

ואם לא עכשיו אימתי

If Not Now, When?

**A month of reflection on the persecution of
Christians in the Middle East.**

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The Council of Christians and Jews' *If Not Now When* initiative is a month of reflection on the persecution of Christians in the Middle East. Throughout August specifically but also beyond, we are encouraging Jewish communities to engage in prayer, reflection and discussion about this serious issue.

The Christian communities of the Middle East are under threat of violence and death from extremist groups. After the suffering and persecution that the Jews have endured throughout history, we feel a responsibility to speak out when massacres and genocide take place elsewhere, in our time.

Presently, Christians in the Middle East face imminent danger at the hands of extremist groups such as ISIS (also known as The Islamic State and ISIL). Many thousands of Christians have been killed, hundreds of thousands more have been forced to flee their homes, and an estimated 100 million in total are at risk in the region.

The Initiative

We have chosen to draw inspiration from the Tanaic sage Hillel, who famously taught in Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers: ***“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”***. Jews should strive to be more than ‘only for themselves,’ reaching into the wider community to empathise with those who are downtrodden. And, as many Christian communities in the Middle East seem to be disappearing altogether, the time we have to act is limited. If not now, when?

The aim of our initiative is twofold:

1. Information

We wish to provide an educational resource so that people in the Jewish community are able to easily access information about the plight of Christians in the Middle East, raising awareness of this issue.

2. Spiritual Engagement

We hope that communities will take time to reflect on this modern-day tragedy and pray that peace can be restored to the region. This resource will provide both information and suggestions for how communities might reflect on the issue.

This resource has been designed particularly for use by Jewish communities and individuals but we would encourage anyone engaging to reach out to their local Christian community, to offer support and demonstrate a commitment to tackling these issues.

For further support or assistance please be in touch at cjrelations@ccj.org.uk.

Christians in the Middle East

Christianity finds its foundations in the Middle East around the 1st Century CE, spread through trade routes from Israel outwards, until it was made the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century CE.

Christianity continued to be the predominant religion of the region until the 7th Century CE with the expansion of the Islamic Empire. Conflict between different religious groups in the region has eroded the Christian presence, however a sharp rise of Christian persecution has been noted in modern times. On two separate occasions during the rule of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, massacres of Assyrian, Greek and Armenian Christians occurred.

At the start of the 20th century, roughly 20% of the Middle Eastern population were Christians; today it is around 5%.

In the latter 20th and early 21st centuries, Middle Eastern Christians were often protected by the dictatorships in charge of the region in spite of the brutality of many of these regimes. However, with the toppling of these rulers, Christians have once again become caught in conflict,

Groups such as ISIS seek to recreate an even more brutal, Islamist regime across the Middle East, based on a narrow and violent interpretation of Islam. Under ISIS, Christians are forced either to convert, pay a heavy tax called the jizya, flee – or, as is becoming increasingly commonplace, face the physical threats of violence and murder.

With brutal attacks constantly being reported in the news, it is becoming impossible to ignore the plight of those who have been subject to violence at the hands of extremists.

Fact File: Iraq and Syria

The Islamist group now calling themselves the Islamic State first appeared in Iraq following the 2003 invasion of the country. The group was at this point called 'the Party of Monotheism and Jihad'. Unlike Al-Qaeda, the early Islamic State targeted its aggression towards Shi'i Muslims, instead of towards the United States.

When civil war broke out in Syria, ISIS seized the opportunity to fight against Bashar al-Assad and conquer land in Syria. In June 2014, ISIS captured the town of Mosul – the second largest in Iraq. A new 'caliphate' was claimed, and from this point on the group turned its attention towards members of any faith groups who did not conform to their ideology, including both Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, Kurds, Yezidis, Alawites, and Christians. Punishments for non-conformity can be particularly violent and include the chopping off of hands and public executions.

1.4 million Christians lived in Iraq in 1987. Around 300,000 are estimated to remain.

Christians now make up less than 5% of the Iraqi population, but they form around 40% of the refugees in surrounding territories. In Syria, roughly 700,000 Christian refugees have fled from ISIS since the beginning of the civil war. Christians face being kidnapped and robbed, and some militants have been encouraged to rape Christian and Alawite women.

Almost no Christians remain in the segments of Iraq and Syria controlled by ISIS: Christian gatherings are forbidden and churches have been turned into jails, stables and Islamic centres. Many Christians have fled to the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, living as refugees from ISIS.

Prayer And Reflection

The persecution of Christians in the Middle East is a humanitarian crisis. Throughout history, Jewish communities have responded to crises such as these with prayer, reflection and learning.

Within the Jewish tradition, the recital of *Tehillim*, Psalms, has been used as the vehicle to engender reflection. Different psalms evoke different emotions through their language and imagery, and often Psalms are recited for reasons such as healing the sick, responding to natural disasters or bringing peace.

Although on these pages we have given some ideas that may act as springboards for personal reflection these are not intended to be prescriptive.

**He (God) puts a stop to wars until the end of the earth.
[Psalm 46]**

**Be good, O Lord, to the good and to the upright in their hearts.
[Psalm 125]**

**How good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together!
[Psalm 133]**

In modern times, some communities have chosen to take moments of reflection through silent prayer, or communal reflection through discussion. We are encouraging communities to respond to the persecution of Christians and other communities in the Middle East through the practices most appropriate and comfortable for them, at some point during or after the prayer service.

In conjunction with this resource we have collected sources for prayer and reflection from the main Synagogue movements in the UK. Any of these can be used in conjunction to this booklet by individuals and synagogues.

On three things the world stands: on the Torah, on Divine worship and on acts of lovingkindness.

[Mishnah Avot 1:2]

What is hateful to you do not do unto your neighbour. That is the whole of Torah and the rest is commentary thereof; Go and learn it.

[Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a]

Peace is great, for the entire Torah was given to bring about peace in the world, as it is stated *her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace*

[Mishneh Torah, Megillah & Chanukah, 4:14]

Considering the Issue

The themes of hope and peace apply universally in Jewish thought, and at times where there is conflict in the world it is important that we take time to reflect on the suffering of others and pray that there should be peace.

Peace, peace, to the distant and the close
[Isaiah 57:19]

Additionally, there is an imperative for Jews to “be a light unto the nations”. CCJ’s ‘Still An Issue’ campaign against antisemitism in the United Kingdom has drawn a wide and enthusiastic response from Christians across the country who have signed onto our initiative to support the Jewish community in a time where antisemitism is rising. In a similar vein, the Jewish community is looking for a way to extend its support to Christians, who share a faith with those being oppressed and persecuted in the Middle East.

Many verses in Tanakh discuss the peaceful era the prophets of Israel taught would one day arrive. The Jewish ideal of a peaceful world does not just concern those in our immediate neighbourhood or community, but is universal, and we are taught to pray for peace for those who are close to us as well as those who are not.

***Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore***
[Isaiah 2:4]

Whilst Shabbat is traditionally not a time in which petitionary requests are made during the prayer service, there are many prayers that are said which discuss peace and our hopes for the ultimate peace to soon arrive. In this vein, we can use these prayers to reflect on worldwide conflicts and pray for peace to be made in our time.

I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

- Elie Wiesel

Commenting on the blessing for “shalom” at the conclusion of the Amidah, Emeritus Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks writes: “Shalom means more than the English word ‘peace:’ it also means completeness, perfection, harmonious interaction. The prophets of Israel were the first in history to conceive of peace as an ideal, most famously in the words of Isaiah: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” [Isaiah 2:4]. Peace is the ultimate hope of monotheism, with its belief that the world is the product of a single will, not the blind clash of conflicting enemies.”

Postscript: North Africa

In February 2015, the world was shocked by a video released by ISIS of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians being beheaded in Libya.

The Egyptians were migrant workers working in the city of Sirte, Libya, who were kidnapped in two separate attacks in the previous two months.

Around 10-20 million Coptic Christians live in Egypt, Libya and Sudan. Christians in Egypt have long suffered discrimination, but in 2013 became caught in the clash between the Egyptian military and Islamic extremists. Around 60 churches were looted, torched, robbed or attacked in what was described by one local scholar as the worst attack on Christians in the region since the 14th century.

Islamist extremist groups in the region still pose a threat to the Copts. In neighbouring Libya, the government has declared that all citizens are Sunni Muslims, and Christians including migrant workers face persecution. In July of last year, just as the Philippine's government was evacuating 13,000 migrant workers from Libya, a construction worker named Antonio Espares was kidnapped and executed by a band of men from Benghazi, with some reports suggesting he was also brutally tortured.

Additionally, a group affiliated with ISIS is in control of the city of Derna, and from there it is able to conduct attacks elsewhere in the country, including the Corinthia Hotel Attack earlier this year in which five Libyan men and five foreign men were killed.

Next Steps

Though this initiative is primarily centred around spiritual engagement with the issue of the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, there are plenty of ways that you can get involved beyond this. We've listed a few possibilities here to get you started, and please remember to let us know about anything you get involved in.

1. Reach Out

Offer a message of support to the local Christian community through initiatives such as:

- A reciprocal visit between the Church and the Synagogue
- A joint event in a local hall, perhaps with a speaker on this issue
- A letter from the community Rabbi to local clergy
- A cross-communal vigil for victims of persecution and discrimination

2. Learn More

Invite a speaker to talk to your community or contact organisations engaged in relief work in areas affected by conflict. We are able to provide some suggested speakers that may be particularly appropriate and can provide links to further sources.

For further information or other suggestions, please email cjrelations@ccj.org.uk and please see our website for links to additional information.

3. Get Involved

As the leading nationwide forum for Christian-Jewish engagement, CCJ is uniquely placed to foster meaningful bilateral relationships across communities. Our programmes range from social action initiatives to educational trips for Christian clergy to Yad Vashem, and though you don't need to be a member to join our programmes, membership is cheap and provides excellent benefits.

For more details see www.ccj.org.uk or email cjrelations@ccj.org.uk

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Registered Charity Number 238005