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Practicing Peace on the 9th of Adar

by Rabbi Amy Eilberg

adapted from *From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Wisdom and the Pursuit of Peace*
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Hizkiah said: Great is peace, for with regard to all the commandments in the Torah it is said, If [you should be in a given circumstance], “if you should see” . . . “if you come upon” . . . “if it happens” . . . “if you build” . . . if the commandment is available to you, you are obliged to do it. But with peace, what is written? “Seek peace and pursue it. Seek it in your place and pursue it in another place.”¹

The Rabbis observed that most of the legislation in the Torah is case law. If we find a lost object, we are to return it to its owner. If we own property, we must take precautions to ensure the safety of those who enter it. If we see our enemy’s animal struggling under its load, we are to help him. When Shabbat or a holy day comes, we are to observe it.

Notably, two commandments are explicitly articulated not as responses to a particular situation, but as imperatives to be followed—indeed, pursued—at all times. We are not only to act in accordance with these imperatives passively when the occasion arises. We are to actively seek out opportunities to engage in them. The two cases are the pursuit of justice, of which it is said, “Justice, justice shall you pursue” (Deut. 16:20) and the pursuit of peace, of which it is said, “Seek peace and pursue it” (Ps. 34:15).

The Rabbis ask why the verse employs two verbs (“seek” and “pursue”) when one would have sufficed. Their answer: “Seek it in your place and pursue it in other places.” The two verbs, they suggest, convey different elements of the command: seek peace when conflict comes to your doorstep, but do not stop there. You must energetically pursue opportunities to practice peace, near and far, for it is the work of God.

This rabbinic teaching insists that we must reach beyond our homes and comfort zones in the pursuit of peace. What is called for is not passive or occasional practice, but a constant, relentless seeking after opportunities to respond to the command of peacemaking.

¹Babylonian Talmud *Perek Hashalom* and Jerusalem Talmud *Peah* 1:1.

Of course, the pursuit of peace does not mean that all disagreement should be resolved or all conflict avoided. On the contrary, the Rabbis, as is well-known, were vibrant practitioners of the most rigorous, wide-ranging, and challenging debate about every topic of significance in their world. So too are we to engage with one another on matters of import, embracing difference as an opportunity for learning and growth, but always honoring the humanity in the other, and trying to remember that we cannot have access to the whole truth.

In observance of the 9th of Adar, I offer below ten practical suggestions for how to practice the art of *machloket l' shem shamayim*, or sacred disagreement. Some of these are self-evident, practical ways to engage conflict or difference in our lives. Some are ways to work with our own internal reactions to difference and discord, cultivating the heart of the peacemaker that lies within us. Consider engaging in one or several of these on the 9th of Adar. And then if you are moved, continue the next day, and the day after. The health of your community and our world may depend on it.

1. Extend a warm greeting to someone at work with whom you have had recent disagreements.
2. Invite someone of another religion or political perspective to lunch.
3. Read a piece of political commentary representing a perspective different from your own. Try to imagine: what in the author's life journey might have led him or her to such a view?
4. Think back over a recent argument with a friend. Make a list of three ways to explain sympathetically why your friend might have believed or spoken in the way that he or she did.
5. Call or email a friend or relative with whom you have felt some tension, expressing a desire to reconnect.
6. If someone speaks sharply or critically to you today, stop and ask yourself what pain or pressure in his or her life might have led to that moment of harsh speech.
7. If you notice that you have spoken with unnecessary sharpness to another today, stop and ask yourself compassionately what might have led you to speak in that moment in a way that was hurtful. When you are ready, look for an opportunity to apologize.
8. If you hear two people arguing at a desk or table some distance from yours, notice how quickly you jump to conclusions about who is right. Stop and ask yourself what more you would need to know to really understand their conversation.
9. Pay close attention to whoever irritates you today. When you sense annoyance or anger in yourself, use that uncomfortable sensation as an internal reminder to ask yourself what about that person causes pain in you.
10. Find at least three opportunities today to say each of the following: "Thank you," "I appreciate you" (or "I love you"), and "I don't know."