

D'var Torah: Parashat Pekudei

by Benjamin Gee - Wednesday, March 06, 2019

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This week the Chief Rabbi explains the last word in Judaism.

What are the four meanings of the word 'Shalom'?

Shalom, of course means peace, hello and goodbye. But what's the fourth meaning? Shalom is also one of the names of God. So central and crucial is the concept of peace in our tradition, that it is embodied within the very essence of the existence of the Almighty.

In parashat Pekudei, the Torah describes the great celebration that took place when we dedicated the new Mishkan - the Tabernacle, and the alter within it, in the Wilderness. For the Haftarah, we have a matching passage from the Prophets, in the first book of Kings, which describes King Solomon's celebration when he dedicated the first temple. At that time, Solomon reflected on the fact that his great father King David had wanted desperately to build the temple. In fact, David saw this as his ultimate mission in life – and yet, he was denied this privilege! But why?

In the first book of Chronicles we are told that the Almighty said to David "ki ish milchamot ata v'damim shafachta", "for you are a man of war and you have shed blood". Now of course, the purpose of all the wars that David fought and led our people into was in order to preserve life, to protect us from our enemies who sought to destroy us. They were 'milchemet mitzvah', he engaged in wars through which he hearkened to the word of Hashem, to defend our people. Nonetheless, since he had blood on his hands, he was not the ideal person to build the house of God.

Instead, his son Shlomo, coming from the route 'Shalom' - meaning peace, was the ideal king to do it. Indeed, throughout his reign, King Solomon did not fight a single battle. We can now understand why in parashat Yitro Hashem tells us that for the purpose of a stone alter, we may not use hewn stones. And the reason is "ki charbacha heinafta aile'ha vatechalelha", because for that purpose you would have had to use knives or swords which can be implements of war and therefore you would be defiling that alter.

That is why Shalom is the concluding word, it's the bottom line of all of our most important prayers. It's the last word of our Kaddish, it's the last word of our Bensching – grace after meals. It's the last word of birkat Kohanim, the duchening where the priests bless us. It is the last word of the Amidah.

In Pirkei Avot, The Ethics of the Fathers, Hillel taught that we should be the disciples of Aaron the High Priest, to be 'ohev Shalom v'rodef shalom', to love peace and pursue peace always. Therefore the Gemorah in masechet Brachot tells us that it is so important, that every single morning in our prayers, we should praise God who is 'Oseh Shalom u'voreh et hakol', 'He makes peace and He creates everything', indicating that nothing is of any value unless there is peace.

It is therefore so suitable that 'Shalom' is one of the names of the Almighty. When I greet you and I say

“Shalom Aleichem”, I am not just saying may peace be upon you, I am also saying may God be with you. Of course, on Shabbat we want peace in our homes, and we want the spirit of Hashem to be with us. As a result, the blessing that we give and which I say to you now, is Shabbat Shalom.

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