



## Bechukosai 2022

### 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 – וְנִתְתִי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ / יִשָּׂא הַ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וְיִשָּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם –

We ask for peace every time we pray and every time we eat – שִׁים שְׁלוֹם / עוֹשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו. 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 – אַם לֹא יִמְצֵא אִישׁ אֶת אֲדָמָתוֹ לְעָמֵל, מִי לִי אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי אֵין אָנִי לִי. 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 – עַתָּה לְאַהֲבָה וְעַתָּה לְשׂוֹנֵא, עַתָּה לְאַהֲבָה וְעַתָּה לְשׂוֹנֵא. 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 – שְׁלוֹם / שְׁלֵמוֹת.

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 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 תִקְמֹד. As our Sages guided us, who is wealthy? One who celebrates and takes joy in what he has – אֵינְהוּ עָשִׂיר, 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 לְשַׁבַּע וְיִשְׂבַּתֶם 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!



## The Places You'll Go

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Mishkan and Beis HaMikdash had different chambers and utensils laden with meaning and symbolism.

Quite arguably, the centerpiece and focal point of the entire endeavor was the Ark, the gold-covered wooden chest containing the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments; the seat of the Torah and the physical embodiment of God's immanent closeness, as represented by the cherubim, the angelic children sculpted on top in a warm embrace.

By its very nature, the Mishkan and its contents were built to be portable; taken apart then put back together every time the camp moved. Some items were simple to box and move, like knives and cups. Some oversized items were not designed to be dismantled and boxed, like the Menora and Table. Those items had built-in rings that enabled the insertion and alignment of moving rods; large poles that enabled and facilitated portability by the carrying crew.

These rods were auxiliary gear whose sole purpose was easy and balanced handling on the go; they weren't part of the furniture. When not being transported, they were entirely redundant otherwise and were removed and stored away. This was standard and uniform policy, with one notable exception – the Ark.

Just like every other large instrument and utensil, the Ark was built with rings for its moving rods. But quite unlike every other instrument and utensil, its moving rods were forbidden to remove:

וַיִּצְקֶתָ לּוֹ אַרְבַּע טַבַּעֲתֵי זָהָב וְנִתְּתָהּ עַל אַרְבַּע פַּעֲמֹתָיו וּשְׁתֵּי טַבַּעֲתַי עַל־צַלְעוֹ הָאֶחָת וּשְׁתֵּי טַבַּעֲתַי עַל־צַלְעוֹ הַשְּׁנִייתַי: וַעֲשִׂיתָ בְּדֵי עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים: וַצִּפִּיתָ אֹתָם זָהָב: וְהִבַּאתָ אֶת־הַבַּדִּים בְּטַבַּעֲתַי עַל צַלְעוֹת הָאָרֶן לְשֵׂאת אֶת־הָאָרֶן בָּהֶם: בְּטַבַּעֲתַי הָאָרֶן יִהְיוּ הַבַּדִּים לֹא יִסְרוּ מִמֶּנּוּ: Cast four gold rings for it, to be attached to its four feet, two rings on one of its sidewalls and two on the other. Make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold; then insert the poles into the rings on the sidewalls of the Ark for carrying. The poles shall remain in the rings of the Ark: they shall not be removed from it. (25:12-15)

The Ark used the exact same prefabricated rods that went on and off everything else; only these remained permanently attached. But what is the point of designing the Ark with moving rods that don't come out? Why not simply design an Ark with elegantly built-in handles?

R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch suggests that these poles highlight a powerful symbolism. They weren't just ordinary handles, which perhaps truly could have been a permanent design feature. Instead, the Ark – which contains and represents the Torah and all it entails – is deliberately designed with permanent moving rods, meaning the Ark is built to be permanently portable. It requires no preparation to arrive or depart; it is designed to be taken wherever we need and wherever we go at a moment's notice.



## TorahRedux

Our sages suggest that the Ark had a variety of physics breaking properties; that it had an anti-gravitational effect, hovering and never touching the ground, and carrying its carriers; that it flattened and smoothed the hills and obstacles in the way of the weary Jewish People; and that it bent physical space when measured end to end. When Jerusalem was sacked for the last time, the Beis HaMikdash was pillaged, and many vessels and utensils were famously plundered. Yet the Ark was not – it was mysteriously hidden, and legend has it that it will show up again one day when it's supposed to.

While each of these alone is wild, R' Nosson Adler takes them together to thematically reflect that the Torah contained in the Ark transcends space and time. Torah precedes creation – אסתכל באורייתא וברא – עלמא; it can bend space and time because it does not belong to space and time. It comes from somewhere beyond our dimensions and is not bound by them.

Permanently portable, we have carried the Torah through crusades, exiles, expulsions, and pogroms, the living memory we lovingly look to for wisdom and guidance through good times and bad. But perhaps in some sense, the Torah has carried us too, helping us soothe some of the bumps and scratches we've accumulated along the way, providing us with comfort and warmth in the times we need it most.

The Ohr HaChaim notes that the Torah is self-referential as a way of life, a way of being – אים־בְּקִוּתִי – וּבְלִקְחָהּ בְּדֶרֶךְ. תְּלַכּוּ. It speaks to use on the go, in the desert, in liminal space, the place between places – While this certainly holds true in the global historical macro sense, you should make it true in the local and personal sense; in the small chunks of time between things, there have never been more opportunities to learn something short, so make sure to take the opportunity.

In the Torah's profoundly symbolic way, it goes as we go, built to move with us.

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## **Soul Sparkles**

3 minute read | Straightforward

When you think about the parts of Judaism and Torah that capture hearts and minds, you probably aren't alone if the book of Vayikra isn't on your highlight reels. It's quite understandable! The sacrifices; purity laws; Shemita; Yovel, and all the other miscellaneous laws and rituals – they're rather arcane and quite removed from our daily lived experience.

Of course, that's not to say that they don't matter – they're part of the Torah; they're important. But unlike, say, most of the books of Bereishis and Shemos, there's no overarching story or character-driven narrative with broadly applicable lessons and morals. It's not exactly blasphemy to notice that maybe they're just a little less exciting.



The book of Vayikra draws to a close with a beautifully detailed exposition of abundant blessings and fulfillment for properly observing the Torah. The blessings are accompanied by an equally detailed and gruesome description of all the terrible calamities that could befall the Jewish People should they fail to uphold the law properly. Many congregations customarily read this section quickly and quietly, and it is no honor to be called to the Torah for this particular reading.

Yet curiously, the final word that immediately follows this grim reading is a postscript with an abrupt and stark change of tone, the miscellaneous section about the assessment and valuation of pledges – Parshas Archin.

The laws of pledges are technical and specific, and there is a lot of literature that explores the exact parameters. When the Mishkan and Beis HaMikdash stood, they were operated and managed by a public endowment. People could pledge all kinds of contributions to the fund; they could pledge animals, money, property, and fascinatingly, even humans.

The essential broader point of these laws is that the fund was sophisticated and could receive anything of value. Since everything can be valued, it's simply a question of determining what that specific value is. While the eyebrow-raising notion of pledging a human conjures imagery of human sacrifice or slavery, it only modestly and simply entailed calculating the lifetime labor value of that person and then redeeming that value by contributing the corresponding amount to the public fund.

But of all things, why do the ponderous laws of Parshas Archin close out the book of Vayikra, following all the awful curses?

We could probably make peace with the notion that the Torah is like all things; some parts are more interesting, and some less. If we find meaning in the details of the census, architecture, and sacrifices, the Torah blesses us for observing the laws with joy. Yet specifically for those of us who are disenchanted with some of the arcane technicalities the Torah charges us with, the Torah forecasts a grim and intimidating future for us, that our worlds will fall apart with misery and pain.

The Ishbitzer compellingly suggests that by stating these laws specifically here, the Torah makes a sweepingly broad statement that all humans and all things have a fundamental and intrinsic value and worth – reminding us that even after tragedy strikes, all is not lost. All people are still worth something, including the people who have temporarily lost their way. Faced with a disheartening list of some of the worst things that can happen to a human, the Torah reminds the same people cowering from the curses that we are still worth something. Sure, how exactly we calculate the precise value is technical, but don't miss the wider point. Even the worst of us still has something valuable and special to them, and it ought to change our orientation to ourselves and to others.

Moreover, it bears noting that the nature of the endowment's expenditures was not profane or secular. From even the most awful, depraved, and lost souls, the endowment spent every last penny of their contributions on only the holiest and most sacred things; the value he has to offer is not worth less than yours.



There's a Yiddish expression that powerfully captures a vast amount of wisdom in just a few short words: the pintele Yid. It literally means the dot of a Jew; the fundamental essence of Jewish identity, and is perhaps related to the concept of the incorruptible soul – חלק אלוהים ממעל. This imagery articulates clearly and plainly that no matter how far you try to distance yourself, there will always remain some small spark that lies buried deep within. Perhaps that's the inalienable and inviolable part of us that Parshas Archin tries to speak to, even if we may have lost our way to some extent. The pintele yid, your soul spark, cannot be lost or extinguished; it can only ever lie dormant. It will wait patiently for as long as it takes to reignite and burst into flame once again, even if it takes generations.

Whatever you have done, whatever mistakes you have made, big or small, many or few, you need to remind yourself that you are worthwhile.

We are all better than the worst thing we've ever done.

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### Quote of the Week

“Direction is more important than velocity. It's no good going fast when you're going the wrong way.”

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### Thought the Week

“These days it seems that one of the essential goals of faith is the calmness that it provides. not an external calmness that thrives when there is no opposition, but rather an internal calmness that thrives within the opposition.”

– Rabbi Joey Rosenfeld, @jorosenfeld

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*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.*

Neli



## TorahRedux

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

**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.