



Jewish teachings about the importance of peace

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This week Jews around the world will read the weekly portion from the Book of Exodus in which we find the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), one of the most troubling portions in the Bible, in which God is referred to as a man of war. This raises the question of whether the God of the Bible — and the God of the Jewish Tradition — is a God of War or a God of Peace! Or can this God be both?

There is no question that the Bible is replete with wars and conquest. It is part of our history. We can't deny it. Joshua conquered the land from the local inhabitants, and the kings of Israel fought many a war.

But is this theology the essence of Judaism? Or can we uncover a theology of peace and reconciliation as more central to Jewish faith and yearning?

Well, one rabbi has uncovered it!

A few years ago, I reviewed a book by Rabbi Sheldon Lewis, of Palo Alto, California, entitled *Torah of Reconciliation* by Rabbi Sheldon Lewis (Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2012). In this book, Rabbi Lewis' introduction on "Peacemaking in Jewish Tradition" is the best article that I have ever read on the subject. It is thorough, well-documented and convincing. I would say that it is a "must-read" for anyone who wants to know how deeply the search for peace and reconciliation is central in Judaism.

Rabbi Lewis argued persuasively that in the Jewish Tradition "there are more expressions lauding the virtues of peace than of any other single value". Indeed, he claims that "when one turns the pages of Jewish sources, the quest for peace and the praise of peace appear to be an obsession". It is certainly an obsession for him! And for me! And I only wish it were more of an obsession for more rabbis, Jewish educators, and Jewish leaders in Israel. To my sorrow, very few rabbis in our country speak up for peace these days. Perhaps there are more in North America. I'm not sure anymore, but I still hope so.

Shalom — Peace — is certainly one of the central tenets of Judaism. We pray for peace in all of our worship services. Moreover, peace is linked inextricably to justice and it could become a central component of our Jewish way of life, if we not only were to preach peace but to actively pursue it, and live it in our human behavior through ethical interpersonal relations. Indeed, pursuing peace could lead us to the values and methods of reconciliation in our personal, communal and national lives. It is not just an abstract concept, but it could also be a guide for living.

In this week's Torah portion, we find the highly problematic verse that is part of the song that the Israelites sang when they emerged free from Egypt: "God is a man of war." This verse demands some creative interpretations, lest we think that Jews really think of their God as a warrior God. One of the greatest commentators on the Torah, Rashi, offers this comment:

Rashi interprets: "God is a man of war to mean that God is a master of war. This means that God has mastery over war. He rules over it and stands above the cruel manifestations

of war. Even at a time of war, He is a master of mercy since God is His name.

Therefore, even if war is sometimes necessary, as in a just war for self-defense, one must approach it with care and mercy. The killing of innocent civilians should clearly not be allowed. Massacres or genocide or ethnic cleansing should not be acceptable.

In another famous rabbinic commentary, which is often mentioned this week with reference to the miraculous exodus story in which the Jewish people are saved by parting of the Sea of Reeds, God rebukes the Israelites for singing a song of triumphal victory:

The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you are singing a song!?” (Talmud, Megilla 10b).

In many contemporary Hagaddot, which are used for the recitation of the journey from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to the Promised Land of Israel, at the Seder during Pesach, this midrash has been included, to remind us that we should never rejoice when other human beings are killed.

The idea that traditional Jewish sources actually call for peace and reconciliation — and not just for conquest, occupation and settlement — is unfortunately virtually unknown in Israeli society, especially in establishment circles here. I wish that every rabbi in Israel would come to understand how central these values are in Judaism. They might even begin to preach and teach peace to their congregants and to the Israeli public at large! Wouldn't this be a refreshing change? And maybe even some of our politicians — especially some of those on the so-called “religious right” — might learn some new ideas, which would influence Israel's search for peace with our neighbors.

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