

**Project-Genesis Interfaith
January 2019**

**FROM EGYPT TO REHOBOTH
A Spiritual Roadmap to Peace**

PRESENTED:

**Saturday, January 19, 2019 7:00pm
Peconic Landing
Greenport, NY**

**Sunday, January 20, 2019 4:00pm
Shrine of Our Lady of the Island
Manorville, NY**

**Monday, February 11, 2019 7:00pm
Leonardo Plaza Hotel
Jerusalem, Israel**

AROUND THE WELL-AROUND A WALL

Three Wells as Three Temples

“And Isaac's servants dug in the valley, and they found there a well of living waters. And the shepherds of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's shepherds, saying, ‘The water is ours’; so he named the well Esek, because they had contended with him. And they dug another well, and they quarreled about it also; so he named it Sitnah. **And he moved away from there**, and he dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he named it Rehoboth, and he said, ‘Now the Lord has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.’” (Gen. 26: 19-22)

In 1951, my parents left Yemen with nearly 50,000 other Jews during a mass exodus. **They were running away from their homes in a land that became too hostile toward the Zionist project in Palestine. But they also believed it was a sign that the Messiah had come**, and they walked for a year across the Arabian desert, following an invisible path back to their ancestral homeland. My father, then seven years old, had to walk, while my mother, a five-year-old, rode in a basket strapped to a donkey. The little they did not leave behind was stolen from them along the way. But they kept going, propelled by their faith in ancient stories. They arrived in Israel to a harsh reality: wooden shacks, with nine people to a room, no running water, low labor wages, and constant wars. Though there was no evidence of a messianic arrival, they continued to believe in the miracle of their return, 2500 years later, to the land of their forefathers and foremothers.

During early years after the founding of the state, Jews emigrated from over 80 countries and from several ethnic groups, forging a new Israeli identity. The phenomenon of *kibbutz galuyot* - the in-gathering of the exiles - was clear already in my elementary school: all forty of the children in my class were immigrants or children of immigrants from more than twenty countries as varied as: Argentina, Canada, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Morocco, Poland, Romania, Russia, the United States, and Yemen. Despite Israel’s many integration problems, we all shared the feeling that this was our communal home--a long-lost family reuniting.

My familial experience of migration during the early years of Israeli independence, my rabbinic background in Jewish texts, and my interfaith work with *Project Genesis* have led me to propose a possible theological solution to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

I believe that a religious journey is one in which one moves from a narrow to an expansive and diverse place. From darkness to light, from depression to hope. In Biblical thought, the **paradigm of narrowness** is embodied by Egypt (*mitzrayim*), the site of the Israelites’ slavery, but also the canal of their birth as a nation. *Mitzrayim* is the Hebrew word for *narrow* and, at the same time, *enemy*; it means that the essence of enemy is narrowness. In contrast, the narrative of

Isaac's well at Rehoboth provides us with a **paradigm of expansiveness**. When Isaac digs his third well and is successfully able to avoid strife with the Philistines, he names that well Rehoboth and declares, "Now the Lord has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land" (Genesis 26:22).

The medieval rabbi Nachmanides addresses this paradigm of expansiveness with reference to building the Third Temple - a **key premise of Jewish messianism**. He compares it to the very place that is one of the two points of orientation in this proposal: Rehoboth. Nachmanides writes in his commentary on Genesis 26:22: "And he called the third well Rehoboth (wide-open spaces), and this one alludes to the Holy Temple which will one day be built... and that one will be built without fighting or conflict. Then God will widen our boundaries, as it says 'When The Lord your God will widen your boundaries, as He swore to your Forefathers...'" (Deuteronomy 19:8), which speaks of the future time. And of the Third Temple it is written that [the chambers built into the Third Temple] 'became wider and they wound about higher and higher' (Ezekiel 41:7). 'And we will be fruitful in the Land' (Genesis 26:22), **when all the nations 'will worship Him shoulder-to-shoulder'** (Zephaniah 3:9)"

The principle of coexistence is that the land is ample enough for two peoples to dwell in it simultaneously within two states, each reflecting the national and religious character of its inhabitants. But before we agree on the Two States Solution, we must not neglect to identify the two nations and to take into account their deep-seated religious beliefs. In our case, in the heart of the two nations--Israel and Palestine, we can find the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael. The descendants of Isaac are mainly Jewish, while the descendants of Ishmael are mainly Muslim. Therefore, in order for the Two States Solution to work, and for the two nations to live truly in peace, we need to adopt the language of **Two Nations Solution** first. Only then, political borders would make sense and can be finalized.

Coming under Israeli sovereignty in the aftermath of the Six Day War in 1967, Temple Mount, continues to be a core source of contention between Israelis and Palestinians and the greater Muslim world. The reason, is the existence of the Dome of the Rock on the same spot where the First and Second Temples once stood. More importantly, **the messianic aspiration** includes building a third Temple, presumably, on the same spot. A political sovereignty, which may translate itself into a religious sovereignty, has aroused the concerns of Palestinian Muslims, and the greater Muslim world, who worship at the two mosques on Temple Mount. The conflict is around the idea that the Dome of the Rock was built on top of the Holy of Holies of the Temple. Even though being the heart of the matter, and a reflection of the peace process as a whole, conversations regarding Temple Mount seem to always lead into a dead end, or at least a very narrow end.

"NOBODY MOVES"

An Interfaith Peace Proposal

In recent years, as I've been leading interfaith pilgrimages to Israel and seeing the land through different prisms, new angles have been revealed to me. More and more, I see the land in its fullness and in its great potential of becoming **The Holy Land**, many have sought to 'conquer.' All those who conquered it by force, caused ultimate pain and suffering, to themselves and to others, eventually were pushed by the next conqueror. What if there is a way to **prevent the next war, and perhaps the war of wars?**

In the pursuit of peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and as part of the effort to move from a narrow to an expansive place and to affirm that ample space exists in the land for both peoples, *Project Genesis* proposes a creative solution that both respects the existence in perpetuity of Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock mosques, and at the same time seeks the realization of the building of the Third Temple.

Last year, on our pilgrimage, I asked our guide (a Christian-Arab-Palestinian-Egyptian-Coptic Deacon) a question about the rebuilding of the Temple: "Do the Muslims have a problem with Jews building a temple in general, or is it a question of the **location** of the temple?" Our guide immediately replied that it was a problem of **location**. I then asked, "What if the People of Israel gave up their aspiration to build the Third Temple on Temple Mount and continued to worship in the Kotel Plaza?" He jumped up and said with light in his eyes: "**WORLD PEACE!**" It was the way he said it that lit a small light at the end of the tunnel.

The light in the guide's eyes felt like the little light at the end of a subway tunnel. Years of waiting for the subway in NYC, sometimes late, sometime hot and sweaty, taught me to spot the first glimpse of light, when it finally appears around the corner!

Project Genesis hopes to supply a novel idea, or *chidush*, to Nachmanides' teaching about a Third Temple that will be built "without fighting or conflict." The wide-open space that becomes the site of the Third Temple is already an area of Jewish worship: the *Kotel*--Western Wall Plaza. With the *Kotel* as the site of the Third Temple, the potential conflict over the prospect of building the Third Temple where the previous two Temples stood dissolves.

The biblical story of Isaac (Gen. 26) and the commentary of Nachmonides form the foundation of our vision. Our vision conceives of movement of the mind so we can all keep our permanence. In Judaism, once something has been acquired and held for a considerable period of time, it acquires a permanence that is conveyed through the principle of *hazakah*, or a stronghold. According to this principle, the existence of the two mosques on the Temple Mount is secure in perpetuity.

On one level, a “well” represents the *Torah* and the spiritual well being of the people who possess it. But a “well” also signifies sovereignty. Originally, Isaac dug wells that his father dug, but he learned that he must dig his own wells. He is not his father. This is the reason we repeat the phrase “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” Just as each patriarch had to find his own way to God, each generation has to possess the land on its own. Our generation needs a fresh view. Perhaps the view that Jews are not alone in the religious desert anymore.

While the Jewish journey begins in Egypt, the “narrow” place, it must end in Rehoboth, the “wide” place. For us, the metaphor becomes reality, an example and paradigm for all. The journey to the “wide” place, moving from narrowness to wideness and diversity, when all the nations ‘will worship Him shoulder-to-shoulder’ (Zeph. 3:9), is a journey for all. Not a Jewish journey alone. Among the diverse religions in Israel, there exist Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Furthermore, in his work *Yad Chazaka* (Hilchot Melachim), Maimonides teaches us that Christianity and Islam usher the way of the messiah.

The rationale rests in the fact that the Bible, with its prophets, rabbis, and history, teaches us that it’s not the walls that matter most, but the meeting (cf. the Tent of Meeting). After all, the first sanctuary was simply a tent, as God dwells in our hearts (“Veshachanty betocham.”) It’s about meeting other people and praying together. Therefore the rabbis mandate us to find ways to constantly expand and to widen the Tent of Meeting.

Notably, the Torah doesn’t specify a place for the ultimate House of God. to tell us that the House of God is not a specified place, but a place of inspiration. Wherever we pray, if we set our hearts toward Jerusalem, Jerusalem will come to us. Thus, any place of worship becomes holy — whether in a synagogue or at home. The place becomes *Hamakom* — The Place — another name for God Himself. What matters is not the location, but the holy space we ourselves create. In Parashat Re’eh (Deuteronomy 11:26 – 16:17), the Torah repeats 16 times the statement by Moses “...the place which the Lord your God shall choose...” God intentionally does not yet reveal the location of His intended sanctuary. As God’s instruction to Abraham of Lech Lecha, “...go one step at a time to the place I’ll show you.”

A beautiful Midrash explains **where God decided to place the Holy of Holies**. It speaks of two brothers who received equal share of inheritance from their father, one had a family and one did not. They each thought of their brother and thought the other needed a greater part of the inheritance. The each went to give the other. The place on the road where the two brothers met each other, became the spot of the Holy of Holies.

To further make the point, when King David wanted to build the Temple, God conveys the message that He is not interested in a building, rather, in the meeting. “Go and tell My servant

David: Thus saith the Lord, Should you build Me a house for Me to dwell in? For I have not dwelt in a house since the day that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle. In all places wherein I have walked among all the children of Israel, spoke I a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed My people Israel, saying: Why have you not built Me a house of cedar? (2nd Samuel 7:5-7)

Our proposal does not ignore the historical location of the Jewish Temples on Temple Mount, and hopes that one day we can all share the Holy of Holies. But identifying the *Kotel* and its Plaza as the site of the Third Temple is consistent with the vision of peace and worshipping shoulder to shoulder. In short, no one need move from where they live or worship in order for a peaceful resolution to be reached.

I was surprised to find out in meetings with top politicians in Israel, in preparation of this proposal, I was told that all these years of negotiations, including those in Oslo 25 years ago, religions were not part of the peace process by design. “Why bring up problems?” Perhaps, but religions are also the solution. Empires came and went through the millenia, but the three faiths have been here over thousands of years. In the process, many holy sites for one religion become holy to another.

As our forefather **Isaac “moved” from the first and second wells to the third**, so have we, and just 100 meters from where we believe that the original spot was. Nobody needs to move anymore! At this point we all have *Hazakah* on the land denoting “acquisition through stronghold.” And this is the basis for all three religions’ holy sites.

Metaphorically, Egypt, in its narrowness, represent a strictly hierarchical and vertical structure (a horse **and** a rider) but what God wanted was to drown that mindset. We must move to the horizontal, one next to each other, shoulder to shoulder.

THREE FAITH SOLUTION

Sharing Holy Lands

For many years taking the subway in New York City, I was fascinated by the ability of so many people of infinite diversity to sit quietly together, totally accepting each other, even if only for a brief time, perhaps just one stop. There must be some sort of “**subway wisdom**” there, I thought.

What is it that allows us, the Muslim and the Christian, the black and the white, the gay and the straight, to get along in the subway that we haven't yet learned above ground? Can sharing holy lands be similar to that? Can we simply sit together for a little while, pretending not to look at each other, but seeing that we may not be that different, that we may all just want to arrive peacefully at our destination. When the subway doors close, make it a holy place. A few minutes later, the doors will open and another group will be tested. Will they pass the challenge of the subway wisdom? Perhaps we can look at **our lives here on earth as a short subway ride**, and not waste our time on conflict.

During Sukkot of 2017, *Project Genesis* hosted a interfaith panel discussion at the Orient Congregational Church. Dr. Donald Russo and I hosted Sheikh Ghassan Manasra in a unique opportunity to have a Jewish, Christian, and Muslim dialogue. The main purpose of the discussion was to present our respective views of sharing holy sites and spaces, in the Holy Land and elsewhere. In a world that too often opts for division, we wanted to offer an alternative of sharing. The reality is that many holy sites changed hands over the millennia and are holy sites to all religions in the same areas. They can become **spiritual cities of refuge**.

While Dr. Russo spoke about the idea that often we are addicted to certainty, and thus are not open to a real conversation and real growth, **Sheikh Ghassan spoke about the need for each faith to learn the “code” of the other** — the red buttons we should respect. I spoke about the Pizza Model I learned at an interfaith evening at Tantur in Jerusalem the year before, when I met Sheikh Ghassan at the *Abrahamic Reunion*. **The Pizza Model** simply says that whether you belong to the Jewish “slice,” the Christian “slice”, or the Muslim “slice,” as you move toward the front tip (or to the center), you become closer with people of the other faiths. I added that since Judaism works in concentric circles, we can then make an additional circle around the middle and create a separate category of those who want to come more toward the center of the pie.

The existence of interfaith dialogue can achieve the ultimate will of God as articulated by Isaiah: “And the foreigners who join with the Lord to serve Him and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, everyone who observes the Sabbath from profaning it and who holds fast to My covenant. I will bring them to My holy mount, and I will cause them to rejoice in My house of prayer, their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon My altar, for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Isaiah 56:6-7)