

## The 18th Niwano Peace Prize Acceptance Address

Rev. Abuna Elias Chacour

Ladies and Gentlemen

Two thousand years ago, the Magi from the Far East came to Jerusalem looking for the King of Peace. When they found him in Bethlehem they were filled with joy.

Today, I am coming from the same Holy Land to the Far East, to Japan to meet with and learn from a different "king of peace" - the Niwano Peace Foundation. After reading the famous book "My Father, My Teacher" I can only pay tribute to the late Rev. Nikkyo Niwano for his courageous peace initiative. I come as a pilgrim full of awe and reverence for the Rev. Niwano, known throughout the world as a role model for religious leaders. So, I am both humbled and honored to receive this prestigious award from the Niwano Peace Foundation.

It is my conviction that God has not terminated the era of the prophets. Neither does he limit His prophets to the Holy Land and the Middle East. The light also shines in Japan, inviting all believers to join together to build a diverse, pluralistic society; a society united by mutual respect and by the belief: Do to others what you want others to do to you. I learnt this from my compatriot Jesus. The Buddhists teach "Do not hurt others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." In Judaism they say, "Do not do to your fellow human being what is hateful to you." And Islam says, "Not one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." I don't believe that Christians have a monopoly on the Holy Spirit and on God. Our Creator is not a "Christianized" God confined to specific denominations or nations.

I stand in your presence today with all the complexities of my social affiliations. I am proud to be a Palestinian. Although my nationality is Palestinian, I am also a citizen of the State of Israel. My mother tongue is Arabic, my faith is Christian. It is already far too complicated to be a Palestinian Christian. How much more complicated is it to be an Arab-Israeli? How can a person join together all these conflicting affiliations? Which has the priority? I wondered, until I realized that as a man, as a believer in God and as a brother to anyone else I am firstly a child of life more than any other affiliation. I believe I am created in the image of God, resembling the Creator Himself. Each baby born, each person is the most beautiful, the most valuable, and the most precious that was ever created.

When I remember the Israeli soldier who destroyed my father's home and my native village, when I look at the Israeli army who cleansed my homeland from my Palestinian people, whenever I consider the ugliness of the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories, I remind myself of this fact: that the soldier, the army and the Jewish people were also created babies in the image and the likeness of God.

I am reminded of the first two questions in the Bible that the Creator asked humanity. When mankind was hiding because he had done evil, the Creator asked him "Man, where are you?" After

the first murder was committed and the first murderer was left with his arrogance and false security, the Creator asked him the crucial question, "Where is your brother?"

I have often wanted to bombard the mighty, arrogant ones of this society with the questions "Man, where are you? Where is your brother?" I wanted to rage against the Nazis who killed my Jewish brothers and sisters in that horrific Holocaust; against the Turks who massacred over one and a half million Armenians; against those regimes who exterminated over three million Cambodians, and who purged their brothers and sisters from Rwanda and El Salvador. Do I need to mention the martyrs of Hiroshima or the many other holocausts of the last century? Often I wished I could invade the conscience of every Jew in Israel. "Man, why are you hiding? Where are you? Where is your brother the Palestinian? How can you manage to forget what your God has commanded you 'Do not kill!'"

I am grateful that the world has a foundation like the Niwano Peace Foundation to enhance religious pluralism. I believe that we people of faith are endowed with tremendous power to create or to destroy. Should we use our power to propagate sectarianism and religious exclusiveness? Should we use religion as an excuse to divide and destroy, expel and exterminate? No! Twenty-first century humanity is seriously threatened by sectarianism and religious exclusivity. Instead, I call on all religions, on all men and women of faith to co-operate in order to avert such calamity and such disaster. We are called to reshape our human society and endow it with hope. We are invited to promote and protect life on our small planet by protecting the rights of the minorities. We endanger all human beings, as well as our life on this planet unless we join hands together and accept the otherness of the other. Accepting the otherness of the other challenges and enriches us and deepens the meaning of our private faith.

There was a time when I was made a refugee, a deportee, a second-class citizen and marginalized human being. I was made to feel like the Jew of the Jews, the victim of the previous victim. Despite this or perhaps because of it, I determined to recreate my social environment so that every person is firstly considered to be a child of life rather than a child of this religion or that nation. That is why I opened Mar Elias College to students from all faiths, all nations and all political persuasions. The seedbed for this educational facility was planted in 1982 when we built a high school for 80 students and four teachers. Today approximately 4,000 students and teachers study and work on campus at Mar Elias Educational Institutions.

Peacemaking is not the sole responsibility of politicians, ministers and prime ministers who are often content just to sign a peace treaty. Cultivating peace is a matter of planting the roots of peace, which are justice and integrity, in the hearts of the young generation. Justice and integrity, wholeness and perfection, security and safety, —isn't that the real meaning of Salaam in Arabic, Shlomo in Aramaic, and Shalom in Hebrew. It is a totally different concept to 'Pax Romana,' which is mostly quietness in public places and submission of the powerless to the domination of the powerful. The peace of the slave and the lord is no real peace. I understand that peace is the quality of the heart expressed in daily living. It is a generous welcoming of the otherness of the other. Thank goodness we are not copies of one another! It is only when we are different that we can compliment each other. It is only when we are different that we can form an orchestra of tolerance, respect, and acceptance. I want to remind everyone on this planet that mankind doesn't live by bread alone. We do not only live from the understanding of our religious principles. We do not need theocratic regimes to govern us, but we do need theocentric principles to govern us. We need to daily implement these principles, living out these principles with each another. We need to be able to answer the Creator "Yes, Lord, I am my brother's custodian."

At Mar Elias College we still believe and are determined to strengthen our faith by living together with sincere, mutual respect. We share our despair and hope, our sadness and joy with Jews, Muslims, Christians, and others. I regret that we do not have the contribution of a Buddhist presence in the School. I have learned a lot from the strong concept of love and charity in Buddhism. The late Rev Nikkyo Niwano enjoyed the highest respect because of his open-minded Buddhist concepts of humanity. He was able to promote real co-operation by establishing the World Conference on Religion and Peace. May his memory be eternal and his example followed.

The challenge I face concerns the physical presence and survival of Christians in the land of Christ. Christians are an increasingly diminishing community in the Holy Land, choosing to immigrate rather than endure a dispiriting and depressing lifestyle. Can you imagine Japan devoid of Buddhists? It is also inconceivable that the Holy Land should be emptied of Christians. Christianity is not a western product. The flame that ignited in the small country of Palestine/Israel now radiates around the world. There is no risk that the churches or shrines will ever disappear from the Holy Land, but surely Christians are more important in the eyes of God, history, and decent humanity than all the stones and antiquities. That is why I call all peoples of faith to join together in a concerted effort to safeguard the small minority of Christians that are still living in the Holy Land. I expect men and women of faith to follow in their Creator's footsteps. God sees the evil, is affected by the suffering of His children, and extends a liberating arm to free them from oppression. People of faith do not have the option of apathy and inertia, observing the evil that overwhelms their brothers and sisters. Peace and justice don't need contemplation. They need you and me united together in our pluralism, to get up, go ahead, and work. We need to get our hands dirty in order to pursue justice and integrity, and to build peace and security for everyone who was born in the image of the Creator.

The Niwano Peace Prize that I am so honored to accept is destined to provide the cornerstone for a unique university in the Holy Land. This Christian-Arab-Israeli University will host all religions from all nations in order to create a centre of hope in the Holy Land - Palestine - Israel: the crossroads for many civilizations and the cradle of the three monotheistic religions. From Galilee came the one the world calls the "Prince of Peace." He is my compatriot and my champion. From Galilee we want to fuel the torch of light, of hope, of religious pluralism, and of unity with diversity.

We need more than a cornerstone to build a university. The Niwano Peace Foundation has contributed the first stone. Now I am calling other organizations from all over the world to match this generosity and to lay a white stone in this University of Peace in Galilee.

In our global village, in this era of mass media and the Internet, Tokyo is no longer far away from Galilee. What happens in Tokyo affects us in Galilee and vice versa. An earthquake in India shakes us in our being. A collapsed bridge in Portugal breaks our heart. Floods in Africa or starvation in Palestine open our purse. Massacres in Bosnia, genocide in Rwanda, and a holocaust in Cambodia traumatize human beings all over the world. Tragedy triggers sympathy and solidarity so that in rescuing the victims old enemies become friends. Greece was motivated to help Turkey, and Pakistan hurried to assist India in their recent earthquake disasters. Who in the world did not cry scandal when the Israeli soldiers killed Mohammad Al-Durra, the young Palestinian child hiding in his father's arms? Aren't we developing a human story of solidarity? Aren't we using technology to

reinforce our human solidarity and draw every nation and religion closer to each other? We need to learn the importance of taming each other and together taming life on this planet.

Working together, ladies and gentlemen, working together with our differences, forming unity rather than conformity, makes us stronger than any storm.