

# A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

This past week I had the delight and privilege of participating in the bris of our newest grandson, born to my son Eli and Tzivie in Jerusalem. It was also an opportunity to bask for a few days in the unique luminance and inspiration that only radiates in 'Yerushalayim shel Zahav'.

One of the less comforting realities that hit me during this trip was the ever-widening gap that separates the secular and religious factions. Never before have the fundamental differences between the two groups appeared so irreconcilable. The rhetoric has gone well beyond the line of what might have been acceptable-even to hardened Sabras.

As a deeply religious Jew I strongly believe that the time-honored status quo must be maintained in order to preserve a sense of national peace and unity. But how can there be peace when such sharp differences separate the different camps? How can there be dialogue and respect when there is no room for compromise? Yet how can one respect those who seek to compromise our most cherished life values?

It is a question that all those engaged in outreach and kiruv must constantly grapple with. How can one reach out with warmth, respect and acceptance to Jews of all backgrounds and affiliations without compromising one's own core values and beliefs?

Perhaps an insight from the opening Chapter of this week's Torah portion will provide us with some guidance on this thorny issue. Society today extols the value of pluralism and multiculturalism. Liberals preach that all cultures are morally equal and therefore must be equally respected. Only then can world peace be achieved, or so the dogma goes.

Undoubtedly, peace requires that we respect each other's human rights, a key one affirming the right to practice what you believe. But a distinction must be drawn between respecting other individuals and respecting their life choices.

At the beginning of the Parsha, we find Pinchas zealously standing up to the wave of debauchery that had swept away sections of the Jewish people. With a dagger he stabbed to death the two main perpetrators, Zimri and Kozbi, and succeeded in halting a Divine plague that was poised to strike the nation. For his courage and self-sacrifice, Pinchas was awarded by Hashem with an everlasting covenant of peace.

How striking! Pinchas' zealotry that outwardly appeared to be the antithesis of shalom, of

accommodation, was in fact a life-sustaining force that elicited Hashem's covenant of eternal peace.

This is symbolized by the unusual way the word "peace," shalom, is written in the Torah at this juncture. The Mesoratic text (handed down from generation to generation all the way from Sinai) teaches us that the letter vav in this word is split in the middle. It is thus written almost like two yuds placed one on top of the other.

How strange. Why the deviation from the way the letter vav is customarily written, as one unbroken stroke?

The commentaries teach us that the letter vav, which is used as a prefix to mean "and," implies chibur, connectedness. Vav never stands alone; it is always attached as a prefix to another word.

In the same vein, the semantic definition of vav is "a hook" because it is the symbol of connectivity and uninterrupted flow. We mortals stand upright like the letter vav, reflecting our divine mission to connect heaven and earth, becoming the conduit of Hashem's bountiful goodness on this earth while reflecting His heavenly values in our day-to-day lives.

It would seem that peace, too, requires an uninterrupted flow of reciprocity and unqualified acceptance of one another. Yet true peace can also only be established by a separation denoting the boundaries and stark difference between holy and profane, true and false, light and darkness.

Advocating for social unity, pluralism and rainbow coalitions might provide the sensation and look of peaceful coexistence. It cannot build genuine and lasting harmony. The ultimate objective of each individual's allegiance is the preservation of their own personal liberties and freedom. It is only when we highlight the clear distinctions that define us that we can achieve true peace. By blurring evil and good we end up with a murky mess that drains life of authentic meaning and joy.

Only when we clearly separate ourselves from elements that disturb our Divine connection can we aspire to achieve a spiritual flow of connectivity that bonds us for eternity to our Creator.

Text Copyright © 2012 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

Rabbi Reich is on the faculty of [the Ohr Somayach Tanenbaum Education Center](#).