

VISIONS OF PEACE:
Over Idealization and Under Realization

The priestly blessings conclude on the theme of peace: *וְיֵשֶׁם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם*, "and may He grant you peace." The Rabbis cherished this blessing above all others, and referred to it as *כֶּלִי מַחְזִיק בְּרָכָה*, the vessel which contains all blessings. All the previous blessings require peace as the context in which they can be effective and meaningful.

Exactly what does this "peace" refer to? The Sifre gives us two alternative definitions. R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim says: *שָׁלוֹם בְּבֵיתְךָ*, peace in your home. R. Nathan teaches: *זֶה שָׁלוֹם מְלָכֹת בֵּית דָּוִד*, it refers to the peace of the Kingdom of the House of David. The difference is that R. Hanina defines peace as domestic tranquility, whereas R. Nathan gives it a political-national definition, the peace of the realm.

What is surprising is that of these two possible interpretations, it is R. Hanina who teaches domestic peace. After all, it is the same R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim who tells us, in a celebrated passage in *Avot*, *הוֹי מִתְפַּלֵּל בְּשִׁלּוּמֵי שָׁלוֹם מְלָכֹת*, "Pray for the peace of the realm, for if not for the fear of authority people would swallow each other alive." Why, then, in the blessings of the priests, does he suddenly turn inward and interpret the concluding blessing as domestic peace, leaving it to someone else -- R. Nathan -- to emphasize the political aspects of peace?

Perhaps the answer is something we shall all have to learn, painful though it is.

Most of us have been reared on a noble vision: peace for all the world and in our own times. Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and every American president since then, have preached and strived for this vision. It is one of the most beautiful and inspiring themes to capture the imagination of mankind.

Of course, it is not new. It stems from, and is a secularized version of, the great visions of the prophets of Israel -- of Isaiah and Amos and Micah. It is they who taught that, "and the wolf shall lie down with the lamb...", and "they shall beat their swords into plough shares...", and "nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

The only difference is this: the prophets recognized that these are Messianic dreams, that they will be realized only with the advent of the Messiah. Isaiah, in Chapter Two, introduces his vision with the words of *וְהָיָה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים*, "And it shall be at the end of days." We must not expect the fulfillment of these uplifting visions until the days of the Messiah.

The secularized version, however, is not Messianic but Utopian. It is a modern phenomenon, the painting of an ideal world which is within the grasp of man. It teaches that we can, with the means available to us, create the perfect society, one of universal peace and justice for all men. The Messianic vision is one which sets an unrealizable goal, and inspires us to approximate it as best we can. But it knows that we cannot do so fully right now. The Utopian dream is one which inspires us with impatience and drives us to expect realization here and now.

Most of us, who are passionately devoted to the cause of peace, have assumed without further reflection that it is indeed possible to achieve peace universally "in our times." We are, hence, more Utopian than Messianic. Since the advent of the Atomic Age, this has become a working hypothesis of international relations,

something which is accepted beyond doubt. Indeed, consider the alternative -- all of civilization reduced to a fine atomic ash! Hence, universal peace is not only a distant goal but an immediate necessity.

And yet -- how frustrating! -- how many wars have been fought, and how much blood has been shed, since Hiroshima and Nagasaki!

What R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim is telling us is this: dream the dreams of Isaiah, of nation not lifting up sword against nation; pray for the peace of the realm; but don't be unrealistic. Strive for these always -- but without illusions as to their viability and applicability and realizability in the present or the immediate future.

Insofar as *now* is concerned, here we must turn to the blessings of the priests. It is they who refer to that aspect of the good life which can be attained and is within our grasp. The blessing of peace in the priestly blessings speaks of a peace which is much more realistic and attainable: **שָׁלוֹם בְּבֵיתְךָ**, peace in your homes. First you must strive for peace in your own home, between husband and wife, between parents and children, between brother and sister. *Then* you can strive for the larger aspects of peace -- political, social, international -- which will find their full realization at the end of days, the days of Messiah.

Not only Jewish tradition, but Jewish historical experience as well, teaches us never to over-anticipate the "end of days," the eschatological age, the days of Messiah. Judaism teaches us to beware of the fallacy of thinking that the visions of the future are all at hand, just around the bend. This is the great Utopian fallacy. There is a process of auto-suggestion and self-hypnosis at work: the facile illusion that turns Utopian dreams into supposed realities, only to disappoint and frustrate us and sow the seeds of disaster.

Jews who have come to Utopianism via a secularized Messianism seems particularly vulnerable to this fallacy, to this illusion. Moreover, many of our fellow Jews combine this Utopian fallacy with yet another element: a highly idealistic readiness to offer great sacrifices on behalf of the visions which are all but realized -- and especially are they willing to sacrifice for universal peace such elements as Jews, Judaism, and the State of Israel!

This is especially true of those deracinated Jews, both of the Right and of the Left, who have almost no Jewish affiliation or Jewish identity, and yet when it comes to Israel, express their dovishness by using that patronizing first-person-plural: "we" ought to be "magnanimous" by returning to the Arabs all they wish without any compensation. "We" ought to give up land and security, and perhaps our very existence, for the sake of "peace." As if Israel's suicide, Heaven forbid, will bring *shalom* to the world. Proof of the falsehood of this contention is -- Lebanon... Some peace! Some Utopia!

This holds true not only for Israel, but for Jewish interests in this country as well. I refer specifically to the Jewish situation in our own community, something for which you and I share a collective guilt. For too long have we ignored our interests and have had our attention distracted elsewhere. As a result, we have allowed special interest groups to undermine and erode the Jewish commitment to and presence in the West Side of Manhattan.

We are rightly compassionate towards all minorities and especially low income groups. Yet, that does not mean that we must set out deliberately to destroy an excellent neighborhood and de-Judaize it by sending our Jews fleeing to the suburbs. Does turning all the West Side into a slum contribute to universal justice? There

are events that happen in this neighborhood that, paradoxically, were advocated as acts of social justice towards lower class people, and resulted in disadvantaging them economically. Businesses were chased out of the neighborhood, and both we and they were the losers -- only some rabble-rousing politicians stood to gain.

Yet, I am told that when one official was approached and reminded of the Jewish interest in this community, his answer -- whether innocent or not, I do not presume to know -- was, "But what about our prophetic tradition?..." This -- from a man who probably cannot name any three Jewish prophets -- is supposed to be a reason why Jews must abandon the West Side of Manhattan, their homes and businesses and communal institutions...

For too long have we preached this Utopianism, have we subscribed to this fallacy, have we permitted the confusion of peace and pacifism and of goodness and altruism.

Perhaps this distinction and this awareness -- that the wholeness of peace and joy and plenty is reserved for the "end of days," and not available at present -- ought to serve not as a depressant but to encourage us. When we lower our over-idealized expectations, we become more realistic and less frustrated -- and, in addition, we achieve greater peace in the world too.

A generation after the Holocaust is hardly the time to expect age-old beautiful visions to be fulfilled.

A generation after the Holocaust is hardly the time to ask Israel or Jews to obligate the world and disappear so as to bring it peace.

A generation after the Holocaust is the time when Jews need the present reality of Samson as much as the future visions of an Isaiah.

If we are Jewishly realistic, we will not grow impatient because peace eludes us in the Middle East and in the world. We will learn to live with international tension -- even as we live with personal tension if there is no alternative. We will not expect universal peace in our times, but will spare no effort to obtain as much peace as soon as possible.

What bothers me is not the absence of universal peace or the peace of the realm as much as the lack of שָׁלוֹם בְּיַת in the State of Israel itself. How can we entertain Isaiah's vision of the lamb lying down with the wolf, or R. Nathan's dream of the peace of the kingdom of the House of David in its relations with others, when we have not begun to attain R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim's blessing of שָׁלוֹם בְּבֵיתְךָ, domestic peace? How can we speak of peace in the world or in the Middle East, if the Prime Minister and Defense Minister of Israel are not on talking terms? -- if its two Chief Rabbis do not even greet each other? -- if Israel's Ambassador to the U.N. and its Ambassador to the U.S.A. are at loggerheads?

Peace must be built from the bottom up, not from the top down.

So, we need visions -- grand visions, holy visions, universal visions -- and even if they cannot be realized at once, they still tell us in what direction we should be going and they exercise a "pull" on us.

But we need not only visions, but blessings. And the greatest of all blessings is: שָׁלוֹם בְּבֵיתְךָ, may He bestow upon us peace, שָׁלוֹם בְּבֵיתְךָ, peace in our homes.