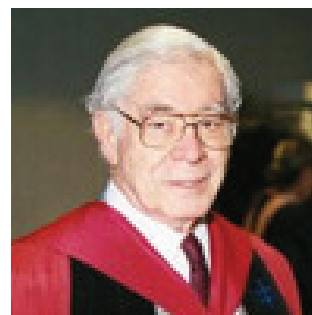


## “Will the President be able to resolve the Middle East crisis?”

Richard L. Rubenstein

November 2008 (Transcription of a lecture delivered at the University of Bridgeport)



I have a short and long answer for the question: “Will the President be able to resolve the Middle East crisis?” The short answer is “No.” The longer answer follows: I believe in discussions of the Middle East crisis, I believe both sides neglect an important element that renders the crisis impossible to resolve. Moreover, even were that element recognized, it would still not be possible to resolve the crisis. *That element is religion.*

In reality, religion plays a more crucial role in the conflict than most people trained in Middle Eastern studies understand. I have some knowledge of the career paths taken by senior government officials trained at both Harvard and Yale. Certain trusted professors recommend their most promising graduates who start at entry-level positions at the State Department and other government agencies and then quickly move up. Henry Kissinger is an excellent example. A graduate of Harvard College, he has a Harvard

PhD. His skills and promise were recognized by Nelson Rockefeller and that led him into international politics. Unfortunately, such people tend, in the words of the great German sociologist, Max Weber, to be “religiously unmusical.”

To get ahead of the story, it is my view that the Middle East conflict is not unlike the narrative that unfolds in what the German philosopher Hegel regarded as the nuclear Greek tragedy, Sophocles’ *Antigone* composed in or around 442 BCE. Antigone and Creon, king of Thebes are the two dominant figures in the drama. Antigone’s two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, were rivals for the crown of Thebes and had led opposing sides in Thebes’ civil war. Both perished in the war and Creon, who succeeded to the throne, decreed that Eteocles was to be honored in death while Polyneices was to be punished as a rebel by being left unburied where vultures and other carrion-feeding animals could feed

### **Biography**

*Dr. Richard L. Rubenstein is President Emeritus of the University of Bridgeport. A Distinguished Professor of Religion at the University and a Life Member of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Rubenstein also serves as Director of the University's Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. An internationally recognized historian of religion whose writings lie at the root of Holocaust writings, his works have been the subject of more than a dozen doctoral dissertations. One of his books entitled "The Cunning of History" was recently translated into French. Professor Rubenstein's writings have also been cited as a key inspiration for the Academy Award winning film Sophie's Choice. Prior to assuming his role as President of the University of Bridgeport, Dr. Rubenstein served as Distinguished Professor of Religion at Florida State University. Recently Florida State University created the Richard L. Rubenstein Chair for Religious Studies in his honor.*

on his corpse. In the world of ancient Greece that was the most terrible of punishments. Moreover, the penalty for disobeying Creon’s edict was death.

A sentry subsequently reports to Creon that Polyneices has been buried. Creon soon learns that it is Antigone who has buried her brother and decrees that she is to be buried alive in a cave. Antigone has no regrets. She insists that she has obeyed a higher law, the law of family loyalty in which her highest obligation was to bury her brother. By contrast, Creon is convinced that he has done right by punishing the rebel. As ruler, his primary responsibility is to maintain order and punish those who disturb it.

For Hegel, the flaw in the tragic hero is not *hubris* but an *ethical collision* between conflicting values that make an exclusive and irreconcilable claim on each side. As he wrote:

The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*, while on the other hand each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and *damaging* the equally justified power of the other.<sup>1</sup>

Given his role as ruler, Creon acted in accordance with what he saw as right. We might regard his actions as cruel, but he saw no alternative. Antigone’s place was entirely different and, hence, she was bound by a very different set of impera-

tives, the law of family loyalty, that all members of the family, no matter what their offense, must be given an honorable burial.

In this clash, both Antigone and Creon are destroyed. Creon loses his son and heir, Haemon, who is engaged to Antigone and who enters the burial cave with her. In Hegel’s thinking, oppositions are always partial, always partly right and partly wrong. In such a situation, when two rights come into conflict, there can be no non-tragic resolution.

I have begun this discussion by referring to these reflections on Greek tragedy because, I believe, it helps to contextualize the Middle East conflict. I also want to distinguish between two terms, *enemy* and *villain*. I imagine it is clear to you that I am Jewish. When I think of that part of the Arab world that opposed the creation of the State of Israel and its continued existence, I do not regard them as villains. A villain is a person or group that deliberately and gratuitously injures without cause or reason. That is not the case here. Those persons and groups believe that they have good reason to fight with whatever tools they have in order to dislodge the Israelis from what they see as their historic territory.

Nevertheless, though they are not villains, they are most certainly my enemies. There is in my tradition an historic memory of Israel being a Jewish possession. Some people will argue, and not only Jews, but a very large number of American Protestants known as Dispensationalists, that this land was promised to the Jews. Per-

sonally, I do not make such a claim although many Jews do.

If I were a Muslim, I would claim that this land is, as stated in the charter of Hamas, an irrevocable, sacred trust (*waqf*) granted by Allah for all eternity to those who believe in him.<sup>2</sup>

I also think that it is confusing simply to dismiss Hamas as a terrorist group. They certainly have used strategies that others have called “terrorist,” but they are a religious group that is convinced that the whole territory of Palestine is part or should be part of *Dar al Islam*, that is, part of that territory in which Islam is dominant and that they are under an unconditional religious imperative to regain the entire land of Israel by whatever means are necessary.

Let me now tell you the story of my grandmother’s paper bag, a story I first told in Cordoba, Spain in the nineteen-nineties at a conference of Jewish and Muslim scholars. When I was about sixteen years old, I visited my grandmother, an Orthodox Jewish woman, who had emigrated from Lithuania as a young girl in the late nineteenth century. During the visit, I noticed an open drawer and a paper bag within. The bag was addressed to her and carried a cancelled postage stamp of the British mandate of Palestine. When I looked into the bag, I found nothing but dirt. At the time, I couldn’t understand what possible meaning the dirt had for my grandmother or why she wanted dirt from Palestine. The next time I saw the bag was when her coffin was lowered into the grave and her oldest son took the

bag and poured its contents on the coffin. I then understood the symbolism of the bag. This was her way of saying, “I have been a wanderer all my life, exiled, as have been my people, from my true home, Palestine. When I am buried, I will return home to the land of Palestine, at least symbolically.”

In the land of Israel/Palestine, there are two peoples, both of whom believe that they have a divinely-legitimated claim. Notice that I have not said that one claim is stronger than the other. I have been trained as an historian of religion, and, as such, I do not do take sides. Of course, I personally do take sides, but not as an historian of religion. As an historian, I do not have a side: I try to understand both sides. Now I suspect, and it is more than a suspicion, that there are men in the State Department and the Department of Defense who do not appreciate the depth of the religious feeling involved on either side. Or, if they do, they do not care. There is, however, at least one element other than religion that we must take into account, and that is the related elements of humiliation, defeat and rage.

To understand the relevance of humiliation, defeat, and rage, I suggest that we turn our attention momentarily from the conflict between Arabs and Israelis and consider events that took place in Europe in the summer and fall of 1918. Ninety years ago this month, an armistice, a cessation of military activities, was signed between Germany and the Western powers, namely France, Britain and the United States, which signaled the end of hostilities on the Western Front during

World War I, hostilities that had been going on with horrendous loss of life on both sides since September 1914. An armistice is not a peace treaty. It is simply an agreement to stop fighting.

On March 13, 1918, Bolshevik Russia signed a peace treaty with Imperial Russia. Less than three weeks later, General Erich Ludendorff, second in command only to Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg, launched the first of four German offensives in the west against the Allies. By July 1918 the German offensive had spent itself.<sup>3</sup> On September 29, 1918, Ludendorff summoned Germany’s political leaders and demanded that they ask for an immediate armistice.<sup>4</sup> In seeking an armistice, Ludendorff and Hindenburg were partly driven by fear of the imminent collapse of German arms and its likely consequences, the worst being a Bolshevik-type revolution in Germany.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, with the German army still in northern France and Belgium, and the former Tsarist Empire defeated, a number of senior officers strongly opposed the armistice initiative.<sup>6</sup> Their resolve was strengthened after receiving Woodrow Wilson’s uncompromising replies to the German armistice request between October 10 and 14. Ludendorff and Hindenburg became convinced that the Allies would never offer peace terms Germany would deem acceptable.<sup>7</sup>

According to historian Michael Geyer, the High Command became convinced that surrender was incompatible with German honor which could only be saved by an apocalyptic *Endkampf* (terminal struggle) involving the systematic devastation of

the population and infrastructure of occupied French and Belgian territory, as well as a possible war to the death involving the entire German population. The *Endkampf* would be both a war of annihilation against the enemy and the self-annihilation of the German nation.<sup>8</sup>

German defeat did not result in an *Endkampf* because the government of the newly appointed Chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, and the Reichstag majority rejected the High Command’s plans. Prince Max pointed out that the first responsibility of the government was to assure the *survival* of the nation. If that meant acknowledging defeat, the humiliation had to be accepted. By contrast, the High Command insisted that the Allied terms were dishonorable. Hence, *total military catastrophe was to be preferred to a humiliating surrender.*

In late October, Hindenburg and Ludendorff attempted to persuade the Kaiser to reject the armistice and call for a *Volkskrieg*, a total “people’s war.” The Kaiser refused and sent them with several other senior commanders, to meet with the Imperial Vice Chancellor Friedrich von Payer, Prince Max being unavailable because of illness. Ludendorff sought to persuade Payer to abandon peace negotiations and call for a popular insurrection. The issue for both the military and the German ultra-right was no longer victory or even territorial defense but the “honor” involved in preferring catastrophic national destruction to surrender.

Payer rejected Ludendorff’s demand for an end to peace negotiations whereupon

Ludendorff declared, “Then, your Excellency, *I throw the entire shame of the Fatherland into your and your colleague’s faces* (emphasis added).”<sup>9</sup> In his memoir of the war years, Payer spelled out his fundamental disagreement with Ludendorff:

An army commander with his entourage may well end his illustrious career [*Ruhmeslaufbahn*] with a ride into death [*Todesritt*], but a people of seventy million cannot make the decision about life and death according to the terms of honor of a single estate [i.e., the military]<sup>10</sup>

The idea of fighting to the death, rejected in the First World War, was accepted by Adolf Hitler in the Second World War. For example, the Battle of Stalingrad was the turning point of that war. The German attack was launched on July 17, 1942. The German surrender took place on January 31, 1943. It is estimated that a total of 750,000 Germans were killed or wounded and 91,000 captured; 478,471 Soviet military were killed or missing; 650,878 were wounded or sick and 40,000 Russian civilians were killed. The Battle of Stalingrad was the bloodiest military battle of the war and arguably the bloodiest of all time. By mid-January 1943, it was clear to the German commander Friedrich Paulus Friedrich Paulus that the German situation was hopeless and he asked Hitler for permission to surrender. Permission was denied and Paulus was ordered to hold Stalingrad to the death. On January 30, 1943, Paulus informed Hitler that his men were hours from collapse. Hitler responded by promoting

Paulus to the rank of Field Marshal, the highest rank in the German army, noting that no Prussian or German field marshal had ever surrendered. In effect, Hitler was telling Paulus to die with his troops, but allowing him to do so as a field marshal. The next day, Paulus, a Roman Catholic who did not believe in suicide, surrendered to the Russians.

A second example of Hitler’s determination to bring Germany down with him can be seen in the way the Second World War ended. It only ended when the Americans, British and Russians arrived in Berlin. By any normal logic, the Germans should have surrendered before, but under Hitler, they fought to the bitter end. Hitler even commanded Albert Speer, his Minister of Arms and War Production, to destroy Germany’s infrastructure rather than permit it to fall into Allied hands. Speer, fearful that implementation of the order would cripple Germany’s ability to recover, refused to comply.<sup>11</sup>

How does this history relate to the Middle East crisis? For those who have been socialized with the values of a dominant military caste or who believe in military virtues, (and I do not necessarily criticize these virtues because countries sometimes survive because of the military virtues), there is often nothing worse than defeat. For 1400 years, Muslims saw Jews as a defeated, conquered people. As such, they were objects of condescension or contempt. Much has been written about the fact that there were times when Islam’s tolerance of Jews was greater than that of the Christian West. When the Jews were



expelled from Christian Spain in 1492, a large number were permitted to enter the Ottoman Empire which believed that there was a place for them. The Jews were received as subordinates into a society of structured inequality under strictly regulated conditions. This was also true of the way the Muslims dealt with Christians. They could not, for example, bear arms. They were permitted domicile solely under conditions in which their inferior standing was always apparent. For us to say that such practices were wrong is to measure their society and its imperative in terms of our own.

Moreover, the Christians behaved in very much the same way. How then did the Muslims regard the Jews? There's a term for it, *dbimmis*, that is, people who had either surrendered or their ancestors had. Every Muslim, regardless of how humble, could look down on the *dbimmis*. Even the poorest Muslim was part of the dominant group and the richest *dbimmi* was not. Notice that I am not criticizing this system. This is the way it was.

As noted above, the Muslims had a somewhat similar attitude towards the Christians. Christians were also *dbimmis*, but there was one big difference between them. The Christians had fought and defeated the Muslims in the naval Battle of Lepanto (1571), a naval battle, and had defeated the Muslims in the Siege of Vienna in 1683. Although never defeating them, they had pushed the Muslims back. Like the Muslims, they had a military caste. The Jews were completely non-military and had been since 70 C.E. when the Romans put down a violent Jewish

rebellion that had lasted four years and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem.

As defeat became certain, the Jews had two choices. They could fight to the death. And, some did at Masada, a desert fortress some 900 feet above the Dead Sea. 930 Jews resisted the Romans for almost 3 years. Finally, the Jews of Masada could no longer hold out and Eleazar ben Ya'ir, their leader, convinced the people that surrender was not an option. Eleazar persuaded his followers that if they killed themselves, they would never know slavery. They knew that if the Romans took them, the men would have become slaves and the women used sexually and then sold as slaves.<sup>12</sup> 930 Jews, imbued with military virtues in the sense that defeat and surrender were absolutely unacceptable, committed suicide up on Masada. They had made their grim choice.

There was another choice the Jews could have made. It was, as a matter of fact, the dominant choice. In the year 70, the most important Jewish leader in Jerusalem was a rabbi named Yochanan ben Zakkai (30-90 C.E.). There was a group in Jerusalem, the Zealots, who like the men and women of Masada, believed that death was preferable to surrender just as did Ludendorff and Hindenburg in 1918. Yochanan did not agree. He understood that if the Jews died fighting the Romans, Judaism would come to an end. However, the Zealots controlled the city. To evade them, Yochanan ordered his disciples to place him in a coffin and take him outside the city for burial. In spite of the bitter war, the Romans permitted the Jews to bury

their dead outside Jerusalem. At the Jewish checkpoint, one of the Zealots wanted to take his spear and put it through the seemingly dead rabbi. He was persuaded to refrain on the basis of the honor due to the dead.

As soon as he was outside of the city, he requested an audience with Vespasian, the Roman commander and soon to be emperor. It was in Vespasian's interest to end the war that had lasted almost four years, with Roman forces stretched out from Persia to the gates of Scotland. Vespasian asked Yochanan, “What do you want?” The rabbi replied, “Give me the yeshiva (religious academy) at Yavneh and its wise men.” In effect, speaking on behalf of the Jews, Yochanan was willing to surrender and forgo sovereignty, putting Jewish safety in the hands of Vespasian and his imperial successors. An agreement was struck that rendered Jews powerless people until 1948 and the birth of the State of Israel which regained Jewish sovereignty the same way an earlier generation had lost it, by force of arms.

From the Muslim point of view, the Jews were for 1400 years a dependent, powerless people and, to repeat, as such the object of either condescension or contempt. The idea that in 1948 and afterward, 650,000 of these people could defeat them in three wars was totally unacceptable. At the end of the 1948 war, the Arabs refused to make peace which would have been a confession of defeat. The same thing happened at the end of the Six Day War of 1967. The Arab nations adopted a policy of “Three No's”—“No peace, no recognition, no commerce.”

The idea of admitting defeat on the land of Allah, especially to the Jews, would have been an irredeemable disgrace.

There were leaders in the Muslim world who were willing to broker a compromise peace with the Jews. President Anwar Sadat of Egypt was one. He was assassinated in 1981. It is also well known that King Abdullah of Jordan, the grandfather of the current king, preferred to have the Jews in control of part of a Palestine rather than have Mufti Muhammad Amin al Husseini in control. He tried to work out a deal with the Jews. He too was assassinated in 1981 and a street was named in Tehran in honor of his assassin Khalid Al-Islambouli.<sup>13</sup> One wonders what might happen to Mahmoud Abbas if he ever signs a *real* peace treaty with Israel.

From a strictly pragmatic point of view, an Arab-Jewish peace would benefit both parties.<sup>14</sup> Jews possess certain skills with which to enrich the Middle East. As a matter of fact that was the illusion that the Jews had when they came to Palestine. They were under the illusion that because they had the skills the Muslims would see them as an asset. The Muslims weren't interested. People who are willing to sacrifice themselves in suicide bombings aren't thinking about material advantage.

One cannot solve a problem where honor and religion are involved on the basis of economic compromise. Obama and the State Department may try. But there will always be a critical mass of Muslims who will refuse anything other than the destruction of the State of Israel. That

means that the Jews have picked—some would say God had picked for them—an especially difficult piece of real estate. Notice I speak of enemies, not villains. Simply by being there, the Israelis are facing the fundamental enmity of a significant portion of the Arab population. That will never go away.

Let me close by recounting an incident that took place on Masada in 1976. I was there with my two sons. The day before, my youngest son had his Bar Mitzvah at Jerusalem’s Western Wall. At Masada, I told them about how Yochanan ben Zakkai had surrendered to the Romans. I pointed out that Yochanan ben Zakkai only surrendered because he assumed that Caesar could be trusted. That was the basis of Yochanan’s surrender. And for 2,000 years, the surrender agreement held. Neither Vespasian nor any of his successors, Roman or European, sought to annihilate the Jews. Some expelled them; others persecuted them, but none sought to exterminate them until Adolf Hitler, who took full advantage of the powerlessness implicit in the original surrender. I told this to my sons and asked, “What would you have done had you been there in the years 70 and 73? Would you have surrendered like Yochanan ben Zakkai or fought to death like the men and women of Masada?” Being young and virile, their answer was simple: “We would have fought to the death.”

I then told them my answer. It was not unlike that of the Kaiser when Ludendorff and Hindenburg wanted the entire German nation to go down in flames. I said, “You had better remember that you

and I are alive today because Yochanan ben Zakkai surrendered and that those who surrender always do so because they hope, if not for themselves, that a later generation of their descendants who would live in freedom.”

As a footnote, let me add that those of you who studied the dialectic of the master and the slave in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* will recall that the slave surrenders to the master at least partly for that reason.<sup>15</sup> I therefore conclude that there may be a truce, a *hudna*, but there will never be genuine peace.



**References:**

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: lectures on fine art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2 vols., p. 1196)
2. Avalon Project of the Yale Law School, “ Hamas Covenant 1988,” Chapter 11, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/hamas.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp)
3. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), p. 190.
4. Schivelbusch, *Culture of Defeat*, p. 197.
5. Michael Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a Levée en Masse in October 1918,” *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Sep., 2001), 464 and 467-468, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3079705>> (6 Mar. 2009).
6. Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 470. These included Max von Gallwitz and Bruno von Mudra.
7. Wilson stipulated that the Central Powers would be required “immediately to withdraw their forces everywhere from invaded territories.” He further insisted on “absolutely satisfactory safeguards and guarantees” for the maintenance “of the present military supremacy of the armies of the United States and its allies in the field.” And, Wilson explicitly demanded a new government in Germany because “the nations of the world do not and cannot trust the word of those who have hitherto been the masters of German policy.” The text of Wilson’s replies is to be found in Oliver Marble Gale, *Americanism: Woodrow Wilson’s Speeches on the War* (Chicago: Baldwin Syndicate, 1918), 141-144. This book was digitized and made available by Google from the Harvard University Library.
8. Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 475-502.
9. Wilhelm Deist, ed., *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg, 1914-1918* (Dusseldorf: Droste, 1970), Vol. 2, 1338-40; I am indebted to Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 506, for this citation.
10. Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik*, 1338-40.
11. Hugh R. Trevor Roper (ed) *Blitzkrieg to Defeat: Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945* (NY: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971) pp. 206-207
12. The mass suicide of the Jews on Masada has been described by Flavius Josephus (37-101 C.E.). It is available on the internet at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>

“Will the President be able to resolve the Middle East crisis?”

maps/primary/  
josephusmasada.html .

13. The name of the street was changed to Intifada Street in 2004 in an effort to improve Egyptian-Iranian relations. “Egypt Wooded with New Street Name,” *BBC News*, January 5, 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3369821.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3369821.stm).
14. An important account of Israel’s technological capabilities is available in Dan Senor and Saul Singer, *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel’s Economic Miracle*, a Council on Foreign Relations Book (New York: Twelve, 2009).
15. *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 111-119.