

CHAPTER 6, MISHNA 6: WAYS 39-40: WORDS OF PEACE, WORDS OF TRUTH

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Torah is greater than priesthood and kingship, for kingship is acquired with 30 qualities, priesthood is acquired with 24, whereas the Torah is acquired with 48 ways. These are: ... (39) setting [his fellow] on the path of truth, (40) setting him on the path of peace...

For the past few weeks, we have been in a "cluster" dealing with the Torah scholar's relationship with other -- usually not as holy -- individuals. As we have seen so far, the scholar views himself with his greater Torah knowledge as more obligated to -- rather than removed from -- his fellows. Here we learn an additional lesson of how he impacts upon them -- that he leads them on the paths of truth and peace. This is of course so very nice and poetic. What, pray tell, do these two paths mean?

The path of truth sounds like correct, "true" behavior. The scholar speaks truth; he tells his fellows what the Torah requires of them and how to truly and properly serve G-d.

Now this would seem, roughly speaking, to be the scholar's entire mission to man. What more is there to tell them after telling them "the truth?" Yet the scholar speaks "peace" as well. What is this separate message he carries? Isn't peace just one of the many wonderful lessons the Torah teaches us: "...on three things does the world endure -- justice, truth and peace" (earlier, [1:18](#))? What does "peace" imply which "truth" does not already tell us?

The truth is (bad pun there), truth-speakers are not always all that popular. People are usually just a little bit afraid of the truth. They are not prepared to be told that their hallowed beliefs are flawed or require reexamination. People are afraid of change, of anything that will wrench them out of their complacency.

Throughout history and until today reliable reports of impending doom have all too often been wholly discounted or just ignored until far too late: that the wholly speculative bull market of the Twenties would tumble, that Holocaust atrocities were really happening, that al Qaeda was planning a major U.S. attack, greenhouse gasses will fundamentally alter the planet on which we live, social security will become bankrupt, etc., etc. We are incapable of imagining our world will change in some fundamental or cataclysmic fashion, that the stable and given of today may come crashing down upon us. And people who see beyond the immediate and predict the fearful beyond are just dismissed -- either as crazies, wild pessimists, doomsday prophets, conspiracy-theorists, or whatever -- but are rarely taken seriously (except by other conspiracy-theorists -- some people just

drink this stuff up). For human beings are just incapable of seeing beyond the revealed and immediate -- usually until it is quite too late.

Unfortunately, we do not have to talk major current events or doomsday prophecies. People are equally scared of "truth" when it affects their personal lives. To tell me I must rethink my value system, that much of my life is based upon fallacy, or that life without meaningful religion is an endless succession of distractions obscuring a terrifying void: such knowledge is just as cataclysmic to a human being as the thought that Iran is developing nuclear weapons with which to cheerily murder millions of Jews. (Ahmadinejad isn't exactly hiding his intentions either.)

People are simply afraid of raw and unadulterated truth. The rabbi who leads directly to the "path of truth" may have very few devoted followers. Though we know we cannot live lives of utter falsehood -- we must have some value system and pay some attention to our G-d-given consciences -- we would rather not know every single little detail of G-d's truth. It is too much; ignorance is bliss. And the rabbi who teaches "All of your deeds should be for the sake of heaven" (2:17) may find a somewhat less-than-receptive audience.

Thus, the scholar does not only speak "truth". He speaks "peace" as well. What does peace mean? Does it mean that rather than encumbering his fellows with unqualified truth, he is a little more "peaceful" about it? Perhaps he lets his fellows live in peace, leaving them to at least some of their sinfulness by looking the other way. This sounds a little more like falsehood than peace -- and would hardly be a helpmate to the "path of truth" along which the scholar otherwise leads his fellows. Where is the room for such peace in the face of the Torah's uncompromising and absolute truths?

The answer is that the ultimate goal is truth, but the path that leads to it is one of peace. The scholar must know when to speak and when to remain silent. He cannot force the entire truth upon others, not all at once. The truth never changes, but the path to it may sometimes be roundabout. We are not allowed to lie about what the Torah states -- no amount of "peacefulness" permits stating that Judaism permits abortion -- but people are not always ready for all the Torah has to offer. One must be aware of his audience. He must bring them to truth, but only in a manner such that they can appreciate what truth is all about -- and just how beautiful the Torah truly is.

R. Yisrael Salanter, great scholar and ethical figure of 19th century Russia and Eastern Europe, was the founder of the Mussar Movement (a movement which placed special emphasis on the study of ethics and the development of the ethical personality). At one point in his life, he moved to a German port city in which he found Jewish laborers loading and unloading ships on the Sabbath. He recognized that taking them head on would be pointless as they were clearly far removed from Jewish observance. So what did he have to say to these workers? He met with them, described the beauty of the Sabbath, and requested that they write down their invoices in an irregular fashion. Do your work as usual -- I know you won't forgo an entire day's labor -- but do something to remember

that today is the Sabbath. Give yourselves some kind of reminder that today is special.

And his message reverberates. You can't imagine a full day of Sabbath observance? Then don't do it! But do **something**: keep Friday night. And a real Friday night: prepare the meal and candles before sunset, eat together as (or with) a family, and focus on spirituality. And you know something? If that's what you're ready for and you do it, G-d will love you for it. He's interested in peace and truth just as much as the scholar. But you want to know something else? Chances are that once you've had that taste of Sabbath -- the real thing -- you will want to move on -- just as the Jewish laborers above who eventually became full Sabbath observers.

Thus, R. Salanter demonstrates for us the true path towards both truth and peace. To be sure, he had higher goals for those Jewish laborers. And in fact, for them it was only the beginning. But even if they would grow no more, they were left in "peace". If there would have been no further message they were ready to receive, the rabbi would have known to remain silent. Criticizing, rebuking, embittering -- if it serves no other purpose than letting off the steam of the criticizer -- would have accomplished little more. And truth which causes bitterness rather than love and understanding is not the truth the Torah asks of us.

This teaches us an important lesson about what peace really is. Peace does not mean getting along with everyone and letting everything go. We never compromise our beliefs, and we must take stands whenever necessary, without concern for popularity and public opinion. But peace does mean we want others to appreciate truth. Truth must be the source of peace and goodwill among men, not a source of contention. Truth is what we deliver; peace is how we deliver it.

And even further. Peace is the ultimate goal we want truth to bring about. A world of peace is not one in which we ignore truth, looking away from evil so as to avoid friction. And a world of truth is not one in which we force infidels to behave at the point of a sword. Truth and peace together imply that man not only acts with truth but appreciates that truth and Torah are the only meaningful ways to live. Scripture refers to the Torah's teachings as "ways of pleasantness" (Proverbs 3:17). The Torah is not only "truth". It is truth which is pleasant and beloved, and ultimately it is peace as well.

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