
WHERE
ISLAM
AND
JUDAISM
JOIN
TOGETHER
A Perspective on Reconciliation
Shai Har-El

Where Islam and Judaism Join Together

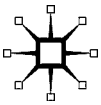
This page intentionally left blank

Where Islam and Judaism Join Together

A Perspective on Reconciliation

Shai Har-El

palgrave
macmillan



WHERE ISLAM AND JUDAISM JOIN TOGETHER

First published in 2014 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978–1–349–48283–2 ISBN 978–1–137–38812–4 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137388124

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Har-El, Shai, author.
Where Islam and Judaism join together : a perspective on reconciliation / Shai Har-El.
pages cm
Includes index.
1. Islam—Relations—Judaism. 2. Judaism—Relations—Islam. I. Title.

BP173.J8H36 2014
297.2'82—dc23 2013050455

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: July 2014

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

I dedicate this book to all those who work diligently across the religious divide to promote understanding and fellowship among the children of Abraham and who see Jerusalem, the City of Peace, as a place of their reconciliation and a beacon for the prophetic vision of peace: "*For mine house shall be called a house of prayer for all people*" (Isaiah 56:7).

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Illustrations

Figures

Tables

This page intentionally left blank

Prefatory Notes

On Transliteration

For the cross-language transliteration of Hebrew and Arabic words, the system set forth below will be followed. The same diacritical marks will be used in both languages. In the case of long vowels (in Hebrew: *tenu'ōt*, with focus on accentuating *mil'ēl* for prefix and *milrā'* for suffix; in Arabic: *ḥarakāt*), a special column is set forth to the right of the consonants to help the reader in proper pronunciation. The following are the transliteration alphabet:

Hebrew	Arabic	English	Long Vowels
א	ا,آ,ى, ء	a,'	ā
ב		v	
בּ	ب	b	
ג		g	
	ج	j	
ד	د	d	
[vowel]		e	ē
ה	ه	h	
ו		v,u,o	ū,ō
	و	w,u	ū
ז	ز	z	
	ذ	dh	
ח	ح	ḥ	
ט	ط	ṭ	
	ظ	ẓ	
י	ى	y, i	ī
כ	خ	kh	
פּ	ك	k	
ל	ل	l	
מ	م	m	
נ	ن	n	

Hebrew	Arabic	English	Long Vowels
ס	س	s	
ע	ع	ʿ	
	غ	gh	
פ	ف	f	
פּ		p	
צ		tz	
	ص	ṣ	
	ض	ḍ	
ק	ق	q	
ר	ر	r	
שׁ	ش	sh	
שׂ	س	s	
ת	ت	t	
	ث	th	

A simplified system of Romanization omitting diacritical marks has been used in transliterating geographical names (e.g., Canaan, Beersheba, Hebron, and Mecca); proper names (e.g., Muhammad, Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael); and commonly used names of classical Jewish texts (e.g., Torah, Talmud, Mishnah, and Midrash).

On Translation

For the most part, translations of scriptural verses are from the following sources:

For the *Hebrew Bible*: *The Holy Scriptures: According to the Masoretic Text.* Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955, and the online program *Navigating the Bible II* in http://www.bible.ort.org.

For the *Qur'ān*: *The Holy Qur'ān: Text, Translation and Commentary, New Revised Edition*, trans. and ed. 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali. Brentwood, Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1989, and online collection of Qur'ān translations offered by http://www.altafsir.com (published by the *Royal Aāl al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought*, Jordan).

For the *Jewish Prayer Book*: *Siddūr Tehillāt Hashēm* [A Praise of the Lord]: With English Translation, trans. Rabbi Nissen Mangel. Brooklyn, NY: Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, 2002.

To simplify the translation of scriptural texts, I took the liberty to replace the archaic dative forms (e.g., thou, ye) with their modern equivalents (i.e., you).

On Terminology

Since the book focuses on the relations between Islam and Judaism, the terms "BC" and "AD," which are conventionally used in the West, are not appropriate. The alternative terms "BCE" (Before the Common Era) and "CE" (Common Era) are used instead.

When quoting verses from the Bible and the Qur'ān, the word "God" was generally used in translating the Names "Adonai" and "Allah" respectively. When quoting verses from the Talmud and Midrash, the conventionally used "the Holy One, blessed be He" for God's Name is not used in this book. The alternative, simplified Name, "the Blessed Holy One," is used instead.

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

Although it would be impossible to acknowledge all the people who have influenced me in this book, I still want to express my deepest appreciation to a few of them.

It is a pleasure to first acknowledge my gratitude to Dr. Abidullah Ghazi, founder and executive director of the IQRA' International Education Foundation, who was the catalyst that inspired me through many years of interfaith dialogues. This book grew out of a series of interactions with him and his colleagues. I also want to acknowledge the late Hajj Anwar Zainal, a friend and a peace-loving individual who enthusiastically introduced me to his devotional life and "his" Islam. I am proud to express my indebtedness to both of them and thankful to everyone who allowed me to enter into their spiritual life.

There is no limit to my debt and gratitude to my teachers, who taught me how to read text and how to approach it with critical judgment. Many years have passed since I was an undergraduate and graduate student at Tel Aviv University, but what I learned from all of my teachers has never departed from me. It is not possible here to note every one of them. However, I want in particular to recall Professor Shimon Shamir, a rare scholar of Middle Eastern Studies, from whom I have learned immensely, particularly during our fruitful exchanges when he served as my MA advisor.

In the course of my doctoral studies in Middle Eastern History at the University of Chicago, in the late 1970s, I was privileged to study under a scholarly giant and an internationally renowned master, Professor Halil Inalcik, who taught me about late medieval Islam and Ottoman history. I have never forgotten nor ceased to be astounded by his immense learning and his willingness as my PhD advisor to share his knowledge and private Ottoman archives in the course of writing my dissertation.[1] I also owe a special debt to the late Professor Fazlur Rahman, who patiently guided me through some of the intricacies of Islamic religion and encouraged me to research and write about complex subjects, the benefits of which I reaped while writing this book.

Many friends and scholars have read the manuscript of the book and have given me the benefit of their counsel. I particularly want to thank my friend Fadel Abdallah, lecturer of Arabic in John Hopkins University, whose suggestions have contributed immeasurably to my final formulations.

I like to express my great appreciation to Professor Douglas Giles, my editor, whose careful editing of the manuscript and invaluable comments on the text have meant much to me.

Words are incapable of expressing my special gratitude to my wife, Rosalie. She has been my *'ēshet ḥāyil* (woman of valor), a treasured life companion, a never-ending source of encouragement, and a friendly and honest critic of style and clarity. Indeed, in the immortal words of the famed sage Rabbi Akiva, "Shelī ve-shelakhēm shelāh hū'"[2]—everything that I have learned and written, are truly hers. She is the most precious gift that the Blessed Holy One has granted me.

I am deeply indebted to you, my readers. After all, it is your interest in world peace and interreligious reconciliation that has inspired me to write this book.

Finally, as I complete the preparation of this manuscript, I thank God for allowing me to finish this book. And may He grant us the fulfillment of the following prayer for the peace of Jerusalem in our times:

Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem;
Jerusalem that is built as a city that is united together.
[. . .] Pray for the peace of Jerusalem;
May those who love you be serene.
May there be peace within your walls,
serenity within your palaces.
For the sake of my brethren and friends,
I ask that there be peace within you.
(Psalms 122:2–8)

Introduction: Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy as a Context

As an epigraph to my book, I chose verses from Psalm 122, because they send a message that is close to my heart—peace within the City of Peace, Jerusalem. Whenever I visit my homeland, Israel, I make sure to *be* in Jerusalem. One cannot comprehend what this holy city is all about without *being* there spiritually, experiencing the intense presence of the Divine, and having the inner understanding of the mystical Ladder Dream of the Patriarch Jacob, when he said, "How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the Gate of Heaven."[1]

When I am in Jerusalem, I sense what Jewish sages wrote, inferring from the above citation: "When a man prays in Jerusalem, it is as though he prays before the throne of glory, for the Gate of Heaven is in Jerusalem and a door is always open for the hearing of prayer."[2] When I am in Jerusalem, I try to listen to its ancient stones telling primeval stories about how the faith of Abraham—venerated as the common forefather, patriarch, and spiritual ancestor of the three monotheistic religions—had begun four millennia ago. I try to understand why it is that the City of Peace—where peace should have reigned and conflicts been kept out—has been, for so long, a focus of powerful and intertwined passions of religion and politics that caused Islam and Judaism to be in a fierce contention over this place. I wonder why this place is called the Golden City, "Jerusalem of Gold, and of bronze, and of light" in the famous Hebrew song, when its long history down to our days is stained and darkened with intolerance and bloodshed. After many spiritual pilgrimages to this magnetic city, I realized that perhaps the answer to these questions may be found right there. Perhaps only in this city of contrasts, where Islam and Judaism are so much apart, can they truly join together in peace. For this reason, and because of the symbolism that the Holy City of Jerusalem offers, I chose this place as the context for my book.

The Holy City, also known as the Old City—considered by many nations to be the metropolis and sanctuary of the world, where heaven and earth meet—is surrounded by ancient walls with eight gates that are open

S. Har-El, *Where Islam and Judaism Join Together*

and one that is closed. Seven of the open gates were built by the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, between 1535 and 1538 and one by the Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Hamid in 1889. Every gate carries several names from different centuries-old traditions. Each gate has its own special timeless look with its unique geometric design and floral ornamentation. There is one gate, however, that is more beautiful than all of them and that is totally sealed by stone slabs. Seemingly standing blind to its surroundings, this earthly gate gives the impression of a heavenly sense of sight that transcends human comprehension. It is known in both Jewish and Muslim traditions as the Gate of Mercy (*Shā'ar ha-Raḥamīm* in Hebrew; *Bāb ar-Raḥmah* in Arabic). What does this "gate of all gates" possibly see that we may be blind to?

Figure 0.1 Image of the Gate of Mercy, Jerusalem.

The Gate of Mercy, through which Jews believe the Messiah (Hebrew: *Mashīyaḥ*) would enter Jerusalem when he comes, is part of the eastern wall that surrounds not only the Old City but specifically the Temple Mount (Hebrew: *Har ha-Bāyyit*), which is considered highly sacred to both Jews and Muslims and is one of the most contested religious sites in the world. Jewish traditions identify this as the summit of Mount Moriah, where Abraham passed the trial of faith by his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to the will of God. It is the site where the Jewish Holy Temple has stood, until Titus and the Roman legions destroyed it in 70 CE, and where the magnificent *Qubbat aṣ-Ṣakhrah*, or Dome of the Rock, was built by the Muslims 60 years after the conquest of Jerusalem by the Caliph 'Omar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. "The Rock" refers to the Foundation Stone (Hebrew: *'Ēven ha-Shetiyyāh*) located at the heart of the Dome and considered in Jewish traditions to be part of what was the Temple's Holy of the Holies, the place that served Abraham as the altar for the binding of Isaac, and the foundation of planet Earth. The building of the Dome on the site of the Jewish Temple and over the Foundation Stone has been interpreted as a symbolic act placing Islam in the lineage of Abraham and dissociating it from the precursory monotheistic religions Judaism and Christianity.[3] That site was considered by Jewish sages as the Gate of Heaven, and by the Muslims as the point where Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven to commune with God face-to-face, a journey known in Islamic tradition as the *mi'rāj*.[4] Here, over the Temple Mount, on the plaza of *Al-Ḥaram ash-Sharīf*, or the Noble Sanctuary, we find *Al-Masjid al-Aqṣa'*, the third holiest mosque in Islam. After the Arab conquest of Jerusalem, *Madīnat Bayt al-Maqdis*, or the City of the House of the Holy (referring to the Hebrew name for the Holy Temple, *Beit Ha-Miqddāsh*), became synonymous with Jerusalem and eventually shortened to simply *Al-Quds* meaning "The Holy."

The Gate of Mercy is also special because of its double-entry structure and because it is more significant in size and ornamentation than the open gates. The earliest mention of the Gate can be found in the writings of Arab historians and Muslim travelers, who referred to it by its two names, one for each of its entries: the northern entry, the Gate of Repentance, and the southern gate, the Gate of Mercy. They say that when a Muslim prays to God, he stands in front of the Gate of Mercy, and then turns in front of the Gate of Repentance to receive God's answer. Although the Jews referred to the Gate by a single name, the Gate of Mercy, there are several medieval accounts by Jewish pilgrims mentioning the two entries to possibly allow the traffic in and out of the Temple compound. The Christians, believing that it is the "beautiful gate" mentioned in the New Testament, named it the Golden Gate, an appellation picked up by all the languages of Europe.[5]

When visiting the place, one can see a distinct difference between the inside and the outside of the Gate. It appears from outside to be composed of two adjoining facades and crowned by twin arches of equal height and weight, but its interior is actually a unified structure built into the wall. Perhaps this monumental gate sees what it represents—the special bond between Islam and Judaism. Like the Gate of Mercy, they are one faith from the inside made of two religions from outside. Although they represent two ways of worship, one by the descendents of Isaac and the other by the descendents of Ishmael, and they pray separately through the Gate of Mercy's double entry, their prayers eventually reach God through a single entry, "the Gate of Heaven." The two together form a unity of faith—a shared belief in One God. Because of what it symbolizes, the Gate of Mercy in this book is dedicated to the shared heritage of these sister religions and selected as the context for this book.

One of the verses in the Qur'ān speaks of a gate in a certain wall and makes a clear distinction between the inside and outside sections of that wall: "So a wall will be put up between them, with a gate therein; inside there will be mercy throughout, while outside facing it there will be punishment."[6] It has a symbolic meaning for us: just like in the case of the Gate of Mercy, the interior that is dominated by unity of faith represents mercy, whereas the exterior that is dominated by division between the two contending religions represents punishment.

Making this message even more powerful is the addition of another symbol. A certain Islamic decorative motif appearing in the ornamentation of the Gate of Mercy is a knotted rope.[7] This reminds us of the beautiful words of the Qur'ān: "Hold firmly, all together by the rope of God and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude God's favor upon you, for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His grace, you become brothers."[8] To be the knotted rope of God that joins people in brotherhood, Islam and Judaism can no longer relate as separate ropes dangling next to each other. In order for them to tie their ropes together, to bind them into a knot that is much tighter, each rope must give up little, surrender a bit of its original length, to achieve a stronger unity.

So we all have a choice: either we become the knotted rope of God that binds us together, or we continue to exist as separate ropes apart from each other. Either we live in unity as brothers and enjoy God's mercy, or we live apart as enemies and suffer punishment. Like one of Martin Luther King's pearls of wisdom, "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."[9]

It is in this spirit of harmony and brotherhood that I wrote this book—as a place where I attempt to bridge between Islam and Judaism, and as a tool to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of the two Abrahamic traditions. It is my hope that both Jews and Muslims, in their search for

common ground, will adopt the symbol of sharing and bonding represented by the unique structure of the closed Gate of Mercy and the knotted rope. It is my prayer that they will carry out their search *from the inside out* by allowing the oneness and compassion that dominate the interior of the Gate of Mercy to influence the exterior of interreligious relationship.

* * *

This book presents the Abrahamic concept as an alternative to "Judeo-Christian," a term used to describe the moral traditions thought to be held in common by Judaism and Christianity and considered a fundamental basis for the body of concepts and values in the modern Western world. It has been argued, however, that Judaism and Christianity are entirely autonomous of one another, that there is no shared and ongoing "Judeo-Christian Tradition," and that there is not now, and there never has been, a dialogue between them.[10] This term has been used only by Western scholars and was never adopted by Jews or by Muslims, whereas the term "Abrahamic" has been accepted by all three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as a term of both historical relevance and future significance. Labeling them "Abrahamic" acknowledges that all three religions come from one source, Abraham, whose biblical name means "the father of a multitude of nations," and whose primordial creed can be used as a unifying force to bring all of them together.

In this book I chose to concentrate only on Islam and Judaism, sister religions that are closely related to one another, with roots intertwined in the land, in the language, and in the memories of shared history. Of all religions, they are by far the closest to each other in their fundamental religious tenets, practices and systems of law, and their social, cultural and ethical traditions. (On the similarities between the two systems of law, see Appendix 1). Since Abraham (*Avrahām* in Hebrew; *'Ibrāhīm* in Arabic) is claimed by Jewish tradition as the ancestor of the Jews through his son Isaac (Hebrew: *Yitzḥāq*), and by Muslim tradition as ancestor of the Arabs through his son Ishmael (Arabic: *'Ismā'īl*), the need to build bridges of understanding between these historical antagonists and to seek better understanding and peaceful coexistence between their religions is, in my opinion, much stronger.

It is important to mention one historical fact right away. There are many examples of relative well-being enjoyed by Jews in the Arab and Muslim lands. The classical example is that of Andalus, Muslim Spain, in the ninth to the eleventh centuries. While Jews fared there better, overall, than those in the Christian lands in Europe, Jews were no strangers to persecution and humiliation by Muslims. Nevertheless, Professor Bernard Lewis, one of the world's greatest historians of the Middle East, observed that—although "there

were unambiguously negative attitudes towards Jews in the Muslim lands as part of the 'normal' feelings of a dominant group towards subject groups"—"There is little sign of any deep-rooted emotional hostility directed against Jews . . . such as the anti-Semitism of the Christian world."[11]

Given the spirit and message of peace in this book, I used the following guidelines in writing it:

1. I based my work, almost entirely, on the scriptural sources: the Bible (primarily the first book, Genesis) for the Jewish tradition and the Qur'ān for the Islamic tradition.
2. I let the Torah (both the Written, i.e., the Five Books of Moses, and the Oral, i.e., the Talmud) and the Qur'ān (as well its classical commentary, i.e., *Tafsīr*) speak for themselves and did my best to avoid the type of modern suggestive commentaries that use the text to subserve one's own ideological passions or particular political affiliation.
3. I accepted the integrity of both scriptures and treated them as "these and those are the words of the Living God" (Hebrew: *'ēilu ve-'ēilu divrēi 'Elohīm ḥayyīm*), to use the classical Talmudic model of dialogue and tolerance within Jewish Law.[12] The belief in the divine origin of both the Torah and the Qur'ān is supported by the Qur'ān's own words: "This Qur'ān could not have been produced by other than God; on the contrary, it is a confirmation (*taṣdīq*) of what was before it and elaboration (*tafsīl*) of the Book [of Torah], wherein is no doubt [revealed] from the Sovereign of the Universe."[13]
4. I concentrated on those scriptural verses that support mutual acceptance and tolerance and avoided those that may indicate or infer a negative treatment of others. As the Qur'ān states: "Goodness and evil are not alike; repel [evil] with something that is far better, and notice how someone, who is separated from you because of enmity, will become your intimate friend."[14]

Given the spirit and purpose of this book, I made a decision that neither the exhaustive research by Jewish and Christian scholars on the influence of the Bible, the Midrash (a collection of exegetical or homiletical commentaries on the biblical narrative) and other classic Jewish sources on the Qur'ān,[15] nor the traditional polemical claim by Muslims that the Jews have corrupted or altered some portions of the Bible,[16] should become the subject of this work. While they definitely help in understanding the tumultuous history of Jewish-Muslim relations, they do not forward the intent of this book—reducing the gulf between Jews and Muslims. They only cause the debasement and dilution of the authentic revelation of their scriptures, which is at the core of their religions. I also made a decision to limit the discussion

of the Qur'ānic verses that speak of intolerance and violence against non-Muslims to an appendix and let a Muslim scholar reflect on this subject (see Appendix 5). My purpose is not to blur the differences between the two religions, but to accentuate the similarities so that a common denominator is established for serious dialogue. The emphasis of unity over separation creates a context of love, compassion, mutual respect, and understanding, one in which peace and reconciliation are possible.

Because the relationship between Islam and Judaism is an extremely loaded subject, I must state at the very onset of this book that nowhere in its pages did I allow my Jewish faith to interfere with the integrity of my research and writing. On the contrary, the task of carefully navigating between the texts of the Bible and the Qur'ān and producing this sensitive bridgework was undertaken in the spirit of service to the noble cause of amity and peace among Jews and Muslims.

Abraham is the central figure in my book. From my perspective, as one who believes the Bible, there was such a person. For me, and for all Jews and Muslims, he represents one common religious tradition and the foundation on which all three monotheistic religions have built their faith over the course of history, and from which each has developed a set of beliefs and practices that sets them apart from others. Whether Abraham is historically a real person or a mythological figure, as some scholars question, is irrelevant for our purpose.[17] History, any history, especially the one that is based heavily on scriptural narratives, is a record of imperfections. The narratives are scarce and fragmentary, and we don't know if they are true. What we care about here, however, is that they are held as true. So although this record is inherently imperfect, it is one of great potential. It tells us about the old world, but also about our world. Although it is rooted in the historical past, it sets the context for understanding our present. It actually opens for us a window through which we can look at the present, a gate through which we can enter in order to take action. It can teach a moral lesson; Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son may serve as one example. It can help us understand current situations; thus, the conflict between Abraham and his Philistine neighbor in the south over water continued into Isaac's time, setting the stage for the bitter conflict between Israel and the Palestinians over water four millennia later. It can influence diverse groups of people to come together around a shared belief; thus, Abraham's code of ethics may serve as a source of inspiration for both Jews and Muslims about the possibility of reconciliation.

* * *

Because the Gate of Mercy, the *closed* "master gate," represents the overall context for the book, I divided it into eight chapters corresponding to the