The world cries out for a solution to the conflict that threatens to tear apart the Middle East. Political solutions have come and gone, leaving many feeling that the rocky road to peace will ultimately lead nowhere. But behind the doomsday headlines and beyond the violent images broadcast from the volatile region, several Israelis and Palestinians have achieved a true and lasting peace. Read on to see how . . .
A CASUALTY OF CONFLICT

A few years ago, Lisa’s son Asaf began his service with the IDF. One day he caught a lift from his base with a civilian. Moments later, as Asaf and his companion approached the Ayosh junction, a group of protesting Palestinian students descended upon the car in a rage. The driver managed to escape, but Asaf was trapped in the car. He suffered a blow to the head, which knocked him out cold. As Asaf regained consciousness, he was dragged from the car and beaten. A few seconds’ pause allowed him just enough time to escape.

After the incident, Asaf retreated to his room and Lisa was left wondering how she could possibly cope with what had happened to her son and how she should deal with the rage toward her son’s assailants that boiled inside her: “I [was filled] with this bitterness and this wrath and this anger and this hate,” she said.

A SOLDIER’S STORY

When Moran emigrated from Israel to the United States, he felt hopeless about the situation in the Middle East: “People were dying from the right and from the left; no one is doing anything, and I decided to move on.”

The violence in Israel had struck Moran personally, as a Palestinian suicide bomber had taken the lives of seven of his friends in his IDF unit. So he came to the U.S., seeking a “different reality.”

Little did this ex-soldier realize that his reality would change so drastically as to include two people formerly forbidden to him.

In 1998, Moran found himself in Los Angeles, going to a church service a friend had invited him to. Moran left the service agitated, filled with questions about God. He wanted answers and was challenged to read the Bible, both the Tanakh and the New Testament.

“Throughout the whole Scriptures, you find that God loved his people, Israel. He loved them so much that even when we continued to sin against him and reject him . . . he [is] still faithful to us and he gave us the promised Messiah . . . to save us from all of our iniquities. God opened my eyes to the truth . . .,” said Moran.

What Moran read in the Bible convinced him that Y’shua (Jesus) was Messiah, and Moran committed his life to one whom he’d always assumed wasn’t for him.

But though his newfound faith gave him a love and a peace that he’d not known before, the question was, would it be enough to quell the bitterness towards Arabs that still lingered in his heart? Could that love and peace truly displace decades of anger?

FINDING FORGIVENESS

The Scriptures and Jewish tradition have much to say about forgiveness, in terms of seeking forgiveness both from God and from each other for our wrongdoing. We are also told that in addition to seeking forgiveness, that forgiving is itself a blessing.

Writing for Aish HaTorah, Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir comments:

A careful study of Jewish sources reveals that forgiveness fulfills two distinct roles—one religious, and one personal.

The religious role of forgiveness is that it enables the wrongdoer to achieve atonement for his act. It is a firm doctrine of Jewish belief that God doesn’t grant full forgiveness for our sins against our fellow man until we obtain forgiveness directly from the wronged individual.

An Israeli newspaper shows Asaf being beaten by Palestinian protesters (top); Lisa (above), his mother, was filled with “bitterness . . . rage . . . and hate.”

“People were dying from the right and from the left . . .”

“[I was filled] with this bitterness and this wrath and this anger and this rage, and this hate,” she said.
The personal role of forgiveness is that apology and forgiveness enable the two sides to put the incident behind them, and to restore harmonious relations. . . . This personal aspect of forgiveness is perhaps even more important than the religious one.1

There is much human logic in these words, however another Jewish perspective, the messianic Jewish perspective, holds that forgiveness from God is actually the precursor to reconciliation between people. That is, having a right relationship with God—one in which people know they have been forgiven by their Creator for their wrongdoing—will cause people to be forgiving towards one another.

How can we attain God's forgiveness? It's a timely question, considering we have just commemorated Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and asked God for forgiveness for all manner of sins. Yet, the Day of Atonement was originally instituted because humans cannot attain God's forgiveness, not without a sacrifice.

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. (Leviticus 17:11)

God never changed his requirements for atonement. When Jesus died, it was as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of all who trust in him. Like the sacrifices in days of old, through Jesus' blood, humanity can be reconciled to God, and then to each other.

The assumption here is, as it says in the Tanakh, that vengeance and justice belong to God, not to us. The wrongs that we commit against one another are ultimately wrongs committed against our Creator. This is why when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he responded, “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.” He knew that the second couldn’t happen without the first.

It’s a radical concept, especially in the Middle East, and a tall order for anyone to follow.

Yet, these were all things that Lisa, the Jewish woman at the beginning of this article, believed as she tried to nurse her son Asaf back to health. Jesus’ teachings of love and forgiveness were not easy to apply in her life. Her spirit had become a casualty of the Middle East conflict. So she did the only thing she knew to do—she prayed.

“I said, 'Lord, what do you want from me, don't you know how hard it is?'”

Then Lisa remembered that when Jesus died on a cross as a sacrifice for humanity’s sins, he was recorded as saying, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do.”

She realized then that God was intimately acquainted with suffering and pain, as he’d borne it in his own son, Jesus.

So Lisa continued praying, “Abba [Father], please give me your ability [to forgive] . . . I can't do it. It's too big for me, too enormous . . . give me your compassion . . . .”

Then, she says, “Something just broke in me, just broke, like you just break a dam, and . . . it just went. . . .

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But then I thought, supposing it’s just words, supposing it really isn’t there . . . supposing there’s no connection between my mouth and my heart. That I was tested on, a couple of years later.”

FORBIDDEN FRIENDSHIP

Moran had gone from questioning whether or not there was a God to believing wholeheartedly in God and in Jesus' claims to be the Son of God and his (Moran's) personal savior from sin. Yet, in his heart, he still distrusted Arab people.

One day in March, 2001, Moran was invited to share his story at a conference attended by Jewish and Arab believers in Jesus. At the podium, he spoke about how his friends were killed by a suicide bomber and about how he had come to believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be.

When he was finished, Moran joined a group of his friends. He was talking with them when he saw an Arab man approaching. The Arab man stood in front of Moran and said, “My name is Tass Abu Saada.” Moran greeted him nicely enough, but inwardly wondered, “What does he want from me?” Then Tass said, “I was a Fatah fighter.” When Moran heard that this man had been with the PLO, he stepped back in shock.

But Tass continued: “But I want to tell you something.”

“Yes?” Moran inquired.

Tass replied, “I want you to know that I love you.” Moran could not believe his ears.

Years earlier, Tass had experienced a radical shift in his feelings towards Jewish people. As a young man who’d been born in Gaza, he’d felt nothing but malice for Jews: “I believed they were the ones who took my land, who stole it from me, so I hated them with a passion.”

His anger drove him to fight with Yasir Arafat’s forces. Years later, when he left for the U.S. and became a successful restauranteur, he brought his hatred with him. He admits to having dreamt of poisoning his Jewish customers.

Eventually, Tass befriended Charlie, a customer who had impressed him with his kindness. Charlie told Tass, a Muslim, that Jesus was God. Tass believed that Jesus was a prophet, but nothing more. So he vehemently disagreed with his new friend. “No way!” said Tass.

But Charlie persisted and went and retrieved his Bible, and set it on the table between himself and Tass. Tass jumped back. “I can’t touch that,” he exclaimed. When his friend asked why, Tass stammered that he had the distinct impression that what lay before them was the word of God. This revelation surprised even Tass, who had never considered the Bible valid. But as Charlie began to read what the Bible says about Jesus, Tass felt a burden lift from him. He experienced an instant peace and joy within himself and began to believe that what the Bible said was true. As days passed and he began to read this book for himself, he was prompted to pray. And what he prayed surprised him:

“Suddenly I heard myself praying for the Jewish people . . . I heard myself praying, ‘Lord, bless your chosen ones and take them back to the promised land.’ . . . I started wanting to shut my mouth with my hand . . . but I couldn’t because it was bubbling inside of me.”

Tass discovered a deep desire to unload the hatred towards Jews that he’d carried for so long. As he remembered Jesus’ words of forgiveness, Tass concluded: “Now that is the model for me. If he can forgive so much, I can forgive so little.”

Tass was invited to share his story at an Arab-Jewish conference, where he saw Moran sharing about his own journey. Tass was compelled to approach Moran and introduce himself as a former Fatah fighter and believer in Jesus.

He told Moran that he loved him and then he asked him for forgiveness in the name of his people for what had happened to Moran’s friends. In that moment, Moran felt his hardness towards Arabs melt and he in turn asked Tass to forgive him for not being able to trust or love Arabs.

Says Moran, “What God has done at that moment . . . he has lifted that burden away from my shoulders and he gave me love. He gave me so much love.”

Today, these former enemies are best of friends. According to Tass, “When Jews and Palestinians come together in the name of God, the true God . . . then there is true peace . . . If God can do this change in a reckless person’s heart like

“I said, ‘Lord, what do you want from me, don't you know how hard it is?’”

“Suddenly I heard myself praying for the Jewish people . . . I heard myself praying, ‘Lord, bless your chosen ones and take them back to the promised land.’”
myself, I believe there is hope for anyone... and it’s not just the conflict in the Middle East; it’s the conflict in their own life.”

PUTTING PEACE TO THE TEST
Lisa felt that God had eased the conflict in her heart and that he had helped her forgive her son’s assailants. But this resolution was tested when one of Asaf’s assailants was apprehended. Asaf was asked to testify against him in court, but as he was still traumatized by what had happened to him, Lisa went to the courthouse in his stead. During a recess, Lisa found herself alone in the courtroom with three security guards and one of the men who had tried to kill her son.

Shaking, she walked over to the man and said, “In the name of Y’shua the Messiah, I forgive you. I forgive you. And I can only do it because my sins have been forgiven me. He’s forgiven me my sins and in his name, I come to you and I forgive your sins.”

That day, Lisa describes herself as being free from the bondage of hatred that is dividing her homeland. Asaf continues to recover and Lisa is planning to visit his attacker in prison, to talk more of a peace long thought forbidden.

CONCLUSION: NO LONGER FORBIDDEN
It might seem impossible that Jews and Arabs—people with such a long history of conflict—could reach peace with one another through Jesus. After all, both Jesus and the book that contains the accounts of his life are usually considered forbidden to both groups of people. In order to achieve this peace, Lisa, Tass, Moran and other Israelis and Palestinians like them have risked many relationships with their respective people.

And yet, where else should we look for a peace that lasts? We’ve seen that humanity’s best efforts to attain peace have been temporary fixes at best. Could it be that our conflicts and problems are not primarily political or social or economical, but spiritual? Is it just possible that if people—Jewish, Arab or other—become reconciled to God, they can truly be reconciled to each other? And if so, is that kind of peace not worth it, even if we have to turn to subjects considered forbidden?

For further reading:
The Sulha: Reconciliation in the Middle East by Ilan Zamir (with Menahem Benhayim)
A true story of how one Israeli’s faith in Y’shua led him to meet with an Arab Muslim family—whose son he had struck in a fatal car accident.
http://www.jewsforjesus.org/library/issues/06-04/sulha.htm

A Case of Forsaken Identity? by Maha McDiarmid
The true story of an Arab believer in Jesus married to a Jewish believer in Jesus.
http://www.jewsforjesus.org/library/issues/13-07mar01/forsakenidentity.htm

Israel, the Mystery of Peace by Julia Fisher
True stories of hope and reconciliation from the Middle East demonstrate that there is another road map for peace emerging in Israel today—God’s road map—where, despite politics and war, Jews, Arabs and Christians are praying and working together demonstrating that genuine peace is possible. Available from: www.amazon.com

Everyone is for peace. No one is against it. Yet, how do we assess whether or not peace is possible in our day? Perhaps we can begin by asking ourselves, “What is that very elusive quality we call peace?”

To terrorists or tyrants, getting peace means eliminating those who stand in their way—but what they really want is complete control.

To followers of Eastern religions, peace comes from being one with the universe and having no awareness of self—but what they really mean is serenity.

The person who is trying to sleep while a loud party is going on next door also says he wants peace—but he really means quiet.

Peace of mind is what a person is hoping for while waiting to get the results back from a suspicious biopsy—but what she or he really hopes for is good health.

When we don’t have what we think we should have, when we don’t feel the way we think we should feel, we say we need peace! We often define peace as that condition of life that we think ought to exist. But in all of the turmoil of life, who really has the right or capacity to determine what should or shouldn’t be?

Where can we look for a peace that is right for everyone?

Webster defines peace as (1) a state of tranquility, (2) freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions, (3) harmony in personal relations and (4) a state or period of mutual accord between governments.

These definitions can be broken down into two major themes: the cessation of hostilities, and peace of mind. The English word “peace” came from the Latin pax. To Romans, pax meant the cessation of hostilities between the conqueror and the vanquished. This was always a temporary peace as it was interrupted by changes in the balance of power.

The Hebrew concept of peace is rooted in “shalom,” which connotes wholeness, completeness, soundness, safety, health and prosperity. More than that, peace is experienced when that wholeness or health is expressed in our standing with the God of Israel.

Rabbi Robert I. Kahn of Houston, Texas distinguishes between “Roman” peace and “Hebrew” shalom:

“One can dictate a peace; shalom is a mutual agreement.

“Peace is a temporary pact; shalom is a permanent agreement.

“One can make a peace treaty; shalom is the condition of peace.

“Peace can be negative, the absence of commotion.

“Shalom is positive, the presence of serenity.

“Peace can be partial; shalom is whole.

“Peace can be piecemeal; shalom is complete.”

The mystical writings of the Zohar teach that God is peace, his name is peace, and all is bound together in peace (Zohar, Lev. 10b). In post-Talmudic Jewish thought, Isaac Arama paraphrased this idea by saying:

Peace is a positive thing, the essential means by which men of differing temperaments and opinions can work together for the common good. Pearls of individual virtue would be dim in isolation were it not for the string of peace that binds them together and so increases their luster. That is why peace is a name of God for it is He who gives unity to the whole of creation.¹

The criteria for shalom, true peace, then, rest with God. This definition of peace must begin with the assumption that there is a Creator and that he has established a standard for us. From there must come an acceptance (at least for the understanding of this article) of the way in which God has chosen to reveal himself to man—through the Bible.

The first example of peace in the Bible is the condition that existed in the beginning in Eden. There is good reason to believe the Genesis account of creation; but even if you don’t believe it literally, the message still demonstrates a lesson of peace.

Adam and Eve were at peace with God, with the creation and with each other. All their needs were supplied. There was no disease or discomfort. They were surrounded by beauty. They weren’t lonely because they had each other. More importantly, they had an intimate relationship with the One who created them. If any people ever experienced peace, it was Adam and Eve. But peace, even in the Garden of Eden, was conditional. It was Adam and Eve’s only as long as they remained obedient to their Creator.

The first man and woman lost their shalom because of disobedience. Similarly, the Jewish people were promised peace through obedience to the Torah. God told our people that our relative peace in the promised land was directly related to our obedience to him. In Deuteronomy 28, God promises that
blessing will come with obedience. The description of God’s blessings in this chapter cover every area of life imaginable. In response to our obedience, God promises wholeness in the family, wholeness in the environment, wholeness in relationship to the surrounding nations. The promised land bore the promise of being another Garden of Eden, a land truly flowing with milk and honey. Yet the same passage that promises blessing and peace for obedience declares a curse, violence and strife for disobedience. There would be environmental crisis; drought would plague the land. Strife would occur in the family. Violence would be a characteristic of society. The very safety and security of living in the land would be jeopardized by our disobedience to God. The fruit of disobedience is no peace. Can it be that after these many centuries we still have yet to learn this most basic lesson from the Torah? We are unable to obey God. We are unable to achieve peace through our own efforts.

We spend millions of dollars and an endless amount of effort to negotiate peace among people and nations, as though peace could be achieved through social, political or economic solutions. Yet racial and religious strife has never been more prevalent than it is today. Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Chechnya, Rwanda, Liberia, Bosnia and a host of other places are hotbeds of warring. Even Jerusalem (the name means City of Peace) is a place where acts of terrorism abound.

So should we just pack it in?

Absolutely not. There really is reason to hope. There is a peace that transcends the situations and flaws of our own personal lives because it doesn’t come from our efforts. The peace that we long for is not based on political compromises—it is based on God’s truth. You see, the only real peace, the shalom that is permanent, comes from God.

The blessing of the Holy One is peace.

—Talmud Megilla, 18a

The Jewish sages taught that when the Messiah comes, there will be peace in the world. They taught that the Messiah is God’s solution for peace. The phrase “when the Messiah comes” is a synonym for “when peace comes.” The long-held hope for peace would be fulfilled in a person.

Two thousand years ago, a Jewish carpenter we know as Jesus—Y’shua—claimed to be that Messiah. He claimed to be the bearer of peace. And the prophet Isaiah wrote about him:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. Isaiah 9:6,7

How was the Messiah to bring peace? A permanent end to all warfare is found in a relationship with the One who bridged the chasm between us and God—Y’shua. He said, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be dismayed” (John 14:27). It is a different kind of peace that Y’shua offers us. It is a peace not based on outward circumstances but on the reality of a restored relationship with the God of Israel. God himself became one of us because he chose to demonstrate his love as the way of peace. Isaiah explained this in a prophecy hundreds of years before Y’shua walked the earth:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:4,5

We can have peace, but for Adam and Eve and all who have come after, peace has come with a high price. It was Y’shua’s punishment that brought us peace. The peace he offers us is a permanent peace, but it is also conditional. It depends on our welcoming and following the One who paid that price—the Prince of Peace, Y’shua. There is hope for peace. How much do you really want it?

1. Mishneh Torah, Melakhim XII, 1,5
Recent and Recommended

The documentary film: **Forbidden Peace: the Story Behind the Headlines** *(42 minutes)*
and the companion booklet: **Forbidden Peace: An Invitation to Recall, Reflect and Respond** *(169 pages)*

What would make a Palestinian man, who hated Jews with a passion, embrace a former Israeli soldier as his brother? Why would an Israeli woman, whose son was brutally attacked, look at his assailants with forgiveness in her eyes?

How is it possible that in one of the world’s most volatile regions, a small group of Israeli and Palestinian children play together, unaware that they should be enemies? The first two of these questions were explored in this edition’s lead article. Several similar inquiries are examined in **Forbidden Peace: the Story Behind the Headlines**, a brand new video and DVD.

**Forbidden Peace** offers a bold new perspective on the Middle East conflict, one that is sure to raise some eyebrows. The central claim to the documentary-style film is that lack of peace in the Middle East is not a political or social predicament, but a spiritual one. The Israelis and Palestinians profiled in **Forbidden Peace** all maintain that they have found peace with one another by finding peace with God through Jesus—a faith traditionally forbidden to both groups of people.

The opening footage of violent images from the Middle East is effectively juxtaposed with faces and voices full of hope, as the viewer is introduced to Tass, a former PLO Fatah fighter; Rahel, an Israeli who hosts gatherings of Israelis and Palestinians in her home regularly; Shmuel, an Arab man who leads a messianic Jewish congregation, just to name a few. Most moving are the segments involving Lisa, whose son Asaf was savagely beaten while serving in the IDF and Abigail, a young believer in Y'shua who was killed by a suicide bomber. Both stories can be seen as tests of faith and one cannot help but be impressed at the way those featured hold fast to their beliefs in the midst of crisis.

From a technical perspective, **Forbidden Peace** is skillfully filmed and scripted. One can either argue that some of the content is repetitive or conversely, that the stories’ similar themes serve to reinforce the position of the film. One thing is for sure: these words and faces will be difficult to dismiss.

There are those who will approach this film with skepticism, and given the numerous peace plans proposed, it’s no wonder. However, a companion study guide called **Forbidden Peace: an Invitation to Recall, Reflect and Respond** allows viewers to delve deeper into the ideas presented in the film.

Broken into six chapters plus introduction and conclusion, the booklet raises such questions as, “What is the origin of conflict?”; “Why do our attempts at peace fail?”; “If Jesus is the Messiah then why isn’t there peace on earth?”; and “Is peace through Y’shua worth risking relationships?” The study guide makes for challenging, thought-provoking reading.

The current Middle East situation demands that we consider any possible antidote to the violence that threatens the region. The solution presented in **Forbidden Peace** is not a quick fix; it’s not a national resolution, but a personal conclusion that will take time and courage. But after all, are we not in times that call for courage?

1. A congregation comprised of Jewish and non-Jewish people who believe Jesus is the Messiah.