

Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, HarperCollins, 2006, \$26, 352 pages

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT'S book *The Mighty and the Almighty* is path-breaking; for the first time, one of the major political actors on the world stage and in American foreign policy is seriously engaging and interweaving the issues of religion, politics, diplomacy, war, and peace. The book is not without its flaws, but it is comprehensive and eloquent on a number of fronts. Albright addresses a range of issues rooted in America's foundation of religious freedom and separation of religion and state. She passionately defends that separation and yet offers a critique of governments and Western institutions that fail to respect and take into account religious sensibilities and opportunities for cooperation with religious people. The book also explores the rise of the radical religious right and its effect on American politics; the rise of extremist forms of Islam; the question of what is moderate Islam; the interpenetration of religion with failed Israeli/Arab peace accords in which she was involved; creative alternatives on the Arab/Israeli scene in terms of interreligious cooperation for peace; disastrous problems with the war on terror and its impact on American influence in the world; and the failed policies that led to the Iraq debacle.

In every instance Albright shares her intelligent and thoughtful views on how religion fits into these topics. Most important for an American audience, she charts a new course, similar to that of Barak Obama, which is an essential corrective to Democratic Party mistakes and the tragic takeover of the Republican Party by religious extremism. It is, put simply, the classic reassertion of American democratic foundational principles and thinking: Religion, though a vital part of people's lives and a consideration in understanding complex social problems, should not be embraced by the state. Nothing proves that more definitively than the disastrous role of manipulative religious political parties in the Middle East — the single greatest enemy, besides the corrupt few, of the emergence of truly liberal democracies in the Arab world.

Let's get into the details. Albright bends over backward to present to the American audience the moderate voice of Islam, and to

explain in easily understandable terms the rudimentary elements of the religion for a largely ignorant American public. She also deals extensively, though, with Al Qaeda and the complexity of Saudi society, and thus does not ignore trends in Islamic extremism. Aware of what has already been written on Islamic extremism — the radical right's deluge of what there is to fear — she points out potential allies of religious tolerance, of democracy both in the West and the Middle East, and of peaceful settlements in the Middle East. This — in such a complex world of both danger and opportunity — is an essential balancing act to maintain, and one that is informed by her conversations with world leaders.

In some key places, she misses a necessary critique of peace processes. Her training, which she acknowledges, has been focused on major state actors and not on the complicated ebb and flow of public opinion, cultural and religious leadership, and how and why leaders are free or not free to make fateful and necessary choices for peace. My primary critique, in fact, is that Albright cannot help but be overfocused on her bailiwick — her intimate connections and relationships with global leaders. While this world is important for readers to know, such a global, leader-oriented focus can also preclude a vision of the larger picture, both in terms of today's dangers and possibilities. For example, it is difficult to fully comprehend how "up for grabs" religion really is, how many hundreds of millions of people, both men and women, are on the move in terms of their theologies and passions. Some are embracing passionately feminism, religious liberty, classic Enlightenment constructs, whereas millions of others are following blindly whatever preachers and clerics come their way, either physically or virtually. This latter path is very risky because religious passion is such a dangerous, all-encompassing human experience.

Let me take an example from Albright's description of the heated final hours of the failed Camp David process in 2000. In the end, much depended on persuading Arafat that the Old City and the Temple Mount, what to Muslims is the Haram al-Sherif, actually have

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Jewish roots. He horrified the negotiators by denying any roots of the First and Second Temples. Why the horror? Why was everyone so shocked? Was Arafat's use of this lie any different from the anti-Israel propaganda spouted over decades and decades? But his denial of this shared legacy highlighted the utter failure of the Oslo peace process to shift public opinion — to make coexistence possible, especially on the cultural and religious levels, the most ignored aspects of Oslo's secular, liberal push. Religious people had been excluded from peace processes on both sides, from negotiations, from all the many efforts at cultural rapprochement. Is it any surprise, then, that Arafat could blow up Camp David by the misuse of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount?

Is it any surprise that today the most authentic voice to be raised by the Palestinian population is that of Hamas? Not really, because political leaderships on all sides and the intellectual leadership of the Oslo years held religious people in such disdain that they threw them into the arms of anti-pragmatic suicidal radicalism. Albright and others need to understand that today there is no point in trying to negotiate new realities in the Middle East, in Israel, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Iraq, in Iran, without a broad and deep appeal to cultural and religious paradigm shifts. It is not enough to sit with leaders at Camp David anymore and iron out everything for the rest of us. Albright does duly acknowledge the role

of Rabbi Melchior and others as religious peacemakers, but it is not enough.

Political leaders must recognize the awesome, frightening will of the people. Education and massive investments in intercultural efforts to foster dialogue, tolerance, and cooperation on vital issues like health, poverty, and security are an essential part of the future of effective global politics. Although religion has enormous potential to bring people together, we are so traumatized by hatred and violence that we underestimate how shared religious values and commitments have served, historically, as powerful bridges of cooperation.

Extremists and power-hungry state actors have poured billions of dollars over many decades into manipulating religion for their own goals. What might happen if just a small portion of such resources were used, instead, to support health, social reform, and education for cross-cultural relations and tolerant understandings of the world's religions, especially Islam? We cannot condemn religion until the warped investment in extremism is counterbalanced by a persistent and massive investment in tolerant religious expressions and outlets. This will take a level of rational, bipartisan thinking in the United States that is not yet on the horizon. But it may soon evolve if leaders like Albright become more enlightened and balanced about religion, and humbly acknowledge that they need hundreds of millions of partners to restore or shift religion back to tolerant political expression. 

## Discussion Guide

*Bringing together myriad voices and experiences in a sacred conversation provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. In such a globalized world, how do we define peoplehood today?
2. Are there core values that underly the notion of peoplehood, and what are those values?
3. What makes Jews in Israel, Europe, Africa, America, and other places part of the same people — religion, ethnic traditions, culture, a sense of nationalism?
4. What are the responsibilities of belonging to the Jewish people? What are the mitzvot of peoplehood?