

A Covenant of Peace
Pinchas, 5781
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This week I called a dear friend to discuss the parashat hashavua, parashat Pinchas, and he told me a moving story related to parashat Pinchas.

We are coming up on the first yahrtzeit of an Israeli scholar, political figure, and provocative columnist by the name of Meron Benveniste, z"l. In 1967, after the Six-Day War, Benveniste was serving as a special assistant to the mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek.

On the day after the cease fire, Kollek asked Benveniste to go into the Arab Quarter of the Old City and tell the local Arab residents that they were welcome to stay without fear of any reprisals or persecution. In accordance with those instructions, Benveniste set out for the Arab Quarter. As he was walking from house to house introducing himself, an elderly Arab man rushed out to greet him and gave him a present-- a partially burnt column of a Torah scroll. The man explained that back in 1948 he had seen his fellow Arab neighbors burning a Torah scroll that they had taken from a synagogue that had been ransacked in the Jewish Quarter. This man had stopped them and thereby preserved the Torah scroll before it could be fully burnt. Now years later he was presenting it to Benveniste as a gift in hopes of a better future and better relations between Jews and Arabs. Benveniste gratefully accepted the burnt fragment and later gave it to my friend as a wedding gift. It stands in a frame at the entrance to my friend's house and underneath the frame is a caption that reads:

"Torah Scroll (early 19th century)
Synagogue, Jewish Quarter, Jerusalem
Desecrated, 1948
Fragments preserved and returned by an Arab resident, June 1967."

The column of the Torah scroll that this Arab resident had saved from the embers of fire was our portion, parashat Pinchas.

My friend sent me a picture of this fragment and the following words from the fragment were clearly visible and jumped out at me:

"Hashem spoke to Moses, saying, "Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion. Say, therefore, 'I grant him My covenant of peace'" (Bamidbar, 25:10-12).

What is this 'covenant of peace' (*beriti shalom*) that Hashem has given to Pinchas?

Rashi says it is a promise from Hashem that Hashem will bestow kindness and peace upon Pinchas:

“I give him my covenant that it should be to him as a covenant of peace; just like a man who shows gratitude and friendliness to one who has done him a kindness. So here, too, the Holy One, blessed be He, expressed to him His peaceful feelings towards him.”

In other words, just like Pinchas showed his love for Hashem with his act of zealousness on behalf of Hashem by stopping Zimri and Cozbi from fornicating in the Mishkan (see below, and see, Bamidbar 25:8), so too, Hashem will always zealously love Pinchas.

Another direction in explaining this verse is offered by the medieval French commentator, Chizkuni. Chizkuni, himself, offers three explanations.

- 1) Since Pinchas in his zealousness for Hashem had killed prominent people --the prince from the tribe of Shimon, Zimri ben Salu, and the Midianite, Kozbi Bat Tzur -- he might have been worried about repercussions from their relatives seeking vengeance. Thus, the first meaning of this promise from Hashem is that Pinchas would be protected from their angry relatives.
- 2) The proper way to translate the phrase *'beriti shalom,'* is not a covenant of peace. It should actually be translated as “My covenant, the Covenant of Peace.” The very name of Hashem’s covenant is, in fact, the “Covenant of Peace.” As a result of his deed, Pinchas was embraced with a covenantal relationship with Hashem, but it was not specifically a covenant of peace with peace—it was just a general term for the covenant that Pinchas was entering. By granting Pinchas entrance into the covenant, Hashem was signalling approval for Pinchas’ behavior.
- 3) The Talmud states “Any kohen who has killed a person may not lift his hands to offer the priestly blessing” (Berachot, 32b; see also Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 128:35). This is based upon the fact that, according to Isaiah, Hashem does not want anyone to make a blessing in Hashem’s name with blood-stained hands, *yedeichem damim mileiu* (Isaiah, 1:15). As a result of this law, Pinchas was concerned that because he had killed two people, he would not be permitted to ever fulfill the priestly duties of his father and grandfather. For this reason, Hashem promised him that this killing would not disqualify him from the priesthood. Hashem therefore gave him the covenant of peace, which was a promise that since his killing was done with the intent of glorifying Hashem’s name, and with Hashem’s approval, it would not invalidate him for service.

An entirely different approach is offered by Netziv. He argues that when Pinchas killed Zimri and Cozbi he had removed the anger that Hashem was, so to speak, burning inside Hashem. Thus, since Pinchas removed Gd’s anger by protecting Hashem’s honor, Hashem, in turn, promised Pinchas that Pinchas would also never feel anger. The feeling of anger would forever be removed from Pinchas. Instead of anger, Pinchas would now have shalom. The reason—according to Netziv-- why it was so important for Pinchas to receive this blessing is because when one commits a violent act it is often the case that one’s very nature changes and becomes more aggressive and violent. Thus, Hashem promised Pinchas that because of the fact that he had acted with the absolute purest intentions, his nature would never change and he would remain calm and peaceful at all times.

There are many additional approaches amongst the traditional commentators to the meaning of *beriti shalom*, but the last commentator that we will look at is, Rabbenu Bahya (1255-1340), who offers multiple approaches. One of his suggestions is that the word, *shalom*, is an acrostic of the words, *she'lo lamut*, i.e. that Pinchas never died. This is in line with the rabbinic tradition that Pinchas is identical with Elijah the prophet, who according to tradition never died.

Another approach of Rabbenu Bahya is a psychological approach. He writes:

“A Midrashic approach: the letter ך in the word שלום is broken to teach us that the covenant with the priests is contingent upon the priests being whole in body and mind. A blemished priest may not perform priestly functions in the Temple.”

Rabbenu Bahya is connecting Hashem’s covenantal promise of a *beriti shalom* with Pinchas, to a Talmudic tradition that when the words *beriti shalom* are written in our Torah scrolls, the letter *vav*, in the word *shalom*, must be broken. This is usually accomplished by the scribe making a hair line crack towards the bottom third of the letter.

The source for this broken *vav* is a Talmudic text:

From where do we derive that the service of a blemished priest is retroactively invalid? Rav Yehuda says that Shmuel says: As the verse states with regard to Pinehas: “Wherefore say: Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace [shalom]” (Numbers 25:12), which means that he receives the covenant when he is whole [shalem], but not when he is blemished and lacking a limb. The Gemara comments: But shalom is written, rather than shalem. Rav Nahman says: The letter vav in the word shalom is severed. According to tradition, this letter is written with a break in it, and therefore the word can be read as though the vav were missing. (Kiddushin, 66a).

On the surface this text is teaching us a purely technical law –that the service of a kohen who serves with a physical imperfection is disqualified, even retroactively. The basis for this law is the fact that the word *shalom* when written without a *vav*, spells *shalem*, or whole. Hence, the kohen who serves must be physically whole.

This esoteric law seems overly legalistic. Isn’t it almost missing the point to take this soaring rhetoric of a *beriti shalom*, and turn it into a teaching that has almost no relevance for us today—that the service of a kohen can under certain circumstances be retroactively disqualified?

Rabbenu Bahya’s approach to this teaching translates it into a modern meaning for us. He writes that “the covenant with the priests is contingent upon the priests being whole in body and mind.” Yes, Hashem granted Pinchas the *kahuna* forever. But forever doesn’t actually mean forever. It means only as long as you keep true to who you are. As long as Pinchas stayed true to himself and his passionate dedication to service of Hashem then Hashem

promised him the *berit shalom*. But if that should fail then the covenant would no longer remain.

Indeed, this is what our prophets warned us about. As Isaiah said:

“What need have I of all your sacrifices?” Says the LORD. “I am sated with burnt offerings of rams, And suet of fatlings, And blood of bulls; And I have no delight In lambs and he-goats. That you come to appear before Me— Who asked that of you? Trample My courts no more; Bringing oblations is futile, Incense is offensive to Me. New moon and sabbath, Proclaiming of solemnities, Assemblies with iniquity, I cannot abide.

Your new moons and fixed seasons Fill Me with loathing; They are become a burden to Me, I cannot endure them.

And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you; Though you pray at length, I will not listen. Your hands are stained with crime, *yedeichem damim mileiu*” (Isaiah, 1:11-15).

If this phrase, *yedeichem damim mileiu*, can mean that a kohen cannot make a blessing if he has killed someone accidentally, it can also surely mean that if we are living a life that is not true to ourself and to our service of Hashem then we are no longer guarding the covenant with Hashem. This is why the *vav* of *shalom* is broken: in order to remind us that it is our responsibility to guard the covenant of peace by staying true to the values of the Torah and not being hypocritical in our relationship with Hashem.

It is very powerful that it is this passage of the Torah that was on the burnt fragment of the Torah that an unknown, elderly Arab man gave to Meron Benveniste. We can look at his gift of the fragment with a broken *vav* as though the gift itself is the prophecy of a broken *vav*. It was a prophecy to the representative of the mayor of Jerusalem that you will only have this holy land as long as you are worthy of it and stay true to your core values.

The basic point of the *berit shalom* is that we also must be true to our promise to who we are in order to maintain our covenant with Hashem.

What this means is that we must always be dreaming of improving the world and helping people, which is why we were given the covenant in the first place.

The Torah Temimah comments on the *berit shalom* that it is a blessing to Pinchas that he bring shalom to the world. In this sense, the broken *vav*, is a reminder that Pinchas' work and our work as well, is still incomplete.

We must all work hard to fill in the broken *vav* of the world.

You can now watch a Youtube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah:

<https://youtu.be/zyp1vMD-0uM>