

Shalom Aleichem – Peace be upon you.

Now, that’s a greeting. So when I say, “Shalom Aleichem,” you say...

["Aleichem Shalom"]

That’s right: “Aleichem Shalom” – upon you, may there be peace.

So let’s try that: “Shalom Aleichem,” and you say:

["Aleichem Shalom"]

Peace be upon you.

So, what does this classic Jewish greeting have to do with the corner of my lip?

Well, a while back I drove past a crowd of peace protesters out on Ward Parkway – I’m sure some of you have seen them –they had all kinds of signs, and they wanted me to honk for them and everything... , and I found that my reaction to them was this instinctive curling up of the corner of my lip into a sneer – that universal physiological response to the emotion of disgust.

And I thought, “What is wrong with me? What has happened to me that I find myself sneering at peace?”

After all, we can say, pretty unequivocally, that peace is one of the most important values in Judaism. Just look at the siddur, our prayerbook: oseh shalom, sim shalom, shalom rav.... We ask God to spread over us sukkat shalom, a shelter of peace, and I’varech et amo va-shalom, to bless God’s people with peace. ...And in our texts and our stories and our teachings too, peace is everywhere. I could go on and on with so-called “proof-texts” demonstrating the centrality of the value of peace in Judaism.

So to discover myself sneering at it is pretty profoundly disturbing.

But I ask myself, what is the peace that I’m sneering at; that I have disdain for? And is it somehow different from a peace that I do still long for?

In asking these questions and looking at the answers, I began to realize that I have not lost my love of peace. What I discovered instead is that at the root of my disdain, at the source of my sneer, is a recognition that the kind of peace that is evoking this reaction in myself, is not peace at all, but is more of a kind of cartoonish caricature of a peacenik attitude in which “peace is the answer no matter what the question;” a perspective that is completely disconnected from the realities of the world we live in. As if we are the only factor in the equation; as if peace is simply a matter of having the will to make it happen; if we would just give peace a chance.

But, unfortunately, making peace is not simply a matter of determination. It takes more than willpower and desire. We can’t simply declare peace unilaterally, and longing for it does not make it happen.

Now I know full well that not every advocate of peace thinks this way, but this perspective on peace is astonishingly widespread. And not just among the “honk if you hate the president,” peace-mongering crowd, but among thoughtful and intelligent people as well. The positions are carefully argued and reasoned by academics and intellectuals. And no less a figure than Mahatma Ghandi was prone to this kind of thinking. In correspondence between Ghandi and the famous philosopher/theologian, Martin Buber, Ghandi told Buber, in the 1930’s, that the Jews of Germany needed to respond to the Nazis by using “sat-**yah**-graha” – or soul force, passive resistance. Buber, who was about as liberal minded a person as one can imagine, responded by effectively telling Ghandi that he had no clue what he was talking about; that against an enemy like the Nazis *satyahgraha* would be a laughable and meaningless strategy.

But it is tempting to think this way because it fits our values, the foremost of which is the value of peace. But, no matter how deep our desire for peace, no matter how uncompromising our determination is for peace – these things do not outweigh the hatred and determination of our enemies.

So it is demands for peace that come from these places of unreality; that pretend that it is only our failings that stand in the way of peace; that ignore the thronging crowds that chant “death to America; death to Israel” and march with signs warning us “Be Prepared for the Real Holocaust,” – such demands for peace – this is the peace at which I sneer. This, the peace of those who take on the foolishness of mistaking what they believe in and long for, for what is real and at hand – this is the peace of which I am disdainful.

So what then, what is the peace that I do believe in. What is the peace that is at the heart of my hopefulness and my striving, not only as a matter of human longing, but also as a matter of my religious obligation to hold peace among my highest values?

It is not just the absence of fighting. Look at Israel and Hezbollah right now – there’s no fighting, but we would hardly call it peace. When our enemies put down their weapons but still plan to kill us, that isn’t peace – it’s a cease-fire.

The peace that I long for, the peace of our songs and our prayers and our teachings and our texts, the kind that doesn’t bring a sneer to my lips, is the peace of shalom, of wholeness and completion which is what the word means. It is a peace of unique individuals and disparate peoples living together in interdependence, living in freedom and justice, far from the precipice of violence and war.

Real peace is not just an end to fighting. It is an end to having to worry about fighting. Like the dreamed of age when the wolf will lie down with the lamb..., when we no longer have to worry that our enemies are going to attack us..., when our enemies are no longer our enemies – that is peace.

But here we are – in a state of war, or something like it. And the prospects for that kind of peace seem depressingly distant at best.

Here we are with a growing realization that our wars of the last several years, and Israel's war this summer are not separate struggles.

Here we are with an increasing and impending sense that what we have seen so far may end up being only a prelude of what's to come.

And how desperately we want for this not to be true. How desperately we long for there to be real peace between us and those who hate us.

But longing for it does not make it so.

This is a dangerous time to be confusing our desperate longing for peace with having achieved it. This is a dangerous time to live under the delusion that we have but to lay down our arms if we want an end to the fighting.

When we hear the pundits and the politicians say that we are in a struggle for civilization – that we are at a crossroads of history – many of us regard such talk as extremist and reactionary; but the unsettling truth is that there are struggles that are struggles for civilization; there are moments in time that are crossroads in history.

Were the Romans who sounded the alarm over the invading German tribes being extremists? Were the Muslims of Spain who expressed concern over the incursions of the Conquistadors being reactionary?

And in the last century, the struggle against Nazism and Japanese militarism was a crossroads in history. The struggle against the Soviet Union was a struggle for civilization. And had we not recognized them as such at the time, then we would be living in a very different world today. And, although the world that do live is far from perfect, I daresay that it is better than it would be had the Nazis or Joseph Stalin had their way.

In every generation, we have to struggle against those who worship the idol of their hatred; against those who want to destroy us. And in every generation the struggle is real and of unexaggeratedly epic proportions. And it is, I believe, just as real today.

If we do not believe that what is going on now is a struggle for civilization then we have to know at least that they believe it is. Those who hate us declare their hatred day by day. They scream out loud their intention and their determination to destroy us and our way of life.

This is not hyperbole that I am speaking. This is not paranoid demagoguery. This is what they tell us themselves. And it seems to me that it is foolish not to listen.

Now I hope: I hope that I am wrong. I pray that this struggle can be resolved without war. That by seeking peace and pursuing it, as the Psalm says – that we can actually achieve it.

But if we cannot achieve peace without war, if there is no other way, then the sad and frightening reality is that we will have to pursue peace, through the means of war.

I know this sounds like crazyness. It's outrageous - what I'm saying. Peace by means of war? What nonsense.

But there are times when the only way to achieve peace – real peace, not just the absence of fighting – there are times, when the enemy is so filled with hatred, so filled with the determination and the capacity for destruction, that the only way to achieve peace is through their complete and utter defeat.

After all, none of us go to sleep at night worrying that the Germans are going to attack us, or that we are going to be bombed by the Japanese. It just isn't a worry. They are our friends; our allies. But that would not be the case if we had not defeated them – in war – if we had not delivered them from the depths of evil and tyranny from which they threatened the world.

To speak of peace through war seems odd and disturbing to say the least. The same kind of disturbing feeling I felt when I found myself sneering at peace. But if Judaism holds peace as one of its highest values, it also teaches us, clearly, that war is sometimes necessary. God after all, is called both Adonai-Shalom (Lord of Peace) and also Ish Milchama – a man of war, Adonai Tz'va-ot (the Lord of Hosts). And Abraham, who was a great lover of peace, when he had to, he raised an army and went into battle.

The Torah teaches us that we have to do everything that we can to avoid war. We must use every strategy, every means at our disposal l'vakesh shalom ve-rodfeihu – to seek peace and pursue it. War must be for us a worst and a last resort, but we must be willing and prepared to enter into it if there is no other way.

And if we must fight a war for the sake of peace, then we must always bear in mind that it is for the sake of peace. If we must fight then we must be driven by the dream of an end to the fighting, not by a hatred of our enemies. In our making of war we must not lose what makes our way of life worth fighting for.

Judaism teaches that we are not permitted have joy or glee at the death of our enemies. We can celebrate an end to fighting, but not the death of another human being. This is why we empty wine from our cups on Passover when we recite the plagues; because we are not allowed to have fullness of joy knowing that that people have suffered.

There are times when wars must be fought, and it is always a tragedy. But even as those who clamor for peace must open their eyes to the reality of our world, those who clamor for war must hold fast to the vision and value of peace.

A foolish peace that ignores the actions and intentions of our enemies is, perhaps, a fair thing to sneer at. But real peace, the peace of shalom in which enemies cease to be enemies, that is always better than war. That kind of peace is everything; it's what we long for and what we strive for. May we know that kind of peace soon, bi-m'heirav v'yameinu, speedily and in our day. Then the hopes expressed in greeting to each other will become true:

Shalom Aleichem – may peace be upon you.