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LEAP OF FAITH

YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI'S QUEST FOR RECONCILIATION IN THE HOLY LAND

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I first met Yossi Klein Halevi at a reading he gave in New York City on September 8, 2001, just three days before the attack on the World Trade Center. He read from his second book, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land (Morrow)*, which had just been published. I was already a fan of his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist: An American Story (Little, Brown)*. In it, Halevi tells of growing up with a Holocaust-survivor father in the insular Jewish world of 1960s Brooklyn. Absorbing his father's stories and opinions, Halevi became determined that the Jews would "never again" be helpless victims. Though raised in a traditional Jewish home, Halevi had by this time abandoned religion. In its place he chose activism. He joined the movement to free oppressed Soviet Jews and became a follower of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, a radical right-wing activist who founded the Jewish Defense League and advocated the use of violence.

Over time, the allure of right-wing rage faded, and Halevi and his wife-to-be moved to Jerusalem and began exploring spirituality together. To better understand other faiths, Halevi followed the sacred yearly cycles of Christianity and Islam and joined in the devotional ceremonies of both. In *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*, he writes about his experiences, which took place not long before the outbreak of the current intifada, an uprising of Palestinian Arabs against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Halevi is presently working on a book about the Israeli paratroopers who fought in the Six-Day War of 1967 and who later helped to found both right- and left-wing movements in Israel. Halevi has more than twenty years' experience as a journalist and is a contributing editor at *Azure* and the *New Republic*, and a senior fellow at the *Shalem Center*, a social-policy institute in Jerusalem.

After our initial meeting in 2001, Halevi and I kept in touch. While I was in Israel in the summer of 2002, I asked Halevi if I might interview him. He invited me to join him at an interfaith conference where he would be the Jewish voice on the panel. Afterward, we began to chat, and I reached for my tape recorder. "Oh, don't worry about that now," Halevi said with a casual wave of his hand. "This is just us talking." Afterward, I was glad I hadn't

let that conversation get away; it was remarkable.

That night, I awoke to the sound of the muezzins' call to prayer from an Arab village down the hill. A sudden intuition told me to check the tape of my interview at once. Sure enough, the sound was completely garbled. When I called Halevi to let him know what had happened, he said with a chuckle, "Well, it wasn't meant to be."

In June 2004, we would try again. By then I had moved to Israel myself, and we set a time for me to come to his home on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

On my way to meet Halevi for this interview, I saw a young Arab man sweeping outside Halevi's apartment complex, and I asked him which one was Number 8. He scratched his head and then suddenly said, "Ah, Yossi Halevi! My friend! Of course. Why didn't you say so?" And he guided me to his door.

Halevi and I sat on chairs in his study, beside a Muslim prayer rug and under a shrine to saints from a panoply of faiths, to discuss his pilgrimage for peace in the Middle East. (This was prior to the death of Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat.) Occasionally we were interrupted by one of his three children, or by a phone call from a student, or, once, by an elderly woman who had wandered in to use the telephone.

Dreisinger: In your first book, you tell of being drawn to the extremism of Rabbi Kahane because of the Holocaust. Tell me more about what led you into Kahane's camp and why you left.

Halevi: I was drawn to Meir Kahane as a teenager in the late 1960s, when many American Jews were trying to convince the Soviet Union to free its Jewish citizens. At the time, Kahane was advocating a militant — that is, violent — approach to pressure the Kremlin, and that appealed to my rebellious sixties sensibility. I saw Kahane as the Jewish Malcolm X. He also represented for me the antithesis of the Jewish establishment, which I blamed for not having done enough to try to save Jews during the Holocaust. I was the son of an angry Holocaust survivor, and Kahane articulated my inherited rage — against both the American Jewish community and the non-Jewish world.

I left Kahane for many reasons, especially after he began

his racist hate campaign against Arabs. Once Kahane stopped representing the effort to liberate Soviet Jews and became identified instead with expelling Arabs from Israel, I no longer wanted anything to do with him. But mostly I left him because I finally grew up.

Dreisinger: How did you go from angry teen to spiritually striving adult?

Halevi: It was a combination of disillusionment with the one-dimensionality of ideological politics and the realization that my life as an American Jew was the diametrical opposite of my father's life as a survivor. I also realized that I would be limiting myself if I saw myself exclusively through the prism of my father's life — which is how I grew up. It's a long story, obviously, but for all its twists and turns, it's really a simple story of a human being trying to overcome the negative consequences of history and circumstance.

I broke away from religion as a teenager. But then, in my twenties, I discovered a book called *Mystical Testimonies*, which offered firsthand accounts by mystics of different faiths. What struck me was that, if you looked beyond the cultural differences among them, you found an astonishing unity of experience: that of divine love and human oneness. That was a seminal moment for me. It made me realize that the claims of religion might actually be true. It helped bring me back to Judaism, but it didn't confine me to Judaism.

Dreisinger: At some point, it seems, you developed religious goals that went beyond the personal.

Halevi: In engaging my Christian and Muslim neighbors in a dialogue of prayer, my goal was to test the possibility that religion, specifically in the Holy Land, could be an instrument for healing rather than hatred. Praying and meditating with my Christian and Muslim fellow believers was an attempt to move beyond stereotypes. People of different faiths have always judged each other by what we believe about God rather than by how we experience God's presence. We need to see each other's synagogues, churches, temples, and mosques as variations of home, refuges from a secular world.

Dreisinger: Mystics don't have much in common with fundamentalists, even when they share the same faith. Can mystics on both sides of the conflict help convince the fundamentalists to stop fighting?

Halevi: Pluralists need to support each other across religious lines. On one level mystics and pluralists from different faiths have more in common with each other than they do with fundamentalists of their own religion. Sometimes I feel like I belong to two peoples: the Jewish people and a pluralistic people drawn from all faiths.

I'm a religious Jew, and the Jewish story is the context in which I try to experience the miraculous. But I'm also a pluralist who believes that all the great religions are "denominations" of one great religion, which teaches that the unseen is more important than the visible, and that this is a universe of unity and intentionality, despite the surface appearance of



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chaos. That dual commitment means I live on two levels and in effect belong to two faith communities. I live fully within the Jewish people, and I also live within a new religious community that is quietly being formed by people of all religions who regard interfaith dialogue as our generation's great spiritual advancement. For the first time, one can experience the vitality of another faith without being forced to leave one's own faith. My venturing into Christianity and Islam as a religious Jew was an attempt to take advantage of that new reality.

That journey can be viewed as an experiment in applied monotheism. The mystics don't consider monotheism a theological concept,

but an experience of God's oneness, and each of us a cell within the divine being.

Dreisinger: What, then, distinguishes a Jew from a Christian or a Muslim?

Halevi: Each faith is a distinct language of intimacy with God, and each is equally valid. Judaism is my language. Beyond that, being Jewish means joining the Jewish journey through history, which for me is the distinguishing characteristic of Judaism and Jewish spirituality. Judaism is the love story between God and the Jewish people, and Jewish history is the arena in which that tumultuous love story is played out. By being a Jew, you join the Jewish people's struggle to reveal the presence of God in history through our collective experience — from the ancient revelation at Mount Sinai to the modern ingathering of the exiles in Zion.

Dreisinger: What are the political implications of an Israeli Jew praying with Palestinian Muslims?

Halevi: It's part of a larger call for reconciliation based on religion rather than politics. The Oslo peace process, which ended the first Palestinian uprising in 1993, was planned by secular elites who bypassed the vast religious populations on both sides. Now we face a second intifada. There is an urgent need to develop a religious language of reconciliation, and my search for a common language of prayer among the monotheistic faiths was an experiment in that direction.

There is historical precedent for such an experiment. Islam and Judaism have known periods not just of civility but of intimacy. When I prayed with Muslims, I found their way of expressing devotion somehow familiar. The prostration of the body in surrender to God was once a mode of prayer in Judaism, and it's echoed today in the Yom Kippur prostration in Orthodox synagogues. I was surprised to find that joining the Muslim prayer line helped reconnect me to my ancient roots here. But that was a bonus. My primary goal was to honor Islam and to try to experience something of its inner life.

Dreisinger: Can you give us an example of what religious, rather than political, reconciliation might look like?

Halevi: In my book, I tell the story of a visit to a Sufi community in the Gaza refugee camp of Nusseirat. I was joined by Rabbi Menachem Froman, one of Israel's leading proponents

of Muslim-Jewish dialogue, who also happens to be the rabbi of a West Bank settlement. The Jewish settlers, who make their homes in disputed areas, are known for being extremely nationalistic. That a settler rabbi would be in dialogue with Muslims in Gaza is one of those crazy paradoxes that make Israel such a surprising place, though you won't read about them in the newspapers.

The rabbi explained to the skeptical Muslim men in the mosque that we'd come to learn how to worship God from our Muslim brothers, because the Jews had been exiled from the land for so many years that we'd nearly forgotten how we'd served God in our earliest days. Now that God had brought us back, he wanted us to learn how to serve him with the joy of the Sufi dances we once knew.

Can you imagine it? A settler rabbi telling Palestinian refugees that God was responsible for our presence in this land. But the tone of his message was the key: respect and modesty that conveyed a love for Islam, so that the men were not offended. The Muslims in that mosque suddenly saw us not as foreign intruders nor agents of godless Westernization, but as fellow believers, fellow Middle Easterners. It was Froman's honoring of Islam that effected that change, which would allow Muslims to honor the Jewish return.

Dreisinger: I've always felt that the lack of respect evidenced by both sides is far more of an obstacle than people realize. Particularly in the Middle East, respect is of paramount importance.

Halevi: True. The intangible issues of legitimacy and respect are at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Those intangibles will continue to undermine the efforts of the peacemakers so long as they concentrate on finding a precise political formula for peace. They are redrawing the map, thinking that will resolve all claims and grievances, rather than confronting the religious and psychological dimensions of the conflict.

This is a historical-theological conflict. In the Middle East there is no nationalism without religion. That's true not only for Arabs, but also for Jews. The Zionist movement was largely secular, yet it drew on religious roots for its legitimacy and appealed to both secular and religious Jews. The overlap between politics and religion is even more overt among Muslims. That is why you can never have total separation of religion and state in the Middle East — though Israel proves you can create a thriving democracy with religious elements in its identity, and live with the resulting tensions.

Dreisinger: What obstacles did you face in undertaking such a radical journey?

Halevi: The first obstacle was fear. I had to have an armed Palestinian escort to pray in Gaza, even though this was before the current intifada began.

The second obstacle was my own anger. As an Israeli, I'd been living with the threat of jihadist terrorism and the refusal of Muslim theologians to recognize Israel's right to exist, so I felt a lot of anger toward Islam.

The third obstacle I faced was the tension between my political and spiritual selves. I'm a journalist by profession, and a journalist's sensibility is the opposite of a spiritual seeker's. The

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journalist inhabits a world of duality in which opposing sides compete and clash, whereas the seeker recognizes humanity as one great, unified soul. The journalist suspects spirituality of being an impediment to political clarity, whereas the seeker dismisses politics as an impediment to spiritual vision. Throughout my journey, the journalist and the seeker were constantly monitoring each other, suspicious of each other's perceptions of reality.

Ironically, it was the threat of violent fundamentalism that allowed the seeker and the journalist within me to converge. Both agree that the reality of the Arab-Israeli conflict is hopeless by rational standards, and that only some entirely unexpected development, some intrusion of the miraculous, can possibly avert disaster. In the Middle East, despair reconciles the realist and the visionary.

Finally, there were the historical and psychological obstacles. A Jew trying to encounter the devotional life of Christianity and Islam is burdened with traumatic memories. The history of our relationship with Christianity is shattering, but the Jewish-Christian dialogue of the past few decades has given us a hopeful present and future. Our situation with Islam is the opposite. Muslim-Jewish cooperation in the past resulted in an extraordinary school of Jewish Sufism in Cairo, but the present state of Muslim-Jewish dialogue is abysmal. What little dialogue exists is due only to the heroic efforts of a handful of individuals on both sides.

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