

We Have Only to Begin

By Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf

I first visited Israel in 1962. My two young sons and I stayed on the border of a Jerusalem divided; we could look into the old city but could not go there. I wondered what it might be to live in a Jewish Jerusalem, not thinking much about the many Palestinians all around me.

A few years later I entered the newly "liberated" city to meet my kibbutznik son. On that earlier visit, he, his brother, and I had visited with the venerable scholar Martin Buber, and we treasured his model of coexistence ever after.

The new Israel was larger but not safer, victorious but not secure. Then came the burgeoning settlements, filling the occupied land and denying Palestinian integrity. I began to talk cautiously with PLO moderates, two* of whom were assassinated for meeting with American Jews. "Breira"*** was my way of protesting the occupation and trying to keep open a way to two safe and peaceful nation-states.

But the settlements have grown continually after 40 years, and peace seems no closer than it ever was. Corruption, incompetent leadership, and deep divisions within have marked these 40 long years, years that we have wasted in pride and fear.

It is time to begin anew, to withdraw bilaterally from an Arab Palestine, and to remake Israel as a truly Jewish, very humane homeland. Jerusalem will be united first in the mind of God, and then it will be built only with "mishpat," justice, fairness, truth.

We know what we must do. We have only to begin.

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*The two assassinated PLO leaders were Said Hammami, killed in London in 1978, and Isam Sartawi, killed in Portugal in 1983.

*** Breira: A Project of Concern in Diaspora-Israel Relations was founded in 1973 with Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf as its founding chair. Breira called for Israel to make territorial concessions and recognize the legitimacy of the national aspirations of the Palestinian people in order to achieve lasting peace. When Breira leaders met with moderate Palestinians, they were denounced by major Jewish organizations as PLO supporters; some rabbis and other Jewish professional members were threatened with dismissal. The group was forced to disband in 1977.