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What's Wrong with the Middle East, Anyway?

Paul Flesher

When President Clinton was host recently to the new Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Barak, the newspapers were filled with new hopes for peace in the Middle East. This hope was shamelessly spurred on by Barak himself who never missed an opportunity to say that he wants to get the peace process on a fast track.

While the urgency is palpable, there has been trouble in the Middle East for my entire life-time, most of it centering around the state of Israel and Arab resistance to it. The reason for this trouble started nearly two millennia ago.

In the first century A.D., the Romans had conquered the Land of Israel, naming it Palestine. They ruled with a heavy, uninformed and often uncaring hand. Palestine was little more than a tax farm from which to extract money. The native Jews disliked this poor treatment and in 67 A.D. they rebelled. Within five years, they had been soundly defeated and the capital city of Jerusalem had been destroyed.

In 130 A.D., a messiah-figure named Simeon bar Kochba arose to lead the Jews to independence from the Romans. Five years later, Rome was again Rome victorious. To prevent a third rebellion, Rome made it illegal for Jews to live in Jerusalem or the surrounding region. This law remained in effect for many centuries. That meant that tens or hundreds of thousands of Jews had to emigrate. They moved into European and Arabic countries, where their descendants continued to live.

These countries were not always hospitable to the Jews. England expelled the Jews in the 12th century, Spain expelled them in 1492. In Venice, the Jews were shut up on an

island called Ghato, from which we derive the modern term "ghetto." In the Moslem countries, the Jews lived as second-class citizens. In addition, the Jews underwent occasional mass slaughters. During the Crusades, as many Jews were killed in Europe as Moslems in the Holy Land. In World War II, Hitler killed over six million Jews in what is now known as the Holocaust.

To escape these difficulties, some Jews began returning to Palestine just before the turn of this century. By the end of WWII, Jews there declared themselves an independent nation, a nation of Jews. There was unfortunately a problem with this. The Arabs who lived in Palestine did not want to leave. They and their ancestors had dwelt in Palestine for centuries. Not only was this where their homes, their relatives, and their livelihoods were, this was also where generations of their ancestors were buried. Many Palestinian Arabs left, assuming that Israeli rule would be short-lived. Many stayed, only to endure their own second-class status in the new nation.

In a nutshell, that is the problem. How do two peoples, the Arabs and the Jews, live in a single land? Peace will only come when that question is answered to the satisfaction of all concerned.