Beyond Liberal Peacemaking: Lessons from Israeli-Palestinian Diplomatic Peacemaking

Ofer Zalzberg[1]
Trinity College Dublin

Abstract

This article briefly reviews the faults and merits of peacemaking efforts anchored in liberal ideologies. It further calls for a shift in strategy and outlines an approach that seeks transformation of conflicts through acknowledging the ways in which contrasting worldviews undergird and sustain the political conflict.

Bluntly put, liberal peacemaking approaches share an emphasis on a correlation between the advancement of human rights, free markets, liberal democracy, and international law, on the one hand, and, on the other, the promotion of global peace. Statements in this spirit can easily be found on the websites of most western foreign ministries.

Diplomats tend to define the overall objective of peacemaking as getting parties to a conflict to agree to a diplomatic treaty written in the language of international law. Academically, conflict settlement theories and alternative dispute resolution approaches by and large share this definition. Historically, U.S. democracy promotion efforts, notably since the end of the Cold War and particularly under the presidency of George W. Bush, have also generally shared such assumptions. The influential book of former Israeli minister Nathan Sharansky, The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror,[2] is emblematic of such thinking. Civil society peacemaking methodologies, notably in the form of people-to-people activities, have sought to foster empathy toward the other, and to base peace on a universal sense of humanity. This can be seen for example in much of the work of pro-peace organizations such as Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salam[3] and Seeds of Peace[4].

The Problems of Liberal Peacemaking

However, not everyone is a liberal. Some constituencies have principled opposition to liberalism, faulting it for atomizing society through its emphasis on individual economic entrepreneurship and on individual human rights. Liberalism is considered in this light to be a major cause for the weakening of family and community ties as well as for the erosion of cultural and religious

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[1] Ofer Zalzberg is an Ussher PhD fellow at Trinity College Dublin. He is a Middle East Senior Analyst with the International Crisis Group and a Senior Advisor in the Herbert C. Kelman Institute for Interactive Conflict Transformation. He has been working since 2012 with prominent conservative, right-leaning religious authorities, Jewish and Muslim, toward the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has been teaching at a religious-secular Beit Midrash regarding the interplay between Jewish tradition and modern sovereignty.

[2] Natan Sharansky, The Case For Democracy: The Power Of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny And Terror
(New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

[3] Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salam is "an intentional community jointly established by Jewish and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. The village is located midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv-Jaffa." More information is available at their website: https://wasns.org/.

[4] Seeds of Peace was founded in 1993 by John Wallach, an author and journalist. With the help of Bobbie Gottschalk, its executive director, and Tim Wilson, a long-time camp director and educator, they ran a summer camp in Maine that brought together 46 Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian, and American teenagers. President Clinton invited the campers to the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn. More information is available at their website: https://www.seedsofpeace.org/.

attachment. Scholarly critics of modern liberalism often point to its weaknesses in forming and supporting collective identities.

Liberal peacemaking inherently pushes illiberal groups to oppose conflict resolution efforts. By inextricably tying together the acceptance of liberal norms with peace, it (often inadvertently) produces so-called spoilers. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, the exclusive liberal basis of peacemaking efforts alienated several powerful constituencies from engaging in the diplomatic process. Many ultra-Orthodox Jews and religious Zionists, as well as so-called Palestinian "Islamists," have perceived the Oslo process since the 1990s as an attempt to advance international law at the expense of their respective religious laws, the Halacha and the Shariʿa. From this traditional point of view, liberal peacemaking efforts can be seen as an attempt to override the values and religious laws of local communities with the secular, more universal laws of a purportedly liberal "international community." Similarly, the goals of liberal peacemaking, to establish territorial partition and an "end of conflict" and "end of claims," (reminiscent of aspects in Kant's notion of perpetual peace) may seem to close the horizon for fulfilling deep-rooted eschatological beliefs, which in certain readings of Judaism and Islam depends on each party's ultimate full control of the land. Some religious stakeholders thus came to view liberal peacemaking efforts as diametrically opposed to the intent and meaning of the prayers they conduct several times a day.

Furthermore, those subscribing to more all-embracing readings of liberalism tie together the rights-based quest for peace with a rights-based shaping of their own society. Thus, those who have fully embraced liberalism often see peacemaking efforts as a means to reshaping society, imbuing the process with a political agenda beyond the simple desire for a cessation of conflict. The late Ron Pundak, an architect of the Oslo accords, revealed to the International Crisis Group his peacemaking motivations, saying, "I seek peace so that there will be 'Israeliness.' Peace is not an objective in and of itself. It is a means for transitioning Israeli society from one era to another era, to an era of what I count as a normal state. An 'Israelization' of society instead of its Judaization will allow to integrate Jewish nationalism, prosperity of Israeli culture, separation of religion from the state and full equality for the Arab minority in Israel."[5] In a somewhat similar vein, on the eve of the Camp David peace summit in 2000, at a meeting of the Israeli cabinet, then-Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami told his fellow cabinet members: "This is our opportunity to become a member state of the European Union." Confronted with this "package deal" non-liberals are taken aback and often end up opposing it in spite of their interest in securing peace. Thus, one can see how consummately tying up liberal peacemaking efforts with broader liberal political goals can goad illiberal constituencies into opposing the process even if they support the ultimate goal of peace.

In Defense of Liberal Peacemaking

It is incumbent upon critics of liberal peacemaking to acknowledge the inherent challenges of such work. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict offers an excellent example of the recalcitrance of illiberal groups toward any peace process that is not conducted on their terms. Illiberal groups have rarely initiated any of the attempts to peacefully end the conflict, let alone bring them to successful resolution. They have also almost never sought to join liberal peacemaking efforts, even when there were opportunities to affect them from within. The rarity of exceptions such as forerunner

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[5] International Crisis Group, "Leap of Faith: Israel's National Religious and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Middle East and North Africa Report, no. 147 (November 21, 2013): 39.

Rabbi Menachem Froman of the Tekua settlement, who engaged religiously and politically with Hamas's leaders, demonstrate the rule.

Furthermore, the purportedly pro-peace positions of illiberal movements, which commonly promise that peace would come if only they had full political power, have failed to persuade their enemies to even begin exploratory conversations on the matter. Israeli Jews, for example, are largely unconvinced by the professed sincerity of Hamas leaders who say Jews would be better off as citizens in a Palestine extending from "the river to the sea." And in spite of the socio-economic benefits of the Israeli economy, barely a handful of Palestinians are enticed to permanently waive their national rights in deference to religious Zionist politicians promoting annexationist plans while claiming that Jewish sovereignty over the entire land would be optimal for Palestinians.

Moreover, as with liberal peacemakers, illiberals often use policies toward the conflict as a vehicle for pushing arguably extraneous political agendas. Gush Emunim leaders, for example, promoted a vision of exclusive Jewish rule over the land between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea, purposively drawing secular Israelis toward the light of the redemptory teachings of Gush Emunim's spiritual founder, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook (1865-1935). Confronted with an interpretation of Jewish religion which dictates a negation of Palestinian national rights, Israeli liberals were often reluctant to altogether explore whether it has any positive facets.

More broadly, the contemporary nation-state system is based on liberal values, and international law and peacemaking cannot fundamentally diverge from it. Even when some political leaders rebel against this world order, such as U.S. President Trump or Hungary's Prime Minister Victor Orban, they most often do so from within its premises. Although their rhetoric may suggest the opposite, they in fact challenge existing treaties and institutions in order to improve them rather than discard them. The only way for states today to create formal relationships is through international law: treaties, conventions, institutions, etc. Much of the global efforts to promote development, eradicate diseases, and mitigate climate problems require such diplomatic tools. Diplomatic peacemaking, too, has to be codified in international law.

Beyond Liberal Peacemaking
Fundamentally, liberal peacemakers should both acknowledge that liberalism is only one of several political philosophies with particular worldviews and recognize that the political conflicts they aim to resolve are undergirded by a worldview conflict. When done earnestly, this means abandoning radical messianic liberalism, like Durkheim's and Weber's versions of the secularization thesis, which predict that as societies modernize, religion declines and eventually loses all significance. Coming to terms with a plurality of worldviews means understanding the radical differences between the ways in which human beings experience reality, and thus politics. As scholars of religious studies, such as Ninian Smart, have shown, worldviews can differ from each other in dramatic ways: some are oriented to the future, others to the past, and often they are anchored in unrelated, dissimilar systems of law.[6]

An analogy from the field of Zoology somewhat overstates the differences but may shed some light on the challenges and opportunities worldview conflicts pose. Bats are famously blind. They find their way by using their ears to pick up on radio waves. Snakes in contrast are known for being

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[6] Ninian Smart, Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983).

stone deaf. They have poor eyesight too. They sense motion through vibrations around them. Finally, eagles are well known for having excellent long-distance vision. They can see clearly about eight times as far as humans can, allowing them to spot a small rabbit at a distance of some three kilometers. These sensory dissimilarities mean that these different animals experience and conceive reality in radically different ways. They are incommensurable.

Imagine how hard it would be for a bat, a snake, and an eagle to reconcile their different perceptions of reality and reach a shared understanding of a situation. Let's say our assorted critters were diplomats and wanted to craft a joint solution statement. Even if an intelligent specimen from each species somehow learned Esperanto and used it to communicate with each other, they would still need to convey the agreement to their respective flocks and convocations, with their limited sensory capacities.

People with conflicting liberal and illiberal worldviews face similar communication challenges to those of a blind bat communicating with a deaf eagle. Attempting to find common ground by resorting to some universal framework like human rights and neglecting the worldview of each party in the process, will fail when those worldviews do not share such a conception of human rights. Human rights, in the language of international law, are but a single worldview.

From Liberal Diplomatic Peacemaking to the Transformation of Worldview Conflicts

Negotiating for peace across worldviews requires an entirely different approach. Four principles deserve mention here. First, peacemaking should shift from aiming to produce a single document constructed from within a particular worldview to producing several documents jointly capable of encompassing multiple frameworks. The negotiating of a rights-based peace treaty as per international law should not be viewed as the exclusive embodiment of peace. Peacemaking should be viewed more expansively, with a rights-based treaty seen as only one of several necessary building blocks. For example, in the Israeli-Palestinian case, peacemakers will need to produce at least five different documents: a rights-based treaty between the PLO and Israel forming the contractual agreement itself; a Zionism-inspired victory speech for the Israeli leader to explain the rightness of the treaty within the bounds of nationalist ideology; a Palestinian nationalism-inspired victory speech for the Palestinian leader to do the same; a Jewish sermon to laud the achieved peace as religiously correct; and likewise an Islamic sermon to also affirm it as religiously desirable. Whereas the rights-based treaty will have to reflect an inter-subjective accord regarding the central rules of conduct, the other documents are bound to vary and reflect the fundamental discrepancies between the worldviews.

Second, peacemakers should engage the conflict parties also on their own terms, within the parties' own worldviews. Above all this requires acknowledging the non-negotiable sacred values of each worldview and working to reframe them (as per the work of Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod[7]) rather than facilitating crude compromises over them. Doing so necessitates identifying and fostering the cultural or religious resources required for supporting the tangible transformations (political, social, economic, etc.) mandated by the contractual agreement the parties have reached. It may, for example, be wiser to enable religious stakeholders to accept territorial partition as part

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[7] Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, "Reframing Sacred Values," Negotiation Journal 24, no. 3 (July 2008): 221–46.

of a long-term, extendable arrangement, along with symbolic and concrete acts demonstrating their lasting commitment to it, rather than insisting on them doing this by using secular concepts which clash with their theological beliefs. Hamas, for instance, repeatedly offered to engage in a long-term peace treaty as long as they could frame it within the traditional Islamic concept of Hudna, which refers to a reciprocal armistice under agreed-upon terms for a provisional, specified duration. Irrespective of the significant substantive gaps between Hamas and Israel regarding the political details of the Hudna (borders, Jerusalem, refugees, etc.), principled Israeli acceptance of such an interim framework could open the door to constructive negotiations over these details.

Third, the participation of religious and cultural authorities should be ensured so that the worldviews they represent, and have the power to reshape, can develop in parallel to the peace treaty. Worldviews may be inherent to human existence, but this does not mean that they are fixed. Rather, as with all things in nature, they evolve over time or perish. Peacemakers should avoid the reductionist mistake of focusing exclusively on changing the tangibles of conflict arenas and neglecting the need to support the transformation of the conflict stakeholders' worldviews. For example, whereas international law mandates that the settlements in the West Bank/Judea and Samaria are illegal, it includes mechanisms for changing that if the signatory parties all agree. A peace treaty signed by Israel and the PLO that recognizes the settlement of, say, Ofra as legal, becomes part of international law and effectively legalizes the settlement. The same holds for religious law, be it Jewish or Islamic. But if the negotiating table includes only secular-minded diplomats, then constructive adaptations in religious law become improbable. In fact, excluding religious authorities is likely to harden their positions as they wish to protect what is sacred to them from compromises that political leaders may reach without them. In this sense, exclusion of religious authorities – the ones most competent for adapting the worldview of their constituents – unnecessarily makes religious law a rigid obstacle to the peacemaking process.

When peacemaking repeatedly feels like building a puzzle with mismatching pieces, peacemakers should consider moving beyond further sterile attempts to build the puzzle. They should focus instead on having the conflict parties reconstitute their identities so that they could fit neatly together rather than trample each other. Authors, poets, and religious authorities are best positioned for advancing the cultural and religious reconstituting of identities.

Fourth, peacemakers should support the development by conflict stakeholders of "delicate" political strategies and actions that cohere with their worldviews. Peacemaking beyond liberalism should not demand that the parties justify their strategies in liberal terms. For instance, peacemakers should tolerate Ultra-Orthodox leaders who advocate partition to two states on the basis that this would decrease the frequency of exogenous intermarriage.

In sum, liberal peacemaking is insufficient for addressing worldview conflicts. Peacemakers need to help the proverbial blind bats and deaf snakes communicate in spite of their differences. The task should not be drawing conflict parties toward liberalism, but rather helping conflict parties communicate across worldviews – between different conflict parties and among them. This does not mean throwing liberalism out the window, for liberals will unite against peacemaking efforts that cannot be digested within a liberal worldview. Jerusalem's rabbis, priests, and imams, so rarely in agreement, tellingly concur in disapproval when the city witnesses its annual gay pride parade. Illiberal religious authorities who seek sustainable peace should take the mistakes of liberal

peacemakers as a cautionary tale, as errors not to be repeated. Otherwise they too would be creating so-called spoilers who would seek to bring down a peace agreement that excludes and discriminates against them. True peace should be acceptable to liberals and illiberals alike. Like all other conflict parties, liberals would have to abandon the radical, absolutist interpretations of their worldview. Such a reality can only be the fruit of dialogue and cooperation across worldviews.

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