

Access to Water and Transforming Conflict: EcoPeace-Middle East

--Rabbi Dr Frank Dabba Smith

I am deeply grateful for the gift of this opportunity to engage in discussion with all of you today in this special place.

I come here bearing the labels of 'Jew', 'rabbi', 'doctor' and 'liberal-left' but I am not primarily interested in these ethnic, institutional or political constructions. I speak simply as a human being.

Let me start with a true story. While living in Israel in the 1980s, I worked as a freelance photographer for various NGOs and publications such as the *Economist*. One assignment took me into Gaza during the first *Intifada* in early 1988. During this excursion, I had an experience that forever reshaped my views of those whom I was indoctrinated to regard as my enemies. Together with my client, an American agricultural specialist working with the NGO Catholic Relief Services, I witnessed violent incidents involving the throwing of stones and burning of tires in an area of squalor. Not far away, our jeep broke down. My client went off looking for help. A short while later, a small group of Palestinian young men approached. As I was quite isolated and vulnerable, I feared for the worst: these men could have harmed me and no one would have been the wiser. I soon realized that they only wanted to repair the jeep. After a few minutes' tinkering with the carburettor, the engine

roared to life. I opened my wallet and offered money, which they politely refused. ‘Salaam Alaikum,’ they said, and then they left.¹

I was stunned by their unaffected kindness and generosity. Since that day, my faith has been informed not only by a profound respect for the ethical and peaceful ideals of Islam, but an openness to others, *strangers*, regardless of background.² I must say that this particular unexpected gift of hospitality, and appropriate help, positively informed my sense that sacred behaviour arises out of a person’s virtues and values rather than nationality or other labels.

In this regard, my faith may be described as being expressed in acts of hospitality to the stranger. As the Catholic theologian Richard Kearney writes, ‘I hear a call from an Other; I receive a gift from an Other. I receive the power to make the impossible possible.’³ In sum, I believe in maximal inclusivity, maximal celebration of difference and never giving up on the *possibility* of positively transforming conflict in the here-and-now through working for justice, compassion and kindness. Or, as a dear Christian colleague often says simply, ‘Just keep chipping away’.

In expressing my faith actively, I am affiliated with EcoPeace-Middle East, an NGO that is devoted to restoring two historically fascinating and environmentally unique features of the

¹ Frank Dabba Smith, “Our Shared Humanity,” in *Faith: Essays from Believers, Agnostics, and Believers*, ed. Victoria Zackheim (New York: Atria Paperback, 2015), 104.

² Ibid, 104-5.

³ Richard Kearney, ‘Imagination, Anatheism, and the Sacred: Dialogue with James Wood,’ in *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, eds. Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 29.

region, the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. Over the course of the last century and a half, the flow of the Jordan River has been reduced by over 90% due to water being diverted, as well as polluted, by all sides in the conflict.⁴ One result is the ecological disaster happening in the area of the Dead Sea, as its depth decreases at the rate of one metre per year. Not only do these critical water issues affect the health and welfare of Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis living in the area of the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea, but the migratory route of hundreds of millions of birds dependent on the northern section of the Great Rift Valley is also damaged.

Since its inception twenty-five years ago, EcoPeace-Middle East has brought together cooperating neighbours from Jordan, Israel and Palestine to restore the Jordan River and to engage in education and advocacy. To the best of my knowledge this is the only body that has a tripartite leadership, of citizens of these three countries. Thanks to their efforts, international awareness of regional water issues has grown considerably, along with a sense that the physical environment must not be held hostage to any failed political negotiations. I feel hope because of the progress that has been made in improving water quality, and in the growing cross-border trust despite the presence of rejectionists emanating from opposing sides. Some of those who are very involved have come to view themselves as *citizens of the geographical region* rather than citizens of a national entity.

EcoPeace's cross-border grassroots programme is known as the 'Good Water Neighbours Project'. It was founded in 2001 with two primary aims: first, 'to advance cross-border

⁴ Gidon Bromberg, et al eds., *Good Water Neighbors: Identifying Common Environmental Problems and Shared Solutions*, (Amman, Bethlehem and Tel Aviv: EcoPeace-FoEME, 2007), 6.

cooperation by focusing attention on shared water concerns and the need to protect shared water resources' and, second, 'to foster peace and cooperation through long term trust building based on the shared interests of neighbouring communities'.⁵ Central to the programme is the involvement of youth, educators and local officials in specific environmental projects. I have been impressed with the development of practical solutions as well as the growing empathy for those unjustly facing water shortages and pollution among the twenty-eight communities participating. The development of articulate young 'Water Stewards' has been extraordinary. One strategic outcome of this programme has been the development of the 'Jordan Valley NGO Master Plan' which highlights the necessity of creating shared solutions to these critical concerns together with the introduction of environmentally sustainable enterprise to the area.⁶

To deal with the acute water shortages, particularly in Jordan and Palestine, a top-down approach is also necessary. Here, desalinization may be regarded as the game-changer as Israel is the world's leader in the field. Unfortunately, these facilities are powered by fossil fuels. Therefore, EcoPeace advocates the development of an 'Energy-Water Nexus' which would see Jordan trading solar energy to Israel for use in desalinization and the resulting drinkable water being sent to Jordan and Palestine. Such a scheme would create a practical interdependency which would lead to more equal access to water and hopefully contribute

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Jeroen Kool, et al, *Regional NGO Master Plan for Sustainable Development in the Jordan Valley*, (Amman, Ramallah and Tel Aviv: EcoPeace-Middle East, 2015).

to regional stability. EcoPeace is in the process of seeking investment in a pilot project for this pioneering scheme.⁷

There is also the acute awareness that when it comes to the environment there is no such thing as a 'free lunch': insufficient scientific research has been done concerning the brine and heat released into the Mediterranean Sea by the desalinization processes as well as the long term effects of consuming desalinated water on human health. Such significant concerns must be rigorously monitored. In the meantime, especially for Palestinians and Jordanians, access to water is an absolutely critical issue and must be addressed urgently for the sake of life and regional security.

Speaking of water justice and security, the situation in Gaza is especially dangerous. The depleted aquifer yields virtually no water that is safe to drink and some 110,000 cubic metres of raw sewage is dumped into the Mediterranean Sea daily.⁸ It is nothing short of a humanitarian disaster and it holds the potential for much more violent conflict and suffering of innocents. EcoPeace lobbies vigorously for access to water and energy supplies for Gaza and has met with some success but political will is very limited, thus far. A properly implemented 'Energy-Water Nexus' would help greatly. (In this regard, I should say that

⁷ David Katz and Arkadiy Shafran, *Energy Water Nexus: A Pre-Feasibility Study for Mid-East Water-Renewable Energy Exchanges*, (Amman, Ramallah and Tel Aviv: EcoPeace-Middle East, 2017); Inga Carry, et al, *Climate Change, Water Security, and National Security for Jordan, Palestine, and Israel*, (Amman, Ramallah and Tel Aviv: EcoPeace-Middle East, 2019).

⁸ Gidon Bromberg, et al, *Gaza on the Edge: The Water and Energy Crisis in Gaza*, (Amman, Ramallah and Tel Aviv: EcoPeace-Middle East, 2018), 1-12.

EcoPeace continues to support the two-state solution with the West Bank and Gaza formed into a viable Palestinian state with justice and dignity for all inhabitants.)

As a member of the International Advisory Committee of EcoPeace-Middle East, one of my primary aims is to develop partnerships with and between faith groups. For example, where I live in Northwest London, Jews, Muslims and Christians meet to support EcoPeace's efforts and this partnership has also created enduring positive relationships locally. I am working closely with the Interreligious Committee of the World Methodist Council to develop a mutually beneficial and sustained partnership with EcoPeace based on pilgrimage and youth internships to the region as well as advocacy for transforming conflict through equitable access to water supplies and rehabilitating the environment. We at EcoPeace are ready to discuss practical collaboration with other faith groups from any region, too.

We all know that aspects of the Jordan River and its neighbouring areas are considered sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Surely, the moral imaginations of adherents to any faith must be stirred into practical action by the possibility of transforming conflict through rehabilitating and enhancing the supply of these precious waters. By renewing and sustaining the waters for those who are Other to, and Othered by, our own religious tradition, not just those who we consider 'our own', we also transform ourselves more fully as ethical human beings on our shared fragile planet.

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