

Potential Partnerships for Peaceful Co-existence within Israel and the Region

*Rabbi Michael Melchior in conversation with Sruli Fruchter
Ner Yisrael Synagogue, Hendon, London, 12 July 2026*

Sruli Fruchter: Rabbi Melchior, I want to begin with the mekorot, as they say. This week's parsha seems, at least to the naked eye, to follow a pretty common narrative: the people are about to head into the land of Israel, about to wage another battle, and they are rebuked by Moshe for not being tough enough on the Midianites. Yet here we are trying to speak about spreading peace across the region. How do you see the Torah's perspective on the relationship between peace and battle, between Israel and her neighbours?

Rabbi Melchior: That's a good question! (audience laughter)

First of all, thank you, thank you to the achsanya, to Dayan Zobin and to those who have organised all of this.

It's a special day. It's not an easy day for me, and I'll come back to this. Today is a yahrtzeit: it's the yahrtzeit of mori ve'rabi, Rabbi Yehuda Amital, zecher tzaddik livracha, who was groundbreaking in his courage, standing for what was right and moral in what Israel should be doing. He didn't care what people said about it, and he often paid a heavy price for it. He stood practically alone, but he said what he believed should be said.

Let me start with an anecdote about him. It was exactly thirty years ago, in 1996, right after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin zichrono livracha. Rav Amital was called to serve as a minister, a kind of bridge-builder, in the very short-lived government of Shimon Peres. I was then a leading assistant to Rav Amital, and I brought him to different communities around the world, London among them. We arrived in the late afternoon, and there had been a very terrible incident in Southern Lebanon that day, in the war then called the Grapes of Wrath, Invei Za'am. About a hundred innocent people had been killed in Southern Lebanon that afternoon.

I had arranged for us to meet the Foreign Secretary here in London the next morning, Malcolm Rifkind, who was a Jew, and afterwards we were to visit several Jewish high schools.

I told Rav Amital he should be prepared for the meeting not to be easy. We discussed what he might say, and Rav Amital said, I know what to say, and I will

say what I believe. Before Rifkind could say anything, Rav Amital (his English was not perfect, but he had a coach who worked with him three or four times a week) said: there is a Talmudic expression, difficult to translate:

מגלגלים זכות על ידי זכאי וחובה על ידי חייב

(Dayan Zobin: Good things happen through those who deserve good, and less good outcomes come through those who are responsible for them.)

Rabbi Melchior: “Bad things happen through those who are responsible.” So he (Rav Amital) said: what happened yesterday did not happen with our good will. It was against everything we stand for, everything we want. But it happened because we are chayavim, because we are responsible for it. And I, as a cabinet minister, am responsible. I'm chayav for that terrible tragedy, for all those innocent people killed yesterday. I have to tell you, as a representative of the Israeli government, that we take full responsibility for what happened, and that we must make amends. We must do teshuvah, we must repent for that terrible act. I'm responsible. I'm not putting it on the Minister of Defence or the Prime Minister. I'm responsible.

Rifkind had nothing to add to that. What could he say, other than that he appreciated it? And Rav Amital said exactly the same thing at the schools we visited, at JFS and at Hasmonean, and both times there was a standing ovation. People appreciated that he came and spoke honestly, that he didn't try to sweep it under the carpet, even when something terrible had happened, even if it had been done b'shogege, as HaRav Mosheh told you this morning. It was done b'shogege, but it happened, and we were responsible, and we had to take full responsibility for it, done in our name, by our government. Don't talk about how it started, or about what happened long ago before it.

This was ahavat emet. This was my teacher, and this is the legacy I try to continue. That's one story I wanted to tell you, as an answer also to your question.

Sruli Fruchter: If I might interject briefly: can you imagine something like that happening today? (slight Audience laughter)

Rabbi Melchior: If I can imagine what should be happening is that I put forward what should be happening, what we should be doing. And what we should be doing is what I try to do in my work today, together with serious Muslim leaders. We do a lot of it under the radar, and you don't hear much about it, because people don't want to hear it.

That's why I'm here: to tell you a different story than the one you usually hear. There is a lot going on today that's important, and it's not only happening on the Jewish side; it's happening equally on the Muslim side.

Let me tell you a story from some years back, though it's relevant now too. You remember the vicious terror attack in Itamar, when the Fogel family was murdered on a Friday night. We had (still have) a large coalition of rabbis, including some very right wing rabbis, and Islamic leaders. Motza'ei Shabbat, some of the rabbis called me and said: enough, we can't live with this if we don't have some kind of response from the Muslim leaders.

I said, I'm not going to tell them how to react; let's wait and see. These were leading settler rabbis I'm talking about, very well-known ones. Two hours later, the most prominent of the Islamic leaders, who hadn't spoken to me, gave out a public statement, which was headline news in the Muslim press, though it never reached the Hebrew press or you. It said: what happened Friday night was a chillul Hashem (in Muslim terms), against everything Islam believes in, against the will of Allah. And although we deserve a Palestinian state next to the state of Israel, if this is the way to achieve it, then there should be another thousand years, and we should not have a Palestinian state.

That statement came out, and other very prominent Palestinian leaders, many of them Hamas leaders in the West Bank, joined it.

The same thing happened on the seventh of October. We heard this morning from Rabbi Yirmiyahu Stavitsky about the atrocities of the seventh of October, the massacre, the viciousness. But when Sinwar called on all Muslims to rise up, as he previously did in April 2021, our coalition partners, seven or eight hundred of them across Yehuda VeShomron, East Jerusalem, and inside Israel, went out to every mosque and to the press and said that what Sinwar and Hamas did was sadistic, against everything they believed in, a chillul Hashem. They would not follow his call, and there was not one incident.

This was not because they were afraid of their police (they weren't, any more than they had been in April 2021), but because they were dead-set against it, because it went against everything they believed in. They called me and said, don't abandon us now. Many of them opened their homes (Muslims in Kfar Qasem, Kfar Kara, even Umm al-Fahm) to people from the Gaza envelope who had lost their homes. Come, they said, stay with us, until something is established. And some people did. Fatwas were written to that effect.

Now, you asked for mekorot. Let me give you some mekorot!

Sruli Fruchter: And hopefully we'll return to some of the anecdotes you've raised.

Rabbi Melchior: I'll give you plenty more anecdotes, and solutions too. But let's start with one makor, which most of you probably don't know, though some do.

Many people cite the gemara in Masechet Sanhedrin about the signs of the approach of messianic times, but there's one passage there that's often skipped, especially the Rashi interpretation of it.

The gemara, Sanhedrin 98b, says the following:

בשעה שאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא אלו מעשי ידי ואלו מעשי ידי היאך אאבד אלו מפני אלו

These are My creatures and these are My creatures; how can I destroy these on account of those? Amar Rav Papa: hainu de'amrei inshei:

דהיט ונפל תורא ואזיל ושדי ליה סוסיא ואורייה

This is what people say, a general folk expression: when the ox runs and falls, the horse will take its place in the stable.

So, what's the story? What does this mean? Rashi explains: there's an owner of a stable, and there's an ox in the stable. The owner loves this ox, treats him well, develops him. But then the ox becomes sick, it falls, and when an ox is sick, it can't work, so he sends it out, to a vet, to be cared for, so it can get well again. The stable is empty for a long time, and in the meantime a horse comes to occupy it. The owner grows fond of the horse too.

Time goes by, the vets do their job, and the ox recovers and comes home to his stable. But now the horse is there. What does the owner do? He tries to reconcile the two; he can't send one away for the other. We now have an ox I loved and still love, and a horse too. I can't lose one for the other.

Says Rashi:

כך הקדוש ברוך הוא כיון שראה מפלתן של ישראל. נתן גדולתן לעובדי כוכבים

So too the Holy One, blessed be He, once he saw the downfall of Israel, he gave greatness to the idolaters.

Remember this was in the time of the Gemara, when idolatry was extant. But when Israel repents and is redeemed

קשה לפניו לאבד עובדי כוכבים מפני ישראל

It is difficult for Him to destroy the idolaters on account of Israel.

In other words the Jewish people come back, baruch Hashem, but He can't even then send out the idolaters. Today it's not the time of idolaters. The other people living there today are not idolaters, they are ovdei Hashem, they pray to one God, monotheists.

So this is a clear source, among the sources in Masechet Sanhedrin, for what will be in the future, and it shows clearly what God wants.

I believe fully, as a frum Zionist, that Am Yisrael's return to our homeland is the fulfilment of the prophetic vision of what HaKadosh Baruch Hu wants. But I don't think it's a Divine mistake that another people live there too. And if another people live there, we have to work it out with each other: the two peoples living between the river and the sea, in roughly equal numbers.

There are those who say it should all be ours from the sea to the river, and those who say the reverse, but both really mean ethnic cleansing of the other, and I don't believe in that. Lo b'chayil ve'lo b'choach.

Those solutions don't succeed, and they don't work, not when they come from the Muslim side, and not when they come from ours.

Sruli Fruchter: I know we have more sources to get to, but I'm sure for many people what's immediate, anyone who's gone to Bnei Akiva or had a classic Zionist education, has a reaction: "I hear your vision for coexistence, but October 7th, 2023 was what coexistence was looking like. The most smoli, the most left-wing of the peace activists were on the border of Gaza, and Hamas terrorists, and civilians who weren't even part of Hamas, invaded Israel and created a vicious massacre. Where is the coexistence you're speaking about, against the historical narrative many people hold, that the Israeli people were ready for peace, but there was no hand on the other side to hold ours?"

Rabbi Melchior: First of all, those who want us to become like Sinwar, who said 'we should wipe out Israel'. That's what he said, and he called Mansour Abbas, who leads the Islamic party (Raam) in Israel, a kofer, a traitor and non-believer who should be killed. In his view, anyone who follows that strand of Islam (Abbas's), including among his own people, should be killed.

We can follow that line too, if we want. When some of our rabbis, some of our political leaders, some of our army leaders say, consistently, that we need to kill a hundred thousand, or fifty thousand, to create harta'ah, deterrence, whether they're civilians or not (and leading army people, the third most senior, have said this is what was planned and what was done), then we're becoming what the Jewish state was never supposed to be. All the mekorot brought so

eloquently by the other speakers this morning made that point; I don't want to repeat them, though I have plenty more of my own.

If we want to become Sinwar in response to Sinwar's sadistic viciousness, let's go in that direction! I want to go in a different direction, one we've never tried: to make a religious peace. What we tried in the nineties and again in the 2000s was a secular peace.

Sruli Fruchter: Could you clarify what specifically you're referring to, for the audience?

Rabbi Melchior: Oslo, Camp David with Barak, then the Bush roadmap afterwards. I know all of it like the back of my hand. I was personally involved in a lot of it, and I supported it. I always said I didn't believe it would work, but that if there was a small chance it would, I could be wrong. I'm usually never wrong (audience laughter), but it could happen. So I'd support it and give it a chance.

The problem was that the tent was too narrow. The Israeli left and the Palestinian left were too narrow to hold the peace. You cannot make peace without the religious, traditional element as a main part of it. It goes against our DNA, against who we are. I developed the concept of a religious peace back at the end of the eighties.

This is not just religious people supporting peace. Rav Lichtenstein, Rav Amital, Rav Soloveitchik, Rav Ovadia Yosef and others were all religious leaders whose support for Oslo was itself a kiddush Hashem, and important. I'm talking about something more than that: a peace that comes out of religious ideals and ideas, one in which religion takes a leading role, though it needn't exclude the secular, who should also be part of it.

I spoke about this for three hours once in Yeshivat Har Etzion, where Rav Lichtenstein z"l was present and, I think, he was quite struck by a concept he hadn't encountered framed quite that way before, so that even those who hold differently, leshitatam, following the Ramban, that all the land is ours, that kol Eretz Yisrael is ours, can be included in this peace.

Sruli Fruchter: So maybe you can tell us, in practice, what does that religious peace look like?

Rabbi Melchior: Rav Lichtenstein or Rav Blau could give a better shiur on the Ramban than I can, but let me try.

Let's say there is such a mitzvah today, even according to them. There's a good question here: we know our forefathers were willing to give up land for peace. Who?

Audience member: Avraham.

Rabbi Melchior: Avraham. With whom? With Avimelech, not Lot. Avraham made a brit with Avimelech in which he was willing to give land for peace, and that continued with his son Yitzchak, who also made peace with Avimelech and the Plishtim.

Rav Goren, in his book on the sanctity of the land in Jewish law, says he has no answer to this; it's very difficult for him. And the Ramban himself, in the first chapter of Devarim, explains why Bnei Yisrael, leaving Mitzrayim, could not go derech eretz Plishtim: ki karov hu, because of the agreement Avraham had made with Avimelech.

Audience member 2: Excuse me, but that was before King David.

Rabbi Melchior: It was before King David, because what happened with David, and with Shimshon, is that they broke the deal. Once a deal is broken, you don't have to keep it. That's exactly how a deal works.

Audience member 3: Can we compare deals made by individuals before Sinai to deals made by nations after Sinai?

Sruli Fruchter: Can we hold off on audience questions for now? We'll have time at the end.

Rabbi Melchior: We have a tradition, kabbalah beyadeinu, that Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov kept kol hamitzvot of the Torah, and we don't find them criticised anywhere for these agreements.

Here's another example: Shlomo HaMelech, who, on the plain reading, gave away twenty towns in the Galil. There's a gemara discussion about whether their inhabitants were ovdei avodah zarah, which would make this problematic, but there is no problem in giving away land as part of a political treaty.

There's an interesting rav, not widely known, called Rav Hirschensohn, a great posek, born (1857) in Yerushalayim, who was driven out by the kana'im and ended up in Boston. He was a staunch Zionist who believed in Eretz Yisrael hashelemah, but on the basis of these beritot he says: we can't give up the land litzmitut (permanently). But, and here we come to the religious piece, on the basis of ki li ha'aretz, ki gerim ve'toshavim atem imadi, that the land really belongs to God, we can lease it out for up to forty-nine years. You keep the

dream that it's all ours, but you make agreements for a term, renewable if the other side keeps their word: forty-nine years, and then another forty-nine, and another.

There's an equivalent concept in Islam, called a muwada'a. I won't go into the details, but it means the land ceases to be dar al-harb (an abode of war) without Islam relinquishing its claim to it, and the poskim of the Muslim Brotherhood, among the strictest Islamists in the world, are intrigued by it. It lets us make a warm peace, renewable in periods of up to forty-nine years if both sides keep their word, while keeping the dream of Eretz Yisrael hashelemah, that nachalat avoteinu, Shechem and Chevron and all of it belongs to us, and Jews can live there during that period too. It will be a warm peace, not the cold peace we saw yesterday, and it will be with all the Palestinian factions and all the Arab countries, renewable, based on a religious peace.

The politicians will work out the details afterwards, but we already have plans for those details too: the state will be fully demilitarised, accepted as such by the other side, with all the necessary security precautions, especially after the seventh of October. They understand that security will be the first priority on our side in any deal made today.

Sruli Fruchter: We only have a few moments left before we turn to audience questions, but I sense a strong disconnect in the room between this vision and... let's assume everyone agrees with the mekorot, agrees with the principle. Where is this peace you're speaking about?

Rabbi Melchior: What does the audience need to know, to be on the same page about the viability of what I'm describing?

I spoke last night in Magen Avot about how you turn an enemy into a friend, but let me give you a serious example here, something nistar min ha'ayin, hidden from view, though it's been in the press so I can mention it.

Some years ago two Israeli policemen were murdered on Har HaBayit. Israel moved in strongly, took over the whole of Har HaBayit with cameras, and the Muslims wouldn't go in to daven. They started praying outside the Old City, hundreds of thousands of them, during Ramadan, and the whole thing was set to explode across the Muslim world.

I was with my main coalition partners, negotiating something else entirely, and came back to Israel on a Monday evening. The head of the Jerusalem police came to me and said: we have until Friday. If there's no solution by then, we're doomed; this could mean tens of thousands killed. Everyone had tried to solve

it: the Soviets, the Jordanians, the Americans, the Saudis, the secret services, MI5. He said, we know you have connections; use them, all of them, immediately.

We set up a cheder matzav in my office and didn't leave it for three days, speaking to all our coalition partners across the Muslim world, including some you wouldn't want to hear about, and said: you promised, you're part of our coalition, we need your help now.

They all came through, and two days later we had a solution, presented at four in the morning to the Israeli cabinet. Bibi was Prime Minister then, and the Minister of Police was Gilad Erdan; it wasn't my political camp at the time, but they saw it was a good solution. All eight factions of the Waqf were on board, the cabinet gave the green light by the next morning, and by mincha time for the Muslims the gates were opened. There was one incident right at the start, quickly contained, but it worked. That's how we've solved crisis after crisis, saving thousands of lives.

Even during this conference, I missed half a shiur here because one of the leading Muslims in Great Britain called me out to a meeting connected to a situation with Saudi Arabia that we're working on right now. It happens all the time. This isn't interfaith dialogue for its own sake (though I'm for that too); it's that religious peace can make the breakthrough that lets both sides finally live peacefully.

I can tell you about a leading Hamas figure, one who educates the new religious leadership at Al-Najah in Shechem. He tells his own colleagues in Hamas: what do you want, to kill a thousand Israelis? Find some secret weapon and kill fifty thousand? So what? The Israelis will only be angrier, will kill more Palestinians. Will that make a single Palestinian child happier? Will it give any Palestinian a future?

Today is also the yahrtzeit of my own eldest son, Eitan. He passed away fourteen years ago, very rapidly, from a violent cancer. He was a talmid chacham, a gaon, but always searching for the truth, which made his life difficult, very difficult. A couple of weeks before he died, in Shaarei Tzedek, I was sitting with him when I got a call, during the Haj, from the Palestinian who led the Palestinian delegation to Mecca. They were standing across from the Kaaba, two hundred of them, and he said: I know you're with Eitan. I want you to know all of us here have one prayer: we're praying for your son. Eitan was listening, and he cried. This man is Hamas, not Sinwar's Hamas, but the kind who are willing to make peace with us, not at our expense but together with us.

And they've proven it again and again, including after the seventh of October, when many of them were arrested and thrown in prison without reason, held thirty to a room without toilets, elderly people in their 70s and 80s, treated like dogs. I spoke to the Shabak about it (we have a good relationship), and when these men were released after three or four months, they called me the same day and said: we're still with you.

These are some of the most influential, most committed people, working day and night so their children and ours can have a future.

Sruli Fruchter: I'm sure there's a lot more, and we're going to open it up to the room. We'll take three questions at a time and try to combine the answers so we can be thorough.

Audience member 4: Thanks for coming. How do we help? How do we support this?

Audience member 5: You've given examples of religious Jews and Muslims working for peace, but it's often said the Quran's own internal writings don't leave scope for a real peace of this kind. I'm not making a statement, I'd just like to know your view.

Audience member 6: In a country that's almost half Christian and half Muslim, a situation that the Arab world has accepted for many years, using Lebanon as a model, would something like that work for Israel, for a religious peace?

Sruli Fruchter: So our three questions: what can we do about it; what does religious peace look like from the Muslim perspective of their mekorot; and can Lebanon be a model for this kind of peace. I'll leave it to you to work your magic in somehow answering all three.

Rabbi Melchior: The trouble with Q&A is that every question is really a whole lecture, so forgive me if I don't do each one full justice.

First, what you can do. Many people, when they talk about Israel, talk mostly about what to criticise. Instead, talk about what can be done positively. Work for religious peace. Most of you here are religious people (though secular people can be in the peace tent too, and we welcome that), but support the peace between, mainly, Islam and the Jewish people, since that's where our problem lies. In other places it might be a different pairing: Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, say. I was involved in the early stages of that process, and there are models there we can learn from. From the IRA, a

terrorist organisation, becoming Sinn Féin, and from the Good Friday Agreement. The situations aren't the same, but there's a lot to learn.

You can also help raise support. Our funding today is five times what it was before the seventh of October, so any funders you know who might want to be partners, we can talk about that one-to-one. We don't want from the river to the sea, which is what some in our own government say. We don't want what our Prime Minister said just this week, that we want constant war. We don't want nichyeh al hacherev, to live forever by the sword. We believe there's something else to try.

We tried the secular peace. There were good, serious people involved in it, I won't dismiss that, but it couldn't succeed, at Oslo and later at Annapolis and elsewhere. When you go down a blind alley enough times, on four flat tyres, it gets harder to reach the goal, but that doesn't mean the goal of peace is the wrong goal. We don't have another alternative.

When Secretary of State Kerry told me this was the last chance, I asked him: what does that mean? That if we don't succeed, we're doomed forever to live in war? No! There are other possibilities, and this is one of them.

On the Muslim perspective: there is a concept of religious peace in Islam too. It goes back to Saladin, the most famous warrior of Islam, who defeated the Crusaders (after all the massacres they committed against Jews on their way here) and Richard the Lionheart. The Muslims were good to the Jews throughout that period. In the end Saladin made a peace, at Ramla, defined in religious terms, a religious peace, and there are many later sources and written fatwas based on it, which the poskim of even the more radical Islamic movements accept as a valid basis for an Islamic religious peace. Those are the main sources for religious peace within Islam.

Sruli Fruchter: I feel terrible, but we're about fifteen minutes over. I'm told we have to pause here for a short break before the final panel. But please don't let that stop anyone who wants to come up and talk with Rav Melchior. For everyone else, no one should feel bad about taking a coffee break.