

Peace: Shalom is more than the Absence of War
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Abstract:

This article explores Shalom or peace as a sense of wholeness within a society, which is reflected in the relationships among its peoples. Psalm 72 is used to examine the many meanings of Shalom. Social justice and peace are connected through the King's responsibility to defend the afflicted and save the needy.

Key Words: Shalom, Peace, Psalm 72, Jewish tradition, social justice

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Psalm of Solomon, 72 (NIV)

- 1: Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness.
- 2: May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.
- 3: May the mountains bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness.
- 4: May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor.
- 5: May he endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations.
- 6: May he be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth.
- 7: In his days may the righteous flourish and prosperity abound till the moon is no more.
- 8: May he rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.
- 9: May the desert tribes bow before him and his enemies lick the dust.
- 10: May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores bring tribute to him. May the kings of Sheba and Seba present

him gifts.

11: May all kings bow down to him and all nations serve him.

12: For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help.

13: He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death.

14: He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight.

15: Long may he live! May gold from Sheba be given him. May people ever pray for him and bless him all day long.

16: May grain abound throughout the land; on the tops of the hills may it sway. May the crops flourish like Lebanon and thrive like the grass of the field.

17: May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun.

Then all nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed.

18: Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds.

19: Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.

20: This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.

First of all, thank you for your welcome. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to study with you, particularly during this reflective and very special time of year, as the Christian world moves towards Easter.

The message that I want to bring tonight, in focusing on the 72nd Psalm, is that peace is more than the absence of war. There are elements to creating peace, true peace, that are not reflected in just the fact that people aren't killing each other. That is not to say that we don't have texts that talk about a lack of war. You remember something about "beating swords into plowshares". That's Isaiah 2:4, "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up nation, shall not take up sword against nation nor

shall they learn war anymore.” There is one Hebrew word that is missing in that verse, however. You might be surprised to know that what is missing is the word “*shalom*”. There is nothing in that verse from Isaiah about peace in the sense of *shalom*. It is only about peace in the sense that armies are not killing each other. In Isaiah, the wish is that people are going to take their swords and turn them into plowshares. But the concept of *shalom* means something much more than that.

By contrast, let's take a look at Psalm 72 contextualize it. It is attributed to David as a prayer on behalf of his son Solomon who was about to become king. I want you to really take notice of what David says will need to happen for his son to be successful king. Did you notice when the Psalm was being read, was there anything in there about going over to the other nations and subjugating them by force? Was there any mention of using the sword to bring others to justice? No.

So what were some of the themes of this Psalm? What is going to make Solomon a successful king? Why are the other nations going to bow down to him? Certainly, honoring God is one element but how, specifically, will the new king honor the Lord according to Psalm 72? The psalm tells us that a king's greatness is tied to his willingness to defend the needy and to have pity on the poor. He cares about the poor and brings the needy deliverance. He redeems them from fraud and lawlessness, and the shedding of their blood weighs heavily upon him. So when we take a look at verse three of Psalm 72, which is translated as “May the mountains bring prosperity to the people, to the hills the fruit of righteousness”, we find that the Hebrew word that is translated as prosperity is, in fact, *shalom*. The message is that when the king brings about social justice, the result will be *shalom* for his people.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that *shalom* is translated in the psalm as prosperity, which kind of implies something about the translators' point of view about *shalom*. *Shalom* here was flowing out of not only spirituality but material advancement as well. The poor and the needy are taken care of

through prosperity. Take note of how the understanding of the psalm shifts based on the translation. It is really very interesting. We do a Torah study our in congregation on Saturday mornings, on Shabbat. I encourage people to bring their own bibles because a good chunk of the time is spent comparing translations to realize the full breadth of the meaning of the Hebrew. There's a reason for translation differences. They don't make this stuff up; the translator has a point of view as to the underlying meaning of the Hebrew that reflects his or her understanding of what the Biblical author was trying to communicate. This translator was trying to make a point about the just distribution of material wealth serving the entire community.

Let me tell you, I looked in Strong's concordance and the word "*shalom*" or some variation thereof appears 237 times in the Hebrew Bible alone; not counting appearances in the New Testament. That's how important this concept is. And it's not always translated as peace. Very often *shalom* is translated as a sense of wholeness. Peace is not just the absence of war. Peace is not just the absence of bickering. Peace is about having a sense of wholeness.

If we take Psalm 72, what are some of the things that bring about that sense of wholeness? How is this king/boy going to be successful? The king is going to be successful by addressing the needs of the lowest element of society, of caring about those folks. The other kings are going to come and lick this guy's boots because he is the one who is going to take care of the needs of people. In other words, he is going to create whole society, a society that is rich in righteousness and justice. You will see those words at the end of verse 3 where it reads "and the hills in righteousness". Then, later on towards the end of the psalm the successful king is portrayed as one who dispenses justice.

The concept within the Hebrew bible of *shalom* is almost always tied to the twin concepts of justice and righteousness. If you're going to have peace, if you're going to have a society, which is whole, that society must be righteous

and that society must be just. You don't just create peace on a piece of paper. Peace comes from truth and acknowledging people's truth. Peace comes from a society in which everyone feels included. Peace comes from a society that recognizes and values acts of righteousness. Peace comes within a society where people feel they are being treated justly. Those are the concepts that underlie *Shalom*. It's not just the lack of war. It truly is a sense of wholeness within the society.

And what is the source of justice and righteousness?
Let's look at the first three verses:

1: Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness.

2: May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.

3: May the mountains bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness.

Justice and righteousness flow from the mountains and the hills; they flow from Creation itself. Thus when the king acts justly and righteously he is reflecting God's own values. Another example is Amos 5:24 where righteousness flows like a mighty stream. These motifs are meant to convey to us that this is not just about a king but rather that justice and righteousness flow out of Creation itself; they flow directly from God.

In the Hebrew Bible, however, there is another element of the concept of *shalom* that is more personal. I'll give you an example of this more personal sense of peace that might be familiar. Do you ever close a service with "May God bless you and keep you?" I think the bobbing heads signal yes. So what is the last line of that blessing? "May God's continence shine on you and grant you peace." When hear those words, we don't think about our neighbor coming over with a shotgun. That's not the kind of peace we're talking about when we imagine a sense of peace with those with whom we are in relationship and a sense of peace within ourselves. May God bless you with a sense of *Shalom*, a sense of wholeness and peace so that we go through our everyday lives feeling that we have a core. We have an inner

self. We have a soul. If you have a community that is so blessed, that will be reflected in the relationships within the people who are in that community.

Another example of this concept is found in the Hebrew prayer for healing. The wish in that prayer is that the recipient might realize a *r'fuach shalema*, a full and complete healing of mind, body and spirit. The word *shalema* has the same root as *shalom* but in this sense it means a feeling of “wholeness”. Peace and healing within ourselves comes when we feel that we sense that we are complete and whole human beings.

Finally, we find an example of peace in times of troubled human relationships. In the Book of Numbers, the incident of Pinchas, poorly translated as Pheneas, is recounted. In a moment of zeal, Pinchas stabs a couple, a Jewish male and a non-Jewish female, through the belly because they are doing what couples often do, if you get my drift. God offers Pinchas a *brit shalom*, a covenant of peace, to stem Pinchas’s inner-turmoil and to indicate God’s forgiveness or, at least, understanding of what is otherwise a heinous act. The ancient Sages are quick to point out that this is a singular event, and solely the province of God, lest anyone believe that religious fanaticism is to be tolerated in Jewish society, much less encouraged. In this instance, God is the source of peace; the inner peace that quiets the soul.

Moreover, peace is possible even in the middle of great conflict. There are many instances in which people seem to be able to reach across unbridgeable divides in order to be in personal relationship with people who were seemingly at odds with each other. I was careful not to interject the Middle East thus far but I will here. There are numerous organizations and numerous individuals in Israeli and Palestinian society that are in relationship with each other. Is there a conflict? Clearly, there is and a most bitter one. But nonetheless they figure out a way to be able to maintain personal relationships even in that very, very difficult part of the world.

A lot of people will tell you the reason that the LGBT community has made such strides in this country in the last 20 years is that people have been willing to come out of the closet so that many of us realized they had gay friends we didn't know we had. And all of a sudden, woo, wait a minute. Suddenly, gay people can't be a "they"; can't be an "other". Once you experience being in relationship with somebody who you thought was an "other", big stuff can change.

It is important to remember that ultimate source of peace is God. The last two verses of Psalm 72 is "blessed is the Lord, God of Israel who alone does wondrous things and then blessed is his glorious name. Forever his glory fills the whole world amen and amen." To me, the whole point of those verses is that all the attitudes that the king is going to show, the king learns from God. And when the king acts justly, he is doing so in imitation of God. God is the ultimate distributor of wonders and glory. The king is going to live reflected in that glory so long as the King reflects God's values. In other words, the ending line here is yes, we are all about the king, all about blessings upon the king, we want everything to be successful. But, ultimately success resides with God and not the individual. Even as a king, it is crucial to realize that one is blessed because of the justice and righteousness we model as people created in the image of God.

And, in this regard, let me end on a note of optimism. I believe in progress. While cruelty and war continue to exist in this world, our attitude towards them is different. Things that were once acceptable modes of state action, for instance gassing in World War I, at least we now understand them to be outside the pale of civilization. Is there a possibility it will happen again? Yes. But at least our attitude is that only a monster would do something like that rather than "all's fair in love and war". The very idea of a world war, of the type of all-out warfare that occurred twice in the 20th century, seems extremely remote. And the use of nuclear weapons as tactical, not just at the end of times, seems to be even more remote.

To that extent the world is a more peaceful planet. In his *New York Times* column of September 22, 2014, David Brooks writes about this beautifully. In that column, he suggested that we should get some perspective about the times in which we live. The world and our existence now is so much better than it was 100, 200, or certainly 300 years ago. His examples include our society's discrediting of slavery and child labor as well as a generally higher standard of living. For me, the thought of another set of Crusades is out of the question. To put a particular Jewish twist on it, the Spanish Inquisition isn't happening again. Is it a perfect world? Are we anywhere near a totally peaceful world? Absolutely not, but at least all-out warfare, like World Wars I and II, isn't our normal way of conducting state business. For that we have to be at least a little bit thankful.

Thank-you for the honor of being with you tonight and good night.

Biographical Sketch

Rabbi Alan Freedman joined Temple Beth Shalom, Austin Texas, as their first full time Rabbi in 2002. He holds a Juris Doctor from the University of Pennsylvania Law School. He can be reached at Rabbi.Freedman@bethshalomaustin.org.