

OPINION: RABBI PAUL ARBERMAN AND NICK VINER

Palestinian boy embodies our hope, and need, for peace

SPEAKING this week at a ceremony in Cairo marking the 37th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, the President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, remarked that Egypt would never lose the hope for peace. "We need peace in the Middle East so the generations to follow will enjoy a stable, peaceful region."

Talking about children in the context of the Middle East conflict and peace negotiations is always a good choice. Thoughts of innocent children always touch our hearts. Perhaps that is why a story from Israel about the lives of three children recently caught my attention.

Just over a month ago, three-and-a-half-year-old Abdul Hai Salhut, of East Jerusalem's Jabel Mukaber neighbourhood, fell and sustained grave injuries near his home. He was hospitalised for a week but his condition continued to deteriorate; he passed away. His parents approved an organ donation to a five-year-old Palestinian boy who required an urgent liver transplant and to a seven-and-a-half-year-old Jewish girl who needed a lung transplant. Abdul's father said that he was happy to see his boy live on, and help others, whether they were Jewish or Palestinian.

I remember how prominently the subject of children featured in the Interfaith Conference for World Peace that was held in Israel in 1999. As programme director for the Inter-Religious Coordinating Council, I helped to bring representatives of more than 20 local grassroots organisations from Israel and the Palestinian Authority to meet with the Dalai Lama, leaders from Bosnia, Ireland, South Africa and the USA, who shared

their first hand experiences in resolving their own complex religious conflicts.

Prof Sister Geraldine Smyth, of the Irish School of Ecumenics, described how the conflicts of adults transformed the way children perceived the world. In 1972, one of the bloodiest years in the Irish conflict, she was teaching her niece the names of the flowers as they walked along the road. A few months later in the fall, they happened to be walking along the road again, and Sister Smyth tried to explain that the flowers had died. To which the young girl replied, "Who shot the lilacs?"

And I remember audience member Hadassah Fruman, wife of Takoa Rabbi Menachem Fruman, telling the following story: During the first intifada, residents decided to reach out to their Arab neighbours and have their children meet for a day of activities. The Arab and Jewish children rode together happily until the driver requested that the windows be closed because of the danger of stone throwers.

One Jewish child responded: "But the stone throwers are on the bus with us." The Arab and Jewish children realised that they were now united on one side – those inside the bus – against those who might do them harm from outside. Hadassah commented: "I realised that it was a step toward peace to recognise that people who physically harmed others were the common enemy," she said.

The Torah tells us that our ancestors Avram and Sarai "made souls" in Haran. The rabbis tell us that this means that they converted the people around them to believe in God. How? They

would invite people in to their home, give them something to eat and to drink. They showed them acts of loving-kindness and brought them closer to God.

Abdul Hai Salhut family's gift of life has the power to convert us. This bold act of loving-kindness reminds us that there are good people on the "other side". Of course we know that some Palestinian parents are preparing their kids to become martyrs – I know it. But we too easily lose sight of the fact that some of them are praying that peace will come soon.

We should be converted to the idea that Abraham's challenge to God – to not sweep away the innocent along with guilty – can be our challenge as well. Perhaps we generalise too much about "the Palestinians" and should be more precise about who we are talking about – terrorist groups, leadership or ordinary citizens.

I hope that the act of loving-kindness will convert other Palestinians to see the humanity of the Israelis – how much we value human life – and how much we appreciate this blessed gift. May both nations learn to grieve the loss of life on both sides of the fence. And may the name Abdul Hai Salhut be made great and a blessing, for us all.

It's easy to be cynical about the current prospects for peace. But remembering the next generation, the innocent children, helps us focus on the importance of the task at hand. Hearing the story of Abdul Hai Salhut gives me hope. And Hadassah Froman's story reminds me that this was another way to pick up a few more families on the bus.



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Nick Viner

Chief Executive
Jewish Community Centre
for London

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New building will end our five years in the wilderness

THOSE of you who spent last week camping in a hut exposed to the elements from above will have a very keen appreciation of the value and privilege of living in a permanent, sturdy home.

The experience of sukkah living serves to remind us of how vulnerable we are – to a change in our fortunes, and especially in the unpredictable British autumn, to the forces of nature.

Believe me, as Chief Executive of a Jewish organisation that's been wandering since its inception, I know what I'm talking about. Without our own building, the Jewish Community Centre for London has been camping out at borrowed venues for the past five years. It's a great testament to our programming team that we've been able to make a success of our events despite our itinerant status.

From the start, our aim has been a permanent home. A year ago, we received unanimous consent from Camden Council for an inspirational building on the Finchley Road in Hampstead (on the site of the old Alan Day Mercedes garage), and we set about raising the necessary funds. One year on – while the fundraising task is by no means complete – we've raised enough to enable us to begin work on the site. During the next few months we are demolishing the existing buildings on the site in preparation for construction of our JCC building in 2011. How ironic that the first phys-

annual celebration of impermanence. But how could anyone not wish to celebrate the richness that is Sukkot, a festival inextricably bound up in my mind with that wonderful Israeli film Ushpizin, directed by Gidi Dar. What struck me about it was how seriously the ultra-Orthodox protagonists take the tradition of offering hospitality without discrimination to strangers and those less fortunate than themselves. The two guests turn out to be escaped convicts but, despite their hosts' private reservations, they are given a great welcome from a family that can ill afford it.

More than any sermon I've ever heard, the film underscores the central messages of Sukkot. And I can't think of a more appropriate festival for the start of work on the site of a JCC that will have inclusiveness at its heart. The JCC will welcome Jews of every stripe – religious and secular, Orthodox and Reform, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, and non-Jews too – indeed, anyone who has an interest in things Jewish.

I'm delighted to say that in this respect the JCC is not alone. Our approach to community is shared by a growing number of organisations. Indeed this Rosh Hashanah as we marked the New Year with its attendant themes of growth and renewal, we had more to celebrate than usual, with three key community-wide projects coming to fruition. In addition to the JCC's

Barnet has opened its doors to Jewish pupils of all denominations. The school will ultimately provide places for 1,310 children.

What these three big capital projects have in common is the approach they take towards community, which can be encapsulated in one word – inclusiveness.

More than 200,000 Jews live in London. It's a diverse community: religious and secular; European and Oriental, Londoners for generations and relative newcomers, an amalgam of mini-communities whose paths may rarely intersect. As we seek to renew ourselves and grow as a community, an inclusive approach won't just help us to survive but will enable us to thrive. We have to pitch a big tent in which all Jews can feel equally at home, where we learn to embrace our differences and explore what binds us together. Very soon we'll discover that there's more that unites us than divides us.

It's an approach that's worked very successfully in the United States and works well in smaller communities in the UK, where there is a compelling logic for uniting.

When the JCC opens its doors in 2013 and our wanderings finally come to an end (I can't imagine how the Children of Israel felt after 40 years), we'll look forward to erecting our own Sukkah to better appreciate our newfound permanence and as a poignant symbol of our inclu-