

## **A Higher Peace**

Congregation Betenu Yom Kippur Sermon 5779

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Once upon a time, a king sent a message to the ruler of a neighboring land, a longtime friend. The messenger arrived late and was quickly admitted to the king's throne room. Out of breath, he began to relay his message: "The king... requests... a speckled horse... with... a black... tail... or else..."

"Enough!" the ruler shouted back at the messenger. "Tell the king this: I have no horse by that description, and if I did..." At that, the king paused and the messenger, shocked by the words of the king who had been friendly with his own ruler, ran out of the palace, jumped on his horse, and headed back to his native land.

When the messenger reported the neighboring king's words back to his own king, he flew into a rage: "How dare my friend speak to me that way! Muster the army, for we are going to war!"

Battle was waged, and after much bloodshed and destruction of land, a meeting was called between the heads of the two nations. The two kings, former companions, sat in silence, until finally the one said to the other, "What exactly did you have in mind when you absurdly asked for a speckled horse with a black tail, or else??!" "It is very simple," replied the first king. I asked that you send me a speckled horse with a black tail, or else send me a horse of any other type! And as for you, what did YOU mean when you answered that you had no such horse, and if you did...??" "Very simple!" replied the second king. If I did have such a horse, I would

certainly send it as a gift to my old pal.” Both horrified by their hasty actions, they vowed to be friends again and to immediately cease their fighting.

In Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of Our Ancestors, written in the first few centuries CE, Hillel charges: "Be of the disciples of Aaron: loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humanity and bringing them closer to Torah."<sup>1</sup> Aaron, brother of Moses, is known in our tradition as a *Rodef Shalom*, a Pursuer of Peace. What actions did he take? According to Maimonides commenting on this passage, Aaron would sense when a person was corrupted on the inside, and Aaron would simply greet that person and talk to them. Aaron would be friendly towards that person and would make sure to speak with them for a long time. Then, that person would become embarrassed and say to themselves: “Oy! If only Aaron knew what had been in my heart, he would hardly look at me, let alone speak to me. Now that Aaron thinks of me as a good person, I should make his words right and change my actions for the better.”

Peace comes in many forms. In the first story, peace comes about only after the war, once the two parties recognize the root of their conflict, which is miscommunication. In the second, the story of Aaron, the Pursuer of Peace recognizes the possibility that there is potential for future strife and engages with others to construct a peaceful situation.

*Shalom*, peace, is a fundamental building block of a healthy society. The root of the word *shalom*, the letters *Shin-Lamed-Mem*, comes from a concept of wholeness, of completion. The world, society, families, relationships, cannot be whole without the presence of peace.

But what is peace exactly? Is it simply the absence of strife? The famous commentator Don Isaac Abarbanel, from the late 15th century in Spain and Italy, says about peace:

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<sup>1</sup> 1:12

“In all places that ‘*shalom*’ is mentioned in the the Hebrew Bible, the commentaries thought it to be [about bringing about] agreement between two conflicting parties... [But this way of looking at *shalom*] is as if the matter of peace, according to them, does not occur, unless there is a fight and conflict beforehand! But [those commentators] did not know the greatness of *shalom*, and they did not see the precious splendor of its greatness, for if they say it is about bringing agreement to those in conflict, surely they would also say that *shalom* applies to situations other than fighting and conflicts, [such as working for] the common good, and the making of agreements between people, and loving one another, for these things are necessary in the gathering of a nation, and this is the string that ties and binds us all... Therefore, G-d is called ‘*Shalom*,’ since G-d connects the whole world.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, peace, as an intervening force in a place of strife, is, of course, good. The concept of *shalom*, peace, as agreement between conflicting parties is good, but it is not the ideal. The ideal, according to Abarbanel, is creating situations in which friction does not transpire in the first place. It is about setting up frameworks and societies in which peace is the norm, in which covenants and pledges are undertaken in order to assure that love and peace binds people together, making it ever more difficult to tear those bonds apart.

Now, at this point you may be saying, “OK, that’s great, peace is a very nice idea, but what does it have anything to do with today, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement?” To which I would say: “Good question.” *Teshuva*, repentance, an accounting of our deeds and commitment to do better, is like peace that comes after conflict. It is necessary, it is desired, and it is beautiful. Like peace after discord, *Teshuva* is vital. It helps right wrongs and sets a person, family, relationship, or nation on the right path. And, just like when there is peace after a struggle we are thankful for the peace, yet wish that the struggle did not have to take place from the outset, so too when we do *Teshuva*, we wish that we had not had to go through the pain and difficulty of making a misstep and taking actions to fix it. Now you might be saying: “But Rav Sam, what about that quote from last week from Maimonides, where he said that one who does *Teshuva* is

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<sup>2</sup> *Nachalat Avot* 1:12

elevated above the completely righteous?” To which I would say: “Good question.” *Teshuva* is Judaism’s way of recognizing that we are imperfect beings, of giving us a second chance, a clean slate. While our texts teach us that doing *Teshuva*, in essence, expunges our mistakes, we know from human experience that there can be a certain sense of guilt that remains long after we have reconciled with those we have wronged. How much better might we feel if we didn’t need to make those mistakes in the first place?

*Teshuva* and peace, though presented here as foils, are really two sides of the same coin. If we can construct systems in our lives based on understanding one another more deeply, based on mutual love, shared values, and on working for the common good, we stand to benefit from less missteps. If, from the outset of a new relationship, a new friendship, or a new working or learning environment, we can open up and voice to others what might trip us up in our desire to get along, we just may avoid making those mistakes in the first place. If we can be more honest with ourselves and with others, we may need to apologize less and do less *Teshuva* next year.

The concept of *Tokhecha*, rebuke, can also be an essential element of peace. This afternoon we will open the Torah to read the words of Leviticus chapter 19 verse 17: “הוֹכַח אֶת עַמִּיתָךְ- You shall surely rebuke your fellow.” In other words, the Torah says, when you see someone you know doing something you know they shouldn’t be doing or you know isn’t right, tell them. In fact, the *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabbah*<sup>3</sup> says that “Love without rebuke is not love” and “any peace- *shalom*- without rebuke is not peace.” The *midrash* seems to be saying that healthy relationships require a certain degree of openness and comfort to help better one another’s lives. How many altercations, whether verbal or physical, might have never taken place if a bystander had chosen to be an upstander, to confront a friend and say “NO- that’s not OK”?

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<sup>3</sup> 54:3

How many tragic MeToo encounters might have been avoided with appropriate rebuke from a trusted friend? The verse in Leviticus goes on to say that “you should not bring guilt upon yourself because of it” — because of your rebuke. In other words, don’t unnecessarily embarrass others with your rebuke. An ounce of rebuke, as I understand it in this context, is worth a pound of peace later. Helping to stop situations before they get worse can prevent heartache and pain, and potentially even save lives. Though we may not initially think of *Tokhecha*, rebuke, as an integral part of the process of peace, our tradition teaches us that it, too, is a necessary part of a functioning society.

Abarbanel, in his comment on the greatness of a higher peace, a peace that precludes conflict, says that peace, *shalom*, “is the string that binds us all.” He reminds us that in fact, one name for G-d is *Shalom*. Just as G-d- *Shalom*- has the power to connect the world, peace-*shalom*- is the force that unites humanity and brings us closer together, creating a more whole, just, and complete world. But peace is not merely a lack of animosity: it is a skill, a unique commodity that must be fashioned and sculpted. It must be continuously honed and tended to through the establishment of peaceful infrastructures, compassion for others, and appropriate rebuke. If we are doing it right, a consequence of cultivating an embodied peace of this nature can lead us to a place of needing to do less *Teshuva* in the months and years to come. I bless us all that we should know peace in our lifetimes — a peace that manifests not as a cessation of violence, but as a blissful realization of our shared hopes, dreams, and values that will make our society more whole for those who stand to inherit it after us. *G’mar Chatima Tovah* — may we all be written into the Book of Life, of health, and of peace.