

## Seek Peace, and Pursue It

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This past Thursday and Friday, I had an experience which was new to me: being a call-in guest on two talk radio shows, in New York and Florida. The occasion for this was a letter I drafted in response to the war in Israel and Lebanon, and which—with the help of the Jewish peace organization Brit Tzedek v'Shalom—has now been signed by over 300 American rabbis and cantors. The letter was published as an ad in the Jewish newspaper, *The Forward*, this past week, and is called “A Rabbinic Call to the American Jewish Community: Seek Peace and Pursue It.” The letter is based on a section of Psalm 34, a psalm from our morning liturgy – *Mi ha-ish hechafetz chayim – bakesh shalom v'rodfehu* – “Who is the person who wants life, who desires days of seeking good?...Turn from evil and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.”

The letter begins:

“*Seek peace, and pursue it*—as Psalm 34 so wisely states, peace is not merely the cessation of war, but something that must be actively pursued. This verse instructs those of us who love Israel and yearn for peace that the fragile cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah must now be followed by a renewed commitment to a long-lasting resolution of the conflict, a resolution that avoids a return to hostilities. The second Israel-Lebanon War has left families bereaved, neighborhoods destroyed, and serious questions in its wake. Israel, as well as its neighbors, cannot afford an ever-escalating renewal of violence.”

The second paragraph goes on to voice support for the cease-fire as a first step towards removing Hezbollah's military threat to Israel, strengthening the forces of moderation and democracy in Lebanon, and achieving a lasting peace between Israel and her neighbors. The letter urges the U.S. administration to re-engage with all of the important players in this conflict, including Iran and Syria, in order to promote diplomatic solutions, and not further polarization.

The letter concludes:

“*Seek peace, and pursue it*—as we enter the season of *teshuvah*, “turning,” we hope that hearts that have been closed by hate can turn to compassion, and that minds set on violence and destruction can be turned to the reconstruction of societies damaged by war. The great faith that change is possible is the central message of our *Yamim Noraim*, our Days of Awe. May we have no less faith that a new way is possible in the Middle East, that the vigorous, nonviolent pursuit of peace is not a naïve dream, but our only real hope.”

Like so many of you, I was profoundly pained by this war. I was distraught at the human toll it took, the destroyed lives in Israel and in Lebanon. As the days went on and as the scale of the attacks on both sides of the border increased, I just wanted it to stop. I yearned to hear voices calling for an end to the rockets and bombings, for an end to the horrific cycle of escalation. In place of real wrestling with the moral and ethical challenges the war raised, all I heard were

debates about what was justified or unjustified. I felt like a vacuum had appeared in the space where compassion and concern with human suffering should have been.

In writing the rabbis' letter, I wanted to help raise a voice—a Jewish, religious voice—that wasn't about defending or condemning. I wanted to voice support for efforts to move the situation beyond the cycle of attack and retaliation, and to acknowledge the suffering and loss on all sides of the conflict. While I had initially hoped that the rabbis' letter would be published while the memory of the war was still fresh, perhaps it is fitting that it became public on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, as Israel withdraws its last troops from Lebanon, and as we enter into a new year.

What I'd like to talk about with you today is this challenge that Psalm 34 lays out before us: *seek peace, and pursue it. Redifut shalom*, the pursuit of peace, is understood in the rabbinic tradition as a *mitzvah*, a holy obligation. And it is unique among *mitzvot*. Rabbi Hizkia taught:

Great is *shalom*, peace, because about all of the *mitzvot* in the Torah it is written, “If you happen upon,” “If it should occur,” “If you see,” which implies that if the opportunity to do the *mitzvah* comes upon you, then you must do it, and if not, you are not bound to do it. But in the case of peace, it is written, *Seek peace, and pursue it*—seek it in the place where you are, and pursue after it in another place. (*Vayikra Rabbah* 9:9)

What is the teaching here? That with all of our other ethical obligations, we must act correctly when the opportunity presents itself, when a particular situation arises. But in the case of peace, we have to be pro-active. We have an obligation to do the work of peace-making not only in the place where we happen to be, but also in other places, in places where voices of peace and conciliation have not yet reached.

What I learned, or perhaps re-learned, this summer, as I wrestled with my own response to the war in Lebanon and with crafting a public statement, is that while the pursuit of peace in the abstract may be uncontroversial, there is very deep disagreement about what it actually means in practice. My 25 years of involvement on the issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace, and events of the past five years, since 9/11, have only strengthened my conviction that, more often than not, the use of military force to respond to that which threatens or frightens us is both counter-productive and morally disastrous. Yet I appear to be in the minority in that regard.

One thing I hear quite often is that those of us who call for peaceful means of dealing with conflict are somehow quaint, or naïve. No one with actual knowledge of the world and its realities would speak of confronting threats and violence with anything other than equal or greater violence. This response is often couched in the language of self-defense—the assumption being that force, or the threat of force, is in the end the only thing that will keep us safe.

Another common reaction is that talk of peace in the face of a threat is actually a traitorous act, an act of capitulation to, or misplaced sympathy with, one's enemy.

Can some violence, in some situations, be justified? I am not fully a pacifist, so I will say, reluctantly, that sometimes the answer is yes. If I had a weapon in my hands and someone came to attack me or my family, it's likely that I would respond with force.

Would it have been possible to stop Hitler, short of war? Most likely not. But might Hitler never have gained power if World War I had never happened, or if the terms of Germany's surrender hadn't been so harsh after that war? Perhaps here, too, the answer is "no." Great violence gives birth to its own violent legacy, and succeeding generations are then stuck trying to find an alternative to war.

Is there any wisdom we can gain on this topic from our tradition? What does Judaism have to say about violence and war, and the pursuit of peace?

When it comes to confronting the threat of an enemy, Jewish tradition is quite clear that "A person who is being pursued by another person who wishes to kill him may defend himself and kill the pursuer. If someone is pursuing another person with the manifest intent to kill him, everybody is obligated to save the pursued party, even by taking the pursuer's life" (Rambam, *Sefer Nezikin, Hilkhot Rotzeach* chapter 1, and *Shulchan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat* 425-26). This teaching is sometimes cited as a justification for defensive wars. And it is true that Jewish law holds that one's own life is so precious, and the lives of others are so precious, that taking the life of a person who attempts murder is not only allowed, but required.

But there are important limits to this obligation. The law of the pursuer also states that if you are able to stop the pursuer short of killing him, you must choose the less harmful option—or be considered a murderer yourself. And it is forbidden to kill an innocent person in an attempt to stop the pursuer. Another Talmudic teaching goes even further, and states that if you are told to murder an innocent person or you will be killed, you must allow yourself to be slain rather than become a killer. For "how can you say that your blood is redder than his?" (*TB Pesachim* 25b).

Because of this prohibition of the killing of innocent bystanders, it is difficult to extend the law of the pursuer into the realm of war. War by its nature involves indiscriminate violence. In the modern world, the reality is that every war involves killing innocent civilians. The historian Howard Zinn points out that we can't, in good conscience, call such deaths "accidents." While military planners and soldiers may not "intend" the deaths of innocent people, the nature of air bombardments and explosive weapons make these deaths completely inevitable—as inevitable, Zinn argues, as the deaths of innocent people targeted by terrorist groups.<sup>1</sup> To put it another way: the honorable intention of the soldier firing the missile is of little consolation to the person who loses her family in a rocket attack, to the parent whose child is buried beneath rubble. Who is to say that the soldier's blood is redder than theirs?

In addition to the killing of innocents, the violence of war takes its toll not only in the lives lost, but also on the psyches of the survivors and on the souls of those who do the killing. I want to share with you a midrash on a verse in the book of Genesis, where our ancestor Jacob is about to re-encounter his brother Esau after a 20-year estrangement. The last time they were together, Esau wanted to murder Jacob for stealing his father's blessing. Now Jacob receives a report that Esau is approaching him with 400 men, and the Torah says "*vayira Yaakov m'od v'yetzer lo—*

Now Jacob was very afraid, and was distressed” (Genesis 32:8). The midrash, the rabbinic commentary, picks up on what seems like the unnecessary repetition of “afraid” and “distressed”:

Rabbi Judah son of Rabbi Ilai said: Are not “fear” and “distress” identical? The meaning, however, is “he was afraid” lest he should be killed, and “he was distressed” lest he should kill. (*Bereshit Rabbah* 76:2)

It’s important to note that the early rabbis had no fondness for Jacob’s brother Esau, who was in their mind the ancestor of the oppressive Roman and Christian empires. If ever there was a legitimate and fearful enemy, it was the mythic Esau. Yet they put into Jacob’s heart the ethical concern which should be at the center of our present-day discussions of war: how can I not only avoid being killed, but also avoid becoming a killer?

Today we are told that we are engaged in a new kind of war, a long-term war, a war that may never end. We are told that it is a war of civilizations, a war of reason against unreason, a war between a culture of life and a culture of death. Many of us are afraid—afraid as Americans, waiting for the next terrorist attack; afraid as Jews, watching anti-Israel and anti-Semitic incidents on the rise around the world.

What should be our response? What are we to do? Is our only option being killed, or becoming killers? What did our ancestor Jacob do, in the face of his fear?

Here we have another insightful midrash on the Jacob story. After Jacob and Esau’s reunion, the Torah lists the heads of all of the tribes that descended from Esau. It then goes on to say that Jacob “settled” or “sat down: “*vayeshv Ya’akov.*” The *midrash*, in a surprising move, takes this to mean that Jacob literally settled down among Esau and his tribe:

‘R. Hunia said: Jacob’ s decision to dwell in a land near Esau’ s may be understood by the parable of a man who, while on a journey, saw a pack of dogs and was seized with fear of them. What did he do? **He sat down among them.** So also, when our father Jacob saw Esau and his chiefs, he too, though afraid of them, settled down among them.” (*Ber. R.* 84:5)

What does it mean to “sit down” in the midst of those whom we perceive as our enemy? What does it mean to “sit down” in response to our own fear?

On one level, I take this midrash as a teaching about patience, and caution. Fear tends to make us react very quickly, and often quite thoughtlessly. What is true of the individual is no less true—perhaps even more true—of the society or nation. When we are fearful, we naturally go into a reactive, aversive mode. We either want to be very far from that which strikes fear in us, or we want to obliterate the cause of the fear. This is the instinctive “fight or flee” response. And sometimes it is a healthy or necessary response—if we are attacked by an animal in the wild, or assaulted by someone violent on the street or in our home. But in other situations, where we have time and space to consider the wisest option, this instinct can become dysfunctional. In

confronting his fear and the potential threat of Esau, Jacob stopped; he sat; he reflected. Jacob learned to settle his mind and his emotions before taking the next step.

Another aspect of Jacob's action was his refusal to separate himself from the one with whom he was in conflict. The Torah's version of events makes it quite clear that Jacob went in the opposite direction of Esau when they parted. Yet in this midrash, the rabbis imagine Jacob settling right in the midst of Esau's camp. The teaching here is that if conflict is to be overcome or avoided, then the opposing sides need to remain in relationship, not cut it off. Indeed, the need for communication and connection is never more urgent than when two communities, two nations, find themselves battling one another. Jacob's act is not one of submission, but instead a kind of commitment: to remaining present, to neither fighting nor fleeing, to calming the situation and yet maintaining his ground.

The midrashic Jacob was able to transcend the instinctive response of his adrenal glands. By "sitting down," he perhaps surprised his enemy, and in so doing opened up new options for moving forward. Like the man sitting down among the pack of dogs, he diffused his own fear and the fear of his adversary, greatly reducing the chances of a violent reaction.

Jewish *halakha* around war includes a similarly surprising move. In the book of Deuteronomy, we read: *When you draw near to a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace to it.* The Talmud comments on this verse: "Great is peace, since even in a time of war one should open with peace" (*Derekh Eretz Zuta, Perek Hashalom*). That is, even at the moment of greatest conflict and tension—at the moment of launching an attack—the mitzvah of *shalom* demands a sincere attempt to resolve the conflict peacefully.

How do we, as this teaching requires, "open with peace"? How do we dissolve the fear and anger that escalate so easily into violence?

I'd like to tell you a story that I heard a number of years ago from Sylvia Boorstein, one of my teachers of mindfulness practice.

A man on one of Sylvia's meditation retreats came to talk with her, and told her this story about himself. I'll call him Sam. A number of years earlier, he had gone on a business trip to a city he'd never been to before. One evening, he found himself lost and alone on a deserted street. Suddenly a young man appeared, holding a gun and pointing it at him. The young man was clearly wound up and edgy, and he demanded that Sam hand over his wallet. Sam wanted to keep the young man calm – he told him he'd do just as he was told, and he carefully handed the wallet over. But his assailant didn't grab the wallet and run. He continued to stand there, holding the gun, and he started saying, over and over, "I'm gonna kill you, I'm gonna kill you." Sam again tried to calm him, and told him that he was going to take off his watch and give it to him. He handed the watch over, and still the young man didn't leave; he held the gun pointed straight at Sam and kept repeating, "I'm gonna kill you, I'm gonna kill you." And then Sam said this to him: "You know, you did really well today. There's \$200 in that wallet, and that's a really expensive watch, you can get a lot of money for that. You did great, you really did. Your friends are going to know that you're a big man, that you did good." A moment later, the robber fled, and Sam was fine.

Now apparently, Sam was big man, and strong, and it turns out that he had been in the Marines, and skilled in martial arts. In their conversation, Sylvia asked him if he could have gotten the gun away from the teenager. Sam told her that yes, he most likely could have—but he was afraid he would have killed the kid.

Sam was afraid to be killed, and afraid to kill, and he found another way out. He spoke to the heart, to the sense of self, of a person who was pointing a gun at him. And it worked. Sam walked away a few hundred dollars poorer, but having neither been hurt nor having hurt another.

Many things happened in that encounter, but what strikes me is that Sam never allowed his assailant to become less than human in his eyes. His words worked because he saw a person in front of him. Can every assailant be disarmed with words? No, of course not. But are we willing to believe that any move away from dehumanizing those who threaten us is a step towards peace?

In moments of fear, it is easy to believe—like Jacob—that our only option is to kill or be killed. It is easy to dehumanize our perceived enemy, to reduce them to categories—“Islamofascist,” “terrorist”—that makes hatred even easier. But these reactions obscure the profound complexity of the threats we face today. The conflicts we are engaged in as Jews, as Americans, as members of the global community, have their roots in human fears and longings, in human failings and misunderstandings. It stands to reason that if human beings create a problem, then human beings can address and one day resolve that problem. But we have to be willing to move beyond the level of aversive instinct, to engage our own humanity and the humanity of others in creating those solutions.

**I believe it is urgent that we resist those voices—voices within ourselves, voices of others—that tell us that such an approach is naïve, or unrealistic, or a betrayal of one’s people or cause.** *Redifut shalom*, the pursuit of peace, is not naïve—it’s just very difficult. “Who is the mightiest of the mighty?” the Talmud asks. “The one who makes his enemy into a friend.” (*Avot d’Rabbi Natan* 23)

The pursuit of peace takes great strength. It takes patience and perseverance, and a willingness to sit—like Jacob—in the presence of fear, in the presence of suffering. It demands that we transcend our animal nature, our “fight or flee” instincts. And it demands that we not fall prey to cynicism or despair, to the feeling that human nature is what it is, and that there’s not much we can do about it. Rather, human beings are given the gift of free will, and the faith we express during these Days of Awe is a faith in the possibility of personal, and collective, transformation.

Marc Gopin, a professor of conflict resolution and an Orthodox rabbi who has worked for decades for Middle East peace, writes this:

“One can believe that war is sometimes necessary, but also believe that the choice for war, even if it rests on sound moral principles, **effectively expresses a complete failure of all the other ethical or spiritual directives that are ideally supposed to guide one’s actions...**”<sup>2</sup>

If, indeed, the choice for war represents a “complete failure” of the ethical and spiritual directives that we like to believe guide our lives, then it stands to reason that cultivating the proper ethical and spiritual qualities in ourselves would help us prevent that failure. There is a lot we can do in the political realm to oppose war, to promote nonviolent solutions to social and political conflict. But perhaps there is also work we can do right here, right in ourselves, starting today.

We can begin by looking at our own reactions to our fears. What arises in me when I am afraid? Do I become angry? Do I want to run and hide, or lash out? Do I go to a place of despair?

There are positive attributes we can cultivate in response to our fear. It is possible to learn to sit in its presence, without having to do anything. We can cultivate patience. We can refrain from demonizing those who anger us, who threaten us. We can refrain from arousing fear in others.

What do we do when we have been hurt by another? Do we hold on tenaciously to the hurt, do we nurture a grudge? Are we willing to make a gesture of reconciliation? Are we willing to let go?

Perhaps each of us can imagine ourselves on a kind of war-to-peace continuum, in terms of our own inner life and our actions in the world. Most of us are not warmongers, and most of us are not perfect peacemakers. We fall somewhere in between. To gauge your place on this continuum, and to begin the work of edging further over to the side of *shalom*, here are some questions you can ask yourself, as you head into this new year:

Do any of my actions, my words, contribute to the larger pool of fear and anger?

Do any of my actions or my words dehumanize others?

Whom do I have compassion for?

Whom do I find it difficult to have compassion for?

In his work on conflict resolution, Rabbi Gopin writes of a particularly powerful kind of peacemaking: “the arduous discipline of perpetual personal contact with a wide variety of people with whom you may have serious differences.” This strikes me as an important practice that each of us can take on, to some degree. It may feel like too much to engage in “perpetual personal contact with a wide variety of people” with whom we seriously differ. But how many of us have developed a real relationship with even one person whom we really disagree with? (I’ll leave family members out of the equation!). How many of us really try to understand the views of people whose opinions seem ludicrous, baffling, or immoral to us? Perhaps this, too, could be something we commit to in the coming year.

Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta taught: “See how beloved is peace, for when God sought to bless Israel, there was no other vessel which could contain all of God’s blessings, except for peace.” (Deut. R. 5:15). May we, in this new year, be blessed with the all-encompassing blessing of *shalom*—and may we be blessed with the insight, the wisdom and courage, to carry out the

*mitzvah* of “seek peace, and pursue it” —here, where we are, and elsewhere, wherever peace is needed.

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Zinn, “War Is Not A Solution for Terrorism,” *Boston Globe*, 9/2/06.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon*, page 36.