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A JEWISH DEFINITION OF PEACE

The last of the three-fold blessing of the Kohanim is Shalom or Peace. While the first two are generalized blessings and open to a variety of interpretations, this last blessing ~~of Peace~~ is specific: Peace. It is the climax, the final word, the "vessel that contains all other blessings."

Indeed Shalom is the greatset of all blessings. That is why our Sages regarded it as one of the three pillars of the world. That is why Jews greet each other and bid farewell to each other with this word on their lips. That is why the ways of the Torah are called the ways of Peace and why the highest visions of all the Prophets of Israel ~~was a vision~~ were visions of universal Shalom.

Yet in our day the word has become all but meaningless. "Peace" is often a mockery, the mask of hypocrites and the tool of Machiavellians. Diplomats talk of it but do not mean it. States behind the Iron Curtain are armed to the teeth and boldly call themselves "peace-loving." In the West, the man who passionately proposes peace may be suspect of Communism.

Why this degradation of so noble an idea? Why this fall of Peace? Why is it no longer recognized as a blessing?

The answer, I suggest, lies in the definition of the whole concept. As we moderns currently use the term, it is a negative, externalized, social abstraction. It means merely the absence of war and battle. It relates to the physical and military conditions between two opposing camps. It has no reality of its own, no independent existence. It speaks of a social relationship, not an inner equilibrium.

However, the Jewish definition of Peace is far different. In Judaism, Shalom is a positive idea, it speaks of an inner state as well as an external situation. It has an existence and reality quite its own, because in its essence it is not only a social but an inner, personal phenomenon.

The great Hassidic sage, the Gerrer Rebbe, saw this idea in the very formulation of the blessing of Shalom in the Blessing of the Kohanim. The final benediction is: YISSA HA-SHEM PANAV ELEKHA, VE-YASSEM LEKHA SHALOM, may the Lord turn His countenance to thee and give thee peace. PANAV, writes the Gerrer Rebbe in his "Sefat Emet," comes not only from the word PANIM, thus meaning "His face" or "His countenance", but also from the word P'NIM, which means inwardness, inner substantiality, inner value, inner worth. Only when we have this P'NIM can we aspire to VE-YASSEM LEKHA SHALOM. Nations that are lacking in P'NIM, that are insecure, unconfident, unstable within, can never be relied upon to achieve Shalom with others. Couples cannot expect to find "Shalom Bayit" if there is no harmony and Shalom in their ~~own~~ individual P'NIM of husband and wife. He who wants Shalom in his outer world must first forge it in his P'NIM.

Furthermore, Judaism would disagree with the modern prejudice that all that is necessary for Shalom is treaties, conferences, visits, balance of power and nuclear deterrents. Even good will and peace of mind and economic prosperity are not enough for lasting peace. For Shalom can be understood and attained only in a religious context. Shalom, as the K'LI HA-MACHAZIK BERAKHAH, as the ultimate, climactic and most comprehensive blessing, is primarily a spiritual quality. I do not mean merely a verbal commitment to faith. That sometimes can coexist with an unenlightened religious bigotry which has, in the annals of the human race, caused enough bloodshed and heartache. I mean, rather, a truly G-dly orientation, one which would include both "Thou shalt love the Lord thy G-d"

and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." It must be a religious awareness based upon wisdom and understanding and compassion, one that actively seeks Shalom as a goal, one that -- as does Judaism -- so venerates Shalom that it declares it one of the Names of G-d. For the origin and source of the kind of peace we are discussing is in G-d, and in G-d only. So that until the world's -- and every individual's -- spiritual harmony is established, civil peace must remain an elusive state, one that can be achieved only negatively as the absence of armed conflict. Only when YISSA HA-SHEM PANAV ELEKHA can there be V'YASSEM LEKHA SHALOM.

The late, sainted Rav Kook -- himself an eminent man of peace -- finds this idea of the religious root of Shalom in a familiar passage from the Prayerbook which comes from the Mishnah, Peiah. The Mishnah declares that HAVAAT SHALOM BEIN ADAM LE'CHAVERO, the bringing (note: bringing, not making, for social peace is only a reflection or evocation of one's inner peace) peace between a man and his fellow-man is one of those great virtues SHE'ADAM OKHEL PEROTHEM BA-OLAM HA-ZEH VE'HA-KEREN KAYEMMET LO L'OLAM HA-BA -- a man enjoys the fruits of this meritorious deed in this world, while the principal remains for him in the hereafter. Rav Kook interprets this as meaning that Shalom is a blessing whose PEROT or fruits a man enjoys in his own life and the life of the world, provided that at all times he recognizes and acknowledges that the KEREN, the root and source of this Shalom is OLAM HABA, the realm of the Divine.

Without a religious approach, peace is elusive. Without Torah, peace is a macabre mirage. G-d is what gives life to peace; without G-d peace is a ghost -- and it has not got a ghost of a chance. Unless all nations stream to G-d, as Isaiah put it, they will not beat their swords to ploughshares and their spears to pruning forks. Secularism can never succeed in the full, positive pursuit of peace. Only OSEH SHALOM BIDEROMAV, only G-d Who created this universe and established its natural harmony, HU YAASEH SHALOM ALEINU, only through Him can true and everlasting peace come to us.

How can we explain this profound Jewish insight into the relationship between Peace -- inner, domestic, social, world peace -- to Faith and Spirit? Is there a logical connection between them?

Yes, there is a beautiful and convincing explanation of their relationship first given by the first-century Greek-Jewish philosopher of Alexandria, Philo. Philo tells us that war and peace have their origins in the spiritual outlook of men, for our religious attitudes often influence our daily, mundane activity. Thus, war's origin is in idolatry. In the mythologies of the various pagan cultures of antiquity, their gods were constantly at war with each other -- stealing, arguing, conniving, betraying. And when a man's religious concept is warlike, so will his social behavior tend to conflict. Whenever a man has many gods, whenever he accepts multiple claims on his highest loyalties, his religious vision of conflict will inspire in him a social inclination for battle and bloodshed. But where a man acknowledges only One G-d, one universal Creator and Father of all men -- then there can be no war, no conflict, no division and dissension.

Here then is a powerful insight into the Jewish concept of Shalom, the crowning blessing of the Kohanim as well as the climax of the eighteen benedictions of the Amidah. There can be no peace without G-d. Inner peace is not solely the province of the psychologist. It originates in EMUNAH. Domestic peace, between husband and wife, is not solely in the domain of the marriage counsellor. It derives from a mutual commitment to the values of Torah. World peace can never be permanent unless it is sought from G-d. YISSA HA-SHEM PANAV ELEKHA VE'YASSEM LEKHA SHALOM.