The Holy Land: Jews, Christians and Muslims

Religious Freedom in Israel: A Fundamental Guarantee

As a country in the Middle East committed to the free practice of religion for all, regardless of religious affiliation, Israel stands as an oasis of religious freedom in the Middle East. The Israeli government supports religious services for communities of all faiths. That includes funding Korans and the operating costs for more than 100 mosques as well as the salaries of Muslim religious leaders; serving as a safe haven for minorities persecuted in surrounding countries; allowing citizens of any religion to hold political office; and paying for the upkeep of holy sites for all religions.

Israel’s Declaration of Independence: A Mandate for Religious Freedom

Israel’s Declaration of Independence, issued in 1948, describes the country as a Jewish state but clearly extends religious freedoms to all of its inhabitants by stating: the State of Israel “will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions.”

As a state that comprises people of many ethnicities and religious backgrounds, Israel encourages minorities to take an active role in politics and government. All Israeli citizens enjoy the right to vote and can run for political office, including the presidency.

Since the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel has granted access to holy sites of all faiths and has restored and rebuilt Christian, Jewish and Muslim holy sites.

In 1992, the Knesset, or Israeli Parliament, passed the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty, which codified civil and human rights into law. Although the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty refers to Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state,” Israel does not have an official religion. Each of the country’s largest religious communities – Christian, Druze, Jewish, Muslim – has jurisdiction over its internal affairs, religious affairs and personal status including marriage, divorce and burial. All religious family courts are recognized as autonomous and paid for by the Israeli government.

ABOVE: The Tomb of the Three Patriarchs in Hebron, one of the most sacred sites in the world. 
BELOW: Coexistence in Israel: An Arab and a Hassidic Jew in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City in Jerusalem.
Religious Groups in Israel

Israel is comprised of people who practice a variety of faiths, and all enjoy full rights to do so without fear of persecution or unequal treatment under the law.

Jews in Israel

Israel is the only country in the world where the majority of the citizens are Jewish. The Jewish spectrum in Israel ranges from those who regard themselves as secular, or non-observant, to those who are ultra-Orthodox, or observant. Jerusalem is the holiest city in Judaism and is home to many of the religion’s sacred sites including the Western Wall, the Temple Mount and the Tomb of David.

Muslims in Israel

Israel’s Muslim population consists primarily of about 1.4 million Sunni Arabs, who mostly live in northern Israel. Circassians and Bedouins are members of Israel’s Muslim sector. The Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which contains the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, is Islam’s third-holiest site. Another notable site is the El-Jazzar mosque in Acre. Israel funds more than 100 mosques and pays the salaries of their imams (religious leaders). In addition, Israel purchases the Korans used in mosques. The Israeli government also funds Arab schools as well as numerous Islamic schools and colleges. Arab-operated schools teach Islamic studies and Arabic, in addition to the Israel Ministry of Education’s general curriculum.

Christians in Israel

Israel is home to most of the holiest sites in Christianity, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified and resurrected; the Basilica of Annunciation in the Galilee town of Nazareth, in northern Israel; the Room of the Last Supper and the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem; the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel; and the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, revered in Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Israel officially recognizes 10 Christian denominations for the purposes of personal status such as marriage and divorce: Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean Catholic and (Anglican) Episcopal. The majority of Christians in Israel are Arabs belonging to the Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

Druze in Israel:

The Druze community has a special standing in Israel for its contribution to the country’s defense. Israeli Druze are required to serve in the IDF and have held prominent positions in politics, the military and public office. Israel’s Druze are loyal to the country and often place their flag alongside Israel’s. Most of the country’s 113,000 Druze live in 22 villages in northern Israel; Daliyat el-Carmel on Mount Carmel, southeast of Haifa, is the most populous Druze village with 13,000 residents. The tomb of Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, is one of the most important sites in the Druze faith. Another important Druze religious place, the tomb of Nebi Shu’eib, sits in the Galilee near...
the Horns of Hittin – a twin mountain near Tiberias and the site of a major battle of the Crusades.

**Bahá’í in Israel:**

Israel serves as a haven for the Bahá’í, a religious minority that originated in Persia and whose adherents have been routinely persecuted under the Islamic Shia government in Iran. There are about six million Bahá’ís in the world, residing in more than 200 countries and territories.

Roughly 700 to 800 Bahá’í volunteers from 60 countries reside near the Bahá’í World Centre, in the northern port city of Haifa, where they administer the internal and international affairs of the Bahá’í world community. The staff cares for the Bahá’í holy sites in Israel including Bahjí, where the founder of the Bahá’í Faith, Bahá’u’lláh, died in Acre in northern Israel. See: Bahá’í World Centre http://www.bahai.org/dir/bwc in Haifa.

**Israeli Protection of All Holy Sites**

Israel allows people of all faiths access to the country’s myriad holy sites. In fact, Israeli law mandates that everyone, regardless of religious affiliation, has the right to visit all holy places within Israel.

Anyone who attempts to hinder this right is subject to criminal prosecution and imprisonment for as many as five years. The Protection of Holy Places Law of 1967 also states that anyone who vandalizes a holy site could suffer legal consequences. The law states: “Whoever does anything that is likely to violate the freedom of access of the members of the various religions to the places sacred to them is liable to imprisonment for a term of five years.”

Exceptions have been made during Jewish holidays and after terrorist attacks when the government is forced to impose restrictions because of security threats.

By contrast, between 1949 and 1967, when Jordan controlled the holy sites, all Israelis were forbidden from entering East Jerusalem, including the Old City. Additionally, holy sites and Jewish cemeteries within East Jerusalem were desecrated. Upon gaining control of all of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel immediately opened the area to people of all faiths so that they would be free to worship at their respective holy sites without threat of violence or persecution. Israel made this clear in its first radio announcement after capturing East Jerusalem:

“This morning, the Israel Defense Forces liberated Jerusalem. We have united Jerusalem, the divided capital of Israel. We have returned to the holiest of our holy places, never to part from it again. To our Arab neighbors we extend, also at this hour - and with added emphasis at this hour - our hand in peace. And to our Christian and Muslim fellow citizens, we solemnly promise full religious freedom and rights. We did not come to Jerusalem for the sake of other peoples’ holy places, and not to interfere with the adherents of other faiths, but in order to safeguard its entirety, and to live there together with others, in unity.”

Statement at the Western Wall by Defense Minister Dayan,” June 7, 1967. •
The Holy Land for Jews, Christians and Muslims

Written by Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish, Director, ICCI

The land of Israel, Eretz Yisrael, which is the homeland of the Jewish People, is also sacred to Christians and Muslims. While this is sometimes uncomfortable for many Jewish ears, it is a fact of life which should no longer be denied nor ignored. Indeed, the main challenge facing Israel as it celebrates its 60th birthday is how this Holy Land will be shared by two peoples – Jews and Palestinians – and three religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – for the benefit of both peoples and the followers of the three main monotheistic religions.

With regard to the first part, sharing The Land (Ha’aretz) between the Jewish People and the Palestinian People, there is already a consensus in the international community (which is shared by most Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel), that a two-state solution (i.e. a Jewish State of Israel living side-by-side in peace and security with a state to be called Palestine, for the Palestinian People) is the only real viable answer for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But with regard to the second part, sharing the land sacred to the three monotheistic faiths, there has been less progress and not enough creative thinking.

On one hand, the state of Israel grants freedom of religion to all of its citizens, and offers religious services to all major religious communities – Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druse, Circassians, etc. On the other hand, most people in these different religious communities do not know much about each other and rarely encounter one another.

As a result, in 1991, I and a number of colleagues established the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, as an umbrella organization to foster dialogue, education and mutual understanding among the members of the religious communities in Israel.

Founded in January 1991, ICCI is now Israel’s best known and most-respected inter-religious organization. It comprises over 70 Christian, Muslim and Jewish institutions, including Jewish-Arab coexistence organizations, museums, universities, and other ecumenical interreligious organizations. By recruiting influential religious and cultural leaders and opinion-makers to participate in its programs and by serving as a coalition of organizations with many hundreds of members in each organization, our impact is much greater than that of any one institution.

RABBI DR. RON KRONISH
Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish is the Founder and Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel.
Religiously-motivated violence and pressure have been the single greatest deterrent to the progress of the Middle East peace process in the last several decades. Yet not enough concerted efforts have been devoted among the religious communities in Israel, nor have enough attempts been made to harness religious leaders – local as well as national – as forces for peace and reconciliation.

In contradistinction to this trend, I believe that it is our sacred task to harness the teachings and values of the three monotheistic religions and transform religious leaders – and their followers in Israel – into sources of reconciliation and peace-building for consensual coexistence among the communities in our society.

In the present atmosphere of mutual hostility and suspicion – which continues as part of the ongoing unresolved political conflict – religious leaders should dedicate themselves to having a positive impact on people’s hearts and minds. If they are able to do this, their efforts will help reduce the violence and increase the chances that people in our state (and in the region) will learn to live in peace.

Until recently, religions in Israel have been unfairly perceived as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. By bringing people together from different religions in sincere and sustained dialogue, and by using inter-religious text study as an important tool, we can combat religious and national extremism and work together for the common good.

**Real Change Led by Grass Roots Faith Communities**

In recent years, we have already begun to witness the personal transformation and empowerment of a growing cadre of influential Christian, Jewish and Muslim local religious and cultural leaders. Through programs such as KEDEM (Kol Dati Mefayeis – Voices of Religious Reconciliation) these leaders have begun to work together to – with their communities – bring to Jewish and Arab communities in many parts of the state of Israel a message of hope, reconciliation and peaceful co-existence based on the common universal values shared by all three religions. Even though one reads very little about these efforts in the media, more and more of them are taking place in Israel every year.

Under their leaders’ guidance, the members of the different faith communities have started to work together to address issues of common concern, such as poverty relief, the empowerment of women and environmental protection. In the process, they have begun to see beyond the issues that divide them, started to develop meaningful cross-communal relationships and initiated programs that demonstrate the tangible benefits of living in peace with their neighbors.

Indeed, we can say that a relatively healthy state of peaceful coexistence already exists between Jews, Muslims and Christians in Israeli society. For the most part, despite some problems that arise from time to time, there is a form of “live-and-let-live” between Arabs and Jews in Israel, all citizens of the same state. But by now, we should be able to do better than that. We can move from “coexistence” to fostering relations of mutual understanding and respect, based upon knowledge and acquaintance with each other’s religions, cultures and histories.

As we look toward the future of the State of Israel – towards the next 60 years – we envision the transformation of the public discourse and empowerment of peace-builders in the Holy Land, as non-violent dialogue and mutual cooperation among local Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities becomes a model for society as a whole. People on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide will begin to believe that there are alternative paths away from confrontation and toward conciliation. Serious and sustained efforts at peace-building – educating people about the possibilities and benefits of living in peace together – will supplement the political peace process, enabling Israelis and Palestinians – Jews, Christians and Muslims – to learn to live together in one society in ways that were inconceivable when the state was founded 60 years ago.

**WEB RESOURCES:**

For more information on interfaith activity in Israel please visit: www.mfa.gov.il

Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel: www.icci.org.il

Masorti (Conservative) movement in Israel: www.masorti.org

Religious Action Center (Reform Judaism in Israel): http://rac.org
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