declared desire to help support initiatives to bring an end to the conflict.

As I have already indicated , most of us do not presume that religious leadership alone can bring a resolution to the conflict in our land. However we are convinced that the right engagement with such religious institutions and interfaith cooperation is critical; not only for the success of any such initiative, but in order to overcome the wounds of the past and promote the common good of the communities that share the Holy Land, so that they all may flourish, prosper and live in harmony.

The impact of such would go way beyond that particular geography and have truly global ramifications.

But the work and goals of the Holy Land Council are of universal relevance. These express the responsibility of all people of faith and religion and especially those in positions of leadership, to do the utmost to prevent political conflicts from exploiting religion. To strive to ensure that religion is part of the solution and not part of the problem; advancing mutual respect and peace; affirming that all people are created in the Divine Image regardless of race, color, creed or gender – all children of God. Then the ancient Hebrew prophet's vision of interreligious harmony and pluralism will become a reality.

....and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift up sword against nation and neither shall they learn war anymore. But they shall sit each one under their vine and fig tree and none shall make them afraid, for the Lord of Hosts has spoken. Let all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, and we shall walk in the name of the Lord our God for evermore. (Micah 4:3-5)