

"PEACE AND TRUTH": Strategies for their ReconciliationA Meditation

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I

שלום--Peace and Truth, or Harmony and Integrity--is one of the hoary polarities in the Jewish tradition. Around them cluster similar or equivalent pairs of dichotomy such as אמת and שלום. Each of these poles individually has claims on our attention and commitment--and they go in opposite directions. אמת (truth, integrity) has absolute claims, indifferent to any external considerations or societal demands, while שלום (peace, harmony) insists upon the value of communal happiness, human survival, and mutual accommodation. Another way of putting it: Integrity advocates the harmony of ideas, theories, and commitments, while harmony propounds the integrity of man, community, and society.

The two are not only theoretical constructs, and not only values, but are also dimensions of personality, or characterological factors. Peace is favored by the irenic types, those who clamor for "unity" and are by nature compromisers, while truth is the catchword of those extremists willing to sacrifice anything and everything for "principle." The peace people are generally considered "soft"; the truth partisans--"hard" and radical.

How do we resolve the conflict? How do we reconcile the divergent claims of שלום and אמת, each of which is itself considered a divine Name in Jewish law?

There are, I believe, two grand strategies of reconciliation that I can discern in our sacred tradition. Let us call them the Linear and the Circular Strategies.

II

The Linear Strategy admits of one solution only. It is in the nature of a line that it allows only one point at any one position; a line implies a hierarchy of one point before or after, higher or lower, than another. Of course, it is not simple-minded; it can very well understand that each has its value. But in both theory and practice it insists that one be favored over the other.

In this framework, those who give priority to integrity will not disparage harmony but will consistently and persistently maintain the superiority of truth over peace. They will, in the language of the talmudic Sages, exclaim proudly and courageously that יקוב הדין את החר, let justice prevail (Yevamot 92a). They will look askance at the compromisers and unity-seekers and accuse them of a perilously flippant attitude towards principle.

There is much support for this position in the Jewish sources. Hence, the interpretation of the verse (Psalms 119:160) ראש דברך אמת, "The beginning of Thy word is truth," as referring to the last letters of the beginning of the Torah ("Thy word"): בראשית ברא אלקים, which spell אמת, truth.

The harmony partisans are, of course, not at all oblivious to the demands of integrity, but they earnestly believe that peace is itself a demand of truth. They are not at all willing to ascribe their advocacy of harmony to psychological or ideological weakness.

Thus, the Talmud develops the "white lie" dispensation in its own way: for the sake of domestic tranquility it is permissible to tell a harmless ("white") lie; not only did such eminent biblical personages as Joseph and Samuel indulge

in such linear preference for peace over truth, but God Himself, as it were, did so in reporting Sarah's sarcastic remark about Abraham to the latter (Yevamot 65b).

Similarly, the two famous schools of the early Mishnaic period, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, apparently clashed on this very question when they debated the issue of the standards to be followed in praising the bride at her wedding. The former permitted wedding guests to exclaim that the bride was beautiful and charming even if she was not, in order to please the more homely bride, while the latter were far more strict and forbade even such minor exaggeration (Ketubot 17a, according to Ritva ad loc.; but see Arukh le'Ner ad loc. who attempts to reinterpret the passage in order to avoid having to choose harmony over integrity).

According to this view, while all-out compromise can certainly injure the requirements of truth irreparably, in our imperfect society there is no alternative to seeking a middle-ground between peace and truth. At the very least, they maintain, peace requires that despite the self-confidence of those who are dogmatically certain that they and they alone possess truth and rectitude, they be willing peacefully to discuss issues with their adversaries. Thus, in a comment on the verse, "and [they] could not speak peaceably unto him" (Gen. 37:4), referring to the brothers' antipathy to Joseph, R. Yonatan Eibschutz writes:

If a man harbors complaints and arguments against a friend, their hatred increases day by day. But if he talks it out and says to him, "Look what you have done to me," and the friend has an opportunity either to explain himself or to confess and promise never to do so again, their hatred dissipates... and peace returns again. So, if the brothers [of Joseph] were to talk with him, there would have been peace amongst them.

--Tiferet Yehonatan to Va-yeshev, p. 80

Dialogue amongst adversaries is not only permissible but, indeed, mandatory. Yet in our times this simple, cogent, and self-evident requirement of "talking it out" has gotten a bad press, as if merely discussing issues, even arranging with adversaries to respect and accept one's principles, has become suspect. It is only in our current period that the use of peace even to enhance truth is looked upon with disdain and denounced.

A halakhic precedent for this controversy between those who assert the priority of peace and those who favor truth may be found in a Mishnah. My grandfather, Rabbi Yehoshua Baumol o.b.m., records in his Responsa Emek Halakhah (I:42) a question addressed to him during World War II for his adjudication. A man pledged \$100 to a Talmud Torah if his son, a draftee, would return from the war in peace. The son returned, hale and healthy, but married to a Gentile woman together with a child she bore him. The school demanded payment, because the son returned "in peace," unwounded. The father refused, asserting that an intermarriage in his family could hardly qualify as "peace." In response, my grandfather found precedent for the case in a Mishnah (Tevul Yom 4:7):

התורם את הבור ואמר הרי זו תרומה ע"מ שיעלה שלום,
שלום מן השבר ומן השפיכה אבל לא מן הטומאה, רבי
שמעון אומר אף מן הטומאה

If one was taking terumah (tithe for the kohen) from a cistern (containing wine or oil) and said, "Let this be terumah provided it comes up in the bucket) safely (literally: in peace), it implies that he meant that it is not broken or spilled (such that the spillage is not regarded as terumah and the contents of the cistern is not considered a mixture of both profane material and terumah), but not from contracting uncleanness (or impurity, tum'ah, and hence if it was contaminated by contact with levitical impurity the wine or oil is considered terumah albeit contaminated). R. Simeon says, also from uncleanness (and the contaminated contents of the bucket is not considered terumah).

Hence, the question of whether the term "peace" denotes physical wholeness or also metaphysical integrity, and therefore whether peace takes precedence over "truth" (as the equivalent of ritual cleanness), is in debate between the anonymous Tanna of the Mishnah and R. Simeon. (In the medieval period, Maimonides decides the halakhah according to the anonymous Tanna and R. Asher according to R. Simeon.)

The consequence for our general ideological problem is obvious. Given the Linear Strategy of choosing the one or the other, the first Tanna favors integrity over harmony, and indeed deems a peace that compromises with impurity no peace at all; harmony with contamination is simply unthinkable. R. Simeon, however, holds that peace can accommodate that which pollutes; uncomfortable and unsatisfactory as it is, it remains peace.

So much for the linear conception, which forces us to choose between the two options, even if, somewhere deep in our minds and consciousness, there gnaws the awareness that there is something artificial and misguided about forcing us to choose one good over the other and exclude all other options.

III

However, there is another approach that is more commendable, even if it is more difficult to understand and even more difficult to explain. The difficulties arise because it takes into consideration the vast complexity of life and the shallowness of our ordinary, every-day logic we use in daily life. If the first approach is the Linear Strategy, then this second might be called the Circular Strategy.

Unlike a line, a circle does not insist upon a hierarchy of points. There is no higher and lower, only different points, each equidistant from the center. A circle can contain a

variety of apparently contradictory items which a line cannot abide.

We are here dealing with a dialectical approach, one that is more complicated and more sophisticated and that goes beyond the normal strictures of Greek logic. This is not the place to expand on this interesting theme, save to say that contemporary nuclear physics leads to this conclusion.

The great Danish-Jewish physicist, Niels Bohr, the founder of Quantum Theory, proposed the Theory of Complementarity. He noted that puzzling situations arise in man's efforts to comprehend a universe where various approaches to reality appear mutually exclusive, yet they are each legitimate. Bohr theorized that the findings of nuclear physics are complementary: they cannot be described without using expressions which are logically irreconcilable. This holds true, for example, for the paradoxical nature of the atom which according to some experiments is undulatory, seeming to possess the continuous nature of waves, while according to other experiments it consists of discrete particles or quanta. Each set of results is opposite to the other, yet reality indeed possesses opposite properties which complement each other. Both aspects, the wave and the quantum qualities, are said to be complementary to each other, and the two apparently contradictory aspects are necessary to grant us a full understanding of atomic reality.

Now, according to Bohr, this multiple approach to truth holds not only for subatomic physics, and not only for natural science, but for all areas of human cognition and creativity. Thus, science and art, compassion and justice, neurophysiology and psychology, action and thought--these and many other such pairs are considered complementary. His student, Victor S. Weisskopf, writes, "One view complements the other and we must use all of them in order to get a full experience of life."

This is not an easy idea to accept. What atomic physics teaches us is to liberate ourselves from the prejudice that reality must necessarily conform to the contours and biases of our limited minds. There are, it holds, two kinds of truth: superficial truths, the opposite of which are falsehoods, and deep truths, the opposite of which are also true. Each conflicting proposition may be true, reflecting an aspect of an ultimate truth about a reality too large and too complex to be contained in the simple logic to which we have become accustomed.

There is a good deal of precedent for this in classical Jewish thought. For instance, we affirm simultaneously the divine attributes of middat ha-din (justice) and middat ha-rahamim (mercy), and Judaism has always fought against separating the two, because of their apparent irreconcilability, into two gods, one of compassion and one of malice and evil.

Not only in theology but also in Halakhah does Judaism presuppose that reality requires apparently conflicting outlooks in order to grasp underlying truths. Thus, the Halakhah speaks of twilight (בין השמשות) as possessing the properties of both day and night with regard to their legal implications; an androgyny may halakhically be considered, at different times and for different purposes, both male and female; a slave owned by two masters and manumitted by one of them may be said to be both slave and freeman. Other examples abound.

It is this Circular Strategy, our term for Complementarity, that we may now use as a framework for the polarity of Harmony and Integrity or Peace and Truth. We need not, as a matter of principle, choose between them, accepting one and rejecting the other. Complementarity urges us to use a circular strategy, one that is inclusive rather than

exclusive, that comprehends both harmony and integrity. Neither peace nor truth need be given second billing in this scheme of things. We affirm both, attempting wherever possible to conform to each of the principles of this polarity. Where choices must be made, we choose now one, now the other, depending upon circumstances and judgment--and there is no escaping the need to exercise responsible judgment as we face constantly changing conditions--but always remembering that the other pole remains vital and relevant and may not be overlooked.

The major Jewish thinker whose writing and whole mode of thinking supports such a "circular" approach is Rabi Abraham Isaac Kook. One of the major themes of Rav Kook's Weltanschauung is that of Harmonism. We all experience a degree of dissonance in our lives--our hearts and our minds are in almost constant and tragic confrontation; science and religion steer us into divergent paths; wherever we turn, intellectually or existentially, we are beset by diadic distinctions, cutting contradictions, clashing concepts. Our lives don't seem to hang together, they lack coherence; our cognitive experience is pock-marked by antinomies and incompatible categories of all kinds; and existence itself seems so very fragile, frangible, and fractured.

Harmonism is the desire to transcend all differences between opposing ideas as to the way of truth, viewing such differences as but transient obstacles to be overcome, and harmonizing them in a grand, cosmic mystico-philosophical effort to achieve the Alma de'Yihuda, the World of Unity of which the Zohar speaks and which is the worthiest goal for man's aspirations. Rav Kook sees this as the proper antidote to the Alma di'Peruda, the World of Disunity, characterized by man's atomizing tendencies and the fragmentary nature of his perilous existence. In the state of Alma de'Yihuda, man's integrated life reflects the uncompromised unity of God; in the Alma di'Peruda, man's experience of dissonance is both

cause and effect of the broken, disrupted unity of God.

אין העולם קרוע ומרוסק. עומד הוא בנין איתן.
ושמים ושמי שמים יחד עם תחתיות ארץ עושים הם
הטיבה אחת, עולם אחד, וישות אחת.
--(אורות הקודש א' קמד)

The world is not torn and shattered. It stands as a powerful structure. The highest heavens and the bowels of the earth form one unit, one world, one existence.

--(Orot Ha-kodesh I, 144)

This same Kookian Harmonism can encompass our polarities as well: peace and truth have different agendas, but they are not antithetical. Harmony and integrity can be harmonized--without violating one's integrity.

IV

What does this circular strategy, affirmed both by Bohr's Theory of Complementarity and Rav Kook's Harmonism, mean for us in the decisions we must take daily--especially those who function as communal leaders?

It means that we must be suspicious of those who endlessly, even consistently, advocate only one of the poles--only harmony or only integrity. The extremists on both sides--the self-righteous ideologues and the peace-at-all-cost proponents--should be avoided. Each of them is sacrificing either peace or truth and if, as we mentioned earlier, each of these is a divine Name, then each of the one-sided advocates is guilty of a degree of mehikat ha-Shem, the desecration of the divine Name.

We ought be leery of the loud supporter of "unity" who is willing to forgo every bit of truth we cherish and reverence in order to achieve intra-communal harmony. And we must be equally distrustful of the supremely self-confident saint who knows that he is right, who has never suffered any self-doubt on his politics or policies, who substitutes dogmatic assertion for reasoned argument and invective for conviction. Both peace without the corrective of truth and truth without the corrective of peace are self-destructive: harmony without integrity leads to a peace steeped in falsehood, and integrity without harmony is beyond the grasp of mortal man, even its most impassioned champion.

Scripture taught us: אז נדברו יראי ה' איש אל רעהו, "Then they that feared the Lord spoke one with another" (Malachi 3:16). I take this verse to mean not only that those who are pious talked with each other, but that the test of true fear of the Lord, of people who are profoundly committed to the truth of God and Torah, is that in addition to truth they do not neglect the equal claims of peace and are therefore willing to talk with each other even if there are serious differences of opinion between them.

The Talmud (Taanit 31a) tells us:

אמר עולא ביראא אמר רבי אלעזר עתיד תקב"ה לעשות מחול
לצדיקים והוא יושב ביניהם בג"ע וכו'

Ulaah Biraah said in the name of R. Eliezer: In the days to come the Holy One, blessed be He, will hold a mahol for the righteous and He will sit in their midst in the Garden of Eden...

The word mahol means a chorus of both singers and dancers, with the dancers forming a circle. The eminent Talmudist, Rabbi Akiva Eger (1761-1837), is quoted by his grandson, R. Yehudah Leib Eger (in his Torat Emet [Lublin:1889-1902] II, 101a) as explaining: In this world, every tzaddik worships God in his own manner, and the way of one tzaddik is unlike that of another. But in the Messianic future, it will be

revealed that all these ways are really one, that all revolve about one central point, as does a circle. It may seem that they are going in opposite directions, clashing with each other, but if viewed as joined in a circle, one on one side of the rim and the other on the other side, instead of on a straight line, then it is obvious that they are indeed going in the same direction. This is the mahol which the Holy One will make for the righteous--that they will revolve in a circle about one point--the Holy One--who thus combines Peace and Truth, Harmony and Integrity, שלום ואמת.