

ABRAHAM ACCORD – FORGIVENESS:

On August 13th Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced a groundbreaking agreement with the United Arab Emirates -- the UAE. Netanyahu said,

This is the greatest advancement toward peace between Israel and the Arab world in the last 26 years and it marks the third formal peace between Israel and an Arab nation.

Israel and the UAE are two of the most advanced countries in the world. Together, we will transform the region and forge an even better future for our people. This is a future of peace, a future of security and a future of prosperity.

The UAE deal was closely followed by a similar agreement with Bahrain, and other Arab countries are reportedly lining up to follow.

It is not, however, accurate to call the UAE agreement a “peace” agreement. It’s an agreement to normalize ties between the UAE and Israel, including opening embassies in each other’s countries, direct flights, economic ties, and more. But it’s not a peace agreement because Israel and the UAE have never been at war with each other.

The UAE couldn’t have gone to war against Israel in 1948 or 1967 because the country didn’t even exist until 1971. Before that, the sheikhdoms that now make up the UAE were a protectorate of Britain called the Trucial States.

As Palestinian Authority official Saeb Erekat said, “There was never a single Emirati who fought the Israelis in any war.”

But even though it’s not truly a “peace agreement,” the agreement IS a big deal. NYTimes columnist Thomas Friedman, not a fan of either Bibi or Trump, nonetheless says the agreement is important. Friedman calls it “Huge.” He said it’s not Sadat in Jerusalem or Rabin and Arafat shaking hands, “But it is close.” Friedman explained,

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Just go down the scorecard, and you see how this deal affects every major party in the region — with those in the pro-American, pro-moderate Islam, pro-ending-the-conflict-with-Israel-once-and-for-all camp benefiting the most and those in the radical pro-Iran, anti-American, pro-Islamist permanent-struggle-with-Israel camp all becoming more isolated and left behind.

It's a geopolitical earthquake.

Both the far-left and the far-right in Israel are critical of the deal, which supports the idea that it's a good deal.

Those on the far-left are critical because they say the UAE normalizing ties with Israel reduces pressure on Israel to make peace with the Palestinians. Normalization with the Arab states was always supposed to be the prize for making peace with the Palestinians.

The far-right doesn't like the deal because it seems like Bibi has given up on one of his central campaign promises, unilateral annexation of the West Bank.

But these are minority opinions. The deal is hugely popular with Israelis and much more popular than what Israel supposedly "gave up" – 80% say they prefer having the deal with the UAE to unilaterally annexing territory in the West Bank.

The agreement to normalize relations with the UAE and Bahrain was much easier to accomplish than a real peace agreement would be. There are no hard feelings between Israel and the UAE or Bahrain because of war or terrorism.

No one has to make any big concessions or give up on any important dreams or values. There's no dispute over borders with these two countries that are over 2,000 kilometers away from Israel. The countries have already been forging

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ties, quietly, behind the scenes, for years. Those friendly relations are just out in the open now.

But at the very moment that Trump, Netanyahu, and the foreign ministers of the UAE and Bahrain were signing the “Abraham Accords” at the White House, rockets fired by Hamas in Gaza were raining down on the southern Israeli city of Ashdod.

A true peace agreement with the Palestinians has been and will be far more difficult to achieve than normalization agreements with nations with which we’ve never fired a shot in anger.

How can Israelis forgive the Palestinians for the 1,360 Israeli men, women, and children who’ve been killed in Palestinian terror attacks since September 2000?

How can Palestinians forgive the Israelis for the over 10,000 Palestinian men, women, and children who’ve been killed by the Israeli military or Jewish terrorists since 2000?

On September 16, 2018, Rabbi Ari Fuld, an American-Israeli with a wife and four kids, a man who served as a reserve Israeli paratrooper, was stabbed in the back by a Palestinian terrorist. He managed to shoot and kill the terrorist, saving other people, before falling and dying from his wounds. How are the Israelis supposed to forgive that?

On July 2, 2014, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, a 16-year-old Palestinian resident of East Jerusalem, was kidnapped by three Jewish terrorists who took him to the Jerusalem Forest and beat and burned him to death. How are the Palestinians supposed to forgive that?

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It will be hard for Israelis to forgive the Palestinians for turning down numerous peace overtures dating back to 1948. And it will be very hard for Palestinians to forgive the Israelis for the “Nakba,” the catastrophe, as they call the War of Independence, which displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

By mentioning both Israeli and Palestinian attacks, I am not, *chas v’shalom*, suggesting any kind of moral equivalency. But I AM pointing out that there is a lot of pain on both sides, and making peace requires both parties to somehow find the strength and courage to move beyond their pain.

But it’s difficult. Pain and hurt feelings can paralyze us, can make it impossible to move forward.

We can see this in our personal lives as well. How many of us have people in our families where this one won’t talk to that one, no one is willing to make the first move toward reconciliation, everyone believes they’re morally superior and entitled to an apology?

Our traditional model of teshuvah, unfortunately, can sometimes appear to encourage this kind of behavior. We are told that if you wronged someone you should fix the damage and go to them and ask for forgiveness. But what if you believe *you’re* the one who has been wronged? Is that a license to sit back and do nothing until the other person comes crawling to you asking for forgiveness? No, it’s not.

We can choose to forgive, even if the other party doesn’t come asking for forgiveness. In the story of Joseph, when he finally reveals himself to his brothers, he doesn’t wait for them to ask his forgiveness for what they did. Joseph VOLUNTEERS his forgiveness, but he doesn’t forget. He tells his brothers, “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt.” Surely his brothers know which brother Joseph he is. There was no need for him to add,

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“whom you sold into Egypt,” other than to let his brothers know he hadn’t forgotten what they did to him.

But Joseph continues, and he gives his brothers an “out” so they can forgive themselves. He says, “Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me there; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.” That’s the happy ending to the story – but now let’s look at what happened earlier.

Joseph doesn’t forgive his brothers the minute they show up in Egypt to buy grain. In fact, he puts them through the ringer. He even “gaslights” them. At first, he pretends not to know them. He speaks to them harshly and accuses them of being spies. He puts them in jail for three days. He makes them bring Benjamin to him. He has Shimon tied up and held hostage. He gives them a nice meal, but then he plants his silver cup in Benjamin’s bag and makes him his slave. It’s only AFTER all this that he reveals himself.

So what should we learn from this?

Is this a story about revenge? Is Joseph getting back at his brothers for what they did to him? Since he’s a tzaddik – a righteous man – should we learn to do the same?

Many people misinterpret the expression “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” They think it’s a justification for revenge – you kill one of mine, I kill one of yours.

This is the basis for the “price tag” policy adopted by some Israeli settlers and right-wing extremists. The word “revenge” is often written on the walls at the sites of such attacks.

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But “an eye for an eye” is actually about tort law – not revenge. It means that if someone hurts your eye, you should be compensated for the value of an eye. It’s about proportionality.

Seeking revenge isn’t a Jewish value. In fact, the opposite is true. “Revenge is mine,” says the Lord – it’s not for us.

The Talmud tells us that someone who does not insist on receiving what he has coming to him from people who have wronged him is himself forgiven all his iniquities—the Torah says God is “Forgiving iniquity and passing by transgression.” The Talmud says “Who is forgiven iniquity? He who passes by transgression.”

Joseph didn’t punish his brothers as extremely as they’d punished him. But he did give them a taste of their own medicine. Making them experience a taste of the fear and imprisonment he’d experienced hopefully made them more compassionate.

He made them experience what it was like to be the victims.

In Israel and Palestine, that compassion is often missing. Each side sees only itself as the victim, and the “other” as the villain.

“Price tag” attacks don’t teach compassion – they just harden hatreds and feed the vicious cycle of violence.

One of the most important steps in moving forward toward reconciliation is to be able to hear the other party’s pain. To acknowledge their pain does not mean you have to deny your own pain.

A joint Israeli-Palestinian NGO called “Parents Circle – Families Forum” brings together bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families to hear each other’s stories. For many participants, it’s the first time they directly meet someone from “the

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other side.” They believe we need to be able to hear and acknowledge each other’s pain to be able to move beyond that pain toward peace.

As I said, revenge is not a Jewish value. But compromise is.

Every time Jews walk into their homes, they’re reminded of the value our tradition places on compromise. Many years ago, there was a debate about the proper placement of the mezuzah. According to one opinion, the mezuzah should be placed vertically on the doorpost. According to another opinion, the mezuzah should be placed horizontally. The rabbis agreed to compromise and put the mezuzah on an angle.

Compromise is even more important when conflict puts human lives at stake. And it’s even more important in families than with mezuzahs.

Something else we can learn from the Joseph story is that sometimes it takes a shock or a catastrophe – like a famine or a pandemic or even a peace deal -- to get people to change.

Palestinians were shocked by Israel’s accords with the UAE and Bahrain.

They’re already seeing the results of the cooperation, with flights from Tel Aviv to Dubai and Arab hotels and airlines starting to serve kosher meals. People from the UAE and Bahrain will be coming to Israel to seek medical treatment, vacation, and do business deals.

Israel will, of course, benefit from an influx in capital and an increase in regional tourism.

Bernard Avishai, an Israeli commentator, thinks the Palestinians may take a message from the UAE deal:

Over time, conspicuous exchanges of money and science may prove salutary. Palestinians, after all, will also have to build advanced, urban

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economies; someday, respectful negotiations may resume. Can the Emiratis' example be lost on the residents of Nablus and Hebron, who are an hour's drive, not an afternoon's flight, from Tel Aviv?

And the UAE deal may also make the Israelis more willing to compromise. If the relationships with the UAE and Bahrain flourish as is expected, Israel will have a lot more to lose if it takes unilateral steps that are wildly unpopular in the Arab world. It may feel more ready to compromise to keep the peace with its new and valued allies.

Similarly, there is hope that the pandemic will prove a shock to the system that will cause family members to look at each other in a new light, to remember that family is precious, and to try to repair broken bonds.

As the world slows down and we draw into ourselves, we have been given a time for introspection and a chance to examine our lives and our relationships. Newly reminded of the preciousness of life, we can decide to improve our lives, and those of others, by taking the first step. By doing what we can do.

We don't need to wait for someone we feel has wronged us to ask for forgiveness. We can forgive, and we can reach out. We can listen to the other person's side of the story. We can put aside our pain to hear their pain. We can move from a family war, or a cold *détente*, toward a place of love and healing. We may then be able to find peace with those we have wronged and those who have wronged us. Let us all be, as our liturgy charges us, disciples of Aaron, *ohav shalom v'rodaf shalom*, loving peace and pursuing peace.