

Judaism and Peace

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The Hebrew word for peace - shalom - comes from the root "shalem" meaning whole, complete, and well (cf. Gen.33 v.18). Thus the word "shalom" - peace - as it is used in the Torah in relation to society, refers to its overall social and spiritual well-being for which Torah itself aspires.

In the Midrash on Deuteronomy 20 v.10, we find a whole excursion on the virtues of Peace. These quotations, comments and homilies, conclude with the statement of Rabbi Simon ben Halafta "See how beloved is Peace: when God sought to bless Israel, he found no other vessel which could contain all the blessings He would bless them with, except for Peace, as it is written (Psalm 29 v.11) "The Lord will give strength to His People: the Lord will bless His people with peace". Indeed the Talmud in tractate Gittin declares that "the whole Torah is for the sake of peace".

Of course, the value of Peace is by no means at all an aspiration exclusively for Israel. While Judaism is the particular religious way of life of a particular people born out of particular historical experiences, its purpose and aspiration are universal.

Abraham himself is told to "be a blessing" (Genesis ch.12 v.2) and that through him and his seed, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. The Covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants is ratified at Sinai with the children of Israel as a whole, who are called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus ch.19 v.6). This mandate to sanctify God's Name (Leviticus ch.22 v.32) is perceived within Biblical tradition in two ways. Namely through the very existence of the children of Israel in history as testimony to the Divine Presence as expressed in Isaiah ch.43 v.10 and Ezekiel ch.36 v.23, and by the people's sanctification through the Commandments (Numbers ch.15 v.40), thereby serving as a paradigm, as a light unto the nations (Isaiah ch.49 v.6) - a light to illuminate the world. Thus the ultimate goal that the Jewish people is to serve, is one in which all men and women live in accordance with Divine Will, in justice, righteousness and peace, i.e. the Messianic ideal. (Isaiah ch.11 v.9,10)

Judaism teaches that all humankind is actually "called", "commanded" to live righteous lives. Humankind is in fact "covenanted" with God through the Covenant with the children of Noah made after the flood. (Genesis ch.9 v.9). Tradition understands the demands of this Covenant to consist of seven commandments - the quintessence of universal morality. These are the prohibitions against murder, idolatry, theft, incest, blasphemy, dismembering of a living animal and the command to establish courts of justice (Bereshit Rabbah 34,8). One who lives in accordance with the demands of the Noahide Covenant is perceived as a righteous gentile (who merits the World to Come) and under the rule of Jewish law is guaranteed the protected status of "ger toshav", affording all civil liberties and welfare, as to Jews. (Maimonides, Issurei Biah ch.14 hal.7, Melachim ch.10 hal.12).

Yet while this status applied to both individuals and peoples, for the first millennium and half of Jewish history, gentile acceptance of Noahide standards was seen as exceptional. Society at large in the world was perceived as idolatrous and corrupt, pagan and degenerate.

The emergence of Christianity and Islam posed a new religious reality for Judaism. Despite the experience of hostility and persecution in particular within the Christian world, nevertheless considered Rabbinical attitudes rose above this experience. Theologically it was easier for Judaism to view Islam far more positively as pure ethical monotheism as it contained neither doctrinal nor practical obstacles that were perceived in Christianity, such as in the Trinitarian Affirmation and the use of effigies. Nevertheless, Maimonides (12th century) for example, recognizes Christianity also as an instrument through which humanity might come closer to universal redemption. Rabbi Menahem Hameiri (13th century) went further and declared Christians as well as Muslims to be "peoples bound by the ways of true religion". And the Ashkenazi leader, Rabbi Moses Rivkes of the 17th century, author of the Beer HaGolah, affirmed Christians to be those "who believe in the Creation, the Exodus and in the main principles of religion and whose whole intent is to serve the Maker of Heaven and Earth".

However, Jewish universal ethical responsibility, while rooted in the affirmation that all people are created in the Divine Image and confirmed in the Noahide Covenant, is motivated also by additional impulses.

Maimonides makes these clear in his Code, the Laws of Kings, ch 10 hal.12. He quotes the Talmud (Gittin 61) that Jews are obliged to visit the gentile sick (even of heathens), to bury their dead with the Jewish dead, to provide for their poor together with the Jewish poor, because of "ways of peace"; and he adds the following verses in comment: "Behold it is stated" God is good to all and His Mercies are towards all His creatures" (Psalm 145 v.9) and it is stated "Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace" (Proverbs ch.3 v.17). The latter quotation appears in the Talmudic passage preceding the above (Gittin 59b) which is where the phrase that I quoted earlier appears that "the whole Torah itself is for the sake of "the ways of peace" as it is written "Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace". Maimonides thus follows the Talmud in affirming that the Torah - God's revelation - requires us in fact to go beyond the letter of the law, in order to serve the teleology of Torah, namely, peace and the good for all. The whole Torah and everything that a good Jew does must be directed towards peace. However, Maimonides reveals another dimension behind this imperative. It is not only the societal teleology of Torah that requires us to behave in this manner, he declares, but also and perhaps above all, the highest personal religious goal:- "Behold God is good to all and His mercies extend to all His creatures", and precisely therefore says Maimonides we must behave accordingly. Maimonides thus emphasizes the Biblical commandment and goal of Imitatio Dei (Leviticus ch.19 v.1 "Holy because I the Lord am Holy"). In the words of Abba Shaul in the Hekhlita "Just as He is gracious and merciful so you be gracious and merciful" (Mekhlita Cantides, 3).

Accordingly, Judaism declares it to be both our personal religious duty as well as our societal religious obligation to be compassionate and caring towards all, even heathens; how much more so, towards righteous believers.

The pursuit of peace and good for all is thus a supreme obligation for the covenanted Jewish people - the goal of the Messianic ideal.

Furthermore, inextricably linked to such Redemption and to the above conduct, is the higher (if not highest) value, to which reference was made at the outset. Namely, the obligation upon Jews both individually and collectively, to sanctify God's Name through their conduct, before society at large (Bereshit Rabbah 49, 16; Maimonides Hilchot Eduyot, ch.1 hal.2). For this reason, the Tosefta (Bava Kama ch.10) declares theft from a heathen to be a worse sin than theft from a Jew. In the words of the Midrash (Yalkut) on Deuteronomy ch.6 v.5 (similarly in Seder Eliyahu Rabbah ch.26) "See that you yourself are beloved by human beings and keep far from sin and theft from Jew, heathen and from any person ... for the Torah was only given to sanctify God's Name, as it says in Isaiah ch.66 v.19 "And I will put a sign on them ... and they shall declare my glory among the gentiles.

Indeed, Judaism teaches that God's very Name is Peace and thus the pursuit of Peace itself is the very sanctification of His Name which our Tradition declares to be the very purpose of our existence.