

Chol HaMoed Sukkot - 5785 (2024) Speaking of Peace in the Midst of War

Today, I want to say many things, but with just one idea. Today, I want to share several phrases and quotes from Jewish tradition, but with just one idea: “let’s not stop talking about peace in the midst of war.” The necessary and just war; the marvelous (those that surpass fiction) operations of the **IDF**; the joy after the elimination of the leaders of our enemies (valid, without the need to hide behind a pseudo-moral superiority when bloodthirsty men and terrorists are eliminated); the pain of the **October 7** tragedy—none of this should stop us from continuing to talk about and dream of peace. That is all. Simple, but necessary, in my opinion, a reminder in times of war. We must not lose the vocabulary and practice of peace.

During **Sukkot**, we are invited to read the book of **Kohelet** (Ecclesiastes), and there, Solomon tells us:

“A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.” (Ecclesiastes 3:8)

In modern psychoanalytic terms, this text is enabling. It allows us, at times, to feel hatred; we shouldn’t feel “bad” or have “guilt” for this; it is a natural human reaction. And yes, there are times when the **Torah** permits war. We cannot profess the false naïveté of “Miss Universe” and ask for “world peace” or to “end all wars” when our enemies are stalking us and seeking our destruction.

In Judaism, **Shalom** is one of the guiding principles. We are a people of peace, but not a pacifist people. On one hand, there is absolute pacifism, which I respectfully call “foolish” pacifism; that of empty, absolute slogans that oppose all war, all use of violence, even as a method of defense or prevention; that which some religions advocate, like Jainism, Quakers, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or the religions of modern social movements in university settings with utopian slogans from movies or textbooks, showing only childish will and not reality in the adult world. On the other hand, there are other religions, like ancient Greek with its Ares, god of war; or Mars in Roman culture; Norse mythology with Odin and Thor, and the Islamist jihad, where war, military battle, and martyrs are exalted.

And Judaism? Is it a pacifist or bellicose religion? It is neither: it is a **realist** religion; with peace as an ideal but with the awareness that war can be a reality:

"When you approach a city to wage war against it, you shall propose peace to it."
(Deuteronomy 20:10).

There is no glorification of war as a reality nor of its warriors, but there is, time and again, a call to war when it is considered just or necessary. When **Amalek** attacked from behind (Exodus 17:8-16), Moses led the battle. Before his death, Moses’s last mission was to “avenge” what the **Midianites**

had done (Numbers 31:1-3). Joshua was called to conquer the land of Canaan and fight to the end, without any possibility of truce or concession, against the seven Canaanite nations. The judges, tribal warriors, repeatedly rose up to fight against neighboring peoples attacking the tribes of Israel. The great kings, Saul, David, and Solomon, are also known for their battles.

These are what we might call the “historical” books of the Hebrew Bible. However, in the prophetic books, in the books about ideals and utopias, we find ideas like in Isaiah:

"He will judge between the nations and arbitrate for many peoples; they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." (Isaiah 2:4).

The historical books of the Bible speak about reality, and the prophetic books speak about the ideal. And in this tension lies Judaism. We are what the writer **Amos Oz** called “pasifisnikim.” Not “pacifists” nor “warmongers,” but pasifisnikim: pacifists at heart with realpolitik in action. Being a pasifisnik does not mean being a pacifist who rejects any form of war or use of force. Sometimes it is necessary, sometimes war is a **mitzvah, milchemet mitzvah**, when it comes to defending your population, rescuing a hostage, or protecting your borders from an imminent threat. Being a pasifisnik means not praising war or maintaining a constant state of belligerence and continuously believing that peace is the ideal and that peace is possible. But when the life and death of your people depend on war, then it is accepted as a reality. If you ask me about Jewish political theology, I believe Amos Oz was right: we are pasifisnikim.

As we said, this week during **Sukkot**, we are invited to read the wisdom of the words of King Solomon (Shlomoh, and what a nod from destiny that his own name means “his peace”). This wise king not only says that there is a time for war and a time for peace, but also says:

“A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to tear down, and a time to build; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” (Ecclesiastes 3:3-4).

To which the sages in the **Midrash** comment:

“‘A time to kill,’ in wartime, ‘and a time to heal,’ in peacetime; ‘a time to tear down,’ in wartime, ‘and a time to build,’ in peacetime. ‘A time to weep,’ in a period of mourning, ‘and a time to laugh,’ after mourning; ‘a time to mourn,’ in a period of mourning, ‘and a time to dance,’ after mourning.” (Kohelet Rabbah 3:4-5).

During the past year, without a doubt, we have been in the “Et Milchama” (the times of war), times to kill, times to destroy, times to weep, times to mourn. I fully trust that soon we will be entering “Et Shalom” (times of peace), times to heal, times to build, times to laugh, and times to dance. The elimination of Sinwar, the last leader of Hamas, should mark a turning point to move towards times of peace. The great tragedy for the Palestinian people, their ruin, and consequently also the tragedy and death of so many Israelis throughout history, is the inability of their leaders in the last 90 years

to accept what the Jewish people have known for 3000 years: “a time for war and a time for peace.” To not accept when they are defeated. To see everything as a victory when in reality it is an absolute defeat. Zionism has always been minimalist in its aspirations and practical in its resolutions; from there stems each of its victories. In contrast, Palestinian leaders, and unfortunately the vast majority of their population, have always had maximalist aspirations and idealistic resolutions; hence their failure and ruin. One cannot live in a constant state of war, a Pyrrhic war, where, as the famous king said, “one more war that I win, and I return home alone.” And they don’t even win it.

For one year, we have been in “times of war,” almost ominously, prophetically, in times of “Sukkot” when we speak of “Sukat Shelomecha” (The Sukkah of Peace). The main perpetrator of the tragic October 7th events has fallen, which opens the path to “times of peace.” The Israeli leadership wanted an absolute victory that would serve as an example for the world. Now, they can say they have achieved it. Hamas is decimated, without leaders. Hezbollah is left leaderless and militarily weakened. It is time, and yes, it must come from our side because our enemies still don’t realize it, to enable “times of peace.”

And I am not talking about an ideal peace, but a real peace. Instead of singing in the **Hashkiveinu** prayer asking for a “Sukkah of peace,” wouldn’t it be better to pray for a “fortress of peace”? Why do we ask for a peace like a Sukkah—precarious, fragile, temporary, with holes... Wouldn’t it be better to pray for a steel peace? A concrete peace? Rabbi Kook said:

“How wonderful is peace!” proclaimed the Sages (VaYikra Rabbah 9:9). The value of peace is so great that we pray for it even if it will be like a sukkah — flimsy and temporary.” (Adapted from Mo'adei HaRe'iyah p. 97).

Peace doesn’t have to be perfect; it just needs to be peace.

We cannot say that there is love and fraternity between Israelis and Jordanians or between Israelis and Egyptians... but there is peace. There has been peace since 1994 and 1979, respectively. It’s not perfect; there is still tension and resentment... but you know what there aren’t? Deaths! Since the beginning of the war, Israel has been attacked from seven fronts and has responded to those seven fronts. Egypt and Jordan... nothing. A peace like the Sukkah, imperfect, permeable, always on the verge of breaking, but it holds, and by holding, it sustains the lives of its inhabitants.

We find ourselves in war, but we must not lose the vocabulary and the longing for Shalom, for peace, in our minds and hearts. We conclude each of our blessings asking for peace: “Ose Shalom Bimromav...”. Every time we conclude the Kaddish, the Amidah, the grace after meals, we pray for peace. We greet each other wishing peace “Shalom Aleichem”; the Shabbat greeting is “Shabbat Shalom”, a peaceful Shabbat. When we bid farewell to our dead, we say “Lech beShalom”, go in peace. Peace is so important that our sages wrote a treatise with sayings glorifying peace, all beginning with “Gadol HaShalom, great is peace...”

“Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Great is peace, for peace is to the world as leaven is to dough. Had not the Holy One, blessed be He, given peace to the earth, the sword and the beast would have robbed the world of its children... Rabbi Yehoshua said: Great is peace, for the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, is called ‘peace’... Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: Great is peace, for Aaron the [High] Priest was praised only for peace; for he loved peace, pursued peace, greeted with the salutation of peace...”
(extracts from **Perek HaShalom**).

Et Milchama, veEt Shalom - A time of war and a time of peace. In these times, we aspire to an imperfect peace, but peace nonetheless, like our Sukkah. However, the Talmud (Baba Batra 75a) tells us that the day will come when we will not make Sukkot from Schach, but there will be a great and unique Sukkah made with the skin of a mysterious marine animal known as the Leviathan. This will finally be a complete and perfect Sukkah of Shalom. The sages invite us to imagine that today we live a peace like the Sukkah, permeable to winds and rains; however, in the future, the skin of this mythical animal will cover all of us, the entire people of Israel and all of humanity, in a great Sukkah in Jerusalem, a waterproof Sukkah with thermal insulation, a Sukkah without pores, without holes, and one that no wind can tear down.

Let us go to war, but let us always dream and fight for peace.

Pax et bonum

Salam Aleikum

Shalom Aleichem

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