



The Mitzvah of Conflict Resolution – on Campus

By Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller

We who live in a modern American Protestant environment have been led to believe that religion naturally encourages peacemaking. However, the confrontation in the Middle East has confirmed that just the opposite is true: not only are religious leaders not to be found among the active peacemakers but, they are, whether Muslim or Jewish, the most vociferous opponents of peaceful compromise and often support and perpetrate acts of violence and terror. Since their deeds are grounded in religious teachings and are justified by recourse to sacred texts it is all the more important to demonstrate that there is another voice of Judaism that nurtures the inclination to pursue peace and reconciliation. What follows is a discussion of a number of sources that instruct us in the mitzvah and process of conflict resolution.

There are many conflicts on campus life including interpersonal ones between Jewish groups and between Jewish and non-Jewish groups. Here are two texts I have found very inspirational in transforming these relationships to be more peaceful.

In Exodus 23:5 we read: “When you see that ass of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him (*azon ta’azov imo*).” Herein is presented a classic strategy that is intended to cause both an individual and his/her enemy to rethink their assumptions regarding the other. As the midrash elaborates:

“It was you who established equity” (Psalms 99:4). Rabbi Alexander taught: Two donkey-drivers lay down. His enemy saw him and passed them by.

After passing he thought to himself: It says in the Torah, “When you see the ass of your enemy... *you must nevertheless raise it with him.*” He immediately returned and reloaded and raised the donkey together with the ‘enemy’. The designated enemy began to think: ‘if the other donkey-driver was really my enemy he wouldn’t have helped me.’ He, therefore, concluded ‘he must really be my friend and I hated him for naught. Let me proceed to reconcile with him.’ They entered a tavern, ate, and drank and made peace with each other. What is it that caused them to make peace? The fact that one of them peered into the Torah. This is the implication of, “It was You who established equity.” (Tanhuma, Mishpatim, I)

In other words, the laws of Torah, when internalized, condition its adherents to resolve their conflicts. They do so, in this instance, by motivating one of the disputants to initiate a shared activity that assists his/her adversary. While engaged in righting the ass and loading its burden the two foes discover each other’s humanity and no longer view the other as the embodiment of evil. By the time they drink together they have already broken through the barrier that separates them and dispelled the judgment that stigmatized their old opponent who has now been transformed into a new partner. As is the prejudice in Judaism, action takes precedence over words. Doing together is a preferred mode of healing. Talking is merely the necessary follow-up that helps to cement a conciliatory process that has been concretized as deedⁱ.

Another inspirational teaching suggests a spiritual course for reconciling the ‘children of Abraham’. Exodus 23:12 asserts: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day’ you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed.” The Hebrew for bondman – **ben amatkha**- alludes to an earlier use of **ben ha-amah** as a dehumanizing reference to Abraham’s beloved but nameless (in this context) son Yishmael (Genesis 21:10). If so, the stranger or **ha-ger** almost demands to be read as **Hagar**. Thus at its deepest level Shabbat, the seventh day, is the day on which the alienated members of the family are brought back together to experience the spiritual unity that is the essence of Shabbat. Hagar and Yishmael are to be invited by Abraham, Isaac and Sarah for a family reunion. The secret of Shabbat is that its

observance can provide a setting for *teshuvah* (return), reconciliation and peace. Shabbat is the day of the celebration of relationship-with God and with our fellow human beings. It is after all, **the** day of peace whose name is peace (Shabbat Shalom).

The Shabbat's messianic intrusion into the rhythms of mundane life leads directly to the ultimate day of reconciliation as envisioned by Isaiah. "In that day, Israel shall be a third partner with Egypt and Assyria as a blessing on earth; for the Lord of Hosts will bless them, saying "Blessed be My people Egypt, My handiwork Assyria, and My very own Israel." (Isaiah 19:24-25). How generous! How poignant! The two great enemies of Israel – Egypt and Assyria – will, on that day of blessing and redemption, become *ami* (My people) and *maasei yaday* (My handiwork) respectively. Both of these expressions (*ami* and *maasei yaday*) are terms of endearment that, heretofore, had been the preserve of God's very own Israel. But on **that** day, Israel, Assyria and Egypt will unite in partnership to transform God's world and generate rapprochement and coexistence.

It is for us to begin the process.

On 9 Adar, consider reaching out to a fellow student, or student group on campus with whom you have been in conflict. Consider offering them help "with their donkey" in a creative way or invite them in to your home or community and make them comfortable. Perhaps by fulfilling this mitzvah of conflict resolution peace will *begin* to reenter in between you and to campus life in general.

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ⁱ I am indebted to Marc Gopin and in his trailblazing work, *Between Eden and Armageddon*, where much of the above analysis is presented.