Rodef Shalom

Peace, Peace You Shall Pursue…

by

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We live in a world of turmoil – political, geopolitical, spiritual. Too often it seems that turmoil and strife are fundamental to our natures, but they are not. We want peace; we seek peace; we pray for peace – not because it is a hopeless dream, but because it is the gift God promises us.

Shalom. Peace.

We clamor for it. And yet, we don’t truly understand what it is that we clamor for! Because we experience so much turmoil in our lives, we too often think of peace as an *absence* of turmoil, an *absence* of war. But that is not at all what shalom means. Shalom is not an absence, it is fullness, completeness.

A superficial understanding of shalom, of peace, leads people to want to “smooth things over.” Just make everything “all right.” As a result, such false peace relies on sameness and uniformity. We suffer the illusion of peace when there is so-called calm, when our communities are defined by people who are just like us (for how can we have conflict and strife with those who are like us, who agree with us, who look like us?)

But, as Rav Kook notes, “People mistakenly believe that peace in the world means that everyone will share common viewpoints and think the same way. So when they see scholars disagreeing about an issue, this appears to be the exact opposite of peace.

“True peace, however, comes precisely through the proliferation of divergent views. When all of the various angles and sides of an issue are exposed, and we are able to clarify how each one has its place — that is true peace.”

True peace is a fullness, a completeness, a fulfilling of God’s promise. As such, it can only come about through genuine prayer and Torah scholarship. Rav Kook goes on to note, “When Torah scholars broaden knowledge and provide new insights, they contribute to the increase of peace. We need to recognize that ‘***all*** *of Your children are students of God.*’ All views, even those that seem contradictory, in fact help reveal knowledge and truth. For this reason, Rabbi Haninah emphasized that scholars are like builders. [*Berachot* 64a] A building is erected from all sides, using a variety of materials and skills.”

Building a building is not an easy task. When done correctly, it is a satisfying and meaningful task that results as a place of refuge, a home, an office.

Peace, contrary to the superficial, absence-of-strife understanding, is not an easy task either. But it is the most significant and meaningful thing we can engage in and strive for. It is not achievable but by understanding and embracing the beauty of diversity in God’s world.

As Malcolm Gladwell notes, “What we call tolerance in this country, and pat ourselves on the back for, is the lamest kind of tolerance. What we call tolerance in this country is when people who are unlike us want to be like us, and when we decide to accept someone who is not like us and wants to be like us, we pat ourselves on the back…’

“Sorry — you don’t get points for accepting someone who wants to be just like you. You get points for accepting someone who doesn’t want to be like you — that’s where the difficulty lies.”

Peace. Shalom.

Nothing easy about it. Shalom. Wholeness. It is a gift conferred upon us, a gift we both earn and receive by the grace of God. A blessing.

All possible *brachos* anyone would ever hope for are incorporated in the three blessings of the Birkas Kohanim.  Sifre and most commentaries view the first blessing *“*May Hashem bless (*yevarechecha*) you” as referring to material prosperity. The second, “May Hashem illuminate (*ya’er*) you” relates to the spiritual blessings of Torah. The third, “May Hashem lift His countenance (*yisa Hashem*) to you speaks to God’s compassion above and beyond what we deserve. He forgives and grants peace.

In Birkat Kohanim, we gain another insight into what it means to find shalom, to find peace. Whereas some people would say to a man seeking peace, “Go to the mountains; find solitude; seek the peace within you” Judaism clearly rejects that understanding of peace. Peace cannot be found but where strife can be found; that is, in the community.

We know this because Birkat Kohanim like many prayers, including Borchu, Kaddish, Kedusha, and Kriat HaTorah, can only be recited amongst a quorum of ten. It demands a minyan. These are *public* expressions, *communal* proclamations.

But if so, why “yevarechecha”, (in the singular) and not “yevarchem” (in plural form)?

Blessings, to be real, are singular. Peace must be received by a unified community. There are no brachos without achdus – unity.

This is why, Rabbi Soloveitchik taught that the bracha recited by the Kohanim prior to their delivering God’s Birkos Kohanim to His People uniquely ends with “and has commanded us to bless His people Israel **b’ahavah** - with love.” No other bracha ends this way. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that this is not a blessing on the mitzvah per se “but a request for the Priestly Blessing to be accompanied by love.” The love of the Kohanim for their People is a prerequisite for sharing blessings.

The message is clear. In unity, there is blessing. Without achdus, without love, there is no blessing.

The Talmud [Megilah 18a] asks why, after reciting the Birkos Kohanim, which encompasses every category of blessing, is there still the need to conclude the Shemoneh Esrei with “Sim Shalom” (Grant peace, goodness and blessing)? The answer is found in the very next Posuk after the Birkat Kohanim, “Let them place **My** Name upon the children of Israel, and I shall bless them.” (Bamidbar 6:27)  God’s blessing is Shalom, “and God will bless His nation with Peace.”   “Only with peace, is there *kiyum,* durability to all other brachos,” explains the Torah Temimah. God’s name and signature is Shalom, and it is His desire that after we laud, praise and ask Him for all, we seal and cap it all with Peace. Without peace, the blessings are all an illusion.

But peace where? The Midrash says, “Peace when you enter, peace when you leave, and peaceful relations with everyone.”  The Ksav Sofer teaches that this alludes to the three levels of peace one must strive for – within the family, in the country where one lives, and throughout the world.   There is no sphere of human existence where peace is not the key component to wholesomeness. Completeness.

We Jews live in the best of times, no? We have schools, shuls, yeshivas, shtieblach, books, translations, tens of thousands learning Daf Yomi, thousands of hours of Torah knowledge at our finger tips on the web, hundreds of thousands of kosher certified foods and delicacies, gourmet restaurants, kosher cruises, Chabad in every corner of the globe and to top it off, Israel, our renewed, reinvigorated homeland!

What we take for granted were the impossible dreams of our forebears. And yet… those of us who are honest know too well – there is no achdus. Therefore, there is no peace.

Even as the Orthodox observant community has grown by leaps and bounds we have grown more apart, more splintered. There are no fingers to point blame. We are all to blame. We barely recognize one another, let alone communicate with menschlichkeit, decency and civility.

“Sim Shalom” is the first victim of our pettiness.

Chassidic communities rebuilt by heroic rebbes survivors of the holocaust are today waging battles against each other. Yeshivas restructured by heroic leaders post holocaust witness warring groups assaulting each other. Posters are still hung on Yom Ha’atzmaut decrying the “cursed day of 5 Iyar”!

Peace. Peace. Who will pursue you?

Without achdus, there is no peace! It appears that Sim Shalom has fallen victim to the delete button.

Sim Shalom?

Not long ago, I asked friends and colleagues to, “take a minute to list and explain the most serious issues and concerns where you feel shalom is severely lacking. How is it manifested?”

My son Nathan, put it succinctly. “The most serious issue facing the Jewish people when it comes to shalom is the acceptance of others who are not like us. “He’s wearing a bekeshe, he’s not like me. He has a tattoo, he’s not like me. This view comes about from a fundamental misunderstanding of the degree of separateness that we have as a nation. In truth, *Asher bachar banu mikol ha’amim ‘Who* has chosen us from all the peoples’ *is said about each and every Jew.”*

Shalom.

God blesses us with it only when we pursue it!