

Finding a Uniquely Jewish Path to Peace

By Alick Isaacs

In his discussion of the laws of Chanukah, The Rambam writes,

If [a person has the opportunity to fulfill only one of two mitzvot,] lighting a lamp for one's home [i.e., Sabbath candles] or lighting a Chanukah lamp - or, alternatively, lighting a lamp for one's home or reciting *kiddush* - the lamp for one's home receives priority, since it generates peace within the home. Peace is of great (or of primary importance), as reflected by the mitzvah requiring God's name to be blotted out to create peace between a husband and his wife. Peace is great, for the entire Torah was given to bring about peace within the world, as [\[Proverbs 3:17\]](#) states: "Its ways are pleasant ways and all its paths are peace."

Thinking about the 9th of Adar that falls between Chanukah and Purim this passage seems especially appropriate. As is well known the Rambam combines the laws of Purim and Chanukah in the Mishneh Torah and concludes his discussion of both with the extraordinary importance of peace. The meaning of this passage is not to be confused for liberal pacifism. Rather it is emphasizing something that, though it is essential to the message of the Torah, in our modern world may seem counter-intuitive.

The Rambam here is suggesting that the path to world peace must flow through the special and unique journey of the Jewish people through time as a nation that is bound to the detailed observance of the laws of the Torah. As the many disputes between Hillel, Shammai and others show, this path is not one without disagreement. On the contrary, it is riddled with variety and even conflict. But, underlying this variety and conflict is a deep unity. As the Jewish people look more and more closely at the world through the prism of Torah - while living lives filled with detailed Torah observance - the human aspiration for universality can find its satisfaction in the act of serving the God who unifies all in His Oneness. It is in

this sense that World Peace must be seen to emanate from the light that glows from the home on Shabbat. When understood in this way, we can appreciate why peace in the home, though it is not to be confused for something that is more important than God, is indeed more important than the physical script of His name.

This statement of the Rambam's is in harmony with the many other statements about the importance of peace that appear in the Mishna, the Talmud and many other texts. In all of them, the overriding theme is that peace fulfills our aspiration to appreciate the oneness of creation. It is our path to understanding the unified fields' theory that eluded Einstein and to seeing the oneness of the world that emanates from one single source. As the Midrash says,

This is what the Torah states: Who will bring pure from impure, not one (Job 14,4). Like Abraham who was born of Terach, Chizkiah from Achaz, Yoshiah from Amon, Mordechai from Shim'l, Israel from idolaters, the world to come from this world. Who has done this? Who commanded this? Who ordered this? Is this not the work of the Only One? (Midrash Bemidbar Rabba 19,1)

This grand statement is neither naïve nor vague. The Midrash acknowledges idolatry, impurity and evil in the world. But it poses to us the challenge of converting all of these to holiness through the observation of covenantal commandment so that all may be seen as one. The Torah's commitment to peace is therefore to be understood as a Halakhic principle that, as we have already seen, justifies the erasing of God's name in the case of a Sotah, guides the practical choices between lighting Shabbat candles and Chanukah candles and, to bring yet another example, determines the order in which people are called up to the Torah. As the Talmud says,

Abaye said to Rav Yosef, "Was this order (that cohanim and levi'im are called up first to the reading of the torah) instituted because it is one of the ways that fosters peace? But have we not just proven that it is biblically ordained?" Rav Yosef replied, "It is biblically ordained, but the Torah decreed it because it is one of the ways that fosters peace." Abaye responded, "All the laws of the entire Torah were decreed because they are the ways which foster peace! As it is written, "Her ways are of pleasantness, and all her paths are peaceful." (Talmud Gittin 59b)

The examples that support this principle abound and perhaps culminate in the biblical verse with which the Rambam concludes the Mishneh Torah - his masterwork of halakhic detail:

In that era (the Era of the Redemption), there will be... neither envy nor competition.... The occupation of the entire world will be solely to know God.... "For the world will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the ocean bed." (Habakuk 2,14)

As we commemorate the 9th of Adar we need to recognize the centrality of peace to the collective mission of the Jewish people in the world. This is a two sided recognition. On the one hand, we must prevent the value of peace from falling by the wayside and remain committed to upholding it as supreme. On the other, we must reinforce our commitment to the unique Jewish path to peace and resist the temptation of buying in too easily to other supposed paths that promise too little and run the risk of distracting us from our greater purpose. As we look closely at the conflicts among us, let us pay attention not only to the dangers of violent disagreement (that sadly characterized the conduct of Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai on this day). Let us also consider the power of the idea that a passionate disagreement about the precise service of God through the detailed observation of Mitzvot, when carried out in the name of God, is one that will continue to last and endure forever. This is because a disagreement - in which service of God rather than ego motivates the parties - allows the very differences between them to point out for us all the oneness and unity of God whose name is Shalom.

Dr. Alick Isaacs is author of "A Prophetic Peace: Judaism Religion and Politics" (Indiana University Press 2011) which argues that the central role of peace in the Jewish tradition can come in to view when the unique meaning of peace in Jewish thought is detached from its conventional meaning in modern politics. He is also co-director of "Talking Peace" (Siach Shalom) a project that he founded together with Dr. Avinoam Rosenak and Ms. Sharon Leshem-Zinger in 2010. Siach Shalom creates opportunities for dynamic group dialogue about peace inside Israel placing a particular emphasis on engaging political, social and intellectual leaders from the left and center with Religious-Zionist Rabbis from the ideological settlements.