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AN OPEN LETTER TO MY MUSLIM FRIENDS

By Dr. Shai Har-El

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Dear Friend,

I am writing you this open letter with the explicit purpose of inviting you wholeheartedly to join me in a noble mission of building bridges of understanding and reconciliation between Islam and Judaism, two sister religions founded on the promise of peace. I am confident that the presence of God, the Most Compassionate, will help us transcend the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between them and transform their historical confrontation into harmony and cooperation.

I am an observant Jew born in Israel and live in the United States with my wife, children, and grandchildren. My peace mission began at the early 1990s, when I led an independent, nonprofit organization called Middle East Peace Network. Made up mainly of Arab and Jewish Americans, this organization spread the message that unofficial human interaction and people-to-people interactions could enhance the prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace. Our organization, unique at the time, was not affiliated with any political camp.

My peace advocacy introduced me to the heart of Islam, or rather to “Islam of the Heart,” and to many wonderful people. Suheil Nammari, a Jerusalem-born Palestinian friend, worked with me day and night to expand the circles of peace. The bond between our two families remains as strong as ever. I had numerous soulful conversations with Anwar Zaynal, a devout Muslim of Iraqi origin, who taught me about Muslims’ descent from *’Abūna ’Ibrāhīm*. Until then, I saw Patriarch Abraham mostly as our own father, *’Avrahām ’Avīnu* (our father Abraham). I also had the privilege of engaging with Dr. Abidullah Ghazi, a Muslim educator of Indian descent, who had opened his heart and the doors of his institute, Iqra International Educational Foundation, to me. There, I shared

many intimate spiritual moments with Muslim devotees, like Fadel Abdallah, who welcomed me as their brother in the spirit of God's calling in the Qur'ān: "*I created you as [diverse] nations and tribes so that you may be acquainted with each other*" (49:13) and be enhanced by the presence of the other.

During my journey into Muslims' devotional life, I was invited to a mosque in northern Indiana, where I gave a sermon to a crowded congregation about the commonality between Islam and Judaism. As a Jew of Israeli descent, making a public presentation in a mosque was an unforgettable experience. For the Muslim congregants, it was a refreshing surprise to see a Jew flipping through the pages of the Holy Qur'ān and quoting Arabic verses in support of religious pluralism and world peace. I was always fascinated by the religious cultures of the Middle East. In the course of my doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, in the late 1970s, I was privileged to study under two internationally renowned Muslim professors: Fazlur Rahman, who patiently guided me through some of the intricacies of Islamic religion, and Halil Inalcik, who taught me about late medieval Islam and Ottoman history.

My human interactions with Muslims continued on different levels, finding common grounds for sharing our joys and our distresses. We visited each other at weddings and other personal events and never stopped communicating with one another. I will not forget how one night, at my father's *shiv'ah*, the seven days of Jewish mourning after death, a group of Muslim friends came to my house to offer their condolences. I invited Muslim friends to celebrate a Passover *sēder* with my family and visit my *sukkāh*, during the Feast of Tabernacles. During Ramadan, they invited me to "break bread" with them as they assembled for the evening *iftār*.

I believe that it is essential to build bridges of understanding between Jewish and Muslim community leaders, and to enhance opportunities to do so especially when tragedy strikes. When Bosnian Muslims were brutalized in their homeland in the early 1990s, I was privileged to join Chicago community leaders for an emergency gathering and signed a public statement condemning the ethnic cleansing and calling for intervention by the international community. Immediately after the horrific events of September 11, 2001, when the Chicagoland Muslim community seemed to be under siege and suffering from an unfair backlash, I felt it was vitally important to join their public gathering to show my moral support.

What prompted me to send you this open letter now?

Given the growing public perception that there is an unfolding clash between Islam and the West as civilizations, and in the light of the political storm that is sweeping across the Middle East, I believe it is time for soul searching and genuine reassessment. It is time to come together and allow the true expression of the generosity of our cultures to create a force of peace and harmony. It is our obligation to reject the traditional argument by politicians that religion is a source of conflicts and emphasize the role of religion as a resource for resolving them. Religion can, best of all, serve peace and speak the language of conflict resolution and reconciliation. We have all seen how religious leaders exhibited

remarkable capacities to serve others. It is therefore essential to treat religion as relevant to foreign policy and include religious actors in the diplomatic efforts in the Middle East and other conflict regions.

I recognize the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the overall context of Jewish-Muslim relations. Most Muslim leaders still argue that as long as this conflict is not resolved, resolution of the Jewish-Muslim rift is impossible. I disagree. If anything, an historical rapprochement between the two religions can only help Israelis and Palestinians find peace together. The passions of religious antagonism between Islam and Judaism only aggravate the Middle East conflict. Nothing is more dangerous than turning this conflict into a war of beliefs and exporting it outside the boundaries of that region. It becomes a destructive force without physical bounds that, like a tornado, expands rapidly and sucks in everyone it touches.

It is time for Muslim and Jewish leaders to move beyond this polarization and publicly acknowledge that we are brothers in faith and blood. We both believe in One God (*’Elōha* in Hebrew, *Allah* in Arabic). We have the same faith (*’emunāh* in Hebrew, *’īmān* in Arabic). We keep similar acts of worship (*’avodāh* in Hebrew, *’ibādah* in Arabic). We share the same genealogical ancestor, our father Abraham. It is time to market these reconciling common denominators and “unmarket,” not necessarily ignore, the differences that separate us. While law and practice vary, faith is the same for all, and our relationship with God, regardless of our religion, is judged by our relationship to fellow men. There is a two-word *ḥadīth* that equals a whole book of thought: “*Ad-dīn al-mu’āmalatu,*” which means your faith is judged by your treatment of others. You cannot claim to be a person of piety by simply going to a place of worship. You are what you do. Your true faith would be evident in the way you treat or deal with others. The Qur’ān states: “*The closest people to Abraham are those who follow him*” (3:68). So let’s follow his ethical conduct and his kindness towards all human beings. The Qur’ān also teaches us: “*The Most Compassionate is kind to those who are compassionate to others*” (12:92). So let’s be compassionate to others.

My plea for fellowship and understanding calls to mind the beautiful words of the Qur’ān: “*Hold firmly, all together by the rope of God and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude God’s favor upon you, for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His grace, you become brothers*” (3:103). To be the knotted rope of God that joins people in brotherhood, we, Jews and Muslims, can no longer relate as separate ropes dangling next to each other. In order for them to tie their ropes together, to bind them into a knot that is much tighter, each rope must give up a little, surrender a bit of its original length, to achieve a stronger unity. So we all have a choice: either we become the knotted rope of God that binds us together, or we continue to exist as separate ropes apart from each other. Either we live in unity as brothers and enjoy God’s mercy, or we live apart as enemies and suffer punishment. Like one of Martin Luther King’s pearls of wisdom: “*We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.*” My forthcoming book *Opening the Gate of Mercy: A Perspective on Jewish-Muslim Reconciliation* expounds on this view.

To become the knotted rope of God, we need to reject the voices of fanaticism among us—those voices that manipulate religion and turn it into an instrument of hatred and violence—while supporting the voices of peace among us. We need to disapprove of all cultures of denial and allow infrastructures of mutual trust and reconciliation to be erected instead. We need to cast aside exclusivist religious visions and violent passions and replace them with relationships marked by mutual human care and compassion. We need to go back to our sacred texts to reinterpret their teachings so that an open space is created to embrace religious pluralism and the respect of other peoples' truths. We need to combat the forces of chaos and darkness that divide people and create for them instead a peaceful ecology, where they can rejoice in the human diversity of experience, the colorful tapestry of expression and the noble acceptance of each other. We need to condemn all senseless wanton acts of violence and engage in peace education in our schools, places of worship, and media networks so that our children and grandchildren live in a safe world and enjoy a brighter future.

I respectfully ask all Jewish and Muslim spiritual leaders, as well as academics, educators, opinion makers, and community leaders, to join hands in the spirit of the Torah and the Qur'ān and open a constructive dialogue. With our shared vision of peace and prayer of hope, we together – with God's help – can succeed where politicians have terribly failed.

I invite you to respond, share your thoughts and suggest any idea that may forward this mission of peace and reconciliation by writing to me directly at shai@MEPNetwork.org or just contact us at the [Middle East Peace Network Web site](#). I also invite you to go to the home page and read my essay, [A Quest for Peace](#), which elaborates on my philosophy, my passion, and my commitment to create peace in the Middle East.