

HONOR + RESPECT = SHALOM BAYIS

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week's Parsha, Naso, begins with the families of Levi being counted. The tribe of Levi (which includes both the kohanim and the levi'im) had been entrusted with this avodas hakodesh - the holy service of the Mishkan and all that goes along with it. Here their specific responsibilities in the transportation of the Mishkan and its vessels are being conveyed.

Our parsha also contains the Birkas Kohanim (the blessings given by the kohanim) which conclude with the blessing of peace: "vayasaim l'cha shalom (and He will give to you peace) [6:26]". Our shmone esrei (silent amidah prayer) also concludes with a blessing for peace as does the birkas hamazone (grace after meals).

A joke is told of a husband explaining the key to his successful marriage. "We don't argue because we have very well defined roles and areas of responsibility. I determine our position on all of the big issues and my wife decides on the small ones. The big, important issues such as nuclear disarmament, global warming and the federal deficit are my domain. The small issues such as the neighborhood we'll live in, the schools our children will attend and the budgeting of our salaries, those are decided by my wife."

When discussing peace, it is very tempting to get dragged into a discussion of the 'big' areas which we can't decide or affect and ignore those 'small' areas which obligate us to evaluate ourselves, our relationships and our actions.

The medrash tells of a woman who had attended Rabi Meir's Friday night lecture. She returned very late and the Shabbos candles had already burned down. Her irate husband demanded to know where she had been and she explained that she had been attending Rabi Meir's lecture. He brashly swore that she would not be allowed to enter the house until she'd spit in the face of Rabi Meir.

As she left the house, Eliyahu Hanavi (Elijah the Prophet) appeared before Rabi Meir and told him that on his account, a woman is being banished from her house. When Rabi Meir heard the whole story, he went and sat in the Beis Medrash (study hall). When he saw that woman approaching, he acted as if he had a serious eye problem.

"Do you know how to cure an eye problem?", he asked the startled woman.

"No, I do not", she stammered.

"Well then quickly, right now, spit seven times in my face and that will alleviate the problem." The

dazed and astonished woman did as she was asked and spat the seven times. Rabi Meir then said to her: "go and tell your husband that he had asked you to spit once and you spat seven times!".

The astounded students asked Rabi Meir if the husband and wife's spat (-sorry-) needed to be ended through such a thorough degradation of the Torah's honor. "We would have brought him here, whipped him and forced him to take back his wife!", they exclaimed.

"Should the honor of Meir be greater than the honor of Hashem?!", was Rabi Meir's piercing response. "Hashem instructed us to blot His holy name onto the water that a woman suspected if adultery drinks, in order to establish her innocence and restore peace to their relationship. I certainly won't be concerned about my honor!"

This medrash is somewhat puzzling. The students seemed to be making a very valid point. The same outcome of the wife returning home could have been accomplished without such a degradation. Furthermore, the husband surely deserved lashes, both for his rudeness to his wife and for his irreverence to Rabi Meir.

The Lev Eliyahu explains that Rabi Meir had uncovered a very profound insight in the parsha of Sotah (the 'water-drinking woman' mentioned above). Hashem could have had the water check her without blotting out His holy name. The Torah is teaching us that since there is a greater degree of confidence and thereby peace and harmony in the relationship if she's checked by water with Hashem's name in it, then such a degradation is imperative! Rabi Meir simply followed Hashem's initiative. Since whipping the husband would not have contributed to the shalom bayis (home serenity and peace), Rabi Meir chose to have her spit in his face.

We began with the special role of the tribe of Levi. Before the establishment of the Mishkan, the divine service was the domain of the b'choros (first born). Their participation in the cheit ha'egel (sin of the golden calf) caused this status to be transferred to the Levi'im who did not participate in that sin. We find that in addition to not participating in the cheit ha'egel, the tribe of Levi had always been the leaders and teachers of Klal Yisroel and, in that capacity, were exempted from the oppressive enslavement of Egypt.

What was the root of Levi's holiness?

Rav Chaim Shmuelovitz explains that it began with the very birth of Levi. His mother, Leah, felt secondary to Yaakov's other wife, her sister Rachel. Yaakov had worked for their father Lavan, in order to receive the hand of Rachel in marriage. After the agreed upon seven years of labor, Lavan deceived Yaakov and had him marry Leah. Yaakov then needed to work an additional seven years for the right to marry Rachel.

It was prophetically known that there would be a total of twelve tribes. With two wives and two maidservants, each mother had a 'share' of four tribes. Leah was the first to give birth. When her third son, Levi, was born, she let out a sigh of relief. My husband can have no complaints against me --

I've done my part. "Ha'paam y'laveh ishi ailoy [Breishis 29:34]" -- now my husband will join me -- and she named him Levi (from the word y'laveh -- join). This name and this tribe that brought a heightened degree of closeness between Yaakov and Leah -- that bridged the division between them -- was sanctified for eternity. The divine service is the domain of Levi.

It would seem that the foundation of shalom in any relationship is based on the honor and respect that is shown.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky zt"l was engrossed in a conversation at a wedding when he realized that his wife was trying to catch his attention. Rav Yaakov quickly approached his wife and asked, "what is it that the Rebbetzin wants?".

"I wanted to know when the Rav wants to leave", she responded.

"Whenever the Rebbetzin wants to go", was his quick response.

"I'd like to go whenever the Rav wants to leave", she answered.

"The Gemara (Talmud) states that 'heavenly matters' are decided by the husband and 'worldly matters' by the wife. It seems to me that this is a 'worldly matter'", Rav Yaakov replied.

"For me, listening to the Rav is a 'heavenly matter'", his wife countered.

"Well in that case, my 'heavenly matter' decision is that we should go when you want!", Rav Yaakov persisted.

"Well, in that case, I'd like to remain another thirty minutes", concluded his wife.

Rav Yaakov smiled and said: "we'll remain another thirty minutes".

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