

Shabbat Shalom.

That is always our greeting on Shabbat. As if to say, settling into Shabbat, that we yearn for *Shalom*. For peace. And boy do we feel that so deeply right now. Lately it feels like the possibility of true *shalom* between Israelis and Palestinians is even more remote than it was a month ago, or a year ago. And I know some believe that we shouldn't even bother discussing lofty ideals like lasting peace right now. Instead, they say, we should focus only on the urgent needs of both Palestinians and Israelis in the short term, before discussing what peace might look like between them.

Concrete next steps, and deescalation, are certainly urgent, but the prayers of Shabbat draw us to keep *shalom* in focus. We just recited the text from psalms, *Adonai yivarech et amo vashalom*. We ask God to shelter us in a *sukkat shalom*, during *Hashkivenu*. We end Kaddish and the Amidah with familiar prayers for shalom. And so on, and so forth. Jewish ritual life is so saturated with the word "shalom" that it's perhaps the most recognizable Jewish word. And, therefore, it's worth understanding what we really mean when we say it, particularly in this time of war.

You likely know that peace, shalom, comes from the root of shalem, meaning whole; and our prayers for peace are rooted in an aspiration for integrity, integration, and wholeness. Especially as we endure a year as fractious as this one, our prayers are rooted in a desire for something better, and more whole than what we find today.

That feels so acute for us, as we learned this week of anti-Semitic vandalism at the home of the director of the Brooklyn Museum, casting into sharper relief just how this faraway conflict reverberates much closer to home. And as we watch as a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas has yet to take hold, hostages remain in captivity, and so many Gazans are under threat of starvation and attack.

Praying for peace against this backdrop feels almost indulgent, at times. What do our words, our hopes, really mean, or where do they get us?

Praying for an end to this war is only one aspect of seeking a lasting peace, we know: there will need to be an end to the siege in Gaza, an end to the need for bomb shelters in Israeli cities, and an end to the occupation under which Palestinians are languishing. And a *beginning* of some new outcome that is yet unseen, and maybe unarticulated – in which both peoples live with dignity. *That* sustainable future feels even further away than it did a year ago. And yet...we must still pray for -- and fight for -- peace.

I know that some of you would rather that we, the clergy, spoke from the bimah about other things. And I promise that we can, and will do so, even as this trauma continues. But tonight, I think it's appropriate for us to consider, at the very least, what "peace" might mean – especially as it appears in our tradition in key places, *and* in light of this week's parsha.

In this week's reading, Naso, we read the most ancient prayer for peace in our tradition: The familiar Priestly Benediction, in chapter 6 of Numbers. May God bless you and keep you. May God's face shine upon you, and be gracious to you, May God lift up God's face upon you, v'yasem l'cha shalom, and give you peace.

We hear these words at such diverse moments in ritual life that we might easily forget they are, in sum, a prayer that's all about peace. Each phrase gets longer, and louder, escalating into a subjunctive call for the most powerful thing with which to bless another person: shalom. I'll say those words at many weddings this summer, and again tomorrow, as I welcome a baby from our community into the covenant...Hoping for wholeness during these milestones in their lives.

The priestly benediction is the oldest Hebrew text we have ever found record of -- artifacts inscribed with that blessing were discovered dating back to the time of the first temple, when kohanim used that text to bless the people of Israel. Indeed, that's the initial purpose of that blessing, per the command in Numbers 6: "Speak unto Aaron and his sons, saying: Thus shall you bless the children of Israel," before offering us those three famous

phrases. Though Reform Judaism got rid of all references to the priesthood, many Jews today hear those words in their synagogues, spoken by the descendants of priests, who call to mind the ancient practice of priests blessing Israelites with peace.

But this presents a dilemma for more than a few classical commentators. Isaac Arama, the medieval Spanish sage, wonders: what is the purpose of this blessing from the priests to the people? Surely it's God who blesses...so is it really up to the priests to assist God in this process?

Don't be fooled -- he wasn't an early Reform Jew. Isaac Arama, among others, was trying to grasp how human beings could act as agents of God.

The rabbis of the Talmud try to give us an answer by saying that God blesses the priests and the priests, in turn, bless human beings on earth. But this workaround doesn't account for the fact that it's still people doing the work of God. And if that statement refers only to the priests, in Pirkei Avot, we read the expansion of Rabbi Hillel: "be a disciple of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace." Hillel invites us ALL to be like priests, those initial sons of Aaron, who bless with peace and pursue it.

By beckoning us all to pursue peace beyond merely the blessings of the priests, we learn that in order to bless and be blessed with peace, human beings -- separate from God -- actually have agency to create wholeness in this world. Yiddish proverbs and Talmudic dicta abound on the subject of human beings working to create the blessings we want to see in this life.

And we know from our own lives that merely praying for peace is not enough to bring peace into being. We need to create the conditions in which peace can flourish. In the case of Israel Palestine, we need to advocate toward an end to the occupation such that Israelis and Palestinians can live freely and with dignity, and of course...in peace. This means supporting initiatives toward coexistence, like Omdim B'yachad, which builds power among Jews and Arabs around dozens of issues in a shared society, and joining in their shared protest movement against this

war. We need to pray for it, yes, but we need to support the work of real people on the ground who are making it a reality.

At some point this war will end, God willing. And when that happens, *then*, our prayers for peace might be even more important. As both Israelis and Palestinians grapple with how a war like this one must never happen again. And a ceasefire will only be the beginning. The security that anyone there feels will be an illusion until real peace – active wholeness that Israelis and Palestinians create together – becomes a reality.

In a collection of midrashim known as the Sifra, the rabbis comment on the priestly benediction to say that God will bless the people with material goodness. But, in their commentary on the word “shalom” in the priestly benediction, they say that “food and drink is all well and good, but without peace they are worth nothing...for peace outweighs all else.” Without peace, food and drink are an illusion. Unless you make peace, anything else you have isn’t satisfying, and may not even be real.

When we make a blessing for peace, when we pray for peace, what we are doing is inviting one another to believe in it, and to make it real. To not accept only the bare minimum of coexistence. When we pray, we are committing ourselves to find new solutions, and to support everyday people who are working toward those solutions. Yes, we are directing our prayers toward Heaven, but we must also direct it toward ourselves.

Yisa Adonai Panav Alenu, V'yasem Lanu Shalom.

May God lift up God’s face upon all of us, and grant us peace.

Shabbat Shalom.