

THE KILLER PEACEMAKER

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the Priest, has turned away My anger from the children of Israel, by being zealous for My vengeance amongst them; and [thus] I did not destroy the children of Israel in My vengeance. Therefore, I say, behold I give to him My Covenant of Peace." [25:11-12]

Isn't this an incredible statement? When G-d says that Pinchas was "jealous for HaShem," we can understand that. But then G-d also gives Pinchas the "Covenant of Peace" -- Pinchas killed someone, yet the Torah associates him with peace! The Torah even traces the lineage of Pinchas back to Aharon, about whom Hillel said in the Sayings of the Fathers, 1:12, "Be of the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people, and bringing them closer to the Torah."

How can we understand this?

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch says that a Bris, a covenant, represents an absolute promise from G-d. HaShem promises us that the world will eventually see complete peace and harmony -- and affirms that the actions of Pinchas were a step in the right direction. Rabbi Hirsch notes that the behavior of Pinchas is exactly that which the world likes to designate and condemn as "disturbing the peace" -- but this, he explains, is not the failure of Pinchas. This is a grave fault in a world which fails to respond to evil, and inappropriately labels appeasement of evil as "love of peace."

Peace is indeed precious, and one must even be prepared to sacrifice rights and possessions for peace -- but not to sacrifice that which G-d has declared to be right and good. Peace can only be maintained when we are at peace with G-d. If someone fights those who are against Divine Goodness and Truth, explains Rabbi Hirsch, he is fighting for the Covenant of Peace.

Rabbi Hirsch goes still further, and criticizes those who would prefer to stand silent while evil goes on around them: "He who, for the sake of so-called peace, quietly leaves the field to people who are really at variance with G-d, his love of peace is at one with the enemies of the Covenant of Peace on earth. It was not the inactive standing apart of the masses, not even the tears of those who stood inactive at the entrance of the Sanctuary weeping at the treason, it was the honest brave act of Pinchas which saved the nation and restored his peace with G-d and His Law and thereby brought back the basis for real true peace on earth" [translation by Isaac Levy, Judaica Press 1989].

Consider that Rav Hirsch wrote this less than a century before Neville Chamberlain claimed to have made "peace for our time" — with Adolf Hitler.

The Medrash Rabba [Genesis 8:5] says in the name of Rabbi Simon that when G-d wanted to create man, the attending angels divided into groups to argue the matter. "Kindness and truth encountered each other; righteousness and peace kissed each other" [Psalms 85:11]. Kindness said "create him, for he will perform acts of kindness." Truth said "do not create him, for he is entirely lies." Righteousness said "create him, for he will do righteous acts." And Peace said "do not create him, for he is full of argument." What did G-d do? He took Truth and cast him to the ground, and then created man.

The Kotzker Rebbe, famed for his sharp comments, asks the following question: what about Peace? Fine, the majority was now in favor, but nonetheless is there not a lack of Peace? So he answered: without Truth, Peace is trivial to achieve.

If we don't care about truth, it's easy to have peace -- as Rav Hirsch explained it, the false peace of those who don't care enough to stand and defend that which is right and good. As Chamberlain proved afterwards, appeasing evil leads only to a temporary, illusory peace. Only when we are unafraid to take sides where appropriate, do we build a peace which is lasting and good.

Good Shabbos!