

PARSHAT NASO
MAY 18, 2013
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

The following story is told in Leviticus Rabbah as well as the Jerusalem Talmud: Rabbi Meir used to deliver discourses on Shabbat evenings. There was a woman there in the habit of listening to him. Once the discourse lasted a long time, and she waited until the Rabbi was finished. She went home and found her husband waiting for her. "Where have you been?" he asked. She answered: "I was sitting listening to the voice of the preacher." He then said to her: "I swear I will not let you enter here until you go and spit in the face of that preacher."

The story goes on to say that she stayed away for three weeks from Rabbi Meir's discourses. Her neighbors convinced her to go back to listen to him once more. As soon as Rabbi Meir saw them, he saw by the means of the Holy Spirit what had happened and said: "Is there a woman among you clever at whispering a charm over an eye?" The woman's neighbor said to her: "If you go and spit in his eye you will release your husband from his vow." She approached Rabbi Meir but was frightened. He said to her: "Spit in my face seven times and I will be cured." She did so, and he said to her: "Go tell your husband: You told me to do it once, and I spat seven times."

The story tells us that Rabbi Meir's students were upset with their teacher. They wondered how it was possible that she could abuse this great teacher of Torah. He said to them: "Is it not good enough for Rabbi Meir to be like his Creator?" - for Rabbi Ishmael has taught: "Great is peace, since even of the Great Name, written though it be in sanctity, the Holy One, blessed be He has said: 'Let it be blotted out in water for the purpose of making peace between husband and wife.'"

The reference that Rabbi Meir brings of Rabbi Ishmael's statement is from our Torah reading of this morning. We read the law of the suspected adulteress and the only example in the Torah of trial by ordeal. According to the Torah should a husband be jealous of his wife, for the woman to absolve herself of any possibility of incrimination, "The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off into the water of bitterness. He is to make the woman drink the water of bitterness." The curses which may ensue upon the woman if she is guilty, contain G-d's name, and yet, according to the text, G-d's name is dissolved in the portion of the writing which the accused wife drinks. If she passes the test, it is the hope of the Torah that the man will no longer be jealous of his wife because she will be clear of any possible incrimination and there will be peace in the household. Thus, Rabbi Meir felt that if G-d would allow his Holy Name to be erased in order to create peace in the household, how much more, should he, a teacher of Torah, be prepared to endure a few moments of abuse and discomfort in order to create peace in this woman's household.

The concept of Shalom Bayit, peace in the household, is an important one within Jewish tradition. Officially, the Rabbis designated the whole area of husband-wife relations under this rubric of family harmony. But it is really much more than that. Shalom Bayit involves a whole set of relationships between partners, siblings, children and parents, parents and children, all of which give rise to possible disharmony in many households. It is a challenge to create a

household in which peace resides, where people learn to respect one another, and where the feelings of the other are placed above personal aggrandizement and self-worship.

According to the latest statistics every 13 seconds another child will be abused in the United States. 9.5% of the elderly population in this country in 2010 were victims of abuse. In a National Institute for Justice and Center for Disease Control Prevention study in the year 2000, it was stated that one out of every four women will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime. Over 70% of that abuse is non-physical. It may include emotional, psychological, economic, and sexual abuse. Over 8.8 million children witness domestic violence each year and in the same study in 2000, it was reported that 61% of domestic violence incidents are unreported because victims do not believe police will believe them.

The problem is that this is a crime not merely of one person against another, but a crime against society. In two studies it was learned that domestic violence is behavior learned through observation and reinforcement. It is not caused by genetics or illness. Boys who witnessed domestic violence are more likely to batter their female partners as adults than boys raised in non-violent homes. A child's exposure to the father abusing the mother is the strongest risk factor for transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next.

Lest we think that the Jewish community is immune from these statistics SHALVA, the agency in our community which responds to domestic abuse in Jewish homes, on its website tells us that domestic abuse does not discriminate. It is an equal opportunity destroyer, regardless of education, socio-economic status or religious affiliation. It is a systematic pattern of coercive behavior for the sole purpose of manipulation in an intimate relationship. SHALVA has attempted to serve as an educational resource for Rabbis, educators and community leaders informing them of what is going on in society at-large and in the Jewish community in particular. At the same time, its workers make themselves available in a confidential manner to help those who are the victims of abuse, who reach out for a safe and secure place and may need legal, psychological or emotional support.

Jewish family life has always been based upon the concept of Shalom Bayit. In a remarkable passage Rabbi Jonah from Geronda, a 13th century legal authority, writes: "Close to sunset a person should set his Shabbat table, put out the chairs and lights and everything else including glasses and bowls. He should be very careful to have wine for Kiddush. He should also trim his nails every Friday afternoon and sharpen his knife, as it is said, 'And it shall be on the sixth day you shall prepare.' This means the sharpening of his knife... for if your knife is dull and cannot cut, there is no Shalom Bayit."

I have read this passage many times and can visualize this particular scenario. A family is prepared for a beautiful Shabbat dinner. Around the table are the father and mother, the children and perhaps some guests. The smells of the Shabbat food aroma waft through the air and the flowers show off the beauty of the moment. Kiddush is recited and the family then goes to do Netilat Yadim, the ritual of washing their hands. They return to the table and one of them takes up the knife to cut the challah after reciting Hamotzi. The knife does not cut the bread. It has not been sharpened and immediately there are recriminations from the husband to the wife and from the wife back to the husband. In front of the children it quickly escalates as one claims

the other is at fault. Before you know it other incriminations are brought up, the sanctity of the Shabbat table is ruined, the dissension in the family is evident, and the children are present as their parents raise their voices and quarrel with one another.

How many times have we said that most of our arguments make mountains out of molehills? I think that's what Rabbi Jonah is telling us. Prepare your household and your life so that no one will sweat the small things. Be open to the possibility that things happen and everyone needs to keep their cool. Prepare in advance so that no one can claim that the one was out to hurt the other.

Shalom Bayit is a very central concept within Jewish tradition. In Avot de Rabbi Natan, Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel says: "If one brings peace into his home, Scripture accounts it to him as though he has brought peace to everyone in Israel; but if one brings envy and contention into his home, it is though he has brought envy and contention into Israel - for everyone is monarch in his home." Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel informs us that the principal of a just and equitable society begins in the home. It is critical that people learn to treat one another with respect and dignity, for if they do not it spreads into the society at-large. Shalom in our tradition is something that is extolled over and over again. Our prayers end with a blessing for peace, we bless our children in the hope of peace, even one of G-d's name is Shalom – a sense of peace, wholesomeness, and of harmony.

In the 6th century B.C.E., the Chinese philosopher, lao-tse wrote the following words: "If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations. If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities. If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors. If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home. If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart."

Let us make up our minds to create a world of peace by starting small, in our homes, in our families, among our friends, and in our community. We then pray that this peace will have a ripple effect and move beyond our individual lives to our society, our country and our world. What we learn from the Torah reading of this morning and from the story of Rabbi Meir is that we must extend ourselves to create peace in our home and in our society. We must be respectful to those who are closest to us and teach our children and grandchildren to emulate our behavior as positive role models.

We offer this prayer found in our Siddur Sim Shalom written by Rabbi Nathan Shernhartz and translated by Navah Harlow:

Avinu malkeinu, bless my family with peace. Teach us to appreciate the treasure of our lives. Help us always to find contentment in one another. Save us from dissension and jealousy; shield us from pettiness and rivalry. May selfish pride not divide us; may pride in one another unite us. Help us to renew our love for one another continually. In the light of Your Torah grant us, the people of Israel and all Your creatures everywhere, health and fulfillment, harmony, peace, and joy. Amen.