**The Other Peace Process:**

**Interreligious Dialogue in Israel and the Middle East**

November 11, 2015

**Ronald Kronish**

Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish is the Founding Director and currently Senior Advisor of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), which is now a department of Rabbis for Human Rights. A graduate of Brandeis University (BA) and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (rabbi), Dr. Kronish also holds a doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is also a noted educator, author, lecturer and speaker and the editor of a new book called *Coexistence and Reconciliation in Israel--Voices for Interreligious Dialogue* (Paulist Press, 2015). In this book he has gathered essays by friends and colleagues who share his passion and are committed to the cause of reconciliation in Israel. His eloquent message is that interreligious dialogue, education, and action can be a substantial force for reconciliation and peacebuilding in troubled parts of the world. The book is divided into five sections: (1) Jewish-Christian Relations in Israel; (2) Jewish-Muslim Relations in Israel; (3) Trialogue with Jews, Christians and Muslims; (4) Educating for Peaceful Coexistence: Methodologies and Target Populations; and (5) Reaching Out to the International Community.

* + - 1. Introduction.

1. Kronish has lived in Israel for 36 years, more than half his life. Jerusalem is now his home. 24 years ago he founded the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI). Semi-retired, Kronish writes and lectures, cares for grandchildren.
2. He has a three-part lecture:

The context. The peace process over the last twenty years. Geography really matters in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The four-step model. He will describe how he approaches interreligious peace-building. He learned by doing, because he didn’t have an MA in conflict resolution, and instead worked by trial and error.

Towards the future. The role of interreligious dialogue, education, and action. People don’t like to look down the road. They look to next week. The ICCI offers a process of envisioning, not wanting to be “mired in the present mess.”

* + - 1. The Period of Peace Agreements.

1. Chronology.

* 2000. Camp David II Meetings fail.
* 1998. Wye River Agreement.
* 1995. Assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.
* 1994. Peace Agreement with Jordan.
* 1993 (December). Diplomatic agreement with the Vatican.
* 1993. Oslo Accords. They were signed in Washington, DC, but for ten months prior, there were secret “back-channel discussions” between representatives of Israel and of the PLO.
* 1991. Madrid Conference. This was a one-day process that led to the search for bilateral agreements. This was the first time to get the Palestinians “in the center” of the process.

1. Part One: The Context. “We used to have a peace process.” Until the 1990s, the Palestinians were not considered “a problem,” but rather “a nuisance.” But Kronish said that “we regular people” were told in 1993 that there were “accords,” and there was the famous handshake between Rabin and Arafat.

Clinton was happy to host this event. What was the “great revolutionary thing” that happened in Oslo? Many people in Israel think that the Oslo process was wrong, but it happened, and it changed everything.

There was a “Declaration of Principles.”

First principle: mutual recognition.

Rabin, a “labor hawk” and “military guy,” decided to recognize the existence of the Palestinian people as a people that had “rights” – but rights to what? To self-determination? At any rate, the Palestinians were officially recognized in 1993.

The Palestinians recognized the existence of Israel. There was an exchange of letters between Arafat and Rabin that clarified the relationship. Both sides “stopped playing make believe,” and acknowledged that they have to recognize one another. The recognition is “in principle, but it is still there somewhere.”

Second principle: How to resolve the conflict? By negotiation, talking, dialogue. Rabin gave a “semi-messianic” speech in 1995, borrowing from Isaiah. It was messianic – meaning (to Kronish) a bit unreal.

Third principle: How are we going to reach an agreement? By territorial compromise. Each side admitted that it cannot have it all.

The Oslo Accords were a complete surprise, Kronish said. No one expected them to happen.

1. Further Developments.
   * + 1. The Agreement with the Vatican (1993). The Vatican exchanged diplomats, sent a representative to Palestine and to Israel. And Israel recognized the existence of the Vatican. Israel had been asking for recognition from the Vatican for fifty years.
       2. Peace agreement with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the State of Israel. Things were looking good. This was political momentum.
       3. Election of Netanyahu in 1996. He signed the Wye River Agreement between State of Israel and Palestine. The political process kept going.
       4. But then Ehud Barak was elected in 1999. He was a “clone” of Rabin, “Mr. Security,” a military man. Clinton wanted a peace agreement. In August of 2000, there was a meeting at Camp David (the second, the first was Jimmy Carter’s with Begin and Egypt’s Sadat).
2. Camp David II (2000). Arafat and Barak went to Camp David, but the discussions broke down. Both sides blamed the other. They said, “We don’t have a partner for peace.” In 1995, Rabin was assassinated.
   * + 1. Was it the end of Oslo? Kronish says no, but the peace process was “severely wounded.”
       2. What really brought the end of the peace process were the events of the 2000s. A recent film on Rabin (speaking “in his own words”) showed that he was serious about peace process.
3. Normalization. The 1990s were the time of *normalization*. The goal was normalized relations. There was relatively free transit (if not “love and brotherhood”).
   * + 1. After that, there was “track 2” diplomacy, peace-building (rather than peace treaties), unofficial initiatives.
       2. It was a period that gave rise to the ICCI and other groups.
       3. The War Process.
4. Introduction. There is now no peace process. There are just initiatives to “get the people to the table.” There’s no point in having a process that will lead nowhere. No one even wants a deal.
5. Chronology.

* 2000-2003. The second intifada.
* 2003-2006. Building the security fence/separation wall.
* 2005. Israeli disengagement from Gaza.
* 2006. Second Lebanese War.
* 2008. Gaza Operation #1: “Cast Lead.”
* 2012. Gaza Operation #2: “Pillar of Defense.”
* 2014 (April). Kerry Diplomatic talks end.
* 2014 (Summer). Gaza Operation #3: “Protective Edge.”

1. The Intifadas.
   * + 1. Moshe Dayan, after the six-day war, spoke of “the benign occupation.” If Israel treated the Palestinians well, there would be peace. But the benign occupation “blew up” in 1986. It was only benign to the Israelis, and not to the Palestinians.
       2. First Intifada (1986). It was slingshots and rocks, a “wake up call” to the Israeli government. Rabin wanted to “break their bones” and crush the intifada.
       3. The Second Intifada. Ariel Sharon walked to the Temple Mount. There were popular uprisings with a heavy response by Israel.
2. Interpretation.
   * + 1. The separation wall was supposed to be mainly a fence.
       2. The withdrawal from Gaza. When Israel withdrew, Gaza was taken over by Hamas, and began to launch missiles.
       3. Gaza “Operations.” Three incursions into Gaza. We are now “near the bottom of the mound.” We could get worse (a third intifida?), but we’re near political despair or separation. People still believe in the principles of Oslo, but have resigned themselves to separation.
3. Separation.
   * + 1. There is still lip service to the two-state solution, but both sides refuse to make more compromises, except maybe to please the Europeans and Americans “for a day or a week.” There is no willingness to look to the future.
       2. Jewish Fundamentalism. Since 1967, there is a growing fundamentalism on both Jewish and Islamic sides. The second intifada was called the “al Aqsa intifada.” It was “religious.” There are extremist groups on both sides, nationalistic and religious, who are “powerful rejectionist forces” who do not let things go forward. Indirectly, “they control the show.”
       3. Territorial compromise was created by “intellectuals in Tel Aviv.” It doesn’t work, because most people are not intellectuals in a rationalist setting. But the conflict has become irrational, exacerbated by videos and social media. But the will to peace does not exist. The leaders are afraid to be courageous. Sadat got killed. Rabin got killed.
       4. There is a naïve notion: if only the occupation ended, everything would be fine. This is naïve. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza live their psychological lives in resisting occupation. “Martyrdom is now kosher,” i.e., legitimate. Ideology is running the show, not reality.

Coffee Break

* + - 1. Part Two: The Four Step Model. See *The Process: 1,100 Days that Changed the Middle East*, by Uri Suvir (Vintage, 1999). The Oslo process was led by Israeli academics. It was done in a process called “dialogue,” not “negotiation.” Kronish said, “They schmoozed. They became friends.” When they announced the declaration of principles, the principles flowed out of the trust they had established. Today, there is negotiation (not dialogue) by people who don’t want a deal.

1. The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel. What it assumes about dialogue:

We have to have discussions with Palestinians and with Jews (20% of the people of Israel are Palestinian Israelis, most Muslim with a few Christians).

The ultra Orthodox and the politicians fail the principle of dialogue, which is the willingness to listen.

We do discussions in Hebrew and Arabic, with good facilitators, over a years-long period of time. The process has its ups and downs.

1. The Steps.

* 2.1. Personal Encounter. We have personal stereotypes, which are half real and half paranoia. The ICCI dialogues takes time. “It takes time to get over the hump that the guy I’m talking to is out to kill me.” Like the planners for Oslo, it takes time to build trust.
* 2.2. Interreligious Learning through Text Study. If you want to learn something about the other person, then you must read the other person’s religious books: the Qur’an, Bible, Talmud, and Mishnah.
* 2.3. Discussing the Issues/Learning the Narratives.
* 2.4. Taking action – personal, education, communal, and political.

1. Discussion.
2. Breaking down stereotypes. If I, a Jew, meet Palestinians for the first time, I have to beware of the terrorist stereotype, that of suicide bombings in the name of Allah akbar. Many believe that the members of Hamas and Jihad Islami are typical Palestinians. For the Palestinians, Jews are seen as the occupiers and settlers I meet at the checkpoint who demand that I open my bag. There has been years of victimization and victimhood – it’s not easy to overcome it.
3. Non-Religious or Anti-Religious people (secular Israeli politicians and secular Fatah leaders) reject religious people. So the ICCI takes a different tack. Too many Jews know nothing about Islam or Christianity. Too many Muslims know little about Judaism or Christianity. Textual learning with good teachers can demystify the religion of the other. The religions have something in common. “It comes as a new discovery, because people in this land have never studied the religion of the other.” Such study reveals to participants that the other person can contribute to peace.
4. Discussing the Issues. Find out what’s really happening, not just the headlines from today’s newspaper. (1) It has to be “personal,” about what I think; and (2) there needs to be active or compassionate listening; our goal is not to score points, but to develop empathy for the other side. The compassionate listener discovers that there are many sides to an issue.
5. Learning the meta-narratives. For example, 1948 means for Jews a second Exodus from the Egypt that was World War II Europe. For the Palestinians, 1948 was the *nakba*, the catastrophe. The word is not taught in Israeli schools. On the same day, the State of Israel’s independence day, Jewish kids celebrate the Exodus, and Palestinians mourn the *nakba*. Kronish: “I can’t deny the Palestinians have a story, an interpretation of the facts, that differs from mine.”
6. Rejection of Historical Truth for Ideological History. Kronish taught a seminar in 1995, and the theme was the war of 1948. The last session, “Towards the future,” posed the question: “How many of you think that in the future, it will be a good idea for historians from the West to open the archives from both sides, and write a new, synthetic, syncretistic view of the conflict?” One Palestinian professor said, “That’s a good idea; but in the mean time, we’ll continue to tell our story.” In Israel, there are “two narratives,” and the only way to transcend the dual narrative is to create an environment where people can hear one another.
7. Dialogue is not enough. Talking is easy, but it may not change things. Group therapy is popular, because it makes us feel good; but does it lead to social change? But how do I go back to my community and do something about it.
   * + 1. What is action? It varies from the personal (write a Facebook post, talk to your friends) to education (like teaching a course) to political (like working with communities). The challenge is to do something.
       2. The ICCI has not reached many people, because it doesn’t have enough money. It needs a groundswell.
8. Peace Groups.
9. Rabbis for Human Rights.
10. Mullahs. Most Islamic leaders in Israel are moderate, but in the West Bank no.
    * + 1. Part Three: Towards the Future.
11. The Two-State Song. Netanyahu and other leaders continue to “sing” it and profess their loyalty to it. So peace builders cannot abandon it; we cannot discard it for a one-state solution.
12. Understanding the Future.

Peace Making. Towards a two-state solution. It is the official position of the Israeli government and the world.

There must be two states, side by side. But (Kronish says) the countries haven’t come up with clever enough lawyers to actually establish it. The one-state solution is not real, because it will always be an occupation.

The *Zeitgeist* is changing. It’s like Mandela in South Africa and like Northern Ireland and like Bosnia-Herzogovina. The conflict is likely to end, but Kronish has no evidence. International public opinion, he says, is changing.

Peace Building. People-to-people programs. The politicians don’t know how to do this. It’s going to take decades. Peace builders have to engage in personal dialogue, and wait for the politicians to get back on track.

The average people want a peace treaty, thinking that will solve the problem.

But treaties are merely “houses” in which “there are no furnishings and no kitchen.”

Changing Hearts and Minds. “Peace is our goal, dialogue is our method.” That was once the slogan of ICCI. Now it is, “Peaceful coexistence is our goal, dialogue is our method.”