

# A BETTER FUTURE FOR ISRAELIS & PALESTINIANS: AFFIRMING THE SACREDNESS OF ALL HUMAN LIFE

## Speaker Biographies

### **Rabbi Sharon Brous**

Rabbi Sharon Brous is a leading voice in reanimating religious life in America, working to develop a spiritual roadmap for a soulful, justice-driven, multi-faith ethos in Los Angeles and around the country. Brous is the senior and founding rabbi of [IKAR](#), a Jewish community that launched in 2004 to reinvigorate Jewish practice and inspire people of faith to reclaim a moral and prophetic voice. IKAR quickly became one of the most influential Jewish congregations in the country, and is credited with sparking a rethinking of religious life in a time of unprecedented disaffection and declining affiliation.

Brous's 2016 [TED talk](#), "Reclaiming Religion," has been viewed by more than 1.4 million people and translated into 23 languages. In 2013, she [blessed President Obama and Vice President Biden](#) at the Inaugural National Prayer Service, and returned in 2021 to [bless President Biden and Vice President Harris](#), and then to lead the [White House Passover Seder](#) that spring. She spoke at the [Women's March in Washington, DC](#) in 2017 and at the opening of the [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#) the following year. Brous was named #1 on the [Newsweek/The Daily Beast](#) list of the most influential Rabbis in America, and has been recognized by [The Forward](#) and the [Jerusalem Post](#) as one of the fifty most influential Jews. She was featured on the cover of [TIME magazine](#) in 2018 based on Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms.

Brous is in the inaugural cohort of [Auburn Seminary's](#) Senior Fellows program, which unites top faith leaders working on the frontlines for justice. She also sits on the faculty of the [Shalom Hartman Institute-North America](#) and [REBOOT](#), and serves on the International Council of the [New Israel Fund](#) and the national steering committee for the [Poor People's Campaign](#). She is a graduate of Columbia University, was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary, and lives in Los Angeles with her husband and three children.

### **Mohamed Lazzouni, Ph.D.**

Dr. Mohamed Lazzouni is an Imam at the Islamic Center of Boston in Wayland, MA. Dr. Lazzouni is a former Director of Interfaith Relations at the Islamic Association of Colin County, TX, and served as the chairperson of the advisory board at the center for the study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations at Merrimack College. He also served as a Director at the Interreligious Center on Public Life, a joint venture of Hebrew College and Andover Newton Theological School, and as a board member on the National Conference of Christians and Jews (now the National Conference for Community and Justice). As an interfaith leader, he speaks frequently in houses of worship, interfaith gatherings and on many campuses in the United States and Europe.

Dr. Lazzouni was trained in Classical Islam in Traditional Schools in North Africa, and he was affiliated with the Oxford Center of Islamic Studies at its founding stage. The focus of his

training was on Islamic Jurisprudence, Islamic Philosophy, and the History of Spiritual Islam. Dr. Lazzouni has helped shape the discourse on Islam in the West over the last 20 years in intellectual and spiritual milieus in New England. Dr. Lazzouni holds a PH.D. in Physics from Oxford University, a Masters in Physics from London University, and various other degrees and certificates from Harvard, Case Western, Duke and Rice.

### **Rabbi Michael Rothbaum**

Rabbi Rothbaum is the Rabbi of Congregation Beth Elohim. He is a graduate of the Academy of Jewish Religion in New York (AJR-NY) where he received his Rabbinic S'mikhah (ordination) in 2006. Following completion of religious school and confirmation class, Rabbi Rothbaum felt compelled to get involved in social justice causes. As Rabbi Rothbaum looks back, it was the Jewish imperative of *r'difat tzedek* – the pursuit of justice – that solidified his love of Judaism and his passion to become a rabbi. Rabbi Rothbaum was the Campus Rabbi at Hillels of Westchester (NY), during which he served as sole rabbinic figure for students at Sarah Lawrence College and Purchase College. He has served as Director of Congregational Learning at Kehillat Lev Shalem – the Woodstock, NY Jewish Congregation and Rabbi Rothbaum was the rabbi at the Philipstown Reform Synagogue in Cold Spring, NY.

Before leaving the west coast to lead Congregation Beth Elohim, Rabbi Rothbaum was Co-Chair of the Bay Area Regional Council of Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice, as well as Rabbi-Educator at Beth Chaim Congregation in Danville, CA. Rabbi Rothbaum has spoken and taught widely, addressing groups as varied as Moishe House, Jewish Community Relations Council, and Nuns on the Bus. He has appeared in front of audiences at the US Senate and House of Representatives, Oakland City Council, and the New York State Democratic Party. In 2012 he joined a rabbinic delegation to Ghana, sponsored by American Jewish World Service. He is devoted to creating and nurturing vibrant learning communities, and sharing his love of Torah and commitment to justice in formal and informal settings. His writing has been included in the Forward, Tikkun, the Huffington Post, and the anthology, "Peace, Justice, and Jews: Reclaiming Our Tradition" (2007). Rabbi Rothbaum is a passionate advocate for the idea that every moment is an opportunity to make a Jewish choice. Rabbi Rothbaum is a member of the advisory committee of Boston-based JALSA (Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action).

### **Mehlaqa Samdani**

Samdani is a graduate of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. She is the founder and director of [Critical Connections](#), a non-profit organization in western Massachusetts that educates the larger public on issues related to American-Muslims and other targeted communities. Samdani is a peacebuilding associate with the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding. She worked as an adjunct fellow with the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). She also worked as research analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York (2004-2006). Samdani's writings have been published in the Huffington Post, the New York Times, Foreign Policy (AfPak Channel), Christian Science Monitor, Daily Times (Pakistan), and she has been invited as a guest on NPR, KCBS and news channels in Pakistan.

### **Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon**

Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon is the executive director of Churches for Middle East Peace and an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). Cannon formerly served as the senior director of Advocacy and Outreach for World Vision U.S. on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, as a consultant to the Middle East for child advocacy issues for Compassion International in Jerusalem, as the executive pastor of Hillside Covenant Church located in Walnut Creek, California, and as director of development and transformation for extension ministries at Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois. Cannon holds an MDiv from North Park Theological Seminary, an MBA from North Park University's School of Business and Nonprofit Management, and an MA in bioethics from Trinity International University. She received her first doctorate in American History with a minor in Middle Eastern studies at the University of California, Davis, focusing on the history of the American Protestant church in Israel and Palestine, and her second doctorate in Ministry in Spiritual Formation from Northern Theological Seminary. She is the author of several books including the award-winning *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World*, her recent *Beyond Hashtag Activism*, and editor of *A Land Full of God: Christian Perspectives on the Holy Land*. Her work has been highlighted in The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, Chicago Tribune, Christianity Today, Leadership Magazine, The Christian Post, Jerusalem Post, EU Parliament Magazine, Huffington Post, and other international media outlets.

### **Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway**

Prof. Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway is a member of the Hashemite Fund for the Restoration of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, and the Islamic Waqf Council in Jerusalem. He is featured on the Muslim 500 list of the world's most influential Muslims. He was appointed as the first holder of the Integral Chair for the Study of Imam Al-Ghazali's Work at the Holy Al-Aqsa Mosque and at Al-Quds University in 2012 (HM King Abdullah II Endowment). He teaches Imam Al-Ghazali's magnum opus on Islamic spirituality, *The Revival of Islamic Sciences* (Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din) six days a week at Al-Aqsa Mosque.

He was Dean, College of Islamic Theology (Da`wah and Usul Al-Din), and College of the Qur'an and Islamic Studies, Al-Quds University (2014-2020). He has been a Professor of Philosophy and Islamic Studies at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, Palestine, since 1996. He was a visiting Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at the Wilkes Honors College at Florida Atlantic University (2003-4), as well as a visiting professor at Bard College, New York (2008-2010). In addition, Prof. Abu Sway lectured at many universities around the world, including Oxford, Harvard, Yale and Berkeley.

Prof. Abu Sway is amongst the pioneers in writing about Islam and the environment. His paper "Toward an Islamic Jurisprudence of the Environment" was published in Arabic and English. He contributed to the "Global Chorus: 365 Voices on the Future of the Planet". He contributed to the exhibition on "*Jerusalem 1000-1400 Every People Under Heaven*" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The MET Museum) in New York, NY. Prof. Abu Sway earned his Ph.D. from Boston College (1993), dissertation title: "The Development of Al-Ghazzaliyy's Genetic Epistemology". He is author of three books on Imam Al-Ghazali: "*Islamic Epistemology: The Case of Al-Ghazali*", Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1995 (translated into Malay); "*Fatawa Al-Ghazali*" (ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, 1996); and "*A Treasury of Al-Ghazali*" (Kube,

London, 2017) (translated into Bangla and Albanian). He was editor of “*Islamic Culture*” and contributed to several publications on prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Ishmael and Isaac published by PASSIA, Jerusalem, where he headed the Religious Studies Unit. Most of these publications on the prophets had three authors: Jewish, Christian and Muslim. He serves on PASSIA’s board of trustees.

### **Rabbi Barbara Penzner**

Rabbi Barbara Penzner has served Temple Hillel B'nai Torah in West Roxbury, MA since 1995. She received the degree of rabbi and a Master of Hebrew Letters from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia and a Master’s Degree in Religion at Temple University. She has served as President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and as President of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis.

Rabbi Penzner lived in Israel for a year while studying to be a rabbi and spent the years 1993-1995 in Jerusalem with her family while in the Jerusalem Fellows program. She served as co-chair of the Israel Task Force of Reconstructing Judaism (2001 – 2004). Rabbi Penzner has led congregational tours to Israel, most recently, with MEJDI Tours, bringing congregants to meet peacemakers and builders of civil society in Israel and Palestine.

Among many aspects of her community social justice work, Rabbi Penzner has been co-chair of the Jewish Labor Committee New England and has led the annual Labor Seder for over a decade. In 2011, Rabbis for Human Rights (now T’ruah, the Rabbinic Voice for Human Rights) named her a Rabbinic Human Rights Hero for her work with the Hyatt hotel workers and continues to advocate for farm workers through the Fair Food Program. In 2012, Mayor Menino invited her to give the invocation at one of his last State of the City addresses. In 2015, she gave the invocation at the opening of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the Senate. She was selected by American Jewish World Service to be a Rabbinic Global Justice Fellow and traveled with AJWS to Guatemala in 2019 to meet human rights defenders there.

### **Joseph T. Kelley, Ph.D., D.Min.**

Joseph Kelley is Professor of Religious and Theological Studies at Merrimack College where he also directed the Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations. He has served Merrimack for over 40 years in various administrative and teaching roles, including as provost and dean. He earned a B.A. in philosophy and languages at Villanova University, an S.T.B. and M.A. at The Catholic University of America, and a Ph.D. in the Psychology of Religion at Boston University. He is a psychologist licensed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and has authored many articles and six books, including two introductory texts to the thought of Saint Augustine of Hippo. In his teaching and writing, Professor Kelley emphasizes the importance of presenting religion and theology in ways accessible to people from many different religious and cultural backgrounds. He has lectured and taught around the United States, Europe, Australia and North Africa.

## **Aziza Hasan**

Aziza Hasan, named an influencer by the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, is the executive director of [NewGround: A Muslim Jewish Partnership For Change](#). She has extensive experience in program management and coalition building. An experienced mediator and conflict transformation practitioner, she has co-facilitated with multiple groups. Aziza's work has been featured on Ozy, Yahoo News, MSN, Public Radio's "Speaking of Faith" with Krista Tippett, the United States Institute for Peace, Arabic Radio and Television, and the LA Times.

She earned the "President's Volunteer Service Award" in 2006 under President George W. Bush. Aziza served on President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships from 2015 to 2016, and the Executive Service Corps recognized her with the "Megan G. Cooper Leadership Award" in 2017. Aziza currently serves on Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti's Interfaith Advisory Council and is a volunteer mediator with the Los Angeles City Attorney's office.

## **Rabbi Aryeh Cohen, PhD**

Rabbi Aryeh Cohen, PhD is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and a former chair of the Rabbinics Department in the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. His latest book, *Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism*, emerges from and articulates the same concerns. Dr. Cohen is also the Rabbi in Residence at Bend the Arc: Jewish Action, a national social justice organization. In this role, he organizes the Jewish community around issues of immigration justice and restorative justice and mobilizes a multifaith community of clergy and laypeople to nonviolent direct action. Dr. Cohen is a co-convenor of the Black Jewish Justice Alliance (BJJA) and a member of Clergy for Black Lives. With Clergy for Black Lives, he co-organized one of the largest memorial demonstrations in Downtown Los Angeles after the murder of George Floyd.

## **Nizar Farsakh**

Middle East Expert, Farsakh Training & Consulting, LLC

Nizar Farsakh is a trainer, private consultant, and public speaker who focuses his work around leadership, negotiation and advocacy, and is a Board Member of [Combatants for Peace](#). He has served as an adviser to senior Palestinian leaders: President Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and various ministries. He is currently involved in several non-violence initiatives in Palestine and the U.S. Farsakh used to work at the Project On Middle East Democracy in Washington D.C. where he focused on building the advocacy capacity of Arab civil society. Before that he served as the General Director of the PLO Delegation in Washington DC for two years. Nizar holds a Masters in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School, a Masters in International Boundary Studies from King's College London and BA in Political Studies from the American University of Beirut.

## **Gili Getz**

Gili Getz is an Israeli-American artist, photojournalist, actor, and activist. He served as a military photographer for the Israeli army and as a news editor for Ynet. His work in recent years has been focusing on American Jewish political activism.

Gili is published regularly in Jewish and Israeli press, and by Princeton University in the book "Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel" by Professor Dov Waxman. Gili has performed across the country in numerous theatrical productions. His latest one-man play "The Forbidden Conversation" explores the challenges of having a conversation about Israel-Palestine in the American Jewish community. The play premiered at the Center For Jewish History in the spring of 2016 and has been touring the country since. Gili has been working for peace and against the occupation for many years and is honored to serve on the board of [Combatants for Peace](#), supporting joint resistance and the struggle for freedom and dignity for both Israelis and Palestinians.

## **Ayman Nijim**

Ayman is a Ph.D. candidate in Liberation Psychology & Transformative Social Change. He is originally from Gaza, where he has worked at various international and community-based organizations with children who have experienced war and trauma. Ayman holds a Master's in Intercultural Service, Leadership and Management from the School of International Training in Vermont. He has also received diplomas from the Dispute Resolution Center, the Conflict Center, and the International Trauma Healing Program, all in Olympia, Washington. Recently, Ayman was program director at Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services and executive director of Common Ground, and he currently serves on the Advisory Board of the Gaza Community Mental Health Foundation.

## **Rabbi Tiferet Berenbaum**

Rabbi Tiferet Berenbaum is the Rabbi of Congregational Learning and Programming at Temple Beth Zion in Brookline, MA. She received ordination from Hebrew College in Newton, MA as well as a Master's of Jewish Education. Rabbi Tiferet served as senior rabbi in Milwaukee, WI, at Congregation Shir Hadash and as Rabbi and education director at Temple Har Zion in Mt. Holly, NJ. She has had a front seat at the intersection of race, racism and religion, giving her valuable insights into how different groups of people view the world and their role in it. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in Educational Leadership at Lesley University where she plans to investigate the significance of race to Jews in America.

## **Mitchell Silver**

Mitchell Silver is Senior Lecturer Emeritus in Philosophy of the University of Massachusetts/Boston. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut in 1980 and is the author of *Rationalist Pragmatism* (2020), *The Veterans of History: A Young Person's History of the Jews* (2014), *A Plausible God* (2006), and *Respecting the Wicked Child: A Philosophy of Secular Jewish Identity and Education* (1998). He was the Educational Director of the I.L. Peretz School of the Brookline Workmen's Circle from 1992-2009 and was the Cultural Director of Camp

Kinderland from 1989-2006. Silver writes and speaks frequently on health care ethics, Jewish secularism, and Middle East politics.

### **Nidal Al-Azraq**

Nidal Al-Azraq is a Palestinian refugee who was born and raised in Aida Refugee Camp in Bethlehem, the West Bank, Palestine. He earned his Bachelor's Degree with Honors from Harvard Extension School, Dean's List Academic Achievement Award, and Derek Bok Public Service Prize. He is currently working as the executive director of [1for3.org](http://1for3.org), a US based organization that focuses on water, food, health, environmental work, and education in Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank. He has been involved for over 15 years in working with young Palestinian refugees in refugee camps in the West Bank through human rights, empowerment, and political education projects.

Nidal volunteered at Lajee Center, a youth organization in Aida camp, from 2001-2003. He went on to be the administrative director of Lajee Center, from 2003-2006. He also worked on a documentary, *Degrees of Incarceration*, and published "A Refugee's Childhood in the West Bank," co-authored with Amahl Bishara, in *The Child: An Encyclopedic Companion* (University of Chicago Press 2009). He also co-wrote with Bishara *The Boy and the Wall* (2005), a bilingual children's book produced with Lajee Center, published in the West Bank. This book received the Psychologists for Social Responsibility's 2008 Josephine "Scout" Wollman Fuller Award for the promotion of peace and social justice in the Middle East.

For the past 8 years, Nidal has been organizing and leading medical missions from the US to Palestine to help improve the medical system and treatment, especially in refugee camps. He has been organizing and leading water testing delegations for the past 8 years in partnership with the WSSS program at Tufts University which establishes small labs and water testing and treatment programs run by local teams.

### **Rabbi Jill Jacobs**

Rabbi Jill Jacobs (she/her) is the CEO of [T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights](http://T'ruah.org), an organization that trains and mobilizes more than 2,000 rabbis and cantors and their communities to bring a moral voice to protecting and advancing human rights in North America, Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territories. She is the author of *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community* and *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition*, both published by Jewish Lights.

Rabbi Jacobs has been named three times to the Forward's list of 50 influential American Jews, to Newsweek's list of the 50 Most Influential Rabbis in America, and to the Jerusalem Post's 2013 list of "Women to Watch." She holds rabbinic ordination and an MA in Talmud from the Jewish Theological Seminary, where she was a Wexner Fellow; an MS in Urban Affairs from Hunter College, and a BA from Columbia University. She is also a graduate of the Mandel Institute Jerusalem Fellows Program. She lives in New York with her husband, Rabbi Guy Austrian, and their two daughters.