

Peace, Salam, Shalom: Peacemaking in Our Abrahamic Faiths

Introduction

The Abrahamic Faiths Peacemaking Initiative (AFPI) is a group of clergy and religious activists united in our faith in the God of love and justice and mercy for all; we advocate peacemaking as an essential and defining mandate of our three faith traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Peacemaking is not an option for any of us; the core morals and teachings of our three religions demand an unwavering commitment to peace. By bringing together a collection of each faith's relevant teachings in one document, we aim to contribute an authentic and substantive religious voice to the current peace movement, to activate Americans of faith to insist on peaceful solutions to local, national and global conflicts, and in particular to end the war and U.S. occupation in Iraq.

In spite of the tragic recurrence of war and conflict, we stand together to affirm that every person is sacred and precious to God. Although the traditions and texts of each Abrahamic faith at times allow for violence and war, peacemaking is central to our three faiths, and so justification of wanton destruction in the name of war is, we hold, a perversion of God's will and plan for humanity. Our purpose in this document is to illustrate clearly and faithfully that peacemaking is a core principle of each Abrahamic religion, that true peace is never peace through domination, and that overly literal or misinterpreted readings of sacred texts and ancient events can lead to catastrophic consequences, especially in the 21st century. The misuse of spiritual concepts to justify modern warfare is poisonous religious ideology, and it has led us astray from the path of peace, justice and the recognition of the sacred in the other. War in a nuclear age is simply not a moral option; nothing less than the survival of the planet and all its inhabitants is at stake.

Genesis of AFPI

This project originated in Los Angeles because of the deep trust and friendship built up here among senior leaders from the three Abrahamic traditions who have been active together in the peace

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movement for several decades. Since the era of anti-Vietnam War rallies, relationships and trust have been built in the local interfaith community.

As a counterpoint to the perception that each faith broadly condones warfare, these same religious leaders sought to excavate the increasingly ignored theological roots for peacemaking from the sacred texts of each Abrahamic tradition. Beginning in 2006, they organized a series of meetings in which active laypeople, clergy and religious educators came together to discuss the obligation for peacemaking, conversing both within their own faith traditions and across faith lines. An important aspect of the work has been self-examination – a willingness to confront troubling texts and principles in support of war and push to the surface the robust theological support for peace in each faith tradition. Dedicated Muslims, Jews and Christians continue to gather, to wrestle with their own traditions, and to share with one another their struggles and revelations. The result is this document.

The Imperative of Interfaith Peacemaking

Daily the world suffers from a spiritual isolationism that obscures our understanding of each other. A corrosive suspicion is present in many places where Abrahamic faith communities live side by side. Particularly since 9/11, the manipulation and manufacture of fear in many parts of North America, Europe and the Middle East are palpable. The passions generated by war and propaganda silence our precious religious language about justice, peace and love.

There can be no peace without loving respect for those who believe differently than ourselves. Similarly, none of us can enjoy peace in our religions or peace among religions or peace among nations if the peace we seek is in our own image alone. There can be no peace on earth if it is only a Christian peace. There can be no complete peace if it is only a Jewish peace. There can be no just and merciful peace if it is only a Muslim peace. The only peace possible is a peace that we all construct by making respectful space for each of us to contribute the best of our differing journeys; the only peace

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possible is a peace that insists on human dignity for every person and that serves as “the supreme unifying principle of life.” (M.L. King, Jr.)

Why Now?

There are many obvious examples of religion’s hand in warmaking, ethnic cleansing and genocide throughout the centuries and today. Religious justifications often underpin violence, standing alongside the claims of national leaders that their behavior is rational and required for national security. And although Christians, Jews and Muslims all claim that their religions are religions of peace, each has adherents who endorse and even encourage wars.

The consequences of the United States’ misguided and unjust war in Iraq are devastating: 1.2 million Iraqis dead and tens of thousands wounded, half of whom are children; 4 million Iraqi refugees; a lack of basic services and security for law-abiding Iraqi families who remain in their war-torn country; the gross inhumanity of Abu Ghraib; and on the American side, 4,000 American soldiers dead with 45,000 wounded – and counting, as well as a rash of suicides among returning U.S. veterans. (See costofwar.com for the latest statistics.) The physical destruction of Iraq and the suffering of millions are staggering.

Equally disturbing are the disease of spirit and the erosion of conscience in our own land. Americans have largely become morally inured to the destruction of the Iraq war, and America’s concern for loss of life, human dignity, and property can no longer be taken for granted. The war in Iraq is both a palpable tragedy in and of itself and a powerful example of how U.S. citizens have allowed an institutionalized predilection for violence and profit to lead our nation wildly astray. While death and destruction continue, national leaders argue that an expansion of the war is really a way to hasten its end. National leaders argue that the erosion of our cherished civil liberties is

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necessary for our own protection. National leaders even claim that God has ordained our military misadventure in Iraq.

To counter this widespread misinterpretation of God's message, we assert that peacemaking – as a concept and an action – is absolutely central to Islam, Judaism and Christianity. We make this assertion as an interfaith group, respecting our differences of belief while working together to challenge the widespread view that the Iraq war is necessary.

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Peacemaking from the Heart of Judaism

As Jews, we engage in an ongoing effort to interpret the received narrative and laws of our tradition. Central to that tradition is the principle of peace, along with the impulse to resist the ever present danger of injustice in our own lives and in the world. Jews are explicitly required to value every human life equally because the Torah teaches that human beings are created in the image of God; at the same time, we are keenly aware of our own shortcomings and are constantly prompted by our tradition to address them. It is true that Judaism's sacred texts supply ample evidence of warfare and violence in our history, but we must use our interpretive tradition to situate arguments in favor of war in the proper context; we must also be mindful that in the same interpretive tradition, peace and justice are defining mandates of our faith – anchored by the belief in the holiness of every human life.

Judaism's Interpretive Imperative

Although Jewish sources do legitimize violence and justify war under certain conditions, the Torah and the Rabbis unmistakably articulate the core principle of *shalom*, peace, which encompasses the inviolability of life and the cultivation of compassion, dignity, justice and love. On the surface these competing strains of thought might appear inherently contradictory, but the rabbinic response to this seeming contradiction – and to all seeming contradictions in our tradition – is twofold: interpretation and context.

For thousands of years, Jews have venerated the Torah as the cornerstone of our faith and our civilization; we have been flexible enough to react to each era's challenges, as well as remain steadfastly devoted to the (sometimes life threatening) continuation of Torah study. At several points in our history, military defeat and ensuing chaos have forced some of our most inspired leaders to a new understanding of our relationship to Torah in the name of survival. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai asked of the Roman Emperor not for a restoration of the destroyed Holy Temple in Jerusalem, but for

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a center of Torah learning to be established in the city of Yavneh; crypto-Jews in medieval Spain studied Torah in secret to avoid Inquisitors; Jewish villagers in Eastern Europe buried Torahs under floorboards to protect them during pogroms; and fighters in the Warsaw ghetto entrusted Torahs to righteous gentiles for safe-keeping. Just as Jews have found creative ways to preserve the sacred Torah scrolls in every age, so we have found new ways of understanding the wisdom of the Torah. In this way, we have kept our tradition dynamic and relevant through the centuries despite the hatred and violence we have so often faced.

We are taught by our sages to “turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it” (Pirke Avot 5:24) because we are required to persist in arriving at a renewed understanding of the Torah’s teachings. Indeed, even in ancient and medieval times, interpretation of the Torah’s message was an integral part of the Jewish experience. The Talmud, our most respected and authoritative commentary, is itself a conversation spanning hundreds of years among rabbis who disagree on points of law and the meaning of the Torah. From their different perspectives, they often come to very different conclusions, but it is their model of conversation and willingness to continue engaging that assure the vibrancy of the Jewish faith. Indeed, Jewish thought fosters a culture of *mahloket*, debate and disputation in the name of illumination. It is this embrace of the *mahloket* that keeps at bay absolutism and hubristic certainty in matters known only to the Divine. To be Jewish is to question; to question Jewishly is to be open-minded, rational and skeptical of dogmatic thinking.

Because dialogue and interpretation are essential to the ongoing vitality of Torah, we cannot rest today on the presumed literal meaning of the Torah (*pshat*). Nor, for that matter, can we rely entirely on the interpretative paths of the past without considering the impact of our own contemporary state of affairs. It is our responsibility as Torah-centered Jews to extend those venerable paths into the present day and beyond, employing all the tools of the current age in concert with the teachings of our sages.

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The Centrality of *Shalom*

Many are the expressions of peace in the Torah:

May the Lord bestow favor upon you and grant you peace (Numbers 6:27)

I will grant peace to the land, and you shall lie down to sleep with no one to terrorize you (Leviticus 26:26)

For the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness, calm and confidence forever (Isaiah 32:17)

Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it (Psalm 34:14).

Jews invoke the blessing of peace several times a day in our liturgy, in the Priestly Blessing we recite over our children, in the greetings we offer to one another upon meeting or parting, and on our holiest day, Shabbat. However, “peace” is not a full translation of the Hebrew word *shalom*, the root of which evokes wholeness and completion, which in turn echoes our understanding of God as One. In Judaism, *shalom* is a complete peace – contentment, security, tranquility, justice, wholeness and holiness.

For Jews, humans are both vessels of holiness and reflections of the divine. “God created humankind in His image, in the image of God did He create it; male and female did He create them” (Genesis 1:27). Because the Torah teaches that God created humanity *be-tselem Elohim*, in God’s own image, we value every human life as holy and strive to recognize God’s presence in every human face; as a result, to take even one human life is to diminish God’s presence in the world. “Whoever sheds the blood of a human being, by human beings shall his blood be shed, for in the divine image did God make humanity” (Genesis 9:6). The rabbis elaborate on this point: when one destroys a single individual, it is as if that person destroyed the whole world (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). Moreover, the great twentieth-century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote, “To meet a human being is an opportunity to sense the image of God, the *presence* of God. According to a rabbinical

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interpretation, the Holy One said to Moses: ‘Wherever you see the trace of a human being there I stand before you...’¹

The Torah extols us to revere the holiness not only within others, but also to cultivate the holiness within ourselves: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). The Talmud further underscores the necessity for Jews to emulate God’s holiness in our actions:

Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina taught: The verse says, ‘You shall follow Adonai your God’ (Deuteronomy 13:5). Is it possible for humans to follow God? ... It means that people must imitate the divine attributes of the Holy One. Even as God clothes the naked, so shall you do likewise; even as God visits the sick, so shall you; even as God comforts mourners, so shall you (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 14a).

As God acts, so must we.

It is not an accident that the most commonly quoted verse regarding justice – *tsedek, tzedek tirdof*, “justice, justice you must pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20) – and the above-quoted *bakesh shalom ve-rodfehu* (“seek peace and pursue it,” Psalm 34:15) – both utilize the Hebrew root *R-D-F*, meaning “pursue.” *Shalom* is not passive; we are obliged to work for *shalom* actively and consistently. “Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel taught: The world rests on three things – on Justice, on Truth, [and] on Peace, as it is written [in Zech 8:16], ‘With truth, justice and peace shall you judge in your gates’” (Pirke Avot 1:18). In our tradition, the most effective and most righteous path to peace is the path of justice, and this intimate and symbiotic relationship between peace and justice compels us to be righteous in all relations in order to establish peace – at home and when we travel, with our families, with our neighbors, and even with our enemies. There is a strain of halakhic reasoning exemplified by the thought of Rabbi Menahem haMeiri that affirms the humanity of all God-believers, Jews and non-Jews. For its time, it is an embrace of the human that is a remarkable expression of inclusion.

When we fail to recognize and value the holiness inherent in another by acting violently or dismissively, the Torah suggests that the consequences are dire for us and our descendants because in

¹ “No Religion Is An Island” in *Spiritual Grandeur* p. 239-240

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negating or minimizing another's sacredness and dignity, we necessarily negate or minimize our own. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, has written, "Jews were summoned by God to many things: to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, to be God's witnesses and the medium through which His light is refracted to the world. Not least of these challenges, however, was to be different and at the same time a blessing to humanity as a whole: to be a voice for peace when 'ignorant armies clash at night...'"²

Judaism and War

We stand on a razor's edge. It is so easy to hurt, to destroy, to insult, to kill. Giving birth to one child is a mystery; bringing death to millions is but a skill. It is not quite within the power of the human will to generate life; it is quite within the power of the will to destroy life.³

Jewish history includes several accounts of Jews in heroic battles for righteous causes, such as the Maccabees. In 1936, future Prime Minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion said, "These days, it is not right but might which prevails. It is more important to have force than justice on one's side." Even God is called an *ish milhamah*, a man of war, in the Torah. As Jews, we should not ignore these elements of our tradition; rather, we should follow our sages, from antiquity through modernity, in testing and reworking violent tendencies that are so radically discordant with our understanding of God's call to the Jewish people and with our conception of God as merciful and compassionate, *El rahum ve-hanun*. We must continue to challenge aspects of our tradition that seem to condone violence, warfare and fear of the other. By doing so, we are in accordance with the ancient rabbis, for whom the onset of war was regarded as a failure.

It is written in Ecclesiastes that there is "a time for war and a time for peace" (3:8). For that reason, there are ample guidelines for waging war in the Torah, and the Talmud expands on these by creating two legal categories of permitted warfare – *milhemet mitsvah*, obligatory war, and *milhemet*

² "Difference, Anti-Semitism and the Clash of Civilizations," *The Dignity of Difference*.

³ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. The Wisdom of Heschel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

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reshut, discretionary war.⁴ The basic principles of these *halakhot*, laws, are: we must exhaust all possible attempts to avoid violent conflict; we must allow civilians who wish to flee or surrender to do so before or during an attack; we must honor treaties and agreements; we must safeguard the moral character of our own soldiers; we must preserve the natural environment, even in the midst of battle; and perhaps most poignantly, we must preserve the humanity of our enemy. For example, when a Jewish army is victorious, soldiers are not permitted to rejoice. Jewish soldiers can be happy that the war is over and they have not lost their lives, but they are not allowed to celebrate the deaths of other human beings. We are reminded of this ethos every year at our *Pesah* seders when we remove drops of wine as we recite the ten plagues so that our joy is diminished in response to the suffering of our oppressors, the Egyptians. As General Yitzhak Rabin said in the immediate aftermath of the Six Day War:

The elation of victory had seized the whole nation. Yet among the soldiers themselves a curious phenomenon is to be observed. They cannot rejoice wholeheartedly. Their triumph is marred by grief and shock, and there are some who cannot rejoice at all. The men in the front lines saw with their own eyes not only the glory of victory, but also its cost, their comrades fallen beside them soaked in blood. And I know that the terrible price the enemy paid has also deeply moved many of our men.⁵

Many of the laws guiding Jews in warfare are specifically designed around the particulars of ancient Jewish life, such as attacking walled cities or creating slaves out of captives, not dissimilar to the lengthy talmudic discussions of how to properly conduct sacrifices in the ancient Temple. Given that contemporary warfare is as different from ancient warfare as today's synagogue prayer services are different from animal sacrifice, many of the laws regarding warfare are simply inapplicable. Furthermore, the realities of contemporary warfare – for example, the uncontrollable and devastating

⁴ Historically, these halakhic categories have applied only in the land of Israel. And although the ethics behind the *halakha* may be applied in a contemporary context, it can be strongly argued that the practicalities of these laws directly reflect the circumstances of ancient life and are therefore no longer applicable.

⁵ Speech at the Hebrew University.

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violence of cluster bombs, toxic chemical-filled rockets and radioactive depleted-uranium ammunition – make adhering to the dictates of the Torah and the talmudic rabbis impossible; the use of the term “collateral damage” to desensitize us to the loss of innocent life is deeply unsettling; and, nuclear weapons make the entire category of “permitted war” absurd. It is impossible to protect the environment or safeguard noncombatants when using such indiscriminate and overwhelming armaments.

The book of Joshua’s account of entering the land of Israel in many ways reflects the brutality of the biblical era while simultaneously sanitizing the bloodshed. In talmudic times, the discussion of war was entirely theoretical, as Jews did not have sovereignty over their own land but lived as the subjects of others, occasionally welcomed but more often tolerated or tormented. Today, however, for the first time in almost two thousand years, the ethics of warfare is again a concrete and vital topic for Jews. With the rebirth of Jewish statehood and the power Jews have amassed in American society in the 20th century, we are now called upon to find a balance between war and our obligation to pursue peace in the context of modern geopolitics. Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, former Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Yaffo, articulated this clearly 1985: “...[T]he great moral to be derived by every government among the people Israel is that it possesses an obligation to conduct itself towards its minorities and those who are strangers in its midst with integrity and fairness. In so doing, it will sanctify the Name of Heaven and the name of Israel in the world.”⁶

Rabbi Heschel wrote during the Vietnam War that “the most basic way in which all men may be divided is between those who believe that war is unnecessary and those who believe that war is inevitable...”⁷ To insist that war is inevitable is contrary to the body of Jewish thought and to our commitment to be an *am kadosh* that values, above all, the divine in every human.

⁶ “The Governmental Obligation for the Support of its Citizens: The Governmental Obligation to Act with National Integrity.”

⁷ “A Prayer for Peace.” Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, ed. Susannah Heschel. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1996. 231.

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Heshbon Ha-nefesh – Self-Examination

Man cannot escape the eye of God, but in trying to hide from [God], he is hiding from himself... The decisive heart-searching is the beginning of the way in man's life; it is, again and again, the beginning of a human way.⁸

Humans are frail instruments who are not always successful doing God's work of seeking justice and pursuing peace. We are sometimes thwarted by our *yetser ha-ra'*, humanity's inherent "evil inclination," an impulse that Judaism has always acknowledged in recognizing the complicated nature of human experience and history. Unfortunately and paradoxically, it has sometimes been our own struggle for self-determination, justice and peace that has shaped some Jews into supporters of war. Some proudly carry the mantle of religious or national Jewish assertion but do not balance their deeply-held commitments with the tradition's mandate for peacemaking. Some bear in their lives the burden of having suffered in the Jewish struggle to survive, either in the Holocaust, in Israel's fight for independence, or in any of the other numerous scenarios in which Jews have been persecuted or attacked. Some are simply inexperienced wielders of power because holding power has been a rare and recent occurrence in our history. To acknowledge shortcomings is to strengthen and honor our *yetser ha-tov*, our inclination toward goodness.

"Whosoever possesses these three qualities belongs to the disciples of Abraham, our father: a generous eye, a humble spirit, and a modest soul. But he who possesses the three opposite qualities – a grudging eye, an arrogant spirit, and a haughty soul – is of the disciples of Balaam the wicked (Pirke Avot 5:21). Regardless of the justifications our tradition may supply for limited war or violence, and regardless of the claims we may have to explain our *yetser ha-ra'*, we are nonetheless called by the Torah and by God to pursue peace. This command is not conditional; the instruction to "seek peace and pursue it" applies at all times and in all situations. Even when we seek to defend ourselves – as

⁸ Buber, Martin. The Way of Man: According to the Teaching of Hasidism. Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1966. 12-13.

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Jews and/or as Americans – by violent means against a violent attack, we must simultaneously be pursuing peace if we are conducting ourselves in an authentically Jewish manner. It is the immense difficulty of this task – the pursuit of peace and justice when war, violence and injustice are all around us – that necessitates constant self evaluation, a *heshbon ha-nefesh* (literally, an accounting of the soul).

In our daily liturgy, as well as annually on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we recognize the effects that our *yetser ha-ra'* inevitably has on our actions. In asking God to forgive our trespasses using the ancient prayers, we also remind ourselves of our true, best nature, our *yetser ha-tov*. The daily *Amidah*, the foundation of every Jewish prayer service, brings several aspects of right action to our attention:

Grant us knowledge, discernment and wisdom.

Our King, draw us near to your service.

Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned; pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed.

The rabbis who compiled our liturgy wanted us to make these statements three times daily not only because they believed that these messages are what God wants to hear; they also knew that these are the messages that we *need* to hear to buttress our *yetser ha-tov*. If we behave violently, or condone violence, or fail to challenge a government that does so, our liturgy reminds us that, as Jews, our commitment to honor holiness in the world and in every human being requires that we re-examine our positions when they are incongruous with Judaism's fundamental precepts.

For an individual cannot but sin and err, either through ignorance – by professing an opinion or a moral quality that is not preferable in truth – or else because he is overcome by desire or anger. If then the individual believed that this fracture can never be remedied, he would persist in his error and sometimes perhaps disobey even more because of the fact that no stratagem remains at his disposal. If, however, he believes in repentance, he can correct himself and return to a better and more perfect state than the one he was in before he sinned. (Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III:36)

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If we, indeed, strive to fulfill our role as an *am kadosh*, a holy people, then we need to be self-reflective enough to recognize when we are less than holy in our actions or our attitudes. Rabbi Heschel explains that “even before Israel was told in the Ten Commandments what to do, it was told what *to be: a holy people...* [T]he goal is that man be *transformed*; to worship the Holy is to be holy.”⁹ For our own sake and for the sake of the communities we live in and interact with, we must be self-aware so that we can successfully cultivate our own holiness by emulating God’s. Not only will our enemies benefit from our compassion and mercy towards them, not only will the world’s victims be uplifted by our work on behalf of justice for all, but we will be transformed, our collective spirit and our *yetser ha-tov* will be uplifted. “For the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness, calm and confidence forever” (Isaiah 32:17).

“Our rabbis taught: ‘The sword comes into the world because of justice delayed and justice denied’” (Pirke Avot 5:8). As American Jews, we must resist the temptation to sublimate our Jewish values in favor of mainstream American values that all too frequently support warfare and inequity, whether by active choice or by complacency. We are obligated to be vocal and active in pursuit of peace in the real world of our communities and our nation; it is not enough to talk of *shalom* and *tsedek* in our synagogues; it is not enough to sing “*oseh shalom binromav*, God who brings peace to the universe.” We must pursue *shalom* and *tsedek* in tangible ways if we are to honor our Jewish heritage.

The origin of all conflict between me and my fellow-men is that I do not say what I mean, and that I do not do what I say... By our contradiction, our lie, we foster conflict-situations and give them power over us until they enslave us. From here, there is no way out but by the crucial realization: Everything depends on myself, and the crucial decision: I will straighten myself out (Buber, *The Way of Man*, 29).

When we return the Torah to its ark after chanting from the scroll on Shabbat, we sing, “its ways are pleasantness, and all its paths are peace. Help us turn to You, and we shall return.” Despite

⁹ The Wisdom of Heschel. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1975.

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the fact that God is presented in the Torah as sometimes loving and sometimes vengeful, the essence of Torah and God's most sincere blessing for us is peace, and we must act according to the teachings that we have defended for thousands of years in order to fulfill our role in creation and effect *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. To believe that God is One is not to believe that God is monolithic. Every human being, every point of view, every impulse based in righteousness and compassion is representative of God's *shelemut*, completeness. By embracing the multiplicity inherent in true unity, by evaluating our own beliefs and actions in accordance with Torah values, by seeing God in the face of every other person, we create the conditions for justice and peace to flourish. Throughout our cyclical history of unimaginable suffering, near destruction and miraculous recovery, we have been called to passionately seek justice and pursue peace. It is precisely because of our history of suffering and deliverance that we are uniquely qualified to do so.

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Peacemaking from the Heart of Christianity

Jesus of Nazareth was a radically inclusive and resolute peacemaker who called disciples to be instruments of peace and community-making in his name. Making peace through justice, compassion and healing forms the core of Jesus' preaching and ministry, stemming from his conviction that the Reign of God is powerfully active in the present. In and through Jesus' resurrection, God validates Jesus' message that community-making nonviolence is the path for humankind to follow. All those who seek to live in faithful discipleship, listening to Jesus, are called to practice his way of peacemaking love.

Redefining the Neighbor

False and violence-making boundaries are overcome by Jesus' vision of community. Under the corrupt imperial honor code, "neighbor" had been defined only as a peer – someone in one's own clan, village, region, economic class or political faction; there was no imperative to include outsiders or people of lesser status. Jesus speaks of "sheep who don't belong to this fold" (Jn 10:16) – people outside of one's own tribe who nevertheless carry God's full blessing. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37) redefines the neighbor as anyone in need, especially the outsider. This is Jesus' vision of God's true community of compassion. In contemporary life, followers of Jesus understand that the living Christ calls **people** to meet God in the lives of the marginalized – those in need of justice and healing care – whoever they are. Whole nations are ultimately judged by the manner in which they respond collectively to the estranged and the poor:

"At the appointed time, the Promised One will come in glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, and will sit upon the royal throne, with all the nations assembled below. Then the Promised One will separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be placed on the right hand, the goats on the left. The ruler will say to those on the right, 'Come, you blessed of my Abba God! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.' Then these just

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will ask, 'When did we see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in, or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?' The ruler will answer them, 'The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters and brothers, you did it for me.'" (Mt 25:31-40)

The refusal to see that my enemy is actually my neighbor in God's eyes leads us to base foreign policy on the lie that an American life is more precious than any other. Jesus rejected such discriminatory ways of regarding others, insisting that whoever is in need is one's neighbor and whenever we extend compassion "to the least of these, you have done it unto me" (Mt 25:??).

Peace Achieved Through Justice Is the Central Theme of Jesus' Life and Public Witness

The imperial Roman world Jesus entered was rife with systems perpetuating discrimination, violence, torture and injustice. Augustus, Tiberius, Herod and their various clients had achieved an unstable peace by means of fear and domination. "They made a desert and called it peace," in the phraseology of Tacitus, the Roman Empire's primary historian. But counter to the Empire's reign of terror, Jesus invoked a different kind of reign – God's Reign of *Shalom*, or just peace. Jesus taught that this could be achieved in large and small ways in the present, through the pursuit of justice or through relations aligned with God's love. Where the Empire sought peace through military victory, Jesus sought peace through justice. Jesus' strategy revered the sacredness of all life rather than military domination.

In words and actions the Gospels describe Jesus as the embodiment of God's strategy of peacemaking. At Jesus' birth, the angels herald the news:

Suddenly, there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in high heaven! And peace on earth, to those on whom God's favor rests." (Lk 2:13-14)

As in the beginning, so at the end of the story: in the post-resurrection appearances, Jesus salutes his band of followers with the greeting of peace:

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In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked in the room where the disciples were... Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Having said this, the savior showed them the marks of crucifixion. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw Jesus, who said to them again, "Peace be with you. (Jn 20:19abc, 20, 21ab; see also Lk 24:36)

The Gospel of Luke powerfully underscores the fact that Jesus enters into the Empire's reign of violence and oppression *in order to put an end to this reign* (Lk 20:42). At the very start of ministry, Jesus visits his home synagogue in Nazareth, takes the scroll, and reads the jubilee passage from Isaiah 61: *"... the Most High has sent me to bring Good News to those who are poor...to proclaim the year of our God's favor"* (Lk 4.18bc, 19 GFR: NEEDS ALL OF LUKE 4:18, 19). Then Jesus tells the amazed onlookers, *"Today, in your hearing, this scripture passage is fulfilled"* (Lk 4:21b). Later, toward the end of three years of ministry, Jesus causes a scandal in the Jerusalem temple by driving those who exploit the poor away from the temple courtyard (Lk 19:45-46). Jesus quotes the Prophet Jeremiah: *"Scripture says, 'My Temple will be a house of prayer' – but you have made it a den of thieves!"* (Jer.7:11)

At the heart of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), a collection of sayings concerning the central expression of Jesus' vision, lies this remarkable teaching: *"Blessed are those who work for peace: they will be called children of God"* (Mt 5:9). Jesus then takes up the deep roots of violence – self-promotion, greed and the impulse to judge others without looking inward – and rejects these as unworthy representations of God on earth. Jesus teaches that one aligns oneself with God, not by loving those who can or will return love, but by loving and praying for actual enemies, even when one has been abused by them.

"If you love those who love you, what merit is there in that? Don't tax collectors do as much? And if you greet only your sisters and brothers, what is so praiseworthy about that? Don't the Gentiles do as much? Therefore be perfect, as Abba God in heaven is perfect." (Mt 5:46-48; see also Lk 6:36)

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Jesus' Death and Resurrection as a Testament and Vindication of Nonviolence

The customary understanding of Jesus' crucifixion adheres to a doctrine of substitutionary atonement: the belief that God's wrath in reaction to human sin must be placated by God's sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as a substitute for sacrificing sinful humans. This lens has led many American Christians to validate, and even valorize, the notion of redemptive violence – a violence that purifies. In this view, redemption through torture and death becomes the central message of the crucifixion. Theologically, this belief means that Jesus' resurrection is unnecessary; the cross becomes all that is needed for redemption. Historically, this view has led to untold horrors committed in the name of Christianity – frequently blessed by the institutional Church in cooperation with lay Christian political leaders – through long, bloody centuries. Christian violence against Jews and Muslims stands out as the most egregious example of the belief that brute force and torture can produce redemptive ends.

The religion of the salvific power of sacrificing others' lives (scapegoating) is not even rooted in ancient theology, but is instead derived from the 12th century thinking of St. Anselm of Canterbury. This lens for the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus does not reflect Jesus' own teachings about love and peace, compassion and justice. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32), for example, Jesus teaches that God's compassion does not include punishment, but offers reconciliation without precondition or payment of penalty.

The crucifixion of Jesus is a story of love overcoming hate, of compassion transforming vengeance. It is not a story about passivity. Jesus' death bears witness to the fact that God's response to violence is active nonviolence. Jesus refused to retaliate, but spoke words of compassion and forgiveness to the very persons who crucified him: *"Abba forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."* (Lk 23:24).

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This also is not a story of sin-cleansing sacrifice. It is not the violence Jesus suffered which redeems and liberates us; rather, we are liberated and saved by Jesus' rootedness in God's love and his refusal to embrace vengeance or hate, even in the face of his own death. It is his compassion toward the abusers that liberates even them and overcomes their violent choices. God provides in Jesus' death our strategy for how to behave towards those who wrong us and others and how to break the cycle of violence by engaging in active, transformative nonviolence. Jesus reveals God's way of nonviolence in the crucifixion, and God validates Jesus' nonviolence and peace in the resurrection. *"Go and learn the meaning of these words,"* Jesus says to disciples then and now: *"I desire compassion, not sacrifice"* (Mt 9:13).

Jesus demonstrates that God's unconditional love is not passive; rather, it interrupts the spiral of vengeance and is even transformative. Jesus never wavers from the path of peace through justice and reconciliation, and he sends disciples out to do the same.

Jesus anticipated the violence that his message would provoke, and did all he could to prevent it. When armed Roman soldiers arrested Jesus, one of the disciples struck back with a sword. But *"Jesus said, 'Put your sword back where it belongs. Those who live by the sword die by the sword.'"* (Mt 26:52) Although clubs and swords were used against Jesus and his companions, no weapons were to be used by Jesus' faithful followers in retaliation. Contemporary Christians committed to the present and future reign of God also follow Jesus' non-violent example.

How, then, to understand such teachings as *"Don't suppose that I came to bring peace on earth. I came not to bring peace, but a sword"* (Mt 10:34). Placing this teaching in the context of Jesus' entire message, as well as in its immediate context, lends understanding.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus stresses two concepts. The first of these is non-violence:

"To you who hear me, I say: love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. When they slap you on one cheek, turn and give them the other; when they take your coat, let them have your shirt as well." (Lk 6:27-29)

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The second is God's special care for the weak, the powerless and the oppressed among God's children: "*You who are poor are blessed, for the reign of God is yours*" (Lk 6:20).

Jesus' consistent message of nonviolence and service to the outsider *elicited* violence and resistance. Jesus expected that this revolutionary vision would be met with opposition, such that even families would be split between those accepting and rejecting it. This is the immediate context of Matthew 10:34: "*I have come to turn a son against his father, a daughter against her mother, in-law against in-law. One's enemies will be the members of one's own household*" (verses 35-36).

The *sword* used against Jesus and early Christians fell upon them because they directly challenged the brutality of the Roman Empire through an unwavering commitment to nonviolence. First-century Roman historians make it clear that Christians were despised primarily because of their absolute insistence on human equality. Local religious authorities tied to the Roman Empire were also threatened by Jesus' call for justice, nonviolence and peace. The powerful in Jesus' time – as well as the powerful throughout history – used slander, intimidation and force in an attempt to invalidate such teaching. Jesus understood the transformational power of God's peace, yet also anticipated the oppressive reaction of those who refused the values of God's Reign. To infer, as some do, from a reading of the passages above that Jesus *endorsed* violence, however, amounts to a tragic misinterpretation of Matthew 10:34 and its context.

At the very end, in Jesus' arrest and death, he holds fast to the way of compassion, reconciliation, and peace through love and justice. When Jesus forgives his tormentors, a Roman soldier and executioner is moved to confess, "*Clearly, this was God's Own!*" (Mk 15:39)

Violence and War in Christian Perspective

For three centuries, Christians were marked as disciples of Jesus by their lives of nonviolent love. Origin said that Christians "do not go forth as soldiers." Tertullian wrote, "Only without the

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sword can the Christian wage war, for the Lord has abolished the sword.” Then there are these stark words of Clement of Alexandria: “He who holds the sword must cast it away and that if one of the faithful becomes a soldier he must be rejected by the church for he has scorned God.” But this mandate to be peacemakers was short lived.

By the fourth century, the Christian Church had all but abandoned Jesus’ original vision of nonviolence. Emperor Constantine adopted a form of Christianity that introduced the conquering cross as its symbol for the first time in church history. Constantine fashioned this cross from two swords, and then made it the authorized symbol for the expression of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. With the cross in hand, Constantine proclaimed, “In this sign, conquer.” The church had allowed its very heart to be colonized by Roman imperial values. Yet this sad history of the betrayal of Jesus’ vision of nonviolence in no way invalidates the vision itself.

St. Augustine was a fourth-century Christian. He believed that the only reason to go to war was the desire for peace. He writes, “We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace.” Augustine tried to reconcile Christian nonviolence with the world as it actually was, to bring together the nonviolent teachings of Jesus with the obligations of Roman citizens, including Christians. Augustine’s ethical position on violent conflict became the foundation of the Just War theory.

Thomas Aquinas, in his thirteenth-century *Summa Theologica*, provides the criteria for the Just War theory by taking Augustine’s ethical position and developing various specific conditions that must be met if war is to be waged justly: just cause, proper authority, right intention, probability of success, the last resort, proportionality and the protection of non-combatants.

For 1,700 years, the vision of the nonviolent Jesus who called us to be peacemakers and to love those who abuse us has been abandoned. Nations claiming to fight just wars have gravely violated

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most of the just war principles. Modern war, with its indiscriminate killing and potential for nuclear lethality, cannot be called just and congruent with the life and spirit of the nonviolent Christ. Modern warfare, which includes the firebombing of Dresden, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Iraq War – based on lies and distortions, destroying a country and killing 1.2 million Iraqi civilians – this warfare cannot be called just. The only way to describe such a war is as a brutal violation of the central truths of the Christian story.

Liberation from Obsessive Self-Interest and Fear: A Key Test of Faith

Many U.S. citizens order their lives according to an ethic of acquisitive individualism. This unbiblical, unmindful ethic ignores ways in which the global production system and the international weapons business support over-consumption and domination of others, while perpetuating misery, injustice and violence. Today's worldwide U.S. military dominance, rather than defending from outside enemies, functions to ensure the United States' continuing ability to consume a disproportionate share of world resources. As long as we remain captive to the dominant script of a violence-prone society, *"We grope, like the blind along a wall, feeling our way like blind people..."* – a place where *"Justice is shuffled aside, and integrity stands a long way off; truth stumbles in the streets, and honesty is consigned to the alleys."* (Isa 59:10, 14)

Jesus does not despise or reject the wealthy, fearful and self-preoccupied. Instead, Jesus invites all to a richer life of compassionate solidarity with the poor, laying down the burden of fear-based self-absorption. This is the point of Jesus' dialogue with the rich young ruler (Mt 19:16-24). It is also the basis for urging a wealthy host to invite the marginal and despised to a banquet, rather than the usual friends and colleagues (Lk 14: 12-14). Time and again, Jesus' heart breaks for those who refuse to practice inclusive generosity.

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Jesus tells the story of a wealthy person who is unsympathetic to the plight of a starving, sick Lazarus, lying at the gate. The rich one ends in eternal torment, whereas Lazarus is received into *“the arms of Sarah and Abraham”* (Lk 16:19-31). The gulf between the two in eternity mirrors the economic gulf that the uncaring wealthy man perpetuated in earthly life. This story speaks not only of personal indifference to suffering at our doorsteps, but also to the ordering of institutional and political life – even to the level of national budgets focused on military priorities that neglect those without health care, education and jobs. In this manner, both personal and U.S. national budgets come under moral scrutiny.

Our willingness to be liberated from preoccupation with self-preservation becomes a key test of faith. This is the case with both personal and national security. Jesus teaches, *“That’s why I tell you not to worry about your livelihood, what you are to eat or drink or use for clothing. Isn’t life more than just food? Isn’t the body more than just clothes?”* (Mt 6:25) Those who fear scarcity are, in their isolation, failing to trust God’s generosity available through true community. How many believe that God will provide for humanity as God provides for the birds in the sky or the lilies of the field? (Mt 6:26-30) How many trust Jesus’ promise of shared abundance in feeding a vast crowd by blessing a few loaves and fishes? (Mt 14:15-21) How many, like the disciples in that story, are more apt to send the multitudes home, for fear that there will not be enough for all? As the Apostle James teaches:

“Where do these conflicts and battles among you first start? Isn’t it that they come from the desires that battle within you? You want something and don’t get it, so you’re prepared to kill to get it. You have ambitions that you can’t satisfy, so you fight to get your way by force.” (Jas. 4:1-2)

U.S. Christians who imagine that God is only concerned about individual salvation view a different concern when looking at biblical texts; these show that God’s primary concern is the destructive power to the human family of individuals and nations amassing wealth through force instead of cooperation and diplomacy.

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Fearful alienation from God's generosity given in community leads to an ethic of self-inflation and the callous indifference toward and domination of others. There is a similar spiritual and national cancer in a "God Bless America" mentality. Jesus refuses to sanction tribal exceptionalism. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37) is instructive in this instance. Of the three persons who pass by the victim, only one aligns with God's way – the foreigner, or Samaritan. In some of the healing stories (e.g., the servant of the Roman centurion in Lk 7:2-10, the daughter of the Canaanite woman in Mk 7:25-30 and Mt 15:21-28), the one with authentic faith and ethical clarity is the outsider. The founding national myth in the United States holds that the U.S. enjoys God's special blessing, that the U.S. is anointed to teach morality and bring peace to the rest of the world. But that myth is falsified each time this nation uses war, torture and other violent means to oppress others' dignity, self-determination, well-being and safety. No nation has a special claim on grace, let alone a nation that arms itself at a level greater than all other nations combined, while depriving its neediest members of basic health care and education. From the new definition of neighbor, and from renouncing old ways of fear-based self-promotion, flows a new, inclusive ethic in which every child of God is valued, welcomed and embraced, and all are able to share in God's blessing of peace.

Peacemaking and the Persistence of Hope

The main peacemaking challenge today is to awaken to both suffering and hope. This will involve divesting from indifference to the impact that this country's way of life and recourse to violence has had upon the whole world. It will require seeking liberation from misplaced values for all neighbors, as well as ourselves. At the very core of creation are love, compassion and forgiveness. When these qualities are expressed in a fractured and polarized world, the very power of creation is released within and around us.

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God's grace is given for the healing transformation of this hurting world, and working for such transformation – no less achieving it – is an immeasurably difficult task. *“Enter by the narrow gate. The wide gate puts you on the spacious road to damnation, and many take it”* (Mt 7:13). Committing to live out a Christian life of peaceful conflict resolution and reconciliation, material moderation, mindful nonviolence and genuine social equity could not run more deeply counter to prevailing cultural norms in the United States. At the same time, such a life of collective creative resistance to injustice, discrimination, and conflict represents the most profound expression of Jesus' own teaching and example.

Jesus states clearly that neither more nor less than our own fervent commitment to peacemaking portends the Reign of God: there is no other choice but to heed this call and follow. Peacemaking lies at the heart of Jesus' vision: for Christians, peace through justice is not an option, but is the central mandate of Jesus' life and ministry. Desmond Tutu movingly expresses this call: “I am a Christian. I am constrained by my faith to hope against hope, placing my trust in things as yet unseen. Hope persists in the face of evidence to the contrary, undeterred by setbacks and disappointment. ... I insist that the hope in which I persist is not reducible to politics or identified with a people. It has a more encompassing shape. I like to call it ‘God's dream.’ God has a dream for all his children. It is about a day when all people enjoy fundamental security and live free of fear. It is about a day when all people have a hospitable land in which to establish a future. More than anything else, God's dream is about a day when all people are accorded equal dignity because they are human beings. In God's beautiful dream, no other reason is required. God's dream begins when we begin to know each other differently, as bearers of a common humanity, not as statistics to be counted, problems to be

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solved, enemies to be vanquished or animals to be caged. God's dream begins the moment one adversary looks another in the eye and sees himself reflected there."¹⁰

¹⁰ "Realizing God's Dream for the Holy Land." *The Boston Globe*. Oct. 26, 2007.

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Peacemaking from the Heart of Islam

In the Name of God Who is Compassionate and Merciful

Peace in Islam does not mean the absence of war, but the absence of oppression, corruption, injustice and tyranny. Islam considers that real peace can only be attained when justice prevails.

The Arabic word "Islam" is derived from the same root as the word "salaam" and has the same connotation as the Hebrew word "shalom." The best definition of the word "Islam" is to establish or promote inner and outer peace, in harmony with the will of God. The primary duty of a Muslim is to establish peace so that justice prevails and humanity prospers. A true Muslim does not commit acts of violence, either for the spread of Islam or for the purpose of achieving power in the name of Islam.

Too often, non-Muslims treat the terms "Islam" and "Muslim" as synonymous, mutually interchangeable terms. The word "Islam" should be used exclusively to refer to the religion based upon two sources -- the Qur'an, the divinely revealed word of God, and the *Sunnah*, the proven practices of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing of God be upon him). "Muslims" are followers of the religion of Islam.

Islam never claimed to be a new faith. It is the same faith that God ordained with the creation of the first humans. Islam affirms the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as prophets of Islam and their messages as the messages of Islam. But it is the Qur'an and the *Seerah*, the Prophet Muhammad's example, which form the basis of the theological, moral and social behaviors and attitudes of a Muslim. The ethical code of Islam is similar to those of Judaism and Christianity; Islam differentiates itself in its theology and in its methods of worship of the One God. Islam also strongly emphasizes that the morality and ethics underlying the theology and practice of Islam should govern all spheres and aspects of human life.

The *ibadat*, Islam's mandated acts of worship, include praying, fasting, giving alms and performing *hajj* pilgrimage; these are central to Islam. These *ibadat*, according to the Qur'an, lead to

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inner peace, *sakinat al-qalb*; inner peace and spiritual solace, in turn, are the very foundation stones of ethical conduct. Thus the Qur'an says of God, "He it is who sent down inner peace into the hearts of the believers that they might add faith to their faith" (48:4).

The Sanctity of Life

The fundamental premise of the Qur'an is *tawheed*, the oneness of God from which follows the unity of all humans with one another and with nature. The *Shahadah*, the central creed of Islam, testifies that "there is no god but God." The Qur'an asserts that God breathed His Spirit in every human being; this makes every human life sacred. Hence any wanton act of destruction of human life, whether self-inflicted or perpetuated on others, is strictly prohibited. We cannot love and revere all-merciful God by destroying His creation.

A person who does kill another will be lost to God's guidance in this life and denied entry to Paradise in the Afterlife. As the Quranic story of Cain and Abel states, "Because of this did We ordain unto the children of Israel that if anyone slays a human being - unless it be [in punishment] for murder or for spreading corruption on earth - it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind" (5:32). The value of one life is equivalent to an entire world; to kill another person is to kill one's own brother or sister because all human beings are the progeny of Adam.

"And do not destroy one another: for, behold, God is indeed a dispenser of grace unto you" (4:29). This can be interpreted as a prohibition against suicide as well as murder; do not kill yourself because you are God's creation, and do not kill other humans who, like yourself, are God's creations. Life is a divinely granted trust, and humans are charged as *khalifas*, caretakers, and trustees of *tawheed*, God's oneness, so that we are obligated to treat all life with the utmost sanctity. Humans are given the gift of life with the admonition that they live it as moral beings. With free will and the

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independence to make choices, humans are given responsibility and are accountable for the consequences of our actions.

Suicide is a state of disbelief and loss of faith that is condemned by God in the Qur'an. God commands believers never to despair or lose hope but instead to work for a brighter future. "O you who believe do not consume each other's properties illicitly - only mutually acceptable transactions are permitted. You shall not kill yourselves. God is Merciful towards you" (Qur'an 2:195). "Anyone who commits these transgressions, maliciously and deliberately, we will condemn him to Hell. This is easy for God to do" (Qur'an 4:29). "...None despairs of God's grace except the disbelieving people" (Qur'an 4:30). Some are under the misconception that by killing oneself for an Islamic cause, one commits an act which deserves Paradise, but the Prophet Muhammad said, "He who kills himself, God will torment him with that in the fire of Hell" (Qur'an 12:87).

The Necessity of Reason and Knowledge

"The worst creatures in God's eye are those who are (willfully) deaf and dumb, who do not use reason" (8:22). There is no priesthood or religious hierarchy in Islam; there are only scholars and community leaders, and the Qur'an is a living document that speaks to all people at all times. It lays out in broad strokes moral and ethical guidelines for human beings; it is not a legal document or a book of law. Contemporary Muslims must understand the teachings of the Qur'an and the *Seerah* in the context of the Prophet Mohammad's time, while we simultaneously study and interpret those teachings in relevant ways to authentically and practically guide our lives today. For this reason, Muslims are required to pursue reason, inquiry, and knowledge - a process known in Islam as *ijtehad* - so that we are able to understand and promote justice, equality and peace.

The Qur'an positively invites interpretation and contextualizing. "We have sent down unto You the Message; that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them, and that they may think

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and reflect" (16:44). Unfortunately, Muslims have ceased to adequately realize the responsibility of *ijtihad* as many socio-political factors around the world have allowed the domination of literalistic and sectarian readings and interpretations. Islam in the 21st century must cease to be willfully deaf and dumb to contemporary context; we must be willing and eager to apply the reason and knowledge of our age to help best understand the will of God as revealed in the Qur'an.

Diversity & Relationships with Others

In pointing to diversity as the will and manifestation of God, the Qur'an states: "O mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other" (49:13). The universality of God's message is such that it is not the exclusive spiritual domain of any one religious community or any one nation. The Qur'an emphasizes that "unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has bestowed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ" (5:48). Differences are a part of God's plan for humanity, whereby all people are equally enjoined to turn towards virtuous action, regardless of the "law" or the "way" that they follow. Islam affirms the universality of God's overpowering attribute of mercy; God's message of peace and the sanctity of all life is not the exclusive spiritual domain of any one religious community.

Furthermore, human beings are free to abide by or deviate from Divine guidance as they see fit according to their own conscience. This freedom to follow (or not to follow) the teachings of Islam and the ways of God is articulated in the Qur'an: "The truth is from your lord. Whoever wants to

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believe should believe, and whoever wants to reject should reject.... and the consequences will come on the day of judgement” (7:29). And: “There shall be no coercion in matters of faith” (2:256).

The Qur’an, however, has an overtly social agenda, and it aims to reform not only the individual, but also society. It points out that the roots of exploitation and oppression often lay in social structures, not only in individual avarice. The Qur’an rejects accumulation of wealth and exhorts believers to spend their wealth on those who are poor, needy, orphans or widows, thus emphasizing socio-economic justice. Chapter 104 stresses this:

- 1 Woe to every slanderer, defamer!
- 2 Who amasses wealth and counts it –
- 3 He thinks that his wealth will make him abide.
- 4 No, he will certainly be hurled into the crushing disaster;
- 5 And what will make you realize what the crushing disaster is?
- 6 It is the Fire kindled by God,
- 7 Which rises over the hearts.
- 8 Surely it is closed on them,
- 9 In extended columns.

“None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself” (Sahih Al-Bukhari, al-Iman, Hadith no. 13). Love of the neighbor is an essential and integral part of faith in God because, in Islam, without love of the neighbor there is not love of God and therefore no righteousness. The Qur’an says that God has bestowed dignity upon the children of Adam, the freedom of migration, the right to sustenance and good things in life, and has elevated us high in creation. “We have honored the progeny of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favors about a great part of our creation (17:70). There are numerous references in Islam to the necessity and vital importance of love for everyone because all are creations of God; and love, in this context, encompasses not only good feelings but acts of mercy and pursuit of justice for the neighbor.

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Justice

The essential call of the Qur'an is justice, which requires equal legal rights for all without qualifications. The Qur'an does not distinguish between rich and poor, as can be seen **in a tradition** where the Prophet pronounced, "The people before you were destroyed because they used to inflict the legal punishments on the poor and forgive the rich" [cite?]. The emphasis of Islamic teachings is not personal salvation but the establishment of a society that is just and free of *zulm*, oppression. The Qur'an puts great emphasis on *'adl*, justice, a central value in the Islamic ethic. The Qur'an says, "O you who believe! Stand out firmly for God as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you, or you to them, make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety. And fear God: for God is well acquainted with all that you do" (5:8). In Islam, there is no concept of piety without justice.

What Islam Says About War and Violence

Fighting or war is only sanctioned in order to uphold justice and protect the rights of the weak and oppressed when they are desperately seeking protection and when there are no other means to deter oppression. In the Qur'an, there is no concept of a war of aggression and no permissiveness toward violence. Where permission for war has been given in the Qur'an, it has been given to defend and protect the rights of the oppressed and exploited, and there is no verse in the Qur'an which permits violence for conquering territory or for achieving personal or communal power. Furthermore, permitted wars in the Qur'an have been qualified by the words "*fi' sabilillah*," in the way of God. God's way is one of protecting the rights of the poor and exploited. The very first verse in the Qur'an that references permission to use violence illustrates this point: "And what reason have you not to fight in the way of God, and of the weak among the men and the women and the children,

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who say: Our Lord, take us out of this town, whose people are oppressors, and grant us from You a friend, and grant us from You a helper" (4:75).

Thus, a Muslim cannot commit an act of aggression; killing the innocent, the sick, the elderly, monks, priests, or non-combatants is forbidden, *haram*. Also, wanton destruction of land, forests, trees and animals is specifically forbidden. The Qur'an clearly spells out God's distaste for destruction in verse 2:205: "But whenever he prevails, he goes about the earth spreading corruption and destroying [man's] tilth and progeny: and God does not love corruption." It is therefore impossible to justify modern warfare, which cannot be waged without "collateral damage" to innocents and which utilizes weaponry that cannot distinguish between willing fighters and everyone else. Needless to say, nuclear weaponry's unmitigated slaughter of all forms of life, the destruction of present and future means of sustenance, and the devastating effects on future generations are clearly incongruent with Islamic principles. "Fight in the cause of God against those who fight you, but do not transgress limits. God does not love transgressors" (2:190).

War is the last resort, and is subject to the rigorous conditions laid down by the sacred law of *Shariah*. "If they seek peace, then you seek peace. And trust in God for He is the One that hears and knows all things" (2:193). In brief, war is permitted only under three conditions: in self defense or to defend and protect the rights of the oppressed. Quranic verses that appear to condone war in an aggressive, uncompromising and murderous tone were largely revealed in the context of specific threats leveled at the early Muslim community. The two following verses, in particular, are typically taken out of context and distorted by contemporary religious literalists and extremists:

And kill them wherever you find them and drive them out of the places where they drove you out, for igniting the fire of persecution is worse than killing. And fight them not by the sacred mosque unless they fight against you there, but if they attack you there, then slay them. Such is the recompense of those who deny the truth. But if they desist, surely God is forgiving, merciful. And fight them until persecution is no more and the religion is for God, but if they desist, then let there be no hostility except against the wrongdoers. (2:190-193)

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O you who have attained to faith: when you meet in battle those who are bent on denying the truth advancing in great force, do not turn your backs on them. For whoever on that day turns his back to them on such a day – unless it be in battle maneuver, or in an endeavor to gain another group -- shall indeed have earned the burden of God's condemnation, and his goal shall be hell: and how vile a journey's end. (8:15-16)

By reading these verses in the context of the time in which they were revealed and in relation to other verses which repeat the central mandate of the interdependence of justice and mercy, it becomes clear how discordant expressions condoning violence are with the Prophet's overarching message of mercy, compassion and tolerance.

Jihad

Jihad is one of the most misunderstood of Islamic terms used today, and many Muslims are as confused by it as non-Muslims. Few words carry as much power to install fear or hatred because the news media has widely interpreted *jihad* to mean "holy war," linking it with extremism and terrorism in the public consciousness.

The concept of *jihad* has nothing to do with aggressive warfare or "holy war." The word "*jihad*" finds its origin in the verb "*jahada*," which means to struggle with one's utmost effort to remain Muslim and to exert oneself to establish peace and justice. The word *jihad* has several connotations, since struggle can occur on several levels. As such, *jihad* refers to any effort made – mental, moral or physical – to make God's Word supreme. It covers a wide range of activities, from fighting inside one's self against one's own evil promptings to being engaged in war for the righteous cause of Islam against injustice.

Jihad is an all-round struggle, and the concept makes it obligatory for a Muslim to exercise all capabilities, be these in the form of intellectual and physical capacities, or worldly riches, or one's gift of speech, or one's moral strength, courage and steadfastness in the face of hardship. "The believers are only those who have believed in God and His Apostle and thereafter doubted not, and struggled

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hard with their riches and their persons in the cause of God. Those! They are the truthful” (49:15).

“And strive hard for God, as is due unto Him hard striving. He has chosen you, and has imposed no hardship on you in the (matter of) religion, the faith of your father Abraham” (22:78).

In contrast to the depiction in the public sphere, *jihad* has nothing to do with terrorism. Any attempts to justify the targeting of innocent civilians in the name of *jihad* is clearly contrary to the true meaning of *jihad* and to the spirit of Islam. The primary differences between external *jihad* and terrorism are:

- *Jihad* is to be launched by a recognized and established Muslim authority as a policy of the collectivity of Muslims to deter aggression. Terrorism, on the other hand, is committed by individuals or clandestine groups that do not represent the majority of Muslims nor did they receive any authorization from them.
- *Jihad* is to be declared, while acts of terrorism are born in secrecy and executed as a deadly surprise.
- *Jihad* is limited to combatants who represent a real danger to a Muslim military, while terrorism is usually directed at the soft spots of society or targets innocent civilians.
- *Jihad* is aimed at the conclusion of hostility and the acceptance of peace if the combating enemy inclines to peace, while terrorism is launched against people who are at a state of peace to start with.

Mercy, Forgiveness and Peaceful Reconciliation

There are certain key words in the Qur’an which are greatly stressed, and four of these are very often repeated: *rahmah* - compassion, *ihsan* - benevolence, *’adl* - justice, and *hikmah* - wisdom.

Rahmah, compassion and mercy, has abundant roots in the Holy Qur’an; even among God’s own names are *Rahman* and *Rahim* (Compassionate and Merciful). A Muslim begins everything by reciting

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Bi Ism-i-Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim – In the Name of God Who is Compassionate and Merciful. The second verse of the first chapter of the Qur'an is "*Al-Rahman al-Rahim* – The Compassionate, the Merciful." The first verse, too, carries this sense of compassion when it describes God as *Rabb al-'Alamin*, the Sustainer of the Whole World. The concept of sustenance of the whole world is based on God's mercy and compassion for every thing He has created. In fact, *rahmah* is so central to God's existence that it embraces all that exists in the universe (*wasi'at kulla shayin* -- see verse 40:7).

Rahmah, mercy, is also the primary mission of Mohammad (PBUH). "We sent you [Mohammad] not, but as a Mercy for all creatures" (21:107). *Rahmah* is also the word most frequently uttered by Muslims in the liturgy of daily life. The saturation of the *Seerah*, of the Qur'an, and of the liturgical verses with the word "*rahmah*" indicates how deeply and completely the life of a Muslim should be informed with the quality of compassionate mercy.

Furthermore, God is the Forgiver. As the Qur'an teaches in verse 24:22, "Hence, [even if they have been wronged by slander,] let not those of you who have been graced with [God's] favor and ease of life ever become remiss in helping [the erring ones] among their near of kin, and the needy, and those who have forsaken the domain of evil of the sake of God, but let them pardon and forbear, [for] do you not desire that God should forgive you *your* sins, seeing that God is much forgiving, a dispenser of Grace?" Retaliation may be human, but forgiving is divine. Retaliation results in giving release to one's anger, but forgiving results in mastering one's rage, and such self-mastery is described as a great virtue by the Qur'an: "Those who spend in ease as well as in adversity and those who restrain (their) anger and pardon men. And God loves those who are merciful and do good to others" (3:133).

The concept of mercy is tightly bound with that of forgiveness as we see in the Qur'an and the *Seerah*. Mohammad's example of forgiving his Meccan enemies after the lifelong enmity and abuse he suffered at their hands remains a guiding light for the Muslims. Thus a true follower of the Prophet

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(PBUH) has to be merciful and compassionate to the extent humanly possible. Anyone who is cruel and has no sensitivity towards the suffering of others cannot be following the true teachings of Islam. Islamic ethics demands that Muslims be just and merciful with all, even the enemy.

Because of this demand for justice and mercy, the Qur'an mandates peaceful resolution of conflicts: "...but since good and evil cannot be equal, repel evil with [the best conduct]: and notice how someone who is separated from you because of enmity will become like your close friend. Yet only those who have self-control will attain it; only the very luckiest will achieve it" (41:34-35).

An example is the Medina Charter, which was established by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Medina soon after the early Muslims' migration from Mecca to Medina. The Charter was negotiated between the Muslims, led by the Prophet, and the Jewish communities and non-Muslim Arab tribes who already resided in Medina, and the purpose of the pact was to maintain peace and security by protecting the life and property of all inhabitants and by guarding against injustice and aggression regardless of tribal or religious affiliations. The Charter is notable in that it does not declare the state religion to be Islam; it protects freedom for the whole community, regardless of religious or tribal identity. "But if the enemy inclines toward peace, you also incline towards peace, and trust in God: for he is the one that hears and knows" (8:61).

According to the Qur'an, relations among all human groups should be based on mutual acknowledgment and peaceful coexistence regardless of any similarities or differences which might exist among them. The basic dignity of all people must be equally guarded regardless of race, faith, nationality or ideology.

War is not an option whenever an inclination to peace is communicated; war is only allowed when a peaceful resolution is impossible. In a situation where Muslims are converted by force out of their religion or kicked out of their land, then war becomes the exceptional, un-welcome and painful

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option. If this lamentable situation is imposed, non-combatants, livestock and infrastructures must be safeguarded. Based on this premise, modern war – waged with weapons of mass destruction and causing inevitable and severe harm to civilians – is basically rejected because it is impossible to meet the necessary standards of conduct stipulated by the Qur'an. This must be the collective challenge to all people of faith and to all decent human beings in modern civilization – to form a coalition and create a movement that can handle problems without falling into war, that calamitous pit of un-Godly destruction.

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Conclusion

Common Themes

Peace Through Justice

All three Abrahamic Faiths identify the interdependence of peace and justice, making justice integral to our understanding of peace. Peace flows naturally from justice, just as enmity, violence and war flow naturally from injustice. In order to affect meaningful peace where enmity and violence have been, one must first establish justice; in order to maintain peace, one must safeguard justice. That the relationship between peace and justice is repeatedly emphasized in the scriptures of all three faiths illustrates the essential nature of this principle.

Right Relations with Others

We are encouraged in all three religions to strive for positive relationships in all aspects of our lives – interpersonally and internationally. We all seek to make welcome the other, and we all recognize the multiplicity that is inherent in the unity of God and God’s creation. Honoring the diversity of creation is crucial in the pursuit of just peace. If we do not honor a worldview different from our own, we are collectively unable see beyond our own self-interest. Likewise, if we do not consider the perspective of our neighbors – who are often less powerful, less prosperous or less free than we are – then we cannot properly define what is just, nor can we have the best understanding of God’s presence in this multi-faceted world. Loving our neighbors creates the conditions for us to have just and peaceful outer and inner lives.

Sacred Texts Require Interpretation in Context

It is crucial to understand sacred texts in all three traditions through the lens of critical inquiry and contemporary thought. Scholarship and modern theology must be partnered with the rich, long-standing traditional teachings in each Abrahamic faith in order to provide an understanding of our

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texts' meanings that are relevant for today's practitioners. The over-reliance on past understandings of difficult passages prevents us from living with our texts in an authentic way. Overly literal readings, readings that are inappropriately faithful to traditional teachings without questioning their context, or readings that clearly create discord in our overall understanding of our faith are to be put aside. To apply the interpretive tools of our time to our respective faiths makes each of them stronger and more applicable to our lives.

The Limits of War and the Just War

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all address the conditions under which war may be waged, and in each case, there were specific geo-political and historical realities that gave rise to these teachings. All three faiths recognize the presence of war in the world and respond with ways to mitigate war's devastation (protection of the environment, safeguarding non-combatants, etc). In this attempt to minimize the damage, each faith both acknowledges the gross destruction of war, and laments it. It is useful to incorporate this deep-seated acknowledgement and lament into a contemporary critique of war. War, its justifications and its consequences are clearly all around us; we must strive not to be led astray by these forces in our societies. Rather, we must question their efficacy in solving problems and their value as an organizing tool for communities. Further, we must especially strive to incorporate justice and understanding of the other when we clash with our neighbors. Only in this way can we hope to find solutions to our conflicts that do not involve inflicting or being victimized by gross violence.

Self-Examination and Self-Critique

All three faiths demand that in seeking to perfect the world, we must seek to perfect ourselves. Whether as individuals or communities, self-knowledge and the acknowledgment of wrong-doing are crucial to the pursuit of peace. Just as we must know and understand our neighbors, we must know

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and understand ourselves. We must recognize our inadequacies and errors in order to overcome or correct them. We must be willing to be critical of our own actions if we are to be credible critics of others, including our leaders and our adversaries. Also, in our quest for holiness or closeness to God, an honest accounting of our individual and communal selves lends itself to greater understanding of God's presence within and among us.

God's Example of Love, Compassion and Mercy

God is our best example of love, compassion and mercy. God's ability to love humanity, despite our propensity for violence and the difficulty we have changing our self-interested tendencies, is a model for our own actions. We, too, must love others in spite of their shortcomings; we, too, must value every life equally. In each Abrahamic faith, there are rituals or practices or teachings that maximize our ability to mirror God's example of compassionate, merciful love for the entire world. And in each faith, the God of love serves as both a model and a motivation for striving toward increased justice, compassion and peace between humanity and the earth, between warring neighbors and within our individual spirits.

What's next?

It is the goal of the AFPI leadership to share this document with congregations throughout the U.S.; clergy can preach from it, educators can teach from it, and lay people can engage with it. By interacting with the deeply embedded roots of peace in our sacred texts and traditions, we hope to turn the minds and hearts of our fellow Americans toward the vigorous pursuit of peace. We hope to reactivate committed religious people who have internalized a deep sense of helplessness in the face of continued funding of the Iraq war by Congress, Presidential signing statements that remain unchallenged, the ongoing use of torture, and the renewed interest in nuclear weapons. We must

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reawaken in our religious communities a passion to oppose a system that has continued these actions in our name.

AFPI leaders understand that confronting troubling principles in our faith's teachings is often painful; our desire is to offer support to individuals and communities as they undertake the difficult work of revisiting the problematic dimensions of their faith with respect to war.

In addition, we will bring this document to the attention of policymakers, both locally and in Washington, by sponsoring meetings and lobbying activities so that our representatives know that not all religious people abide by the warmongering political opinions of some who claim to speak for all people of faith.

Finally, we hope this document can be a tool and a locus for grassroots, faith-based peace-work that is already happening all over the country, thereby enabling a national network of like-minded activists and a stronger voice for us all among our religious communities and with our political representatives.

The goals of the Abrahamic Faiths Peacemaking Initiative are indeed aspirational, but our commitment to the teachings of our faiths and to the service of God demand no less.

What if the adherents of each Abrahamic faith could understand that peacemaking is not simply one option or an unattainable ideal, but it is in fact a *mandate* from the heart of faith that cannot be ignored? Such a transformation is possible, and the theological basis for transformation exists in each Abrahamic tradition. The Abrahamic Faiths Peacemaking Initiative was convened to effect this transformation in religious communities, to have a powerful impact on policymakers, and to end the misguided and unjust war in which the United States is currently mired. Peace is a practical substitute for violence and war, and Judaism, Christianity and Islam all require that we vigorously and faithfully pursue peace and justice for all.