

"A PIECE OF PEACE"

Most Jews, and almost all non-Jews, were thrilled with this week's historic news: the disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria.

Certainly, we ought not deny ourselves a bit of consolation, or begrudge ourselves a ray of hope for the future. If only for the silencing of the guns on the Golan, we must all join in a vote of thanks to our brilliant Secretary of State whose tireless efforts have produced this unprecedented agreement.

In our Sidra this morning we read of the blessings bestowed upon Israel by the Kohanim (priests). The blessings conclude with the significant words וְיָשָׁם לָךְ שָׁלוֹם "May He grant thee peace." In a remarkable comment, the גמטריה informs us that the gimatriya (numerical value) of the word shalom (peace) is 376, which is also the numerical value of the name עֵשָׂו (Esau!) -- לְלִמְדָּךְ לְהַקְדִּים שָׁלוֹם לְכָל אָדָם : this remarkable coincidence of "peace" and "Esau," comes to teach us that it is our duty to initiate peace with every individual, even an Esau.

And so, we, this week have seen the beginnings of disengagement -- which, even if it is very far from true peace, at least brings with it the remote promise of shalom -- with Syria, the veritable "Esau" amongst our enemies.

And yet, two points must be made, and if they tend to moderate our enthusiasm and induce in us a bit of skepticism, it is worth the pain now if it will spare us frustration later.

First, it would be a tragic mistake if we were to overestimate what has been done and allow ourselves to be swept up in euphoria. We must not relax our vigilance. We must not ignore the dangers and booby-traps that lie in the way of the State of Israel and therefore world Jewry.

After all has been said and done, we have not yet had the first signal of real intentions for peace by any of the Arabs. For every dovish statement that they make to the world, they make two which are twice as hawkish to their own people. More and more, one begins to feel apprehensive, suspecting that the Arabs may be merely indulging in a tactic in a long diplomatic strategy leading to the dismemberment of the State of Israel. While for others war is an extension of diplomacy, for them now it just might be that diplomacy is an extension of war.

The famous commentator, author of "כלי יקר," tells us in our Sidra the portion of the blessings of the Kohanim follows immediately upon that passage which deals with the law of the Nazarite, one who accepts a vow of abstention and is therefore forbidden to drink wine or liquor or any product of the grape. The sequence of the priestly blessings after the commandment to the Nazarite to refrain from drinking wine, comes to teach us a well known halakhah: that the priests are forbidden to bless the congregation when they are שתיי יין, intoxicated with alcohol.

I interpret that in the following manner: the very climax of the priestly blessings, their essence, that to which all its counterparts strive from the first word to the last, is: peace, שלום, "May He grant thee peace." The Rabbis refer to this as כלי המחזיק ברכה, the "vessel" which contains all the rest of the blessings. So it is with the Amidah prayer: from the very beginning to the end, all of it leads up to the pinnacle of all blessings: שים שלום - המברך את עמו ישראל בשלום the blessing of peace.

What does that mean? Peace is valuable only if one attains it in sobriety. But there is no blessing if peace is apparent only when one is intoxicated with illusions and a sense of unreality. Peace is no blessing if it is concocted or conceived through an alcoholic-type haze of self-delusion resting upon the gossamer threads of one's own wish-fulfillment.

It is good, as the American Indians used to say, to smoke the pipe of peace -- but not if that smoke is going to blind you to the dagger in your enemy's hand.

And so, there must be no relaxation, no premature celebration. There can be no ברכת שלום as a result of שתיי יין -- no blessing of peace when we are psychologically intoxicated, because when the heady stuff evaporates, so does the putative "peace."

If we approach this stage of development in the manner I have elaborated, with clear heads and open eyes, then indeed we can afford at least a murmured prayer of thanks to the Almighty. Then we can console ourselves that even if this is not the final peace between Israel and Arabs, that for which we have been praying and striving all these years, still, even a temporary respite in the battle is good. In a paradoxical statement, our Rabbis said -- and we must agree -- that גדול השלום שאפילו בשעת מלחמה צריכים לשלום peace is so great, that even in the midst of war one needs peace!

Indeed, better a piece of peace, then all of peace in pieces.

My second point is that the peace for which we pray and hope and strive, must not be limited to Israel and the Arabs, or between the superpowers. It must not be restricted to the international, military, and diplomatic spheres alone.

I am increasingly distressed about an area of Jewish life where shalom is desperately needed, and where neither Kissinger nor Sadat, neither Geneva nor Washington, can be of any help.

Let me explain. The Midrash quotes ר' חנינא סגן הכהנים as stating a one-word commentary on the priestly blessing. On וישם לך שלום, "May He grant thee peace," R. Haninah, the assistant to the High Priest, added this word: בביתך, "in your home." The priestly blessing of peace refers to domestic peace, to שלום בית.

Now, that is astounding. One would have thought that in this expression we would find the biblical warrant and authority and source for the great visions of universal peace as elaborated by the Prophets of Israel, the grand visions of cosmic harmony which we find in Isaiah and Amos. Furthermore, it is the same R. Haninah who has taught us -- much to the displeasure of radicals of his generation and of ours as well --

הווי מתפלל בשלומה של מלכות, always pray for the peace of the realm, for national and international peace. Why, in this case, does he restrict himself to the rather modest wish of שלום בית, domestic peace?

The answer is quite evident. If there is no שלום בית, there can be no שלום בעולם; without peace and harmony which reign within, no peace without can be very enduring. If there is divisiveness and hostility and dissension within, then no permanent good can come from any pacts or treaties between nations and blocs. Of course shalom is vital on the battlefield, and in the chancelleries of the world. But I am deeply troubled by the lack of peace in Israel itself. What good will shalom with the Arabs do if, as the Israeli press maintains, we are on the verge of מלחמת היהודים, wars amongst Jews!

Israel is today experiencing a disappointing atomization, a lack of cohesiveness, a sudden loss of public consensus. This characterizes every group -- right, left or center! The ruling Labor Party has showed signs of breaking up into the original factions which constitute it. The same is true of the right-wing Likkud Party. The religious party is in shambles. The Chief Rabbis, both of them distinguished scholars, are airing their

personal grievances by personal assaults upon each other in the press. And I deeply regret and deplore the relentless campaign by an important Hasidic group in Brooklyn against the religious ministers, pressuring them to stay out of the government. I can sympathize with the motives of the Lubavitcher group -- I agree with them on the importance of the "Who Is a Jew?" issue, -- but I am distressed by the manner and the timing and the evaluation. I do not think that shalom can be attained within the ranks of all of Israel by means of constant pressure on religious ministers not to join a fragile government. I think that issues may be vital, but they still have their place and time -- and a time of such national emergency is not one in which to press for improvement in the law. I am worried that a government of the kind that is now being formed -- without a single religious person -- will do us much more damage than failing to improve the "Who Is a Jew?" legislation.

So, if we are going to pray and strive for peace, let our prayers and endeavors include -- or perhaps begin with --  
 שלום בבי"ך , peace in our own ranks. What all of us must work for is a new consensus based upon mutual respect and love. Peace is not a one-time thing that is all-or-nothing, either all there or not there at all. It is a cumulative process, a blessing that is achieved bit by bit, and begins with שלום בבי"ך , with our own inner reconciliation, before we can attain שלום של מלכות , peace on the national and international fronts. The blessing calls upon each and every one of us to make his own contribution of peace in heart and hearth, in family and community. It summons us to begin on a great campaign, each by himself, to earn the blessing of שלום לך וישא לך.

The way to reach that climax of all blessings is by remembering what comes before it:  
 יארה' פניו אליך ויחנך , which is usually translated in that elegant but not completely comprehensible phrase, "May the Lord cause His countenance to shine on thee and be gracious unto thee." A "shining countenance" is the biblical or Hebrew idiom for -- a smile. The blessing is that God smile upon us, that He be receptive and warm to us. And therefore the same meaning must be attached to the Midrashic interpretation of that phrase:  
 יתן ה' מאור פנים אליך , may God give you a smiling face towards your fellow Jews. The greatest blessing is not only when God smiles upon us, but when He teaches us to greet our fellows with smiles, with warmth, with affection. And thus ויחנך , according to the Midrash means:  
 שיתן לכם דעת שתהיו חוננים זה את זה ומרחמים זה את זה

"be gracious unto thee" means, "May He give you the knowledge and intelligence to be gracious to each other and to love

and be compassionate to each other." We are a people of  
 חַסְדִּים, of thought and knowledge. We are very often  
 stubbornly and even fiercely independent in our thinking,  
 and that is why we tend to be divisive. But we must now use  
 this חַסְדִּים, this knowledge and intelligence, to be  
 חַנּוּנִים זֶה אֶת זֶה וּמְרַחֲמִים זֶה אֶת זֶה, gracious and  
 loving and compassionate and smiling to each other.

And while we each begin on the venture of shalom from  
 the grass roots and up, we must hope and urge and encourage  
 Jewish leadership here, and especially in Israel, to compose  
 their own differences not by abandoning genuinely held  
 positions, but by eliminating all personal assaults and private  
 grudges and the interminable political infighting that is  
 unworthy of our people.

Indeed, it is perhaps there, in the high places of Jewish  
 communal and Israeli political life, that שְׁלוֹם בֵּית  
 (domestic peace) must begin.

Then all of us will benefit from it -- all the rest of  
 us, all Israel, and all the world.  
 עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִדְבָּרָיו הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל  
 כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל

"May He who makes peace in His 'high places' -- in government  
 and leading religious circles -- make peace for all of us and  
 all of Israel."  
 וְאָמֵנוּ, Amen.