

Naso 2023

Peace Redux

5 minute read | Straightforward

For most of history, the utopian ideal that most cultures and societies strived for has been domination, subjugation, and victory; the pages of history are written in the blood and tears of conflict.

In stark contrast, Judaism's religious texts overwhelmingly endorse compassion and peace; love and the pursuit of peace is one of Judaism's fundamental ideals and is a near-universal characteristic in our pantheon of heroes – בקש שלום ורדפהו. R' Jonathan Sacks notes that the utopian ideal of peace is one of Judaism's great original revolutionary contributions. As Rashi says, all the blessings in the world are worthless without peace.

Avos d'Rabbi Nosson suggests that the mightiest heroism lies not in defeating your foes, but in turning enemies into friends. The Midrash says that the world can only persist with peace, and the Gemara teaches that all of Torah exists to further peace – דְרָכֶיךָ דְרָכֵי-נְעָם; וְכָל-נְתִיבוֹתֶיךָ שְׁלוֹם. Peace features prominently in the Priestly Blessing, and the visions of peace and prosperity in the Land of Israel – וְנִתְתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ / יִשָּׂא הַ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וְיִשֵּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם –

We ask for peace every time we pray and every time we eat – שִׁים שְׁלוֹם / עוֹשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמְרוֹמָיו. Wishing for peace has been the standard Jewish greeting for millennia – שְׁלוֹם עֲלֵיכֶם. Peace is ubiquitous in our lexicon, and it's not a trivial thing.

We all know peace is important, and peace sounds great in theory, but uncomfortably often, the reality is that peace is too abstract, too difficult, too distant, and too remote.

What does peace look like practically speaking, and how do we bring more of it into our lives?

Before explaining what peace is, it's important to rule out what it's not. Peace is not what many or most people seem to think.

Peace doesn't mean turning the other cheek and suffering in silence. Your non-response to conflict contributes to a lack of overt hostility that is superficial and only a negative peace at best. Sure, there is no external conflict, but everyone recognizes that conflict is there, even if it's unspoken and even if it's only internal. It's a position of discomfort and resentment – possibly only unilateral – and it may genuinely be too difficult or not worth the headache to attempt to resolve. Be that as it may, that is obviously not what peace is; it's not a state of blessing at all. It's the kind of status quo that lasts only



as long as sufficiently tolerable, but it's a lingering poison that slowly suffocates; it's only a ceasefire or stalemate, it's certainly not peace.

Peace also isn't the lack of conflict that stems from being weak and harmless. It's not good morality if you don't fight when you're meek and harmless. You haven't made that choice; you simply have no alternatives. Pirkei Avos is dismissive and disdainful of people who don't stand up for themselves – אָן אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי אֵין. In a world of pacifists, a bully with a stick would rule the world. There's nothing moral about being harmless.

There absolutely are moments the Torah requires us to stand up for ourselves and each other; authorizing and sometimes even mandating aggression as just and necessary – עַת לְאַהֲבַת וְעַת לְשׂוֹנְאֵי, עַת מִלְחָמָה וְעַת שְׁלוֹמִים. In the story of Balak and Bilam, Pinchas restores peace through an act of shocking public violence, and yet he is blessed with peace for restoring the peace; his courageous act makes him the hero, and not the people who were above it all and didn't want to get involved.

But we do not value or respect strength and power for its own sake; the One God of Judaism is not the god of strength and power and is firmly opposed to domination and subjugation. Our God is the god of liberty and liberated slaves, who loved the Patriarchs because of their goodness, not their power, who commands us to love the stranger and take care of the orphan and widow. So being powerful and strong doesn't mean you go around asserting yourself, bullying and intimidating people; but it does mean that if someone threatens you and the people you love, or the orphans and widows in your community, you are equipped to do something about it. Carl Jung called this integrating the shadow, making peace with a darker aspect of yourself. When you know you can bite, you'll rarely have to.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that peace is more than a state of non-aggression; peace is a state of mutual acceptance and respect. Peace does not require the absence of strength and power; peace is only possible precisely through the presence and proper application of strength and power – they are prerequisites – ה' עֹז לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן, ה' יְבָרֵךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ בְּשָׁלוֹם. Peace requires us to cultivate the inner strength and courage to allow others to get what they need.

In Isaiah's hopeful visions, today featured prominently and optimistically on the wall of the United Nations building, world governments disband their armies and repurpose their weapons into agricultural tools. In this utopian vision, it's not that states are too weak to defend themselves, a negative peace with no violent conflict; it's the opposite. It's a vision of positive peace; complete and perfect security with mutual respect and tolerance, where states will resolve differences peacefully without resorting to hostilities.

As the Ohr HaChaim notes, the word for peace is cognate to wholesomeness, a holistic and symbiotic harmony of constituent parts – שְׁלוֹמִים / שְׁלוֹמוֹת.

Peace isn't a lack of external conflict, and it doesn't even necessarily mean a lack of conflict at all. Even in Isaiah's visions of a peaceful future, does anyone seriously think husbands and wives won't
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still sometimes disagree about whose family to spend the holiday with? Which school to send their kid to? That organizations won't have internal disagreements about budget or direction? Then and now, humans are human; we are not robots, and inevitably, we will have our differences! But if peace simply means that those differences can be accepted or settled peacefully, then perhaps peace isn't the unreachable idealism we may prefer to imagine. It's just about putting in the effort to learn to live with our differences.

Ralph Waldo Emerson quipped that nobody can bring you peace but yourself. When you feel secure, you'll have security. It takes benevolence, confidence, and unshakeable strength and power; those come from within. If you do not have peace, it's because you are not yet at peace.

There is a very good reason that envy figures as one of the most important things God has to say to humans – וְלֹא תִקְנֶה. As our Sages guided us, who is wealthy? One who celebrates and takes joy in what he has – אֵיזְהוּ עֹשִׂיר, הַשְּׂמֵחַ בְּהַלְקוֹ. One interpretation even inverts the plain reading, from celebrating what you have, to celebrating what he has – בְּהַלְקוֹ. Someone else's prosperity and success don't make your own any less likely, so be happy when someone else gets a win because yours is no further away. The Ksav Sofer highlights that this is the Torah's blessing of peace; an internal peace of being satisfied and living with security, happy for both yourself and for others – וְאַכְלֵתֶם לְהַמְכֵם לְשָׂבַע וְיִשְׂבְּתֶם לְבֹטָח.

If we value and desire peace, we must first regulate and then free ourselves from looking at others with grudges, grievances, and jealousy. As one comedian said, the only time you look in your neighbor's bowl is to make sure they have enough. When other people's achievements and success no longer threaten us, we can develop lasting and peaceful co-existence and harmony. The differences are still there, but it's not the other person that changes at all; it's how you look at them. Your dream of peace starts with you, and it's an important step that bridges the world we live in with the ideal world of tomorrow. If you cannot accept others, it's because you haven't yet accepted yourself.

What better blessing could there be than to live in balanced harmony with yourself, to be completely secure and at peace? To wholly embrace your differences with your spouse, your parents, your siblings, your relatives, your neighbors, your community, your colleagues, and ultimately, everyone you meet? And if we infused our notion of peace with any momentum, maybe the whole world could experience it too.

So, of course we ask for peace every day! In every prayer, and every time we greet someone. As the Gemara says, peace is the ultimate container for blessing, and it's intuitive; we all know it's true.

We just have to live like it!



Truth Redux

5 minute read | Straightforward

The universe is a competitive place, and every creature is in an existential struggle to survive. As Darwin showed, the fittest to survive are those that adapt best to their circumstances, using all tools at their disposal.

Everyone is trying to get by, so what wouldn't you do to pass the test, get the job, win the relationship? People exaggerate and lie on resumes, interviews, dates, and sales pitches all the time. It's a strategic tool for gaining an advantage like a predator utilizes camouflage to catch its prey. In the context of individual survival and success, so the thinking goes, all is fair.

It's dishonest, and most people are uncomfortable lying, but plenty of people navigate their world in this way nonetheless.

But let's consider a more commonplace scenario, the most trivial interaction we encounter every day. How are you doing today? Fine, thank you.

But it's not always true, is it? You're tired, stressed, and worried. Carrying the hurt, sad about that thing. You're not always okay, but you say you are and you soldier on.

The Torah lists many laws and prohibitions; our sages saw value in expanding those boundaries as protective fences around things that lead to violations. There is one glaring exception – distance yourself from lies. Our sages identify the quality of truth as the Creator's signature, a profound suggestion that truth is not just a moral or ethical principle but a fundamental aspect of the Divine and the reality of our universe itself.

Throughout the Torah, dishonesty rears its head as a consistent signature of its antagonists. The snake is the archetypal trickster whose deception is assimilated to the formless chaos that unmakes Creation. Ephron does business with Avraham as a crook. Esau presents himself to his father with fake piety. Lavan cheats Yakov, not to mention his own children, out of years of peace and happiness. Pharaoh enslaves the Jewish People with lies about work quotas and flip flops about letting them go, and even again once he lets them go. Korach misrepresents his self-serving ambition as a populist revolution. Bilam denies his goals to God and himself in pursuit of power and wealth. Among the many problems with the infamous scout report about the Land of Israel, some key issues were bias and dishonesty in how the scouts framed their experience.

It's not hard to explain why dishonesty is bad; there are so many reasons. You have more to gain from keeping your home than stealing your neighbor's; not stealing is a social contract that mutually benefits everyone. Everyone hates getting cheated or deceived, so lying or stealing is at least



hypocritical and violates Hillel's Golden Rule of all things – don't do to others what you wouldn't want them doing to you.

As a matter of principle and outside of the consideration of benefits or consequences, lying is wrong because it violates and ignores the autonomy of the person being lied to because that person cannot and would not otherwise consent to being lied to or acting under false pretenses. If you have to lie to create a false persona, you are cutting people off from a part of who you are, which is not conducive to long-term relationships.

Additionally, as a matter of principle, lying to another is wrong because to do so would be to use the person simply as a means to an end rather than acting and treating the person as an end and goal of their own right. Humans are created in the Divine image; violating the autonomy and dignity of another also violates your own.

Moreover, the societal implications of dishonesty are far-reaching. Our society is based on a foundation of mutual trust and honesty, and the only way to obtain any benefits from dishonesty is in a world of trust and honesty. If we understand ethics to be universal standards of conduct, deception is self-evidently unethical because it would devalue and erode the foundation of mutual trust and honesty to the point that no one would trust anybody, and there would be no further benefits to dishonesty.

Simply put, people can only lie in a world of truth.

If everyone were to steal, stealing would be meaningless because property is the idea that people have a moral claim to ownership. If everyone stole, the notion of property would be meaningless in terms of ownership, as theft is taking something that rightfully belongs to another. This is known as Kant's categorical imperative; if everyone engaged in dishonesty, dishonesty wouldn't exist, a paradox. Dishonesty as a standalone act may be selfishly beneficial but cannot be sustained as a practice with benefits to all and would become meaningless.

Truth is the cornerstone of civilization and the reality of our primary experience. Honesty builds trust, so people can rely on each other's words and actions, cooperating and collaborating, prerequisites for a society to function effectively. Without honesty, trust breaks down, leading to suspicion, conflict, and a lack of cooperation. Rules and laws depend on honesty to maintain stability and order; justice can only exist with truth and accountability. Relationships require honesty to establish understanding, respect, and mutual support. Business and commerce can only happen in an environment of honesty.

Given the importance of honesty, it's no surprise that the Torah places such a strong emphasis on it.



No dishonest scales at work, don't deceive your business counterparts, don't testify falsely, and a litany of others, with a general rule to keep well away from deceit. Truth is the reality we inhabit, the signature of the Creator, and serves Creation's purpose of fostering life.

We want to tell the truth; we don't want to lie. Are those everyday white lies a violation of divine truth?

Communication is so much more than words; it's a convention of regularities in behavior that solve coordination problems in recurring situations involving mutual interests. They are followed because there is a general expectation that others will follow them as well.

When you respond to a greeting that you're okay, you're not lying, even when it's not so true. Lying is an intentionally false statement, but in context, everyone knows it's probably polite fiction, a form of basic social lubricant. Deception is only deceptive when the intent is deception; social grease is not dishonest when it's what people expect. No one is looking for, nor expecting, a truthful report on your life. It's a social handshake, nothing more.

Does the dress make her look fat? You will hopefully understand that her question is not intended literally; the unspoken subtext of the communication is an invitation for reassurance. It's not dishonest to give the reassuring response you're being implicitly asked for; it's just polite compliance with the request.

Telling her she's beautiful or saying you're okay isn't lying. It is fully aligned with truth and perpetuates life and all Creation.

In our daily lives, we are constantly navigating the complex landscape of truth and deception. We tell white lies to maintain social cohesion, and we sometimes encounter more harmful forms of dishonesty. But truth is more than just a moral principle—it's a fundamental aspect of our existence, the divine signature.

Cultivate a habit of honesty in your life; be mindful of the words you speak and the actions you take. Strive for authenticity in your relationships and integrity in your actions. Even small acts of honesty contribute towards a culture of trust and respect.

Truth is not just about what we say to others—it's also about being true to yourself. By aligning ourselves with truth, we align ourselves with the divine, fostering a deeper connection with our own inner selves and the world around us.

In a world that often seems full of deception and dishonesty, be a bearer of truth, carrying the divine signature into every aspect of your life.



Pure Priorities

5 minute read | Straightforward

In the Jewish Tradition, the human body and human life are sacrosanct, seeing as humans are created in God's image – **הַבַּיִת אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם**.

Traditional burial is mandatory for Jews; other funeral rites, including cremation, are prohibited. The mitzvah of burial includes a component of urgency that, for certain close relatives, nearly all positive obligations are suspended until after the burial has concluded to facilitate prompt burial. It is degrading to allow a body, which remains sacred even in death, to lie idle and unburied – **קְבוּרַת הַתְּקַבְּרָנוּ** – **בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כִּי־קָלַת אֲלֵקִים תְּלוּי**.

But although there are tangible and practical laws relating to death, the Torah also talks about intangible laws, the laws of ritual impurity which result from death.

In the Torah's conception of a Jewish nation-state, ritual purity was a prominent element of daily life. All people were to be mindful of their purity status at all times, because a state of impurity makes people unsuited to specific activities and puts them at risk of contaminating sanctified foods and objects. A person in a state of impurity must undergo a predefined purification process that usually includes the passage of a specified amount of time.

Although we no longer practice most purity laws today, we still retain certain ritual practices such as immersion for our bodies or kitchenware as a legacy of these laws.

Traditionally, the job description for any practicing Kohen was to be knowledgeable and fluent in this arcane and specialized body of law, which was essential given their role in Temple service as well as their year-round consumption of sacred foods that only a Kohen could interact with and only while in a state of ritual purity.

The way the Torah categorizes impurity doesn't neatly correlate with anything we can relate to today; it has nothing to do with hygiene or sin.

But perhaps it's something like this.

Death is the archetypal trigger of existential dread; the confusion and disorientation that result from contemplating our subjective experience of thinking, feeling, and acting in this mode of existence as meaningless and absurd. All you have ever known is your conscious attachment and connection to the universe we experience; one day, that will cease to exist.

The notion of death exposes the fleeting fragility of human life, a thought antithetical to our entire primary experience in this living universe, undermining any real meaning or value to our lives, and exposure to it imparts a status-affecting condition called tuma, which loosely translates to impurity.

Someone out of the state of ritual purity is disqualified from a realm of everyday activities in the land of Israel. Still, for most people, it doesn't matter most of the time, so most people didn't have to be mindful of these laws and can attend to the dead with no issue.

Given that a kohen's life and work revolve around purity, it follows that a kohen's attending to the dead is more restricted; even today, a kohen may not intentionally come into contact with a dead body nor approach too closely graves within a Jewish cemetery, except for certain legally defined close relatives.

The Kohen Gadol was held to even stricter standards; he wasn't even allowed to contaminate himself to attend to a deceased parent.

Beyond the hierarchy of purity standards that exists for people, there is also a hierarchy of purity in time. Before Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol would isolate for seven days to attain the highest purity status and perform his most sacred ritual duties in the Holy of Holies on the holiest day of the calendar.

While it's clear that ritual purity plays a central and pervasive role in the Torah's conception of Jewish life, there is a revealing exception. In a landscape where purity is everything, the Torah obligates all Jewish people to take responsibility for the burial of an unattended Jewish body; this obligation supersedes every purity law and is almost if not entirely overriding – מת מצוה.

If you hear about a Jewish person who has died and has no one to perform a Jewish burial, there is a rare mitzvah to handle the burial personally, and even a Kohen is obligated. Usually, since the Kohen is unrelated, he would not otherwise be permitted to handle the burial. But there is no one else, and the obligation to immediately bury unattended dead is so compelling that it even obligates a Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe highlights this hierarchy of laws to reveal the Torah's sense of where human priorities ought to lie.

Even the holiest person, on the most sacred day of the year, about to perform his holiest and most core function, must roll up his sleeves and wade into someone else's mess and get their hands dirty. This explicitly states that no one is above serving others; it is a grave mistake to be too good for that. The correct decision under the circumstances is to forgo performing his duties on Yom Kippur; the Torah that demands his Yom Kippur service states that it is subject to his duty to bury the dead.



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The Torah obligates all of us to take responsibility for the unattended dead; the Lubavitcher Rebbe asks us to wonder what it might ask of us concerning the living dead, people born Jewish and yet totally unaffiliated, cut off, and isolated from any trace of Judaism?

While the analogy isn't precise, perhaps it's directionally accurate.

The Jewish People are a sanctified nation where all are called to serve – ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש.

However holy or self-righteous, the Torah demands that you get off your high horse, roll up your sleeves, and attend to physical and spiritual orphans, people who don't have anyone else. If the Kohen Gadol encounters an unattended dead body on Yom Kippur, his role and duties are suspended entirely; his only responsibility is to help the person in front of him.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe's followers took this teaching to heart; pioneering heroes and their brave families moved across the globe to set up a Jewish presence. They stepped far beyond their comfort zones with enormous self-sacrifice out of concern for others.

It might be a bit much to ask that of yourself, but you don't have to move to the middle of nowhere to recognize that attending to the needs of others is one of the Torah's highest priorities. The Kotzker mocked the Tzaddik in pelts, a holy man in his fur coat. When people are cold, does the righteous man gather materials to light a fire, or does he huddle in his warm jacket, praying intensely for their wellbeing?

When God talks to Avraham about what it would take to save the people of Sodom, God's conception of righteous people worth saving is people who are out on the streets, engaging with and influencing their surroundings – צדיקים בתוך העיר.

We don't live with purity at the forefront of our minds. But the Torah consistently reminds us where the purity of our priorities must lie.

Caring for others is a core part of the spiritual life. A spiritual life that doesn't engage the world with acts of care and compassion towards others isn't spiritual at all.

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.



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If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.