

YOM KIPPUR MORNING SPEECH – 2014

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It feels like we are living in a chaotic world nowadays, does it not? The Middle East is engulfed in war; Ukraine is barely holding back the onslaught of the Russians who want to reestablish their old iron curtain; while Iran poses the greatest threat in the Middle East to Israel. We watch the gamesmanship of negotiations as Iran postures with the U.S. to arrive at a deal for peace by November 24. Religiously speaking, we see in the Middle East the Shia-Sunni divide metastasize into even more hatred. And finally, the United States is engaged now in a war against ISIS. In a recent speech at a security conference in Israel on 9.11, Prime Minister Netanyahu characterized radical Islam's view of itself as becoming the master faith of all religions, drawing upon the historic quotation from Hitler who described the Aryans as the Master Race.

Obviously, world peace is not something we will achieve today. We can shrai "gevalt" but it will not make a bit of difference. Achieving world peace may very well be beyond our scope of influence, but, I am reminded of a statement of a sage who said, "Before there is world peace I must begin with an inner peace. For only when a person makes peace in him or herself are they able to make peace in the world." What was that teaching about? What was his underlying message? Judaism teaches us that our mitzvah is to pursue peace as well as justice. Especially on Yom Kippur, there is a role for us to play in balancing between inner peace and world peace.

Judaism has always cherished seeking peace, even to the point where in one Midrash the sages say that the Torah itself misrepresents the truth between Joseph and his brothers in order to preserve peace between them after Jacob their father dies.

When Jacob died, the midrash teaches that the brothers were afraid that Joseph would now wreak vengeance upon them for the cruel act of selling him into slavery years ago. That is why they said to him, "Before his death, your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly'" (Genesis 50:16).

However, nowhere in Scripture, according to the midrashic text do we find that our Patriarch Jacob had actually given such an instruction! The upshot is that the Torah sometimes stretches the truth by using fictitious words for the sake of peace" (Deuteronomy Rabbah Shoftim 15).

Apparently there are many pathways to achieving peaceful relations with those who are estranged from us, let alone finding a measure of peace within ourselves. How can we do this?

There are two ways that we can pursue peace where it will make a difference in our lives. Start with peace inside us. Second, make peace with someone whom we have been at odds with recently. Of course we cannot ignore the cause of world peace while exclusively pursuing peace in our own inner recesses. Yet, Judaism teaches us to embrace all these pathways to a better world. The best starting for peace starts inside us and extends to the entire world.

Peace is not about only maintaining quiet in a conflict between two individuals or two nations. Peace is a state of mind and a state of being. Peace means affirming shared values and working

for a common good. Peace inside our souls refers to a deep sense of awareness and contemplation that our life's meaning and purpose is good. Inner peace can include harmony and connectivity within us, our loved ones and with God.

Remember that famous statement from Rabbi Zusia who when asked by his students what he was thinking about now that he had reached his last moments of life? He answered, "I do not fear when people say why you weren't like this one or that one? What I fear most is when someone asks; "why you weren't more like Zusia?" Finding inner peace is often a lifetime struggle. Maybe the hardest question on inner peace revolves around whether we lived up to our own potential? Are we true to ourselves and to others whom we interact with in the world?

I have met individuals at peace within themselves. Sometimes they were great teachers and other times they were simple people who could look over the valley of their life experience and recall traumatic events but still find the spiritual high ground. Being at peace does not mean that life was perfect or that it all went well. It just means that some people learn how to cope with their life issues in a way that transcends challenging times and painful moments and ultimately find an inner strength to transform those moments to wisdom. This is one reason why I love this holy day of Yom Kippur, because it affords us the opportunity to take a break and survey the big picture of our lives. Peace is a challenge to us to work for on Yom Kippur. Taking hold of our issues, facing them and generating hope is one pathway towards embracing shalom in our lives.

One of the hardest things for humans to do is make peace with someone whom we have hurt or are distant from. This is the one day, ordained by God, where we are commanded to make peace with others. It is the day when God is cajoling us to go ahead and reach out to someone and say, "I'm sorry." God is coaxing the other to say, "I forgive you." We all know the feeling of being humbled and submitting ourselves to the judgment of another person. We know how awkward it can feel to forgive someone out of convenience or to just get it out of the way and not truly mean it. The same applies for fake apologies as well.

Still our mitzvah today is to change not only our lives but someone else's life for the better. So I am challenging us this morning to be committed this year to healing one relationship in which we have unfinished business. Take a risk and put your pride on the line for a greater achievement. The Talmud says that turning an enemy into a friend is one of the highest mitzvot we can accomplish. Even the Siddur says oseh shalom bein adam l'havero: namely that, a person should make peace between one person and another. Even if we cannot make peace with another and ourselves, maybe we can find an opportunity to make peace between two other individuals. Whatever we can do to encourage our neighbor to reconcile with a friend or relative and or even an adversary is making a difference in the world.

A rabbi told his students that God helps us to make peace since God was able to make the heavens at the dawn of creation by making peace between the two extremes of fire and water. So if God could make peace between these two extremes, then surely God can bring people together in peace.

Later on that rabbi visited a town and discovered the residents were involved in a huge communal quarrel. He came into the town on the 9th of Av, which commemorates the destruction

of the Temple in Jerusalem. One of the leaders asked the rabbi to arbitrate the dispute that was growing and dividing the entire community. Others said, "He will not do so since it is a fast day on the 9th of Av and we will be in schul." The rabbi heard that comment and exclaimed, "No day is better than this one, for it was because of an idle quarrel and baseless hatred amongst the Jewish community that Jerusalem the city of God was destroyed."

Do we give up too easily towards working for peace in the community? Is it fair to say that the older we get, the more we become focused on our own issues and let go of the world's problems? What is it about aging that lures us into retreat from the challenges in our world? Clearly not everyone does that but how often do we hear someone say; 'leave the world's problems to the next generation to deal with.' Yet is there not still time to impact events in small ways that help others find their own shalom?

Conclusion

Peacemaking is an arduous task. It takes hard work and patience, whether we are talking about inner peace or world peace. But what comes first is looking inside and checking our own attitude about the life we live and those who are near to us. What is the most important quality for peace making? Rabbi Pinhas used to say, "I am always afraid to be more clever than devout." And then he added: "I should rather be devout than clever, but rather than both devout and clever, I should like to be good."

That is the important ingredient to peacemaking whether it is between us and someone else or if we are helping others make peace. God wants us to be good at heart and not play the chess game of life, out-strategizing our friends or adversaries.

Rabbi Baurch of Huza often went to the marketplace at Lapet. One day the prophet Elijah appeared to him there: and Rabbi Baruch asked of him; "is there anyone amongst all these people who will have a share in the World to Come?"

Elijah answered, "There is none."

Later, two men came to the marketplace and Elijah said to Rabbi Baruch; "Those two will have a share in the World to Come."

Rabbi Baruch asked the newcomers; "What is your occupation?"

They replied; "We are clowns. When we see a person who is sad, we cheer her or him up. When we see two people quarreling, we try to make peace between them"(B. Ta'anith 22a).

Remember if we look at peace making in terms of winning and losing then we have lost sight of the inner peace and the outer one. The sages say "Seek Peace and Pursue It, "and that must be our life's goal, on this day and every day.