

BORN OF CLARITY

by Rabbi Label Lam

"I shall give him My covenant, Peace." (Bamidbar 25:12)

If I hadn't lived through recent history I would think it strange to award a "peace prize" to someone who had just carried out such a punishing act as Pinchas did. His approach to achieving peace was not a passive one. What new angle or definition of peace can we extract from the seemingly cruel way in which Pinchas was able to distinguish himself?

Commenting on the statement "Talmud scholars bring peace to the world!" (Tractate Brochos), the Maharsha offers a fascinating description of the dynamics of that process. How is it that those, whose hot pursuit of small points and obsession with detail brings them into constant conflict are titled as the princes of peace in the world? Sometimes it may seem just the opposite is more true.

He explains, that just as the sum of a person's livelihood for an entire year is determined on Rosh HaShana, so are the number of wars to be fought in the world set at that time. Let's say that it was decreed that one hundred thousand battles have to be played out in this world in a given year. That sounds terrible and it is in fact a potentially perilous state of affairs.

One fine morning two old Talmudic lions arise from their sleep and arrive in the study hall armed with their holy books and alert minds.

(If you've ever had the honor to witness the process of learning that goes on in a conventional Yeshiva- study hall, the first thing that you notice is the noise. It is nothing like the ubiquitous public library, whose librarian is prepared to revoke your card if your hush puppies squeak too loudly on the newly polished floors.)

Here, disagreements are constantly erupting. It's hard to hear one's thoughts and yet the thought process is in high gear in that unlikely place.

Now these two scholars who happen to be facing off roar, snap, and bite away at each other's point of view until some complete conclusion is arrived at, besides lunch. Because of this fearsome fight for the truth, because they were motivated to discover "what" is right and not distracted by the ego concern of "who" is right, one less war on the horrific battlefields of the world needs to be fought. That deduction in the totality of human destruction is a magnificent contribution to the peace of the world.

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch writes, "Only falsehood is in need of many supporters to win the day;

falsehood must have the authority of numbers what it lacks in justification. Truth, by contrast will always prevail, even if it takes time. Noble, courageous, and pure, expressed with all the fiery zeal of conviction and with all the clarity of sure awareness, stated again and again at every opportunity, truth will ultimately gain respect and admiration even of those who do not accept it. The only truth that can be lost beyond recall is that truth whose adherents no longer have the courage to speak up candidly on its behalf. Truth has never gone down to defeat as a result of opposition, it has done so only when its friends are too weak to defend it."

Commenting on the words of the prophet, "You shall love truth and peace! (Zachariah 8:19) Rabbi Hirsch wrote, "For peace is not a father of truth; peace is a child of truth. Win the people for truth, inalienable truth that can never be sold, not for the price of peace, when sacred causes are involved, and then true everlasting peace will follow by itself."

Pinchas was not out hunting for a popular prize. He took a lonely path. He acted with uncompromising, even brutal honesty. In the face of confusion and opposition he carried out the hard line of the law. That moment of truth, as cruel as it might seem, because it set the value unmistakably straight, saved more than it destroyed, and is forever to be regarded as a supreme act of peace...born of clarity.

Good Shabbos!

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