

**Jewish Wisdom**  
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“Jewish Wisdom” is a presumptuous sermon title. A better title would be “An Introduction to the Wisdom of Marc Gopin through the Eyes of an Admirer.” I was bowled over by his book entitled *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*. Dr. Gopin was ordained as a rabbi at Yeshiva University in 1983 and received a Ph.D. in religious ethics from Brandeis University in 1993. He is the director of George Mason University's Center on Religion, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution. Among other important work, he has engaged in back channel diplomacy with religious, political, and military figures on both sides of entrenched conflicts, especially in the Arab/Israeli conflict.<sup>1</sup>

It is appropriate to reflect on themes of conflict and conflict resolution as we near the Jewish High Holy Days. In “A Unitarian Universalist Liturgy for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur,” authors Marcel P. Duhamel, Carolanne Mercier Duhamel, Charles (C.J.) Landsman, and Karen Landsman write, “On Rosh Hashanah we are called to review how we have lived our lives in the year past . . . The central theme of Rosh Hashanah is the power of memory itself. Memory defies oblivion, breaks the coil of the present, establishes the continuity of the generations, and rescues human life and effort from futility. And it affords the only true resurrection of the dead.”<sup>2</sup>

The power of memories figures prominently in Marc Gopin’s strategies for peacemaking. Speaking personally, the theological and philosophical foundations for nonviolence within the Jewish religious tradition were less well known to me than Gandhi’s *satyagraha* (“nonviolence,”) which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., adapted to fit a Christian framework. Therefore, a few years ago, I chose to investigate the Jewish foundations for nonviolence. That is how I came upon Marc Gopin’s work.

There are conflicting messages about violence and nonviolence in Judaism. The Hebrew Bible contains verses that support nonviolence. Deuteronomy 23:8 says, “You shall not abhor an

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.gmu.edu/depts/ICAR/mgopin.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See [http://uuja.org/holidays/lit/high\\_holy\\_days\\_duhamel.htm](http://uuja.org/holidays/lit/high_holy_days_duhamel.htm).

Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land . . .” The word for peace is *shalom*, which means not merely the absence of war. *Shalom* comes from a root meaning “wholeness,” indicating active well-being. *Shalom* is mentioned over 2,500 times in classical Jewish sources.<sup>3</sup> Even the verse “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” can be understood as a step forward from disproportionate violence by setting a ceiling on violence.

The Torah (or written Law) is important for understanding nonviolence in Jewish tradition, but I suggest that rabbinical interpretation of the Law is even more important. Over hundreds of years, rabbis have commented upon the written Law and upon the oral Law. There is no central authority to legitimate an “official” position. Yehudah Mirsky writes:

“The Jewish style of reasoning on these issues is highly contextual and fact-specific, informed by a rich understanding of textual warrant and historical experience, repeatedly evaluating circumstances in the light of both abiding imperatives and changing circumstances. This is both cause and effect of this reasoning’s having been developed in legal, rather than theoretical, texts and contexts.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a gap of nearly 2,000 years between the era when Jews had a military force in Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Elaborating a *theoretical* framework for violence and nonviolence was not a priority for a people who had no effective instrument of military force. In contrast, Jewish scholars were accustomed to delving into the *legal* fine points of any situation. Moses Maimonides (1135 – 1204), who was one of the most influential thinkers of the Middle Ages, wrote about the Laws of Kings as follows:

“Our sages commanded us to visit the sick even of heathens and to bury their dead with the dead of Israel and to provide for their poor amidst the poor of Israel for the sake of ‘the ways of peace,’ for behold it is stated, ‘and his mercies are extended to all his

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<sup>3</sup> *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*, Marc Gopin, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> “The Political Morality of Pacifism and Nonviolence: One Jewish View” by Yehudah Mirsky in *War and Its Discontents: Pacifism and Quietism in the Abrahamic Traditions*, edited by J. Patout Burns, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., 1996, p. 61.

creatures' (Psalm 145:9), and it is stated, 'Torah's ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace. (Proverbs 3:17)'"<sup>5</sup>

However, overall, my sense is that nonviolence per se is a minor theme in the written and oral Law and in rabbinical commentary on the Law. The commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" is more accurately translated as "Thou shalt not murder." The concept of *shalom*, most scholars would argue, is held out as an aspiration, not as a reality. Yehudah Mirsky writes that "The thrust of the Judaic law of war is to accept war as more or less a given in the life of nations, but to hem it tightly with moral restrictions at every step of the way."<sup>6</sup>

I believe that if Jews had not been persecuted in many places for many of the past 200 centuries and if they had been able to influence the governments of the countries in which they lived to a greater degree, the rabbinical interpretative literature about violence and nonviolence would have been much more developed. One negative effect of systematic, long-term oppression of any group is that the group does not have a chance to fine tune its norms and ethics concerning power and dominance.

The Jewish concept of martyrdom may have a stronger link to nonviolence than the Jewish concept of conflict resolution. The rabbinic commentary on martyrdom is generally referred to as *Kiddush Ha-Shem*, or "Sanctification of The Name." Martyrdom may result from a conflict of duties where the usual imperative to preserve one's life may be outweighed by a more compelling imperative. Martyrdom, however, has limits. Martin Buber rejected Gandhi's suggestion that passive resistance by Jews was an appropriate response to Hitler:

"In the five years which I myself spent under the present [Nazi] regime, I observed many instances of genuine Satyagraha among the Jews . . . Such actions, however, exerted apparently not the slightest influence on their opponents . . . An effective stand may be

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<sup>5</sup> David Rosen in "The Role of Religion in the Pursuit of Peace" in *Religion and Violence, Religion and Peace: Essays from the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding Conference in Auschwitz, Poland*, edited by Joseph H. Ehrenkranz, Sacred Heart University Press, Fairfield, Connecticut, 2000, p. 120.

<sup>6</sup> "The Political Morality of Pacifism and Nonviolence: One Jewish View" by Yehudah Mirsky in *War and Its Discontents: Pacifism and Quietism in the Abrahamic Traditions*, edited by J. Patout Burns, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., 1996, p. 51.

taken in the form of nonviolence against unfeeling human beings in the hope of gradually bringing them thereby to their senses, but a diabolic universal steamroller cannot thus be withstood . . . Testimony without acknowledgement, ineffective, unobserved martyrdom, a martyrdom cast to the winds – that is the fate of innumerable Jews in Germany . . . I do not want force. But if there is no other way of preventing the evil destroying the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up to God’s hands.”<sup>7</sup>

There is a body of rabbinic teachings on the civilian, the siege or blockade, and standards of conduct. Maimonides outlined rules of military ethics: “When one surrounds a city to lay siege to it, it is prohibited to surround it from four sides; only three sides are permissible. One must leave a place for inhabitants to flee for all those who wish to abscond to save their lives.”<sup>8</sup>

Nachmanides reflected upon those words: “It is from this commandment [to lay siege to only three sides of a city] that we learn to deal with compassion even with our enemies even at time of war; in addition, by giving our enemies a place to flee to, they will not charge at us with as much force.”

If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the heart. The first stage of a Jewish conflict resolution theory may be *mourning*, Marc Gopin writes in *Between Eden and Armageddon*:

“A peacemaking mourning process must speak to the deepest identity needs of a group and also the group’s sense of threat to its future, its fear of annihilation. Often what is mourned, but mourned in ways that create violence, is a loss of the group’s honor, security, or sense of confidence in its future. There is also a sense of loss of some romanticized time – real, imaginary, or a combination thereof – in which the group had a fulfilled, secure existence.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*, Marc Gopin, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 171.

To be complete, the mourning (the part of the peace process that deals with past wounds) must take on an indigenous, religious character. If it is seen as coming from the dominant culture (Western Christian, in this case), the mourning process cannot resonate deeply enough for the most wounded members of the group. However, it is possible for the process to be rooted in the Jewish culture and affirm identity and honor. Gopin continues:

“It is the most religious segment of a community that needs the deepest level of healing, because it is this segment that so zealously and regularly internalizes the collective identity and memory of the group through ritual, prayer, symbolism, and study. Often the religion will rehearse daily, weekly, and annually all of the most painful moments of the traumas of the past . . . This means that religious people will have the hardest time moving to a new stage of relationship with the outside, injuring world. They will not only have to heal emotionally. They will also need the time to create a new [way of spiritual expression (spiritual hermeneutic)], reworked legitimately through the old one, that gives them permission to move forward in new relationships to the world and its inhabitants.”<sup>10</sup>

Marc Gopin imagines the power if Arabs and Jews were to do the following:

“. . . begin to visit the dead together, to bury them together in symbolic ways, to memorialize lost lives and lost homes. They need to talk about the losses for as long as it is necessary, to thoroughly indulge the past rather than suppress it, to let go of the fear that it would disrupt rational dialogue and conversation. We must do exactly what rational peacemakers have tried to suppress, namely, we must indulge memory. But we must do it, not destructively as it is indulged in the privacy of particular groups, but as a part of peacemaking, as part of an effort to honor each group’s memories at the same time that we struggle constructively over the present.”<sup>11</sup>

Marc Gopin continues:

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

“Despite themselves perhaps, [even the most secular Jews still have] many Jewish cultural instincts about what is fair and unfair, what is effective and realistic, what speaks to the core of their beliefs and what does not. It is here that building a theory of peacemaking inspired by a religious tradition can have great effect, as long as it is operationalized with great subtlety and respect for all parties to the conflict.”<sup>12</sup>

May we use memory wisely and well to defy oblivion, break the constricting coil of the present situation, establish the continuity of the generations, and rescue human life and effort from futility. May we reflect in solitude and in religious congregations, and may our reflection ever precede action and follow action. May it be so!

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 195.