On Religion and Social Identity in Jewish – Arab Education

Delivered by Bob Mark at the Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan on October 11th 2006 in the framework of a course on "Religion and Modern Society."

Introduction

I would like to thank the Ritsumeikan University, the Yomiuri Shimbun and the Japanese Committee of the World Council of Religions for Peace for the honor of inviting me to speak to you today, and for their overwhelming generosity and hospitality during my stay in Japan.

Last year when I received the invitation to speak in a course on religion and modern society, it was not immediately clear to me whether or not I should accept. I am not religious. I cannot speak with great authority on the Jewish tradition that I am perhaps expected to represent here today, nor would I use the terminology of an interfaith agenda in order to describe my work. My anxiety only increased when I saw the list of distinguished speakers who were to precede me and follow me: leaders of prestigious international religious organizations and academics in the field.

Since then I reached a few conclusions: Although I'm not religious, the fact remains that as secular as I claim to be, where I come from, religion is difficult to escape or to ignore whether I want to or not. I am not only talking about the power of the Jewish religious parties in our government, or the Jewish fundamentalists who justify occupation in the name of God, or the Islamic fundamentalist movements which appear to be growing in strength. That's to say I am *not* necessarily referring to what *others* may or may not be *imposing* upon us. Rather I am referring to how we *choose* to identify ourselves. What it is that makes us continue to define ourselves as Jews... or as Baptists, Shiites, or Bahai for that matter...

even if we have little ability to explain what these categories mean in terms of a belief system.

I have been dealing with the politics of identity for quite some time in my work, and these choices can be significant. For the past 20 years I have been teaching in the first primary school in Israel which has brought Jewish and Palestinian Arab children together to learn in both Hebrew and Arabic, in the hope of creating a new reality. Whether we look at our pupils as Jews and Palestinians, or as Jews, Muslims and Christians, one of the unsettled questions that we as educators have been dealing with, is what *we* should be doing with these categories. We bring together children who come from different social realities, who face different obstacles, and who enjoy different privileges, largely because they have been categorized differently at birth. And religion is one of the tools used in categorizing us.

In order to bring discussion of "Religion and Modern Society" to a field that I might actually have something to say about, I will address religion in the context of a broader discussion on social identity. Questions of social identity lie at the heart of any discussion on multicultural education. And many of the questions that concern me about about major political and religious movements in the world, stem from my work with 10 to 12 year old Jewish and Arab children. I'll use my understanding of multicultural education in general and my work experience in the field of Jewish – Arab education in particular, in order to raise questions about the place of religion in the inter – cultural meeting. When I discuss religion, I will be looking at it as a *resource* in the construction of our social identity. "Religion," of course, is an enormous word, and I want to be careful about making generalities that are too broad. I will be speaking from very limited experience with the three religions that I encounter in my work.

My years in our school have been one on-going attempt to identify how educational programs might contribute to understanding and peace between Palestinian Arabs and Jews. I think that the questions

of multi - cultural education that we deal with, and the obstacles that we face, have important implications for those interested in conducting any kind of inter – group encounter, including those who wish to advance inter-faith understanding. One of these questions would be how to define the groups of people that we work with. When a Palestinian group meets a Jewish group, what is it that we actually bring together? Any discussion of inter-cultural, or inter-group meetings carries with it certain assumptions about the nature of "culture," and about the boundaries of the group. These assumptions are not always examined as much as they probably should be before embarking upon educational work. Another question of multi-cultural education is, what are we trying to *reach* by bringing together different groups and identities. These two questions; what is it that makes a group a group, and what are we trying to achieve by bringing them together in the same school, are very much tied together.

One might claim that these questions aren't relevant to the inter-faith encounter since the different religious groups and their different beliefs are clearly defined in the books. That may be, but I suspect that if we look at the inter – faith encounter strictly as an exercise in comparative literature, its relevance to any serious problems in the world will be limited. Quite a few of us express loyalty to one religious group or another without ever having been exposed to the literature. We can rally around flags of religion in much the same way as we rally around the flags of nations. I think that questions of religious identities can be approached with pretty much the same questions that must be raised regarding any national or ethnic social identity.

The connection that I make between multicultural educational work and the field of inter-faith work in general, is that in both cases it is easy to use the discourse of inter-cultural understanding as a means of evading the conflict. Effective inter-cultural work must begin with effective definitions of the groups involved and of the issues at stake.

While preparing this talk, I came across an article on the work of Oguma Eiji that I thought might be worth mentioning. If I understand this correctly, Eiji claims that there was a time when Japanese stressed the multi – cultural character of the Japanese nation and that it was only after WWII that they began to regard themselves as ethnically homogeneous. Eiji offers an explanation of the social and political interests behind each group definition and he goes on to explain why today there are voices challenging what he calls the myth of Japanese ethnic homogeneity. *He* connects the changes in Japanese group identity to changing attitudes towards foreigners in Japan. Eiji doesn't seem to be particularly concerned about whether or not the Japanese are in fact ethnically homogeneous. He's concerned about why this is an issue, and what is served by defining the group one way or another. Well obviously I have no opinion on this issue, but I bring it up here because it helps illustrate the *kinds* of questions that also concern me regarding group identity. Discussion of group identity is not so much about what people are. It's about how we define ourselves and why.

A few words about my own religious background and attitude: I was raised in the United States. There were very few Jews in the neighborhoods where I grew up, and I didn't live my life according to customs that were significantly different from those of anyone else in the neighborhood. My Jewish education meant that as a child I went to Hebrew School a few days a week until my Bar Mitzvah, or confirmation, at age 13, which marked the end of any kind of ongoing connection to a synagogue and organized religion. While I am not any more religious today than I ever was, I am aware of a very different role that religion plays in my life in Israel as opposed to memories associated with religion during my childhood in the States. I remember films of young Orthodox Jews going South and risking their lives to join Blacks in Civil Rights marches. Their social commitment appeared to me to be a natural outcome of their religious values. My Bar Mitzvah ceremony took place a week after the Ohio

National Guard shot and killed four students at an anti-war rally in the Kent State University. My Rabbi's anger at the brutality of the State was the subject of that evening's sermon. There was inter-religious cooperation on very real political and ethical issues. Several national Church and Synagogue organizations petitioned and demonstrated against the Vietnam War. You didn't have to be Black and Protestant to be moved by the powerful moral leadership of Rev. Martin Luther King. Those are the earliest voices of religion that come to my mind. There were probably *more* religious movements supporting Right wing agendas, but my point is that I don't remember religion as being a bad thing. We can be encouraged by the thought that situations exist in which moral teachings from different traditions *can* come together in alliances to promote social justice.

What concerns me is why that doesn't happen more often, and in more places. That may be putting it too mildly. What concerns me is the alliance between religion and nationalism, an alliance in which religions fuel nationalist militarism rather than pulling out of their arsenals teachings that advance the common interest of humankind. Events similar to the Kent State Massacre have become a fairly routine part of the week in the Occupied Territories of Palestine and they hardly make the back pages of the newspaper. I spent every Saturday evening last July demonstrating in the streets of Tel-Aviv, furious with the ease with which Israel can choose to go to war. I wish I could at least tell you that I was *surprised* by the lack of religious voices that were represented there. But it no longer surprises me. I'm not talking about whether or not there were religious people in the demonstrations. I'm talking about the lack of a voice in the name of organized religion shouting Thou shalt not Kill... or at least make sure it's your last option. Since I have seen religions play more constructive roles in a different time and place, I can only conclude that the issue is less about the teachings of one religion or another, and more about the social and political structure in which religions work. For those of us trying to make sense out of our conflicts, or even to *do* something about it, this is a crucial point. It speaks to where we focus our attention and energy. Do we first examine social structures as a means of understanding the face of

religion? Or do we regard religion as a source of problems or as a key to solutions regarding social injustice? Similar questions accompany the discourse of multicultural education. Do we use cultural differences to explain what goes on between groups? Or do we first concern ourselves with the social structure of the encounter?

Two years ago I completed an ethnographic study of our Jewish – Arab school for my M.A. thesis. I examined the conventional definitions of the Jewish – Arab inter-cultural meeting as they are usually formulated by the school. I then went on to demonstrate how very little these definitions have to do with what actually goes on between the Jewish and Arab pupils, families, and teachers involved in the school. In defining the educational challenge of Jewish – Arab education, much is said about the significance of the groups' different histories, narratives, national aspirations, languages, religions and social values. However the dynamics of Jewish – Arab relations in Israel have much more to do with processes that can be identified in pretty much any society in which there are majority groups that enjoy more privilege and access to power than minority groups. The literature that helps me identify what goes on between my Jewish and Arab pupils is literature coming from North America and Europe about schools in which Hispanics, Blacks or other minority group children are taught in the same classroom with middle class White children. We could speak at great length about the cultural differences between these children's great grandparents and I think it's an interesting and important thing to do. But what goes on between us has to do with cultural patterns that are constantly being created in our encounter with each other: the children's experience walking the streets, how they expect to be received when people hear their language or accents, the likelihood that doors will be open to professional advancement, and whether or not they've come to regard the police officer as their friend. These are things that distinguish one group from the next.

My paper was meant to serve as a fairly serious warning for our school. If we create a school in order

to advance social change, or raise awareness of the need for social change, we need to start with a more effective and coherent grasp of what it is that we want to change. What is often regarded as inter – cultural understanding, does not always help us very much in understanding patterns of behavior that can be identified in a group.

How do I translate this in regards to the inter-faith encounter?   The implications of our work, and the main point that I would like to make regarding religion, is that in trying to gain an understanding of what goes on between Jews and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, Muslims and Christians ... I will not seek an understanding of the "true" meaning of each group's religious scriptures. Rather I will try to understand why particular definitions of each group gain ascendancy at any particular time. How does the changing definition of a group's identity or religion serve, or resist the particular social reality in which they find themselves? The way we interpret the inter – cultural, inter – group or inter - faith encounter is no small academic question. This is what makes the difference between those who are preoccupied with leading a crusade against an axis of evil, and those who try to gain an understanding of the social and political roots of violent resistance characterizing religious groups, or any other group, at any given time.

I would like to say that in our context, a study of religion will help us to understand the *language* of the Middle East conflict. I don't believe that it will provide us with an understanding of the nature of the conflict. There is nothing inherently problematic in Jewish, Islamic and Christian *beliefs* that keeps us from getting along with each other. Well...nothing that can't be overcome. However there *are* problems inherent in the colonialist structure of relations between East and West that keep us from getting along with each other. I tend to be suspicious of the motives of those who claim otherwise. Regarding violence as an integral part of one culture or another is the common tactic used to blame the victim. Fundamentalism and religious violence, be it Islamic Jewish or Christian, is the sign of a sick society.

But fundamentalism is the symptom, not the disease.

Take into account that if we were to study the past 14 hundred years of history from a strictly Jewish perspective, we might be astounded by the idea that most Jews today regard the Christian world as their natural ally against the Muslim World. Of all of the religions represented by lecturers in this course I don't believe that there are any two religions that have more in common with each other than Judaism and Islam. Historically speaking we cannot begin to compare the abuse and oppression that the Jews suffered at the hands of the church to what the Jews experienced under what was in general a far more humane and tolerant Islamic rule. I would like to remind some of the less enlightened voices coming out of the Vatican and Washington D.C. that scientific advance in the Muslim world wasn't hindered by Islamic religious leaders, unlike western society which had to free itself from the Church in order to progress. Greek philosophy entered Judaism thanks to the work and influence of Islamic theologians. This ought to raise questions for those who insist that we are dealing with a "clash of Eastern and Western civilizations." Anyone who has done the most elementary reading of Islamic history knows that the myth of Arabs forcing people to convert to Islam by the sword was nothing more than anti – Islamic propaganda spread by the church. I heard some interesting and disturbing analyses of the pope's motivation in bringing this subject up once again. If the pope had chosen to condemn the ignorance of some of his predecessors, and the bloodshed for which they were responsible, that would perhaps have been a noble gesture. Since that's not what we heard even in his apology, his comments should raise concern about his own idea of the role of the church. After all, his comments certainly teach us nothing about Islam.

I will speak about several things that I hope can come together coherently and contribute to a course on Religion and Modern Society. Being the only Jewish lecturer in this course makes it difficult to focus on one particular aspect of society without getting buried in a great deal of background information. I'll

start with some historical background of our region, and from there I'll go into a more detailed discussion of the attempt by my village, Neve Shalom / Wahat al-Salam, to respond to our social reality. I'll address the challenges facing our primary school; that's to say challenges facing Palestinians and Jews who attempt to advance change by building a common educational program for their children. And from there I'll end with some thoughts about what all of this might mean for those who are concerned specifically with an inter – faith agenda.

History

[*Regional Map*]

The modern – day state of Israel was founded in 1948. Japan if I understand right is 18 times larger than Israel (374,744 sq. km. / 20,800). It's a very small country, and yet it's impossible to walk from Asia to Africa without going through it. The location of this piece of land, as a crossroad between two enormous continents, has been an influential feature in its history since ancient times. No Middle Eastern empire could ignore it. The meeting of different cultures and the traffic that went through our region presumably have something to do with the incredible impact it has had on world religions that have survived until today.

[*State Map*]

When I speak of Israel I refer to the borders that were internationally recognized after the War of '48. That's to say *not* including the territories that Israel captured in the '67 War. I've been having a difficult time finding websites that will agree with each other regarding some of the following statistics, so speaking in very round numbers this is what I've found. There are about six and a half million people in Israel. About 80 % of Israel's citizens are Jewish, and close to 20 % of the citizens are Palestinian Arabs. When I refer to Palestinians in our village and in our school, I will be speaking strictly about

Palestinians who have Israeli citizenship. They carry Israeli passports and vote in Israeli elections etc. Among the Palestinians in Israel, roughly 83% are Muslim, 9% are Christian and 8 % are Druze.

The 1967 War in which Egypt, Syria and Jordan fought against Israel, resulted in Israel's occupation of additional territory. Israel took the Sinai peninsula and Gaza from the Egyptians, the Golan Heights from the Syrians and the West Bank from the Jordanians. The Sinai peninsula has since gone back to Egypt in return for diplomatic relations. Gaza and bits of the West Bank are run by the Palestinian Authority under a certain form of autonomy. However they are far from enjoying independence. The occupation has never really ended for them. Or for any of us. Today there about two and a half million Palestinians in the West bank and one and a half million Palestinians in Gaza. While I maintain the distinction here between Israel and the Occupied Territories, we have to remember that Israel's control over millions of people who do not have a voice in determining their destiny, has been a part of Israel's reality for most of its history - 39 years out of its 58 – year history. Most of the people who live in Israel today never knew or hardly remember the country before it became an occupying power. The suffering that the Palestinians endure because of the occupation is obvious. The price that the Israelis pay for being occupiers is apparently not so clear to enough of us. Otherwise the occupation would have ended a long time ago.

So how did we get into this mess and what does it have to do with religion? I'll try to summarize the past 3,000 of history, and I'll skip the apologies about how every historical account is a narrative that reflects the story – teller's opinions and positions. I promise you that I'll be filtering the facts just like everyone else. Since my interest here is on questions of group identity, I chose to focus the historical presentation on the formation of a Jewish national group.

There are fascinating discussions over the Bible as history and the Bible as Jewish mythology. While the stories of Abraham Isaac and Jacob are essential to any study of the Jewish people, no historians would take them seriously for their historical value. Still a people's mythology can be as real and as consequential as any of its history. During my time in the country, educated and somewhat intelligent people have actually killed each other over control of alleged tombs of the patriarchs. So it would be irrelevant to ask whether the patriarchs ever existed, much less whether or not anyone knows where they were buried. Regarding questions of history or mythology, the story of Moses and the exodus of Israelite slaves from Egypt remains contested territory. However among archeologists and historians there is a general consensus that there *was* a King David, that he captured Jerusalem, and that from there he at least ruled the Israelite tribe of Yehuda or Judah around 1,000 BC. And most people accept that he ruled all of the other Israelite tribes as well. David's son Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem which served as the focus of Jewish religious and political life during all the years of its existence. The first temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC and it was soon rebuilt when the Persian Empire took over. The second temple lasted about 600 years before it was destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans as they put down a major Jewish revolt. After putting down an additional short – lived Jewish revolt in the second century, the Romans made further attempts to erase the Jews' political and cultural aspirations. The Romans prevented Jews from entering Jerusalem and they renamed Judea, Palestine.

So there was a Jewish political entity in Judea for at least 1,000 years. From the time of the first temple's destruction we begin to see communities of Jews settling in other areas of the conquering empires where they developed codes that enabled them to create and maintain a Jewish religious life without having regular access to the temple in Jerusalem. Eventually after the destruction of the second temple, we reach a point at which the vast majority of Jews lived in scattered communities around the

world, with only small communities remaining in Palestine.

The survival of a Jewish people is a remarkable story. We are called Jews because we trace our ancestry back to the tribe of Judah. The other Israelite tribes were swallowed up by conquering armies and disappeared. There have been comical attempts to unravel the *mystery* of the lost tribes. But the disappearance of these tribes is the most normal thing that happened to the people of Israel. Conquered peoples generally adopted the customs of the conquerors either by will or by force and, like Philistines, Hittites, Phoenicians and Babylonians, they disappeared. It is no great mystery that most of the Israelite tribes disappeared. What is surprising is that one of them lasted.

From an orthodox religious perspective, the idea of Jews returning to Palestine in order to reestablish the kingdom, or to establish any other kind of political entity, eventually became a part of a vision that was to be realized with the coming of the Messiah. We face the direction of the temple when we pray, synagogues are built so that the congregation will face Jerusalem, and the holiest site for Jews is the remains of the wall that surrounded the temple. For Orthodox Judaism, the return to Palestine, or the Land of Israel, became a spiritual vision, not a practical political program.

Those who were to take seriously the idea of reestablishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine, came for the most part out of *secular* European Jewish circles from the late 19th century on. This was a time in which Europeans were busy redefining their loyalties in terms of national group belonging. In Central Europe several groups turned to ancient history in order to explain their connection to each other and to their land. With this kind of foundation for group cohesion, some Christians questioned the ability of the Jews among them to be loyal members of their group. It was at this time, with the growth of

nationalist movements, that the term "antisemitism" appeared. While Jews had previously suffered religious persecution by the church, the nationalist movements needed different grounds to justify the Jews' exclusion. Jews were now being told that regardless of their religion, it was their semitic racial traits that would keep them from belonging to any of the European nations. Of course not everyone ascribed to antisemitic racial theory and alliances certainly existed between Jews and non-Jews who continued to struggle for equal rights. Jews were especially influential in the European socialist movements.

But some Jews had reached the conclusion that there was no chance to be accepted as equal citizens in European states. Their solution was to establish that the Jews themselves constituted a nation in the modern sense of the word, and that they must also reestablish connection with their ancient historical roots, rebuild a homeland in Palestine and renew Hebrew as the common national language. These Jews were to form the Zionist, or Jewish nationalist movement. This is where we see religion mobilized in order to advance what was basically a secular nationalist agenda. One of the well - known stories of early Zionist history is about Theodore Herzl, the first leader of the Zionist movement. Herzl was an Austrian journalist who came to Zionism after witnessing anti-semitic rioting in France. He was a secular Jew, totally assimilated in Austrian society, and he saw Jewish nationalism as the solution that would enable Jews to develop culturally and economically without persecution. At one point Herzl faced a revolt within the Zionist movement when he suggested that they consider options other than Palestine as a site for a Jewish state. A dramatic moment is described in which Herzl, seeing that the Zionist movement might split apart over this question, stood before an international congress of Zionist delegates and, raising his right hand, he quoted a prayer in which we declare, "If I forget thee O' Jerusalem may my right hand lose its power." This story is about a point at which Herzl understood the power and necessity of religious sites and symbols for the nationalist idea. The prayer that he cited suddenly became secular poetry, and the call to return to Jerusalem was now to be taken literally.

Rather than providing spiritual instruction about how we might look at life, the prayer became a call to rally to the flag.

For many religious Jews the Zionist idea was regarded as sacrilege since, as I mentioned, it was up to the Messiah to bring us to the Land of Israel. But it wasn't only the religious Jews who opposed the idea. The Zionist idea was also opposed by many, perhaps most of the secular Jews as well. For one thing the idea sounded impractical. How many people could be expected go along with it? For another thing to many Jews the whole concept that Yemenite, Russian, British and French Jews were part of the same nation sounded ridiculous. What was *more* seriously problematic was that Zionism was seen as strengthening the claims of the anti Semites. Many secular Jews, several of them in leading positions in European socialist movements, saw the very existence of a Zionist movement as damaging to their attempts to convince their respective countrymen that they had no loyalties that competed with their European homelands. After all we would soon see Jewish German and Jewish French soldiers shooting at each other from the trenches of World War I. And here the Zionist Jews were justifying the anti-Semites' claim that the Jews' loyalty is elsewhere.

There was tremendous hostility between Jews over the Zionist question, and there were times at which Herzl had to be protected from physical attack by other Jews. The hostility was mutual. In the first Zionist Congress in 1897, many of the speakers' main target of attack was not the anti-Semites, but rather they attacked the Jews who opposed Zionism, or those who were just not being cooperative. The Zionists saw these Jews at best as naïve and at worst as traitors.

Ideology alone was never a big enough incentive to bring the masses of Jews to Palestine. If the Jews hadn't faced very real threats to their existence, the Zionist idea would not have worked. The major waves of Jewish immigration came to Palestine when on one hand the Jews encountered serious

problems in their mother countries, and on the other hand, they couldn't find any place better to go than

Palestine. During the early years of the Zionist movement, the end of the 19th and beginning of the

20th century, there was a mass exodus of Jews from Eastern Europe as a result of the pogroms – State

supported violent attacks on Jewish villages. A small number of Jews chose to go to Palestine out of

Zionist ideology, while the masses of Jews, my grandparents included, went to the United States. Even

after Britain captured Palestine in WWI and declared their support for the establishment of a Jewish

homeland, the Jews were not standing on line to get in. But in 1924 the gates of immigration to the US

were closed, and in that same year new antisemitic government policies were introduced in Poland and

other areas of Eastern Europe leading to the first large - scale wave of Jewish immigration that turned

to Palestine. A much greater wave of Jewish immigration came to Palestine from Germany in the

1930's, also because their options were limited. The next major wave of immigrants were the Jewish

refugees in Europe who somehow survived World War Two but had lost their homes and families to

the Nazis and to the many neighbors who collaborated willingly or unwillingly with the Germans. The

masses of Jews from Arab countries only came in the 1950's, after the 1948 War between Israel and its

neighbors. These Jews came for the most part because they suffered repercussions from the Arab

countries that were furious at Israel in the wake of the war. Of course ideology was a significant mover

in bringing Jews who paved the way for the state. But those immigrants alone would not have been

sufficient to achieve their aims. The masses of Jews who chose to immigrate did so out of very

pragmatic motives. Most of those Jews who did not succeed in getting out of Europe by the 1940s were

simply annihilated. For many of those who remained, the Zionist solution had become much more

convincing.

Obviously one of the problems with the Zionist idea was that the history of Palestine did not end in the

second century. It flourished in the Byzantine period (when the Roman Empire converted to

Christianity) and, with the Arab conquest in the 7th century, Palestine became part of the Muslim world. And an important part of it. The al-Aksa mosque, one of the holiest sites in Islam was built on the site of the Temple. The name of Jerusalem in Arabic, el-Quds, means the holy city – and of course they mean holy to Islam. In the 20th century it was possible to find Arabs in Palestine who could see economic advantages to a *certain* degree of Jewish immigration and we can find stories of cooperation. But there is no reason to expect any of them to agree to the idea of changing the whole character of the land by flooding it with foreign immigrants. After WWII the UN decided to partition Palestine into one Palestinian and one Jewish state. The Arab World rejected the idea of partition, which would mean opening the gates for mass Jewish immigration, and several Arab armies invaded Israel. The '48 War was a military victory for Israel, but this is a war that we have never finished fighting. According to Benny Morris, out of a population of 1.2 to 1.3 million Palestinians in 1947, between 600 – 760,000 of them - at least half of the Palestinian population - became refugees. Many of them had been expelled by the Israelis and many took off before the fighting. Millions of their descendants remain refugees until today. Of course the arguments around the war have never ended either, and the 5 - sentence summary of it that I just gave you would anger plenty of people on both sides. I have no interest in evading the issues of the '48 war, and I'm sure we'll get back to it, but I want to stay focused on the formation of a Jewish national group.

Israel for its part had brought together Jews from very many different countries, with different customs, different group experiences and speaking tens of different languages. Creating Jewish national group solidarity was largely an educational task. Here's where religion plays a unique role as a resource in the construction of a secular nationalist ideology. I would be surprised to find another society which incorporates the Bible or any other holy book into its public education system in the way that it is

taught in Israeli society. The Bible is a central part of the school curriculum for religious and secular Jews alike. From the early primary school years and well into high school, secular Jews are taught the Bible as Jewish national history and literature. The secular are careful to distinguish between study of the Bible as a source of the Jews' cultural roots as opposed to the Bible as a source of religious guidance. The religious of course make no such distinction.

What is less clear is how to regard the 2,000 years that went by since the time of the second temple until the time of Israel. Here an important bonding component in Israeli education is the experience of persecution and antisemitism in general and the holocaust in particular. Persecution is something that the many diverse groups of Jewish immigrants to Israel had in common, and it is this experience that serves as the primary rationale for Zionism. To take the Zionist view to its extreme, the Biblical period represents the time in which the Jews had a state and maintained their dignity, after which the Jews lived a humiliating existence in exile until their dignity was restored with the establishment of the modern state of Israel.

Many years ago I read a provocative article by Jacob Katz, a very mainstream Israeli historian from the early days of the State, who pointed out the parallels between antisemitism and Zionism. Antisemitism and Zionism, as two movements, grew out of the same political climate, and actually shared a certain understanding of society. Both ideologies had reached the conclusion that a Jewish existence in Europe was not healthy. Both ideologies had very nasty things to say about the face of Jewish society as it had developed in the ghettos, and both movements had reached the same conclusion that the solution to everyone's problem was to get the Jews out of Europe. Of course the Zionists had a program with more constructive intentions than what the anti Semites had in mind. But whether the intentions are good or bad they both come from a very pessimistic outlook about any possibility of different ethnic groups working together constructively. Keep this in mind when I begin to speak about coexistence work with

Jews and Palestinians.

From a Zionist perspective you don't stand a chance as a Jew without having a State with a Jewish majority that you assume will be looking out for your interests. I think that this attitude has become less extreme over the years, but the basic concept has not changed. I remember during my first year in Israel, almost 30 years ago, I used to always comment that I had never heard so much about antisemitism in America until I left the States and read about it in Israeli newspapers. There were times when I told Israelis that I had never experienced antisemitism in America and some of them would argue with me as if to suggest that I was in denial. Another side of this is that I would occasionally hear Israelis describing an encounter with someone who they may say was *really* French, or *really* American, meaning that the person they met was apparently not Jewish and that he or she was steeped in French or American culture. Now I was a New York Yankees fan years before Hideki Matsui was born and on top of that I even play the banjo. I never felt less American than any of my childhood friends, and had anyone questioned that in the States, then the very question would have been regarded as antisemitic. The only place that the question came up was in Israel. This was actually what came to my mind when I read Jacob Katz's article on the parallels between Zionism and antisemitism. Years have gone by since I last had discussions like these and I think that these attitudes are less extreme today, but what hasn't changed is a serious concern for maintaining a society with a Jewish majority. We can hear public televised discussions about future dangers that are lurking because we might not continue to significantly outnumber the Arabs. Ultimately what convinced Arik Sharon to begin to pull Jewish settlers out of Gaza was the understanding that Jews won't be able to maintain a majority while holding on to all of the occupied territories. Arabs in the country regularly hear about themselves referred to as a demographic problem, and few people question the legitimacy of this discourse.

The Zionist movement's pessimism about the Jews' ability to live securely without a Jewish nation state is based on very real and bitter historical experience. When I look at the history of European nationalism, particularly in the twentieth century, I think that there was logic to the Jews' attempt to reach a critical mass and establish conditions in which they could develop physically and culturally. The Zionist movement contributed to Jewish self-esteem, it brought new life to a language that for all intents and purposes had been used only for prayer, and the cultural contribution has been immeasurable. Many of the original arguments surrounding Zionism are no longer relevant. Some of the problems that Jews used to face are no longer issues, and plenty of new issues, no less problematic and dangerous, have taken their place. In trying to address our problems I think that it is important to remember the original arguments surrounding the Zionist idea in order to remember that group identities are organized through negotiation, historical development, and work. This point is important from a political and educational perspective. In trying to advance social change, one of our first tasks is to expose the forces and interests involved in the way we construct our identities. We may face a limited choice of group definitions, or identities, at any given time, but group identity is something that we continue to negotiate and that must be constantly reexamined. It is on this background that I would like to discuss some of the things that I have been learning in my work in Neve Shalom / Wahat al-Salam.

The Village

Following a schematic presentation of the village structure and ten minute promotional film:

Everyone in the village is interested in advancing equality, understanding and peace between Jews and Palestinians. And that's about where the consensus ends. When we begin to speak about what must be

addressed in order advance our objectives, you begin to find a number of different perspectives within the village. But I think we'd all agree that it is the joint decision – making mechanism and the learning process that we undergo that makes the work of NS/WAS unique. I cannot stress this point enough. Most Jewish – Arab dialogue work takes place in Jewish institutions, or with Jewish funding, and the Arabs working in these institutions will, on occasion, find themselves in situations in which they may have to choose their words particularly carefully if they want to keep their jobs. I could say that those of us in the Jewish group whose views radically stray from the consensus will also on occasion choose our words carefully, but I think that as a rule we will find it easier to express provocative views in public. The structure of our village, based on power sharing, is such that sensitive and politically charged issues come to the surface much more quickly than, I believe, anywhere else in the country.

Multi – cultural Education

I would like to expand on the differences in attitudes and approaches towards multicultural education in general and Jewish – Arab educational work in particular. These different attitudes can be found even among residents of the village. I will focus particularly on the primary school where I work, and share with you some very serious questions regarding our school's approach. Before doing so, it is important to me to point out that I could speak at great length about our school's successes. In fact as one of the school's fundraisers this is generally what I do. I wouldn't have stayed so long in the same school had it not provided me with a great deal of professional satisfaction. But I'm far more fascinated by what we have *not, yet,* achieved. I'll even put a twist on that and say that our difficulties could be among our most important contributions to the educational field. A study of the *limitations* of our work provide important insight into the society in which we must act.

The approaches of multi – cultural education might be seen as appearing on an axis between the *liberal* orientation of multiculturalism, as opposed to approaches based on *critical* concepts of multiculturalism. I'll present each orientation in its extreme. The liberal discourse of multiculturalism is by far the more common approach. It stresses the differences between groups, and the importance of learning about and respecting the other's culture. Here the focus of interest would be on national identity, religion, traditional customs etc. Culture in this case has a static definition that is not negotiable. It is seen as something that can be taught, like a set of rules with some kind of internal coherency or rationale, and it is generally regarded as something which must be preserved and protected from problematic influences from other groups. It can often be heard in the Jewish – Arab schools that we don't want to *change* the group's identity, but to expose the children to the other and teach tolerance. It follows that liberal multiculturalism also stresses the idea that group members should "strengthen" their own identity in order to strengthen their self – esteem, helping them to understand who they are, and enabling them to meet the "other" at eye - level. So we help children understand who *they* are by *teaching* them about *their* culture. Over the years of working in this field I even regularly hear it said that there are historical narratives that we are expected to ascribe to if we come from one particular culture or another. Jews understand history one way. Palestinians understand history another way. That's understood as a part of who we are. Differing narratives, like any other part of our cultures, are to be respected. This is justified with the aid of a post modernist concept stating that there are several truths ... an idea, incidentally, that I haven't managed to understand until today.

The critical approach towards multicultural education recognizes culture and group identity as a social construction. In this case culture, coming from the root of the verb "to cultivate," is something that we constantly work at to develop and reproduce. The attempt to gain an understanding of culture requires

constant study of how patterns of behavior characterizing a specific group respond to that group's social reality. The critical multicultural educator recognizes that groups don't act in isolation from each other. They respond to each other. In fact groups are only created in response to others. The natives of Africa never had any reason to be defined as *Black* before they were invaded by *Whites*. Culture and group boundaries have *always* been defined and redefined by encountering other groups. So of course if we bring Jews and Arabs together in a common school, something is going to change in the way they construct their group identities. And frankly if the encounter did not bring about change in the way we perceive ourselves, I think we would have to ask what the point is of doing this work in the first place.

Critical multicultural education is concerned with the influence of majority – minority group power relations on the group members' identity construction. The educational goal would be to identify the role of dominance and oppression in the behavior and belief patterns characterizing one group or another. Once inter-group power relations are taken into consideration, we realize that there are differences in the processes that majority and minority groups undergo in constructing their identities. Minority groups cannot easily evade the need to pay attention to the fact that they have a group identity. Colored people in White societies must cope with racial identity as a routine part of their lives. As the minority group in Israel, most Palestinians in Israel have probably found themselves in situations in which they have thought twice before speaking their mother language in public. For instance speaking Arabic at particular moments is likely to cost you a longer delay at security checkpoints. Majority group members on the other hand will walk a different world, oblivious of the influence of race or ethnicity on their ability to move socially or even physically from one place to the next. They are likely to attribute successes in life purely to their skills and hard work without paying attention to the headstart you get from belonging to the right group. They might sincerely believe that they don't have a group identity. But the very ability to claim that you are beyond group identity, regarding your values as universal, is in itself a privilege enjoyed by majority group members. It often

requires conscious educational intervention in order for them to recognize their universalism as part of a majority group identity. This is one of the tasks of critical multicultural education.

For the critical multicultural educator, the encounter between groups provides teachers and students with an opportunity to learn about themselves by examining the micro-level of classroom interaction. Pierre Bourdieu tells us that in any interaction between two people, the whole social structure is present. The day to day Jewish – Arab encounter in the classroom can be used not only to gain insight into the kind of change necessary in the school, but it can also help to identify the kind of social structural change which must be advanced in the community and in the State in order to advance equality. Note that this idea is very different from the idea that we can *teach* culture as part of a program prepared ahead of time with textbook questions etc. I am talking about things that we only learn from the actual encounter with each other. Critical multiculturalism is less concerned with finding the proper definition of a group's identity, and more concerned with using the encounter with the other in order to *re*examine what it is that we want to identify with. This goes beyond understanding and respecting difference. It means examining how we, majority and minority groups of any society, are part of a common system, how our identities are constructed and positioned in dialogue with each other, and how we might work together in order to *redefine* our roles. In practice we may declare that we have created equality between groups within the walls of the classroom, or the boundaries of a village, because we have the same number of Jews and Arabs on the teaching staff, in management, and we make decisions together. But each group brings to the encounter different cultural resources: different languages, dialects, attitudes, and different expectations from society. Bourdieu refers to these resources as cultural "*capital*." Cultural capital refers to the way that cultural resources are valued in any given society – to the fact that different cultural resources have different market values. Regarding the case of our school: Hebrew and Arabic are both official languages in

Israel. But, since parents tend to want their children to get good jobs and perhaps to enter the university, it is common knowledge that for *those* purposes, i.e. for employment and higher education, Hebrew is more important than Arabic for Jewish and Arab children alike in Israel. For Jews, the importance of understanding Arabic has more of an ideological motive rather than a material motive, and the ideological motive just doesn't sell as well. The result is that the Arabs' level of Hebrew remains far stronger than the Jews' level of Arabic, even in our school. Our job is, on one hand, to do what we can to change that. That's to say to strengthen the place and level of Arabic in the school. But no less importantly our task is to develop an appreciation of the consequences of this situation on our day to day relations.

For instance one of the things that regularly concerns me in my work, is my impression that Jewish children seem to be much more engaged in my lessons than Arab children. Speaking in broad generalities it seems to me that Arab boys present me with a disproportionate amount of the disciplinary problems, Arab girls seem to be much more passive, and Jewish kids - boys and girls alike - seem to stand a better chance of knowing what I want from them. Incidentally the fact that this is my impression doesn't necessarily mean that it's true, but that's beside the point. Jewish and Arab teachers might explain to me that Fatma, a particular Arab girl, comes from an authoritarian patriarchal society in which she was not encouraged to ask too many questions, therefore she is less likely to express an opinion, and it might even be suggested that her capacity for abstract thinking is more limited. Culture in this case would be used to explain what kind of person Fatma is. "Arab girls are passive." And since that's part of her culture we might change our expectations from her accordingly. Perhaps we won't challenge and embarrass her too much with questions that demand her opinion, and we may instead decide that we could strengthen her self-esteem by preparing more assignments with multiple choice questions – questions that allow her to choose the proper response from the options that we provide.

Our understanding of culture in this case would help us to categorize Fatma as being less capable. It is this kind of story that has led some people to warn us, that multiculturalism runs the risk of being a politically correct form of racism.

But there's another option. If I find that Jewish kids seem to be more active than Arab kids in my class, I might want to take a second look at the context that I have helped to create. I'll take another look at the message that is coming across in the language that I speak and in the content that I bring. I might find that the Arab children's passivity or disobedience in my class have less to do with theories about patriarchal authoritarian cultures, and more to do with the fact that most of the classroom discussion has been going on in Hebrew and coming from a world in which the Jewish children feel more at home. My question would be to what extent have I created a framework for Jewish – Arab relations in my classroom that are any different from the kind of relations to which we are accustomed outside of the school?

Rather than understand passivity and disciplinary problems as a deficiency in one group's culture, I may begin to read the children's behavior as a form of resistance characterizing one group whose language and life experience are not validated in the classroom as much as that of another group. What we regard as "culture" then becomes a response to a particular social reality in which being part of one group or another has consequences regarding a group member's chance of being heard... or chance of finding decent housing and getting a good job. Disruptive behavior characterizing a particular group might then begin to make sense. Some kids might be discovering that following the rules doesn't work for them so well.

In a research project that I conducted, I followed an Arab boy who I called Khalil, as he took part in 3 different classroom frameworks: 1) in a mixed Jewish – Arab class conducted in Hebrew by a Jewish

teacher, 2) in a mixed Jewish – Arab class conducted by an Arab teacher in both Arabic *and Hebrew*, and 3) in an all – Arab class with an Arab teacher conducted only in Arabic. I observed how the different classroom structures influenced Khalil's participation and behavior patterns. I paid attention to when he was engaged and cooperative and when his behavior was characterized by resistance – or rather when he was seen as a "trouble-maker."

I could speak at great length about the eye – opening experience of observing Khalil, and if there's time afterwards I might go into greater detail. There are two things regarding culture that I'd like to point out from my study. The first thing is the child's behavior patterns. This was my main focus of attention. To my understanding, behavior patterns are the key to any understanding of the inter – cultural meeting in the school. Or rather than an understanding of the *inter* – cultural meeting I'd prefer to speak of an understanding of the culture that is *created* by the encounter between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

The other thing that I would like to address is the place of religion in the curriculum.

These two things will come together to illustrate the inadequacy of the liberal approach towards multicultural education. On one hand there is very little in the school's definition of multiculturalism that helps us gain insight into the nature of the children's behavior patterns that I observed. On the other hand the school's definitions give a lot of weight to issues of national and religious identity. But during my research period an interesting thing happened to religious studies in the school that should have also raised serious questions about commonly held assumptions regarding religion and culture.

I will start with Khalil. Khalil comes from an Arab Bedouin family that lives in a poor neighborhood of a nearby town. His grandparents were nomads who raised sheep and camels in the desert areas of southern Israel. When their grazing lands were taken by the State, they settled down in a town. Khalil

was a classic example of the kind of child who many would say, doesn't belong in our school. I once entered his class as a substitute teacher in order to teach a song in English, and I just wanted to tie Khalil to his chair so I could work with the kids who "wanted" to learn. As I watched him with other Jewish teachers it was very impressive to see how a child could pass so much time in class without doing a single thing that he was asked to do. Sometimes he put on a good show of looking interested in class discussions that went on in Hebrew. But he never took part in them and from the side I could see that he was busy with other things. I chose to observe Khalil because of his sense of humor. His impersonation abilities were outstanding and he constantly made me laugh. Something about the way he got through the day struck me as being ingenious. Khalil succeeded in lowering the Jewish teachers' expectations to the point at which he could win their praise by performing the most simple and infantile tasks. In speaking about the difficulties of working with Khalil I would hear explanations about how important it is to work with Jews and Arabs from a similar socio – economic level because otherwise the gaps will be too wide to bridge. It is explained that the encounter then damages the Arab child's self-esteem because they don't succeed as well as the Jewish kids. And the Jews might wind up strengthening or creating stereotypes about Arabs because they often see them in positions of weakness and making trouble. When people spoke about the socio-economic gap their conclusion was generally that it was a mistake to allow Khalil into the school in the first place.

Well then I watched a couple of uni-national, or all-Arab classes when an Arab teacher entered Khalil's class. Khalil, it turns out, was regarded by the Arab teachers as the class authority on the Arabic language. Repeatedly the teacher turned first to Khalil to read Arabic texts because she knew that *he* was the one who would read them properly. At least three times it was Khalil who explained to the other Arab children the meaning of one obscure word or another. In a discussion on pre-Islamic Arabia, the teacher made a comment about how the infidels in Mecca laughed at the prophet Muhammad and asked him how he could believe in a God that he doesn't see. Khalil banged his fist on the desk and

asked how can they believe in a god that they themselves made?! Khalil was an active participant in the discussion and his insight was very sharp. Jewish teachers would never witness Khalil in this situation, and even if they did, most of them wouldn't understand the Arabic discussion anyway.

Then there was a Jewish – Arab class with an Arab teacher. In this class the teacher brought a short poem written in Hebrew and Arabic. She suggested that the Jewish children read the Arabic and the Arab children read the Hebrew. The Arab children, not surprisingly, read the Hebrew fairly well. Several of the Jewish children then read the Arabic text and I was pleasantly surprised by their level also. Most of them handled the language much better than I expected. One of the Jewish girls, however, read the Arabic text exactly as I had expected. I have a transcription of two minutes in which she struggled painfully over every syllable. Two minutes is a long time for a child to struggle like that undisturbed. But there was total silence in the classroom and she was given all the time she needed to get through the text. To a Japanese audience the concept of silent children in the classroom might not sound unusual. In Israeli classrooms it is noteworthy. The only other people who said anything were the teacher and Khalil who now and then helped her along. Khalil was sitting up straight, fascinated and enjoying every minute of the Jewish girl's work with his language. It was the only few moments in my 15 hours of recorded and transcribed material in which Khalil was intensely engaged in educational work when there were Jewish children in the classroom. It was the only interaction in which he hosted the Jews on his territory.

The Jewish teachers never saw this side of Khalil. We saw the trouble – maker. The Arab children appear to communicate fine in Hebrew as a second language. But when they sit in classes that are conducted in Hebrew they can be embarrassed to speak because obviously they don't speak Hebrew as well as the Jews. Something has allowed them to understand that fluency in Hebrew is what is expected of them. And when they achieve it, their accomplishment might simply be taken for granted. Their

frustration is communicated either by tuning out or being disruptive. Jewish children on the other hand can struggle through Arabic in front of the class, taking pride and getting credit for the most elementary accomplishments in the second language. While this may sound like a problem that should have been fairly obvious to us, I must tell you that it takes a great deal of work to begin to notice these things. In explaining Khalil's disruptive behavior and problems, I heard a lot of learned sociological analyses of the culture from which he comes. Our first reaction is to regard *Khalil* as the problem. Few teachers chose to target the classroom *structure* as the problem. It may have something to do with the fact that attacking the classroom structure would turn us *all* into part of the problem. It takes a long time for majority groups to acknowledge problems of structure. And the political parallel should be obvious. Imagine the president of the United States suggesting that the problems in the Third World stem from America's military and financial support for totalitarian regimes and their systematic sabotage of any attempt by a Third World nation to take full control of its natural resources. I don't see that happening too soon. Blaming fundamentalism, or culture, just works better.

But I'll stick to our school. I want to take a look at an interesting story on religion that also says something about assumptions regarding culture. Our school has experimented with different ways of teaching different subjects. There have always been questions about whether certain subjects might be handled better in separate uni-national forums; that's to say all - Jewish or all – Arab classes. But from the very beginning of the school the Jews have always been separated for weekly in-depth study of the Bible, the Muslims study Koran, and the few Christians in the school either study New Testament, or for various reasons they might join one of the other two groups. The rationale for this division is that this is important in order to strengthen each group's identity. A secondary explanation of this division also has to do with the high language level of these texts, but that isn't the main point. During the year the children celebrate each other's holidays together and learn about each other's stories and customs,

but the weekly in depth study of religious texts is meant to give the children an understanding of their own cultural roots.

The year that I observed Khalil, two new co-directors took over the school management. They looked at the complicated school schedule. They saw that over the year there are a few classroom frameworks which divide the Jewish and Arab children. They also saw that we don't take all of our holiday vacations together. There are a few holidays in which only one group stays home and the other comes to school. The co-directors made a decision that made sense to me. They said that we will take the study of holy books out of the regular weekly curriculum, and we will use those holidays, in which only one group is in class, for intensive study of the scriptures. The kids are separated in any case so this would be more effective use of our time. Study of the Holy Books that year was taken off of the regular schedule, and it was left for those days in which only Jews or only Arabs were in school.

In January, on one of the Arab holidays, I observed the Jewish children from Khalil's class in their fourth grade Bible lesson. The lesson was on the Ten Commandments. I was very impressed with the level of discussion. The children had their Bibles with them and they knew something about the different parts of the Bible. Reference was made to content of past lessons and the new system of lessons seemed to be working. Throughout the lesson the teacher and the children made clear distinctions between what is of interest to the religious and what interests the rest of us. The teacher explained that the Ten Commandments are found in the Book "Dvarim," Deuteronomy.   She went on to say that since Deuteronomy is all about laws it is generally only of interest to the religious, but we'll discuss it today because of the Ten Commandments. They then discussed the distinction between commandments concerning people's conduct with each other as opposed to commandments concerning their relationship to God. Do not kill, do not steal etc. are laws that we all need. Other commandments such as, Do Not Worship Other Gods and Keep the Sabbath Holy were for the religious and were of

less interest. Several of the children opened up their statements with comments like, "Well I don't believe in God, but..." And then they went into well thought out anthropological discussions of every society's need for rules.

On several occasions in which there were only Arab children in the school, I asked Kahlil's homeroom teacher if I would have the opportunity to observe a Koran lesson. Repeatedly she and also the Arab co-director told me that when they have the opportunity to conduct a school day all in Arabic, then there are all kinds of other things that they want to attend to, and teaching Koran in school wasn't necessarily a top priority item. In June, just before the Jewish holiday of Shevuot, I turned again to the Arab teacher as a joke and said, well I guess there's not much chance of seeing a Koran lesson. It was already the last month of the year, so I didn't expect her response. "You know what?" she said. "That's a good idea. There are all kinds of problems between the Arab boys and girls in the class that I'd like to take care of and a Koran lesson might be in place. Come tomorrow at 8:00."

I came the next day at 8:00. The teacher handed out a photocopy of a chapter of the Koran. As she handed it out she explained that a chapter in the Koran is called a Sura and that a verse is called an Aya. She asked who comes from houses in which the Koran is in use. Half of the children raised their hands. When the teacher spoke of God she used the term "Rabna," our lord. When the teacher began to read she explained about how we usually wash our hands to purify ourselves before opening the Koran. The tone of her voice changed when she read, indicating that we were now entering a different realm. There was no distinction between religious and secular in this lesson. I have often been told that the whole concept of "secular" in the Muslim world is problematic. There does not appear to be a problem in saying that you are not religious. But the term secular has an implied criticism that many would avoid. There was no issue of what the religious believe as opposed to the pupils in the class. The chapter she brought, Surat al-Humaza, is a chapter in which God warns us what will happen to people

who find fault with others and spread nasty gossip. The Koran was brought in to straighten the kids out and get some order in the class.

I'm still trying to put my finger on what all of this means. The easy thing to conclude is that there's still work to be done in trying to define the place of religion in the school program. Because here again, the conventional liberal definition of the multicultural encounter fails to provide an adequate explanation of the different roles that religion plays in each group. On one hand the Jewish children's knowledge of the Bible far exceeded the Muslim children's knowledge of the Koran. But the Jews' anthropological study of the Bible did not involve any attempt to deal with any kind of spiritual or ethical message that Judaism may have brought to the world. And remember that the lesson that I described was not about some Biblical battle story. This was a lesson on the Ten Commandments!

The Muslim children may not have known their texts as well as the Jews, but when the Muslim teacher and children read the Koran, it was very clear what made them Muslims. The Koran was a source of authority in the room - not a subject to be analyzed. The goal of the lesson was to understand what the Koran wanted from them.

The question again is what these different approaches serve in the school. If a critical reading of the Koran is a problematic thing, then perhaps it *should* be kept out of the school, as it would have been had I not intervened and asked about it. Holy books were certainly kept out of the schools that I attended in the US, and they were left for after - school hours.

It would appear that the school's multicultural discourse pushed the Koran into a role that was created for the Bible. But the Koran doesn't serve the Palestinian group in the same way that the Bible serves

the Jewish group. Not all of the Palestinians are Muslims. The Islamic texts don't necessarily contribute to a particularly Palestinian identity, and *national* identity appears to be the issue of concern in the school.

In the following year the old order was restored and Holy books again became a part of the weekly school schedule. The children were divided, and when the Jews studied the Biblical texts, the Muslims studied Koran. So now I wonder if Koran lessons were restored because that's the natural thing for the Muslims to do if the Jewish children in the class are studying the Bible.

Now I'd like to suggest that the Bible lessons are also not as critical as they may at first appear. The criticism that I heard in the lesson was directed at the religious "other." At no point have we as a staff questioned the state's use of religion in the formation of a national identity. Zvi Bekerman and Marc Silverman wrote an article on the corruption of religion (in this case Judaism) by the nation - state. They write that the nation - state culture is intolerant and totalizing. Efforts focusing on achieving a homogenizing Jewish literacy reduces and displaces efforts that could be focused on the serious ethical, political, issues which trouble present day Israeli reality. They go on to point out that it is worth remembering that Judaism did not earn its classification as a world religion - a world - class religious culture - because of its military prowess; it earned this title precisely due to the compelling transcendent spirituality and ethics it offers the world. The life inspiring and constructing tasks towards which this religious ethical tradition *could* be used are sacrificed on the altar of nationalism. They claim that adopting the culture of a nation - state excludes the possibility of realizing Judaism itself as a culture... the culturally violent components *built into* the nation – state not only excludes a Jewish culture, but is inimical to it.

For one thing this article appears to hold the answer to my earlier question about my childhood memories of inter - religious cooperation, my image of Jews using Jewish tradition to advance social justice in America, as opposed to the dominant religious forces in Israel whose teachings are mobilized in the service of the State. Secondly, further examination of Bekerman and Silverman's article might lead our school to rethink the concept that religious scriptures should be used to strengthen particular group identities. We are probably missing opportunities to use religious writings to criticize particularist reading of religion. Though knowing the forces at play, I can tell you that changing these things sounds more simple than it is.

I would like to end with an attempt to connect this presentation to the work of the World Council of Religions for Peace, an organization which may be doing just about everything possible to further inter - religious understanding.

Several weeks ago two of my daughters were here in Kyoto representing the Jewish people in an interfaith conference of the WCRP. They came as guests of the Global Network of Religions for Children. My 11 - year old girl was one of 8 children from different religious traditions who had the honor of being invited for the ceremonial part of the conference. It was obviously an incredible event, though I only followed it on the web site and heard about it from my girls. On the first day of the program the young children met each other, all of them dressed more or less in jeans and T-shirts, and they were taken to the shopping mall and asked what they wanted to eat. I understand that there was a unanimous decision to go to McDonalds. The following day they stood on the stage before the conference audience. The Muslim child wore a jalabiyya, a child representing the Shinto religion wore a kimono, and others wore different kinds of traditional dress. Each child read a quotation demonstrating his or her religion's commitment to mercy and compassion, each ending with the

statement that that religion is a path to peace. In the opening speech of the conference, Dr. William

Vendley warned that our religions are being hijacked by religious extremists, unscrupulous politicians

and sensationalist media. The message of the conference, if I understand it correctly, is that the true

intention of each of the world's religions is to promote peace, and that it is up to us to put religion back

on its original path.

Zvi Lam, a professor of education from the Hebrew University, wrote an article suggesting an

alternative approach to inter-faith work. He writes that the interfaith encounter should start with the

acknowledgment that all cultures, and all religions, are by definition ethnocentric and xenophobic.

Since religious leaders from each religion are convinced that they have a monopoly on the truth, the

only role that they have traditionally had for other religions is one which will help demonstrate why we

are right and they are wrong. Lam claims that the interfaith encounter would be more effective if it

were to stress the intolerance for the other that is inherent in each religion. Bringing people together

from different traditions should be used as an opportunity to examine how the other perceives us. The

educational objective being that this unpleasant experience may make us more inclined to take a critical

look at what our own religions do to the other.

I don't seriously suggest that the WCRP adopt this approach in their next conference, if only because

I'm not sure how many people would cooperate in it. I do however want to suggest that the whole

concept of inter-faith meetings such as those of the WCRP, is a product of modern society. Getting

different faiths together to foster understanding and mutual respect is a wonderful and noble aim that I

am proud to be a part of. But, like Zvi Lam, I think that the way to get there is to use the inter - faith

meeting as an opportunity for each of us to take a hard look in the mirror. I suggest we give up that

search for some kind of golden age when religions fostered peace and coexistence with each other,

because I don't believe that that's what religions ever did. If that's what we want them to do, then I think we should start with the recognition that it's up to us to hijack them. To me the most compelling theme in the Bible is that of the tension between prophet and king. Religion challenging power. The Mahatma Gandhis, Martin Luther Kings, and Jesus Christ for that matter, did not set out to preserve religion. They saw religion as a tool for reform. And if multicultural and inter - faith work are not tools for reform, for rethinking identities, then I just won't see the point of it.

Arigatou.