

The New York Times

The Opinion Pages

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

In a Polluted Stream, a Pathway to Peace

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Published: October 9, 2013

MORRO BAY, Calif. — PEACE talks are under way again in Jerusalem. If the past is any guide, the two sides are stymied over difficult issues like settlements and borders. The negotiators badly need a new approach, and one is right beneath their feet, in the Kidron Valley, the deep ravine that runs from the Old City through the West Bank toward the Dead Sea.



Ruth Gwily

As it snakes its way through the Judean wilderness, the Kidron comes to Mar Saba, a spectacular monastery slung upon a cliff. Orthodox Christian prayers have been chanted there every day for some 1,400 years. The monastery and its domes and chapels are protected on one side by stone walls and on the other by the deep gorge of the Kidron, or Wadi Nar, as the Arabs call it. If you descend the innumerable steps to the fast-flowing Kidron Stream, a vile smell rises to meet you. The flow is raw sewage from Jerusalem, coursing at a rate of 8 to 10 million gallons a day.

Jerusalem treats two-thirds of its wastewater at a plant in the western part of the city. The remainder, which emanates mainly from Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem but also from Jewish housing, has been held hostage to the political impasse since 1967. Underground and out of sight near the Old City, the sewage breaks into the open at the separation barrier, where the West Bank begins; picks up additional loads from Bethlehem and the impoverished town of Ubeidiya; passes beneath the monastery; and eventually, though some is diverted by settlers for irrigation, it reaches the Dead Sea.

In the malodorous water lies a political opportunity. The Kidron Valley traverses an area holy to three world religions. Cleaning up the basin ought to be a lead item in the current talks, a cause instead of a consequence of peace. After all, the pollution is owned by both sides and breaches any possible future boundary between them. Compared with issues like the Palestinians' right of return, the Jewish settlements and the final status of Jerusalem — not to mention the borders themselves — solving the Kidron's problem is straightforward.

More important, if the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government can work together on an uncontroversial civil project, one that improves the quality of life for all residents, they will start to develop a mutual trust.

Over the last six years, an Israeli lawyer named [Richard Laster](#) — a professor at Hebrew University — has laid the foundation for a solution. Heading a team of Israeli and Palestinian officials and academics, Mr. Laster produced the Kidron Master Plan. The group proposes diverting the wastewater from the valley and constructing a sewage treatment plant in Ubeidiya. The plant would be paid for largely by international development agencies but jointly owned and operated by Israelis and Palestinians. The managers would sell the treated wastewater for local agricultural use, and Ubeidiya would get a modern landfill for its trash. While the environment healed, a new park and tourist trail would link Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ubeidiya and the Mar Saba monastery. The Kidron would be, in Mr. Laster's words, "a platform for peace."

Water rights — and water quality — are crucial matters in this area of the world. If Palestinians and Israelis are going to live side by side, they will have to share the scarce rivers and aquifers that crisscross their national demarcations. Friends of the Earth Middle East, a transboundary environmental group, has promoted the importance of water-sharing. Representatives of the group are now on tour in the United States talking up "cross-border environmental peacemaking."

Secretary of State John Kerry, when coaxing the two sides back to the peace table in May, held out the prospect of a \$4 billion development package for the West Bank in the wake of an agreement. But that is putting the cart before the donkey, as it were. Foreign donors and investors ought to support infrastructure projects in the West Bank now, especially those involving Palestinian and Israeli stakeholders.

The place to start is the Kidron, a place of portentous crossing-over, a place that figures in the Judgment Day narratives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

However, it would be naïve to play down the present-day obstacles. Whenever they have been asked to approve a sewage treatment plant in the past, each side has held out for a site where it can exert full control. In addition, the Palestinian leaders in Ramallah are wary of any moves to “normalize” relations with Israel, demanding a whole loaf when half a loaf might do. It’s up to the United States and the international parties in the diplomatic process to push for an environmental resolution in the Kidron.

Of course, the negotiators have much more to discuss than sewage. But when you talk to Mr. Laster about the peace talks and the borders to be drawn, he soon becomes impatient. “Borders are irrelevant,” he says. “If the water table is polluted, it doesn’t matter where they draw the line. Even if there’s no agreement, you still have to fix it.”

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on October 10, 2013, on page A31 of the New York edition with the headline: In a Polluted Stream, A Pathway to Peace.