

Is Shalom (Peace) Everything?

Introduction

This week's Torah portion, *Naso*, features the priestly blessing, the *birkat kohanim*, which the *kohanim* use to bless the congregation every week on Shabbat in the Ashkenazic rite, and every day in the Sephardic rite. The Torah says:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron [the High Priest] and to his sons, saying... You shall bless the people of Israel, saying to them:

בְּרַכֶּה יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ
יְאֹר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחֻנֶּךָ:
יֵשָׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיָשֶׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם

*Yevarechecha HaShem ve-yishmerecha
Ya-er HaShem panav elecha vi-chunecha
Yisa HaShem panav elecha ve-yasem lecha shalom.*

May the Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord make the light of His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you
May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.
[Numbers 6:22-26]

Note that only one specific thing is asked: Peace.
Indeed, peace – *shalom* -- is the supreme blessing in Judaism.
Literally, *shalom* means completeness, wholeness, perfection.

Peace in Jewish sources, liturgy and culture

On Shabbat morning, in the first blessing after the *Barchu*, we call God:

*Yotzer or uvoreh choshech
oseh shalom uvoreh et ha-kol*

The One Who forms light and creates darkness,
Who makes peace and creates everything.

Light, darkness, peace, everything else. Peace comes first. The rest, referred to by the word “everything”, is almost an afterthought.

Note that “everything” is “created”, but “peace” must be “made”. It is not easy to achieve. It requires work. It is not just “created”.

In the Kaddish, we ask God two things:

Yehe shlama rabba min shemaya, ve-hayyim

May God grant abundant peace from heaven, and life.

Life is second to peace, and almost an afterthought.

The Mishna says:

-Hillel used to say: be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace. [Pirkei Avot 1:12]

-Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel used to say: The world stands on three things: justice, truth, and peace. [Pirkei Avot 1:18]

The Midrash reinforces the primacy of peace in many places:

-Blessings in themselves are of no avail unless peace goes with them...

Great is peace, for the seal of the whole of prayer is peace...

Great is peace, for it outweighs everything...

The Torah was compared above all to peace, as it says [in the Book of Proverbs]:

All her paths are peace. [Prov. 3:17]

[Num. R. 6:7]

-Great is peace, because it seals all the blessings. [Sifre, Naso 40-42]

-One may have prosperity, health, food and drink, but, if there is no peace, it is all worthless. [Sifra, Bechukkotai, p 340]

-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai said: Great is peace, for all blessings [all successes] are subsumed within it, as [the Psalmist] stated:

ה' עז לעמו יתן ה' יברך את עמו בשלום.

HaShem oz l'ammo yiten, HaShem yevarech et 'ammo bashalom.

God will give strength to his people, God will bless his people with peace.

[Ps 29:11]

[Lev R 9:9]

Maimonides writes:

Great is peace, for the Torah was given only to increase peace in the world.

[Rambam, Hilchot Hanukkah 4:14]

In popular Jewish culture:

- Jews use *shalom* as a noun, an adjective, a verb, an adverb, an interjection, etc...
- Jews greet one another with *Shalom Aleichem*: “Peace be upon you”.
- The Shabbat greeting is *Shabbat shalom*, meaning “A peaceful Sabbath”.
- Shalom Aleichem* is sung before the Kiddush at the Shabbat dinner table.
- Shalom* also means “goodbye”.
- ”How are you?” in Hebrew is *Ma sh'lom'cha*: “What is your peace?”
- The dead are remembered with *Alav hashalom*: “Peace be upon him”.
- One of the most popular Jewish prayers is *Oseh shalom*:
עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרְמָיו הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן
Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom alenu, ve'al kol Yisrael, ve'imru amen.
May He who makes peace in His high places, also make peace upon us and upon all Israel, and let us say: Amen. [Based on Job 25:2]

- Most important Jewish city: Jerusalem—*Yerushalayim*, the “City of Peace”.
- King Solomon’s name: Shlomo – the peaceful, complete, or whole one.

As the psalmist says:

בִּקֵּשׁ שְׁלוֹם וְרִדְפֵהוּ -- *Bakesh shalom verodfehu.*
Seek peace and pursue it. [Ps 34:15]

Peace elsewhere in Parshat Naso

- In our portion, we also learn that God even allows His Name to be erased for the sake of peace between husband and wife, in the ordeal of *sotah*. [Num. 5:23] This is the only time this is allowed. (God’s name must never be erased, which is why we bury holy books too worn out for use.)

- Our portion also teaches that God allows people to take nazirite vows, to set themselves apart “for the sake of the Lord”, in order to achieve a higher level of holiness. [Numbers 6:2]. (A Nazirite may not to drink wine or other grape products, have his hair cut, or come in contact with the dead.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that God allowed this to make peace among the Jewish people, so ordinary Jews would not be too jealous of the priests and Levites, whose higher level of holiness was a birthright. Extra holiness is available also to the masses.

Is life not the supreme Jewish value?

-Torah:

I [God] have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life! [Deut. 30:19]

-Pikuach nefesh: You may break all commandments to save a life (except those against idolatry, adultery and murder).

-Jews say *lechayyim* (to life!) before drinking alcohol

-Jews give charity in units of \$18, because 18 is the gematria for "Chai", meaning "alive".

How far should we go in the pursuit of peace?

-*Dayenu*, which we sing at the Seder table, begins with "If God had freed us from Egypt but had not, [etc.], it would have been enough." One would think there should be a line before that one saying, "If God had kept us alive but had not freed us from Egypt, it would have been enough." But that line is not there! Is *Dayenu* telling us implicitly "Give me liberty or give me death."?

-In the three ancient revolts against foreign invaders (Greeks in the first case, Romans in the other two), the rabbis counseled against revolting. But that was due to their estimate of our chances for success, not their concern about keeping the peace.

-Right of self-defense:

If someone comes to kill you, kill him first [if that is the only way to stop him]. [Berachot 58a]

-Jews are basically non-violent.

Shabbat... shalom!