

# Sheikh Abdullah Nimer Darwish

RABBI MICHAEL MELCHIOR

## Introduction

BESIDES PERHAPS MY OWN father, I can think of no leader who has inspired and influenced me to pursue peace more than Sheikh Abdullah Nimer Darwish, blessed be his memory. Sheikh Abdullah for me embodied how it is possible to simultaneously be a devout Islamic leader deeply connected and committed to the Muslim world and the Palestinian cause and at the same time a passionate champion of religious peace, working side by side for years with his Israeli rabbinic partner, myself, who am committed to Judaism, Israel, and Zionism. There was not a leader on either side of the Israeli Palestinian conflict with whom the sheikh was not in close contact in order to promote these goals. He was in nearly daily contact with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and later Abu Mazen and still remained close and respected by the leaders of Hamas. He was also respected and in contact with the prime ministers and presidents of Israel, the leaders of most of Israel's political parties, and Israel's Jewish religious leaders. All respected him immensely, sought his advice and often used his services as what may be called an insider mediator.

## Sheikh Abdullah's Story

Sheikh Abdullah was born in Kafr Qasim, an Arab town not far from Tel Aviv, in 1948 and passed away in 2017. In 1956, the Kafr Qasim Massacre occurred, leaving family members of his killed by Israeli soldiers. This tragic event had a profound impact on him and led him initially to have great animosity towards the state of Israel and its military. After the 1967 war, he traveled to Nablus in the West Bank to study Islam and was exposed and connected to the Muslim Brotherhood. Upon his return to Kafr Qasim in 1972, he established the Islamic Movement as a social and

educational enterprise and became one of the greatest proselytizers of Islam in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Once, he told me a story of how he, as an unmarried man, introduced the Islamic practice of religious women covering their hair with a hijab to women in Israel and Palestine. At the time, no one had that tradition nor knew how a hijab should look. The sheikh turned to a tailor in Hebron and gave him instructions of how to design one, according to Islamic law books. When he returned to Kafr Qasim, for the first time ever, a married woman donned the hijab he had designed. From there, the tradition spread. The sheikh explained to me, laughing, that many of his students believed that the hijab had to be in the exact form and color as the first one. I recall telling him how this reminded me of great Hassidic masters, where traditions sometimes developed according to how the followers believed was the right practice of their master without that ever having been the master's intention.

Towards the end of the 1970s, he was one of the founders of Usrat Al-Jihad (family of Jihad), the origin of the Islamic Jihad, committed to liberating Palestine with violence and establishing an Islamic state in place of the State of Israel. Although it never used violence against people, the organization collected weapons and destroyed property. As a result, Sheikh Abdullah was imprisoned in an Israeli jail in 1981 and released three and a half years later. Even during his time in prison, he was their ultimate leader. When rules were broken, he would always take the blame upon himself, although everyone knew he could not have physically committed the transgressions (the sheikh was physically impaired from birth and could not move one of his arms). In prison, he devoted much of his time to studying and thinking about the fundamental sources of Islam, and as a result he went through an incredible transformation. Years later, he retold the story of what he said to his many followers who came to greet him upon his release in 1984:

Gentlemen, I, your sheikh, am from now on the first soldier for peace between Palestinians and Israelis. I am not saying that I am the first soldier to make peace, because I am cowardly, no. I do so because I am strong! Strong in my faith, strong in the deep faith that on this land, both people should live!<sup>378</sup>

For many, his transition to being a soldier of peace came as a total surprise or even as a shock. Some saw him as a traitor to the cause he had founded, but he did not care. He felt with all his heart that he was following the true Islam. This is what Allah expected from him, and he was willing to pay the price for his transition.

Sheikh Abdullah believed in the Palestinians' right to self-determination, to freedom, and to securing a future for their children based

upon a two-state solution. Inside Israel, he did everything he could to help integrate the Muslim community to life in the state—including full economic, educational, and political integration. He declared that once, he had believed that a majority of Jews would convert to Islam, and therefore all of Palestine could become Islamic. Now he understood that this would never happen. Therefore, the Muslims in Israel should live according to the laws of the state as a native minority, working hard to obtain full and equal rights but never using violence as a means of obtaining these rights. He understood that for this to happen, the Islamic Movement needed to function as a democratic movement that would participate in municipal elections, which inherently meant recognition of the State of Israel. His decision to recognize the State of Israel stemmed from his religious belief and not simply on a pragmatic, temporary political solution.

The success of the Islamic Movement in the municipal elections led to Sheikh Abdullah's historic decision in 1996 to participate in the national Knesset election, splitting the Islamic Movement into two factions. Sheikh Ra'ed Salah broke off from Sheikh Abdullah, who had been his leader and mentor, and formed the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement, while Sheikh Abdullah continued to be seen as the leader of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement. Sheikh Ra'ed Salah and the Northern Branch were supported by the leading Muslim Brotherhood decision-maker, Sheikh Yussef Al Karadawi, who forbade participation in Israeli national elections. Yet this did not deter Sheikh Abdullah's position that this decision was the right one for his community of religious Muslims holding Israeli citizenship.

## Our Relationship

My personal relationship with Sheikh Abdullah began with sporadic meetings in the late 1990s and was formalized after a Middle East interfaith summit in Alexandria in 2002. I had initiated the summit together with my friend and Palestinian colleague, the late Sheikh Talal Sider, and others. Sheikh Sider had been among the founders of Hamas but later strongly believed in a solution of peace and had become an independent minister in the Arafat cabinet. Sheikh Abdullah knew Sheikh Talal very well and through him heard about the Alexandria summit. Sheikh Abdullah invited me to his home and spoke of his admiration and the courage it took to create the Alexandria summit at the peak of the second Intifada (Israeli-Palestinian violence, 2000–2005). Before anything else, he received me with such personal warmth that we forged a friendship that grew much stronger than I can describe. Our relationship intrigued many of those who met us, who had

difficulty in understanding how a staunch Zionist believer, a former Israeli cabinet minister like myself, could have such a close relationship with such a leading Islamist figure. At our first meeting, we envisioned what a future peace would look like. We hardly needed a discussion. In thirty minutes, we had solved all the issues over which the negotiators on both sides had racked their brains for a decade, including borders, settlements, refugees, Jerusalem and Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Then we agreed on why the Oslo process that we both had supported had gone sour. We both, for years, had spoken to our own communities about the missing link of religion, about opening the tent of peace to include religious leaders and their communities. We had discussed that when a car drives so many times into a dead end, it sometimes needs to reroute to ultimately get to its destination. It is not that the destination of peace was wrong—there is no existence, no life and no future without peace—but there is a need to reroute the road towards peace to include religious leaders in it.

### **Establishing the Religious Peace Initiative**

After President Bush presented his Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East, we began to formalize our cooperation. Eventually, in 2007, we established the Middle East Religious Peace Initiative (RPI), which Sheikh Abdullah also called the Religious Roadmap for Peace. Under the leadership of Sheikh Abdullah, our Muslim colleagues established Adam Centers in Gaza, Ramallah, and Kafr Qasim, which worked in close cooperation with Mosaica in Jerusalem, where I continue to serve as the president. We wished to remove step by step all the obstacles which had been in the way of the political peacemakers, even when the politicians were sincere and had good intentions. Our main purpose was to restore in the hearts of the traditional and religious populations on both sides the idea that it is possible to make peace between Judaism and Islam, the idea which then can be a basis for political peace. We wanted to show that there are excellent partners for this process, and that the vast majority of both peoples wholeheartedly wish for this to happen.

We were in total agreement that the purpose of our work was not to create another dialogue group but to form a different reality for our children. Our method was to work with the so called extremists on both sides to solve problems that everybody thought were unsolvable. Through this, we could forge true friendships and create trust, which is the necessary key to taking on the greater challenges of saving thousands of lives and paving the path to solving the core issues of the conflict.

I had many talks with Sheikh Abdullah about religious law and interpretations. I could always raise with him the most difficult questions, such as the verse in the Qur'an (7:166) which tells of the Jews turning into apes. Sheikh Abdullah looked at me and said, "Muslim men can marry Jewish women, they need not convert even. Do you really think that we would permit our men to marry apes?! Read the context in the Qur'an. As well as other negative sources about Jews. The context is of Jews who do not observe their own tradition and do not follow the laws of the Sabbath. The Torah says much harsher words about those who do not observe the Sabbath!" This taught me that misconceptions can often be the basis of animosity. At the same time, the sheikh stressed that we live today in a democratic and pluralistic society; just as we are loyal to our own belief and traditions, we must also be tolerant of others.

### **Speaking Out against Hatred and Violence**

Sheikh Abdullah taught me many lessons on life. Once, I gave an interview on Israeli television about anti-Semitism. Afterwards, he called me and said that the interview was fine. I answered that when you say fine, it means that it wasn't anything special. He said: "Listen. When you speak about anti-Semitism, you have the experience, you know the material, but you will always speak from the perspective of someone battling for his own interests, even totally legitimate interests. When you speak on Islamophobia, you speak with grandeur and with passion. It is surprising to the listener and therefore much more convincing." He suggested, "Let us make a deal. You, the rabbi, will speak about Islamophobia, and I, Sheikh Abdullah, founder and leader of the Islamic Movement, will speak out on anti-Semitism." He kept his word until his last breath. In hundreds of interviews all over the Arab world and in front of great audiences both in Israel and in the Palestinian territories, he would explain the perils of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, how these phenomena were against the essence of human and Muslim behavior.

Once, in 2007, I brought him to speak in front of the Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism, arranged by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I explained to him that he would meet great skepticism and opposition in the crowd of several hundred Jewish leaders from all over the world, including a few who believed with all their heart that nothing good could come from any political Islam. He said that he was convinced that if I were at his side translating, nothing could go wrong, that we had passed much greater hurdles than this. In a lengthy exposé, he spoke from his

heart on all the difficult issues. He explained from where he came and where he was today, saying that precisely because he was not a Muslim Zionist but rather a true Islamist, he recognizes the State of Israel and the perils of anti-Semitism. He added that he was the right partner for peace and security not only for all citizens of the State of Israel, but also for a future Palestinian state. He spoke with such passion and answered all the most difficult questions in such a convincing way that it left practically all the skeptics in the audience in awe.

The sheikh could sometimes surprise even me with his forward thinking. I was once offered the position to chair the World Zionist Organization. It was important for me to hear how Sheikh Abdullah would react to this suggestion, having in mind the image of Zionism in the Muslim world. He immediately answered that if I decided this was right for me, the work for religious peace would not be an obstacle. To be sure, our Muslim partners would not become Zionists, but it would be important for them to see a fine, humane face of Zionism devoted to promoting religious peace.

Towards the end of the 90s, Sheikh Abdullah wrote a religious ruling that forbade suicide bombings against Israelis, in opposition to the ruling of Sheikh Karadawi, who permitted and encouraged it at the time (though later he retracted this ruling). Whenever he spoke to Palestinian leaders and big crowds in Palestinian cities, he would always remind them that their goal could be reached only without violence. He unfailingly condemned any attack, and his heart went out to the victims, although he often could be furious at the behavior of Israel's army.

Hearing of the terrorist attack on a synagogue in Har-Nof in 2014 during the morning prayers, he immediately called me to express his disgust and sympathy with the victims. He was willing to go on any media channel and say that this was a double crime in the eyes of Islam: a crime against humanity, when innocent human beings are murdered, and a crime against a holy place, when this savage murder takes place in a synagogue.

### **Expanding Our Network and Gaining Legitimacy**

Sheikh Abdullah opened the door for me to become acquainted and forge relationships with key leaders throughout the Arab and Muslim world, leaders who influenced thousands of younger leaders and also provided them the opportunity to become acquainted with me and the Religious Peace Initiative (RPI). This was essential, particularly because we attempt to keep most of RPI's work under the radar and out of the public eye. He gave me the most precious gift of all: his leading protégé, Sheikh Raed

Bader. Sheikh Raed, under the guidance of Sheikh Abdullah, had studied Islam with the greatest legal minds in Palestine and Jordan and became a great legal authority, who then did not leave the side of Sheikh Abdullah. While early in our collaboration, I would go with Sheikh Abdullah to meetings, audiences, and panels, it became clear that, due to his health limitations, I needed to develop the same relationship with his star pupil. We would, after thorough consultations with the sheikh, go to one meeting after another throughout the Muslim world, as well as with leading rabbis—often rabbis far from my views—including religious Zionist rabbis who lived in the West Bank. The sheikh would sit in the Adam Center and wait for our reports upon returning, extremely pleased with the progress, which was much faster than he had anticipated.

More and more, we understood that the secular peace process had been a threat to religious leaders. The threat was not because of the territorial issues, which are largely solvable, but because those who promoted the secular peace often wished to promote a package deal that would uproot religion from society. The more traditional religious public feared a post-religious reality following a secular peace. While secularism plays a legitimate part in our existence, the combination of a difficult peace solution and aggressive secular proselytizing, motivated by the desire to wipe away the core of traditional existence, was more than any peace process could bear.

We offered a religious peace map from inside our religions, not in order to exclude the secular but in order to change the whole approach to peace. This immediately challenged and opened the hearts and minds of many of those who had been skeptical or outright opposed to the secularized peace process. It was both a change of language and of substance. Sheikh Abdullah took immense pleasure in seeing that so many leaders, including many of those who in 1985 had rejected his transition, now admitted that he had been right all along, just many years ahead of his time.

In 2015, Sheikh Abdullah delivered a momentous speech at the Ha'aretz Peace Conference, in which he spoke about the Religious Peace Initiative:

The devil's assertion "either we OR you" should be eradicated. No! The truth is: "we AND you." We shall live together, each in our independent state, and I, the soldier of peace will continue making peace with my Jewish religious friends . . .

With my brother and friend Rabbi Melchior, we established together the coalition of Jews and Arabs for peace, and we founded the Religious Peace Initiative. It is not very different from other initiatives, other than the fact that we included

religion. This is to say to others “gone are the days when clerics are the obstacle to peace.” We removed the obstacles and for those who do not want to participate with us in making peace, either Muslims or Jews, sit on the sidelines and let us pave the way! Shalom Aleichem!<sup>379</sup>

The process of acceptance of Sheikh Abdullah’s views culminated under sad circumstances. First, he fell ill and was in a coma for a period. Prayers were said for him all over the Muslim world from believers of all factions of Islam. Many who had not even heard about the sheikh now became acquainted with his whole philosophy for the future of Islam. Sheikh Abdullah, with G-d’s help, pulled through and had a couple of years in which he enjoyed the new consensus around himself and religious peace. However, the greatest culmination was at his funeral and in the tent of mourning. Hundreds of thousands showed love and devotion. It was as if his death united us all around this great leader. He was eulogized in person and over the phone on loudspeakers by the leaders of the Palestinian authority and Hamas, as well as by leaders from all over the Muslim world. Chief Rabbi David Lau sent his eulogy, and Rabbi Avi Gisser, one of the leading settler rabbis, spoke warmly of his friendship with the sheikh. The head of the northern faction, Sheikh Raed Salah, kissed his forehead and eulogized him, in this way symbolizing that he was the true leader.

This was the first time I had attended a Muslim funeral. I stood at the very end of the crowd, among Jewish friends, and suddenly I was called to eulogize. I was totally unprepared for being permitted to do this and was overwhelmed by the grief of the moment. There was a total silence in the crowd. My throat was choked. At first, I could hardly utter a word, the tears running freely down my cheeks. The essence of my words was speaking to the sheikh:

You promised me, when we began our journey, that you would never leave my side. Now, Allah has taken you away from my side, and I am orphaned. We are all orphaned, without our leader, without our Tzaddik. But at this solemn moment we promise that we shall continue the roadmap of the sheikh. We shall continue our commitment to create peace, security, and happiness for the generations of both peoples to come.

Dr. Mansour Abbas, the political leader of the Islamic party Ra’am, is another protégé of Sheikh Abdullah. He has been part of the Religious Peace Initiative for years. He is now implementing the philosophy of the sheikh in his efforts to change relations of Jews and Arabs in Israel and radically improve the lives of the Arab minority.

### Celebrating Rabbi David Rosen

Over the years, Sheikh Abdullah crossed paths with Rabbi David Rosen on several occasions. This is not surprising, since there is hardly anyone in the religious world promoting peace with whom Rabbi Rosen did not meet, speak, create a relationship. As with Sheikh Abdullah, everyone holds great respect for Rabbi Rosen's passion and total commitment to promoting dialogue, connections, and ultimately peace. I have known Rabbi Rosen for well over forty years. We have worked on parallel paths, as well as together, with very similar visions of how we would like to see the world. Among our many collaborations were years of dialogue with Christian and Muslim leaders in East Jerusalem in the second half of the 90's and Rabbi Rosen's active participation in the Alexandria summit in 2002, as well as his always active participation and involvement on the board of Mosaica—The Religious Peace Initiative.

Rabbi Rosen has followed and contributed immensely to the changes in the Christian, particularly the Catholic, world. I know of no greater expert with whom to consult on matters of relationships with the Christian world than Rabbi Rosen. This gave him the insight that, just as change could happen between Jews and Christians, so it could also happen between Jews and Muslims. Actually, as he expresses it, it is much easier with the Muslim world, because our religions and history in many ways are so much closer. He is one of the few who first recognized the great evolution taking place in the Muslim world. He is the most eloquent presenter of the Jewish prophetic ideals for peace so desperately needed to bring good forces together instead of the polarization in every forum all over the world. Rabbi Rosen expresses the demand from other religions—not least from our own religion—to interpret and reinterpret our sources and the fundamentals of our religions. Religion is the main force influencing the world, and we, as believers, can do so much good utilizing the precious tool that G-d has given us.

We are now celebrating Rabbi David's seventieth birthday—the number of years taken from Adam (he reached 930, not 1000) and given to the original David, King David, who reached seventy, in order for there to be messianic hope in the world that stems from the house of King David. I wish for Rabbi David Rosen that he will continue to go from strength to strength in preaching and enabling a world which the Messiah would like to join.