

Shalom in the Home Parashat Pinchas

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Allow me to begin with a confession. I've never seen the show "Shalom in the Home." And while I've never seen it, I must say that I am intrigued by it. I've never been a fan of Rabbi Shmuley Boteach's, but I do like the concept of the show and from what I understand about it, I like the ultimate message.

"Shalom in the Home" is a weekly one-hour program that helps families overcome their thorniest problems. The program is hosted by Rabbi Boteach, who is an Oxford-trained rabbi who's written over a dozen books on relationships and families, and counseled thousands of people through difficulties with marriage, parenting, sex and self-worth.

The description on the Discovery Channel's website claims, "The hallmark of the series will be Shmuley's insight into relationships, marriage and parenting. In each episode he'll take one family on an intensive 10-day journey. Using a battery of exercises and technologies, he'll help them come to terms with their problems and find the skills and resolve they'll need to improve things. His philosophy is that there is no such thing as bad children. Rather, adults need help to be better individuals, spouses and parents. When our kids act up, it's time to look in the mirror."

The word shalom derives from the root shin-lamed-mem, which has cognates in many Semitic languages, and means completeness, fulfillment, wellbeing, harmony, a concept usually encapsulated by translation in the word well-being.

Hence usage of shalom in the Hebrew Bible often refers to conditions related to well-being: safety, health and prosperity of individuals and nations.

A thorough etymological analysis of the Hebrew roots and their derivatives reveal that 'Lom was the basic root word for Shalom and appears in other languages in similar forms.

Of course, we know that Shalom is used to mean not only peace, but also the greetings hello and goodbye. As it does in English, it can refer to either peace between two entities (especially between man and God or between two countries), or to the well-being, welfare or safety of an individual or a group of individuals. It is found in many other expressions and names as well. Its equivalent cognate in Arabic is salaam and sälam in Ethiopian Semitic languages.

We can learn a lot about the concept of peace and peacemaking in this morning's parsha. The blessing of peace that God gives to Pinchas for killing Zimri and Cozbi is not a complete blessing. You see, the word "Shalom", as it appears in the Torah, has a broken third letter. The letter Vav is intentionally broken. In Pinchas' name, the "Yud" is also intentionally rendered smaller than usual.

But according to Jewish law, you say, don't we learn that all the letters in the Torah must be written as a complete *guf* (body) and if they are faded or partly illegible then the work is invalid? Yes, but this is the one exception where the scribe is mandated to make the letter incomplete.

According to the Ritva (R. Yom Tov ben Avraham Ishbili Spain c. 1250-1330), the letter vav in the word shalom in Numbers 25:12 must be written with a break in the vertical line according though some think it either a small vav or a normal vav but a little shorter "in front".

What are the reasons for this anomaly?

The text concerns a covenant of peace (*brit shalom*) that is offered to Pinchas – the somewhat over-zealous and fiery priest who skewered Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon, and Kozbi a Midianite woman. Pinchas' act stopped both the Israelites' bout of immoral behavior and the plague they had been suffering because of it, and he was rewarded for it.

However even the Massorettes must have been shocked by the violence of Pinchas' action as they made his blessing only partial through the broken vav which explains that true peace cannot be brought about through violence and that the two concepts are incompatible.

Similarly in the Talmud (Kiddushin 66b) the rabbis explain that the service of a person must be perfect and without blemish, by reading *shalom* without the vav as *shalem* - whole, perfect, sound and translate Numbers 25:12 as 'behold I give to him my covenant of perfection' - only when he is perfect and not found wanting.

Therefore, peace begins with us. We all want shalom throughout the globe. Middle East. Between enemy nations – India and Pakistan, Israel and the Palestinians, even the Wolverines and the Buckeyes. But we must take a look at the shalom in our lives first. And I think that to some extent, this is what Rabbi Boteach is doing when he comes into people's homes.

We can all criticize the relationships of others – whether it be politicians, co-workers, friends, neighbors, athletes, celebrities, or religious leaders. But we first need to take a hard look at our own relationships in our own homes. Is there Shalom in our home? Yes, the relationship between the Israelis and the Palestinians is important. But there's only so much we can do from our vantage point. There is, however, much we can do about the fractured relationship we might have with a sibling, or a spouse, or a child or a parent. Or an ex-spouse, a stepmother, etc.

Family discord is nothing new. We see it throughout the Torah and especially within the dysfunctional family of Genesis. Too often today, when we speak of disharmony, we look at the larger picture. Disharmony in our country, or within countries, or in our school, community, our synagogue, or our neighborhood. Perhaps it is easier, less work, to look externally. But we need to focus on our family at home. We need to question whether we have full shalom in our home or if the peace that we once new is now broken.

Peace has to start somewhere. And it is often too easy to criticize the relationships of others before looking at our own relationships, especially with those who should be closest to us.

Prem Rawat, peace activist, explains in his writings that "Peace Begins with You." He writes, "Something has been the quest of every civilization, the thirst for peace. The thirst for peace lies within you, and peace is also within you. You are the first step. Peace begins with you, not somebody else. All our lives, things have come from somewhere else. But the process of peace begins with you."

If the blessings of peace are broken and incomplete as they were in our Torah portion this morning, then they are not truly blessings of shalom and *shleymut*, completeness. But we can certainly work on making them complete and they will therefore be peaceful blessings, *birkat shalom*, and holy.

So, I can't promise you that I'll start watching "Shalom in the Home" – my television viewing style is much too discriminating. But I will continue to espouse the basic premise of the show. We will all be better people if we first work to establish peace in our own home.

Shabbat Shalom.