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Birkat Kohanim

The Priestly Blessing

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"And Give You Peace"

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I

The famous Priestly Benediction, presented in Scripture at Numbers 6:22–27, ends with the prayer that God give the Israelites peace (6:26). But the peace so referenced, a peace that "is given" by God, is a peace that is not on the same ontological plane as the quotidian. It is, by definition, a peace that is *of God*. It is God who *gives* the peace. What, then, is this peace? It has something to do, seemingly, with God's "countenance," with God's *face*—the very same face about which it is written, "You shall not be able to see My face, for no human can see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20). And, indeed, that is part of the scriptural context as well: the full verse referenced above begins with the prayer that God "lift up" the divine face *and* grant peace to you. And these words too are deeply meaningful: the face that is "raised up" or "lifted up" to you, in the previous line of the Priestly Blessing (6:25), holds a promise that belies the mortal encounter with the face of God, the encounter that will inevitably lead to death. It is an encounter with the face of God beyond death—not after death, necessarily, but in a place that itself is beyond death...a day perhaps that is "neither day nor night" (Zechariah 14:7), a day that is not part of the mundane accounting of our lives, a day that will only be experienced beyond the place where death holds sway.

The peace given after the countenance is beheld—or, at the least, promised after that face, *the* face, the encounter with *that* face, is promised—is not a peace of this world. It is a peace of “and the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together, with a little boy to herd them” (Isaiah 11:6). It is an “on that day” peace: “On that day there shall be one Eternal God possessed of one name” (Zechariah 14:9)... “On that day, men shall fling away the idols of silver and the idols of gold that they made for worshipping” (Isaiah 2:20)... “On that day the Eternal will punish, with God’s great, cruel, mighty sword, Leviathan the Elusive Serpent—Leviathan the Twisting Serpent; God will slay the Dragon of the sea... And on that day, a great ram’s horn shall be sounded; and the strayed who are in the land of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come and worship the Eternal on the holy mount, in Jerusalem” (Isaiah 27:1, 13).

The peace that God will *give* is not a peace that might even be included in an accounting of the world. It is a peace that is a divine gift, a reordering of the world. It is not a *telos* in any known way. It is not the end of history, for in this telling history exists on a different plane. It is beyond the end of history, of a time when the world is reformed in a different ontological model so that the inevitable cycles of war and peace—the Pax Hellena, the Pax Romana, even a Pax Judea—are no longer of any relevance. This is not a peace of victors or vanquished, but something of a different order. It is an Edenic peace, in an Eden refined before and beyond human foibles and sinfulness. It is a peace guaranteed by, and given only by, God.

The divine giving is also a modality that exists in a different ontological context. It is a giving with no expectation of reciprocity. The only reflection of this peace of the end of days (or “on that day”) in the human realm is meditation upon this peace.

The complement, or corollary, of the divinely unilateral status of this peace is that it is unachievable. This peace, which is a gift

of heaven, is not the end result of human action. There is no war that can be fought that will bring this peace. There is no mystical incantation, no set of righteous actions, that will transform the world from its current mundane existence to the pacific existence of divine peace. This peace, then, while granted in a dream and longed for in blessing, is a vision but is not visionary. There is no path to follow whose ending is this land. Humanity is only given the option to wait through the hardships and the wars, the quotidian and the fantastic, until the arrival of "that day"—whose date and time is determined beyond the grasp of mortals. People plan and God laughs. God's laughter will some day be the eternal joy of lasting peace. There is, however, no mortal way to traverse from here to there.

II

Oseh shalom bi-m'romav hu ya'aseh shalom.

The One who makes peace in the heavens shall make peace.

These words, which conclude every version of the Kaddish and have their scriptural roots in the opening to the twenty-fifty chapter of Job, are portentous in their own right, implying the existence of a second order of peace: the peace that God "makes." This peace is the opposite of evil or "woe" and the equal of light: "I form light and create darkness, I make peace (*shalom*) and create woe—I the Eternal do all these things" (Isaiah 45:7). God is the author of this peace, its creator, its founder. This is a peace that is perhaps of the warp and woof of the world from the moment that heaven and earth, day and night, light and darkness were created. According to some rabbinic traditions, it is only because God made peace that the world was able to be created: peace between the upper waters and the lower waters, peace between the sun and the moon, and peace among the angels.¹

This type of peace is a peace that lacks open hostility: "And what was the peace that God established in heaven? God did not call ten angels 'Gabriel,' ten others 'Michael,' ten 'Uriel,' ten 'Raphael,' as is the wont of humans; for if God had done thus, then when God called one—all ten would come and they would be jealous of each other..."² It is a peace that allows the world to exist. It is of course, only one of the possibilities for existence. War, strife, and enmity are all still live options. The movement from war to peace is like the movement from night to day, from dark to light. There is a natural cycle:

Dominion and dread are God's;
 He imposes peace in God's own heights.
 Can God's troops be numbered?
 On whom does God's light not shine? (Job 25:2-3)

In this understanding, spoken by Job's friend Bildad, God can impose peace because "dominion and dread are God's." It is because God has innumerable troops and is everywhere. This is something like a divine Pax Romana, a heavenly "mutually assured destruction" standoff—save for the fact that there is only one side. God's intimidating power will overwhelm the power of nations. God's sword will deliver swift justice and the world will be brought to a state of peace. Peace will reign, albeit in a context of fear and trembling.

This peace will come as the end of history, and not as a process of peace-making that is *of* history. There will have been no reconciliation among the peoples of the world. Nation will not take up sword against nation, but not because they have come to a place of meeting and understanding. Rather, it will be God who imposes peace, who takes their weapons, and who installs a regime of fear. The fear of God's power will still the machinery of war. And this will be the end of history and the beginning of the end of days.

This peace is still not a peace that is woven by peacemakers, but is rather imposed by the Peacemaker. It is not a peace in which people turn to their neighbors or enemies and say: "You too are made in the image of God. What is it that we gain by our enmity?" It is, rather, a peace in which people stream to the mountain of God and worship God's awesome power. God will be the world's only superpower, and the world will have peace, as repeatedly in biblical times, "for forty years" ... and maybe more.

There is, though, no path that we can choose to travel, to get from here to there. There is no promise that if we lay down our arms we will transcend an understanding of existence that is drenched in death and violent clashes. The world of this peace is a monarchical world in which earthly kings are displaced by God as Sovereign. Yet, the reign of God partakes no less of the power of arms than the reign of earthly kings. God's "arms" are just so much more powerful.

This concept of peace has thus moved peace from the heavenly realm into the earthly sphere. It is on the ground that God makes peace, among the peoples of the world. God does not force the transcending of time and space in order to gift peace. And we have here a glimpse of the possibility of an *imitatio Dei*. Just as God makes peace, so too should we make peace. Yet, at this point, this peace would be too terrible to consider. It would be the peace of the powerful.

There is no change of consciousness in this new order; there is only a change of ruler.

III

Hillel used to say: Count yourselves among the students of Aaron. Be one who loves peace and pursues peace (*obeiv*

shalom v'rodeif shalom). Be one who loves people and brings them near to the Torah.³

Hizkiyah used to say: Great is peace, for in regard to every commandment in the Torah it is written: "when you see..." (Exodus 23:5), "when you encounter..." (Exodus 23:4), "when a bird's nest chances to be before you..." (Deuteronomy 22:6), "when you build..." (Deuteronomy 22:8)—when the possibility for fulfilling a commandment arises, you must act accordingly. However, in regard to peace, what is written? "Seek peace (*shalom*) and pursue it" (Psalm 34:15). Seek it in your place, and pursue it in another place.⁴

What does it mean to pursue peace? The sages⁵ relate that when Aaron, the High Priest, Moses' brother, would hear that two people were fighting, he would go to one of them and say: "I was sent here by your friend so-and-so, who is so very sorry about what he did." Immediately, the person Aaron was talking to would think, "Why should such a great and righteous man like Aaron need to come to me to apologize for my friend? It is actually I who must apologize." Aaron would then go to the other person and tell him the same thing. The two people, who earlier in the day had been entangled in an embittered squabble, would set out for each other to apologize—each thinking that the other had already done so. They would meet halfway and would embrace and live in peace.

Aaron is thus considered, in the rabbinic tradition, an exemplar of one who "pursues peace." Aaron's peace is the peace of amity over honesty. It is more important that "we all get along" than that we tell or know the truth. An ancient midrash states this explicitly: "Great is peace, for we find that the Torah speaks falsely in order to make peace between Abraham and Sarah."⁶ When Sarah laughs at the thought of giving birth, it is reported that the cause of her mirth was that her husband, Abraham, was old (Genesis 18:12). However, when God relates this story as told to Abraham in the next verse, the cause of Sarah's laughter is reported as her own advanced age (18:13).

This peace effected by Aaron, however, is a peace on a razor's edge. The underlying relationship of enmity can spring up at any moment if Aaron's ruse comes to light. If, when the two men are done hugging, and are sitting down to coffee, one says to the other: "I am so glad that you sent Aaron to me to apologize; I really should have done so first"—the other then might just reply, "Yes, you should have; actually, I thought you did. Why would I apologize?!" The whole peaceful edifice, so carefully crafted by Aaron, might then fall apart.

Rabbi Ishmael claimed that peace was great, "for we find that the blessed Holy One ceded God's own name, which was written in holiness, that it might be erased in the water, in order to make peace between a man and his wife."⁷ The reference here is to the ritual for the suspected adulteress (Numbers 5:11–31). When the spirit of jealousy comes upon a man and he suspects his wife of adultery, he brings her to the Tabernacle (later, the Temple in Jerusalem), where she undergoes a humiliating ritual "test." If she fails the test, she dies; if she passes, she is considered exonerated and she will be fruitful. Part of the test, the part that may assure her death, includes making a potion consisting of dirt from the floor of the Tabernacle, mixed in water, with ink from a writ of curses that includes the name of God. The writ is placed in the water and the ink washes off and is assimilated into the potion. The woman is then made to drink the "bitter besetting water." Thus the name of God is ceded for peace between husband and wife. Although the spirit of jealousy might not have claimed a victim on the day that the husband first suspects his wife of infidelity, it still hovered overhead, ready to be summoned at the whim of the husband. The marriage is thus only spuriously helped by the ritual (which includes the effacement of God's name): can there ever be certainty about a deed that nobody saw not happen? Will an insanely jealous husband (one who is possessed by the spirit of jealousy) ever be certain or satisfied? Is there a chance that the relationship will be peaceful from here on out? If this is the model of peace, have we not set the bar rather low?

If peace came into the world at creation, if peace was created with the world (or as part of the world), then enmity came along not much later. When Cain raised his hand to strike Abel, by acting upon his jealousy, he destroyed the peace and invented violence. Is there no way to not be violent, to live non-violently—that is also a way of truth and respect?

The sages urge us also in this direction, using this time as their example Moses, the humblest person on earth: “There is no one humbler than one who pursues peace. Think for yourself: how might one pursue peace if one is not humble? Howbeit? If a person curses another, the peacemaker replies: ‘Peace be upon you.’ If a person fights with the peacemaker, the peacemaker holds his tongue.”⁸ Humility. Peace might begin with lessening one’s own ego in the world.

IV

The last chapter of the Mishnah tractate Avot, known as *Kinyan Torah* or “Acquisition of Torah,” lists forty-eight manners (*d’varim*) by which the Torah is acquired. It is not completely clear what is meant by “acquiring Torah.” I will take it to mean the spiritual or moral practices that one must undertake in order to be able to be a link in the chain of tradition, which is listed in the first *mishnah* of Avot: “Moses received the Torah at Sinai and handed it down to Joshua; Joshua, to the Elders; the Elders, to the Men of the Great Assembly...” The list extends to and includes the sages of the Mishnah.

Somewhere down in the middle of the list is “one who carries the yoke with one’s fellow” (*nosei b’ol im haveiro*). The late nineteenth-century rabbi and master of the *Musar* tradition, Simḥah Zissel Ziv, also known as the Alter of Kelm, raised up this specific mode of acquisition of Torah and gave it pride of place. For him, the way to acquiring Torah passed through radical empathy. For the Alter of Kelm, radical empathy consists of envisioning oneself *as* the

person in distress, feeling that person's suffering, and from that position working to alleviate that suffering. For Reb Simḥah Zissel, the paradigmatic case of this manner of radical empathy is Moses himself. Simḥah Zissel is bothered by Moses' seeming brazenness when he speaks to God after leaving Pharaoh's palace after their first meeting, when he challenges God saying: "O Eternal, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people" (Exodus 5:22–23). The Alter of Kelm wonders how Moses was allowed to get away with this manner of addressing God.

To answer this question, Rabbi Simḥah quotes Rashi, "[Moses] used his eyes and heart to suffer over them," and then expands this idea: "[Moses] so accustomed himself [to their sufferings] by way of imagination, to the point he felt their pain as if he himself was suffering it. So he carried their yoke with them even to a greater extent than his own pain.... Thus he was able to say: 'Why did You bring harm upon this people?'"⁹ Rabbi Simḥah seems to be saying that Moses did not *actually* suffer that which the Israelites suffered, since he had been brought up in the Pharaoh's house. He had never been a slave, and he had no firsthand experience of the suffering of the Israelites. Yet he practiced empathy, by way of visualizing and imagining their pain, so that ultimately he was able to actually *feel* their pain enough to challenge God.

This brazen act of bringing the Israelites' pain to God in a defiant manner was a great sin. According to Shemot Rabbah: "At that moment the Attribute of Judgment wished to strike Moses. The blessed Holy One said: 'Leave him be, for he only said this for the honor of Israel.'"¹⁰ This statement of the midrash, for Simḥah Zissel, backs up the point made by Rashi that Moses used his eyes and heart to suffer over the Israelites—that is, he understood intellectually (with his eyes), and he felt their pain as if it was his own pain (in

his heart). Thus the practice of “one who carries the yoke with one’s fellow,” the path of radical empathy, is a practice of understanding and experiencing the pain of another person, *to the point that one suffers that pain oneself*.

Is this then the way of peace? If I feel your pain so intensely, how could I then harm you? Would it not bring about peace if we all practiced this type of radical empathy? There would be no outsiders. No person would ever suffer by themselves, as long as others were around. The possibility of attacking another would dissipate, in the experience of the pain that the other would suffer. There is perhaps hope along this way.

The midrash relates that God’s appearance in a burning bush that was not consumed, in order to commission Moses to redeem Israel, was symbolic of God’s promise to be with Israel in all their troubles—that God would also suffer the Exile and its tribulations. The radical empathy symbolized by Moses and demanded by Avot is an example of *imitatio Dei*, of acting as God would.

V

What, then, are the demands of peace?

Moses was not an uncomplicated person. While the midrash above, following the Torah, understands Moses as the most humble person, this humility was also infused with, or periodically marked by, violent outbursts. The Torah relates Moses’ fateful encounter with an Egyptian taskmaster whom he beat to death for striking an Israelite. When Moses came down from Sinai with the tablets containing the Decalogue and saw the Israelites dancing round the golden calf, he smashed the tablets. The Babylonian Talmud relates that God approved of this act.¹¹

Moses, in any event, was only God’s agent with regard to Pharaoh. While Moses threatened Pharaoh, warned Pharaoh, and “pulled the trigger” on Pharaoh’s punishments, it was ultimately God who landed

the blows. God laid Pharaoh low and ultimately killed off most of Pharaoh's people and his army, and laid his country waste.

God did not allow the angels to sing praise while the Egyptians were drowning. But God did indeed drown the Egyptians, and the Israelites sang praise—with Miriam leading the women, and Moses leading the men.

God rewarded Pinhas' homicidal zealotry with a "covenant of peace" (Numbers 25:12). What manner of peace is that? It is the peace of the ceasefire, the peace of tense disarmament, the peace that is based on war and that will cycle again into war. Forty years of peace. Forty years of war. Almost no one who left Egypt entered Canaan alive, including Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

What, then, of peace?

Aharon Shmuel Tamares, an Eastern European rabbi who died in 1931, claimed that opposition to violence was one of the fundamental pillars of belief. In fact, in the introduction to the Decalogue, God says just that, according to Tamares:

The "God of Israel"—that is, the aspect of divinity in which God was revealed before our people on Mount Sinai...this aspect is: the good traits of the blessed Holy One, the trait of righteousness and fairness, and that the archetype of all these divine traits is to hate crass violence (*ko'ah ha-egrof*).¹²

When God wiped out the Egyptians, God intentionally did this alone, without help. "I and no other," as we read on the night of the *seder* in the words of the midrash in the Haggadah. God did not empower the Israelites to seek violent revenge against the Egyptians. Rather,

the blessed Holy One could have given Israel the power to avenge themselves upon the Egyptians; however, the blessed Holy One did not want to show them the way to use violence. For even if in the present moment it was to

defend themselves from the evil ones, it is in this way [i.e., the use of violence] that violence spreads in the world, and from defenders they will ultimately become pursuers.¹³

Tamare's overreaching claim that the Exodus was a realized eschatological moment beclouds the moral acuity of his aspirational vision. The demand of God's own use of violence was that humans should not use violence. Divine violence is separated from human violence in a Maimonidean dichotomy. The violence that God deploys is not such that might be compared to the violence of humans. Even the concept itself is used merely in an analogical way, as the divide between divine and human action is so absolute as to necessitate scare quotes around the term "divine action."

Yet, Tamare also says that when the force of violence is unleashed in the world it is indiscriminate, and so the Israelites had to seal themselves in their houses in order for them not to be tainted by it. This is how he explains the talmudic dictum attributed to Rav Joseph: "Once God gave permission to the Destroyer to destroy, the Destroyer does not distinguish between righteous and evil."¹⁴ Tamare expands this to mean that if God had allowed the Israelites to let loose their own power of destruction, if God had empowered the Israelites to wreak justified revenge on the Egyptians, then their destructive, violent powers would not have distinguished between good and evil—"and they would have eventually turned from being defenders to being oppressors."¹⁵

VI

Said Resh Lakish: One who raises his hand to his fellow, even if he has not hit him, is called evil, as it says: "And he said to the evil one, 'Why will you strike your fellow?'"

(Exodus 2:13). It does not say "Why have you struck," but rather "Why will you strike"—even though he has not yet struck he is called evil.¹⁶

It is almost a cliché that Judaism is not a pacifist religion. The Talmud expands on the biblical law of the thief who comes in the night (Exodus 22:1), saying: "If one comes to kill you, kill him first."¹⁷ (This is Rashi's connection,¹⁸ theorizing that the reason that one is allowed to kill a thief who tunnels into the house at night is because he presents a clear danger: since the thief obviously knows that at night people will be home and he presents himself as ready to steal at all costs.) Moreover, preemptive killing is permitted in the case of a person who is pursuing another to kill him or her. In that case, a third party is permitted under certain circumstances to intervene with necessary force, and even kill the pursuer in order to save the life of the would-be victim.¹⁹

How then do we get from here to there—if "here" rabbinic tradition allows for violence and "there" Tamares demands radical pacifism?

Resh Lakish, in the passage quoted above, sees that the dividing line between good and evil rests on the matter of intention. One is judged to be evil based on whether one *wants* to hit another, and not just on one's actions. The actual deployment of violence is not necessary to be judged evil, only the *intent* to deploy violence. Violence itself, then, is obviously evil. The actual act of raising one's hand and striking another violates the bounds of the permissible.

Is there a way of inferring from Resh Lakish's declaration that even the intent to do violence is evil? On the one hand, Resh Lakish asserts that even the intent to act violently is evil; on the other hand, the Talmud seems to authorize such violence when it will result in saving an innocent life. What, then, are we to conclude about the permissibility of violence or the imperative of pacifism? One way of resolving this tension would be to draw a distinction between self-defense and other cases: "If one comes to kill you, kill him first." In

a case where my life is in danger, I must obviously be able to defend myself. What then of the case of the pursuer? My life is not in danger when I see one person running after another with homicidal intent. Yet, I am authorized, there too, to use violent means to stop them.

VII

The "self-defense" objection to nonviolence is in many ways the path of least resistance. Self-defense usually breaks into the discussion of nonviolence in the manner of a challenge: "But what about self-defense?" This is played as a trump and not offered as a move in the dialogue. It seems obvious that one is permitted, even obligated, to defend oneself, to save oneself from harm. This is more than an obligation; it is a natural drive. A person's first instinct is self-preservation. Is that not obvious?

It seems that no, it is not completely obvious to the Jewish tradition. There are three prohibitions for which one is obligated to give up one's life rather than to transgress them: idolatry, impermissible sexual relations, and murder. Let us leave to the side the complicated demands of the jealous God of monotheism and the obsessive purity of sexual mores. Why murder? If I am told to kill you or else I should be killed, why should I not kill you? Is your blood redder than mine? Is your continued existence more important, more pressing, more vital than mine is?

To be clear, it would never even enter my mind to kill you unless there was a gun to my head. However, now that there is a gun to my head—all other things being equal, does my drive to self-preservation not have a voice? And yet, the demand of the law is clear

Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Yehotzadak: By a majority vote, it was resolved in the upper

chamber of the house of Nitza in Lydda: In regard to every law of the Torah, if a person is commanded: "Transgress and be not killed," one should transgress and not be killed—excepting idolatry, impermissible sexual practices, and murder.²⁰

Two out of the three of these demands for martyrdom—the demand that one forfeit one's life rather than worship idols or engage in forbidden sexual practices—are contested. In each, a biblical grounding is sought and presented. However, the demand that one allow oneself to be killed rather than murder another is based purely in *s'vara*, in argument rather than biblical precept:

And from where do we know [the prohibition concerning] the murderer himself? It is common sense. It is as the one who came before Rabbah and said to him, "The governor of my town has ordered me, 'Go and kill so and so; if not, I will kill you.'" He said to him, "He should kill you and you should not kill; who would say that your blood is redder? Perhaps his blood is redder."²¹

Turning the question around ("who is to say that your blood is redder," rather than "who is to say *his* blood is redder") essentially answers the question for Rabbah. If you are to actively take someone else's life, then you have to be able to articulate an argument that shows that your life *is* more important than that of the other person. In order for you to claim the right to tip the balance in your favor, when you are on one side and another person is on the other, you have to have a substantial—or even overriding—reason. The instinct of self-preservation is not enough.

VIII

Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues. And what needs justification through something else cannot be the essence of anything. The end of war is peace; but to the question, And what is the end of peace?, there is no answer. Peace is an absolute, even though in recorded history the periods of warfare have nearly always outlasted the periods of peace.²²

The moral consciousness can sustain the mocking gaze of the political man only if the certitude of peace dominates the evidence of war. Such a certitude is not obtained by a simple play of antitheses. The peace of empires issued from war rests on war. It does not restore to the alienated beings their lost identity. For that a primordial and original relation with being is needed.²³

What of war? Even if we might have led ourselves down the primrose path to the seemingly solid garden wall of *aporia*, of *undecidability*, about the question of personal self-defense, does the same pertain to the idea of war? Is war analogous to a conflict between individuals, where one side might claim self-defense while the other is the aggressor and thereby loses all legitimacy? Do we always voice the psalmist's stark plaint: "I am for peace...they are for war" (Psalm 120:7)?

The cycles of war and peace do not lead to peace. The history of the world is based on these cycles of war and peace. The biblical recording of the rhythm of forty years of peace and then forty years of war could be the template for this history—though the periods of war were far greater and the periods of relative peace far shorter.

Is there any justification for war? Arendt, in her 1969 essay "Reflections on Violence," writes that

all violence harbors within itself an element of arbitrariness; nowhere does Fortuna, good or ill luck, play a more important role in human affairs than on the battlefield; and this intrusion of the "Random Event" cannot be eliminated by game theories but only by the certainty of mutual destruction. It seems symbolic of this all pervading unpredictability that those engaged in the perfection of the means of destruction have finally brought about a level of technical development where their aim, namely warfare, is on the point of disappearing altogether.²⁴

Almost fifty years later, the role that unpredictability plays is not diminished. With the end of the Cold War, with the end of the threat of mutually assured destruction, Arendt's optimism that war will put itself out of business seems almost quaint. In our age of ongoing genocides in Sudan and Congo and Syria, with the threat that nuclear weapons might get into the hands of non-state actors, with the abilities of the superpowers to destroy the world many times over, it is hard to abide the thought that war could ever be justified. The basic fact of war, as Arendt states clearly, is that "violence harbors within itself an element of arbitrariness." The means of war almost always, almost certainly, will overwhelm whatever ends seem to justify the violence. Along the way, those who will be killed will not entirely—or even, at times, largely—be those who are ostensibly being attacked.

The definition of modern warfare is the unleashing of violence that will very soon be uncontrollable. Embarking on a war means embarking on a course during which it is guaranteed that innocent people will be murdered. Until World War II, it was correct to assume that most of the casualties in war were combatants. Nevertheless, this supposition still requires one to justify the massive homicides of innocent people incidental to military operations, and to justify the killing of enemy combatants as being distinct from other forms of homicide. Be that as it may, from World War II until the present,

the ratio of civilian to military casualties is somewhere between 7:1 and 9:1. That is, between seventy and ninety percent of the deaths in contemporary wars are civilian deaths.²⁵ It is important to appreciate the impact of this fact: when a state mobilizes its army to fight an offensive or defensive war, it is preparing to murder innocents and incidentally to kill combatants.

How then can we hear the intoning of the Priestly Benediction, and the solemn invoking of the final phrase “and give you peace”—putting all our hopes in God that God grant us what we are not willing to exert effort to do for ourselves, and not join in Isaiah’s full-throated condemnation?

Hear the word of the Eternal,
 you chieftains of Sodom;
 give ear to our God’s instruction,
 you folk of Gomorrah!
 “What need have I of all your sacrifices?”
 says the Eternal.
 “I am sated with burnt offerings of rams,
 and suet of fatlings,
 and blood of bulls;
 and I have no delight
 in lambs and he-goats.
 That you come to appear before Me—
 who asked that of you?
 Trample My courts no more;
 bringing oblations is futile,
 incense is offensive to Me.
 New Moon and Sabbath,
 proclaiming of solemnities,
 assemblies with iniquity,
 I cannot abide.
 Your New Moons and fixed seasons
 fill Me with loathing;
 they are become a burden to Me,

I cannot endure them.
 And when you lift up your hands,
 I will turn My eyes away from you;
 though you pray at length,
 I will not listen.
 Your hands are stained with crime—
 wash yourselves clean;
 put your evil doings
 away from My sight.
 Cease to do evil;
 learn to do good.
 Devote yourselves to justice;
 aid the wronged.
 Uphold the rights of the orphan;
 defend the cause of the widow.²⁶

As people of faith, as Jews who walk in the path of the covenant of Sinai, the only path forward is to demand, as a first step, that Judaism and all other religions bless war no more. There is no war that is just. Every war is an exercise in mass murder.

We must learn peace. It is not enough to "learn war no more." We must learn peace. This perhaps is what is hinted at by the psalmist:

Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you what it is
 to fear the Eternal....
 Shun evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. (Psalm
 34:12, 15)

We must not only celebrate peace, bless each other with peace, and pray for peace. We must actively seek peace. We cannot do that through evil means. "Shun evil and do good." What is the good? "Seek peace and pursue it." The path is not easy. However, we should be investing as much time, energy, life, and treasure in that pursuit as we have already in the pursuit of war and killing. We must first reorient

ourselves away from the instinctual violent and martial reaction to any and every situation. We must begin to learn nonviolence.²⁷ Our government must have nonviolence as the option of first choice when conflict starts brewing, and not wait for a shooting war.

To seek peace and pursue it, in an age in which we can easily destroy the whole planet with the stockpile of weapons currently available, is not only good and just. It is the only way to preserve the species—and all other species. Rabbi Tamares' insight is even more valuable today than it was a century ago. Violence only ever begets violence. Violence never begets peace. Only peace begets peace.

NOTES

- ¹ Cf. the midrash of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai preserved at Vayikra Rabbah 9:9.
- ² *Avot D'rabbi Natan* 12:5.
- ³ M. Avot 1:12.
- ⁴ *Derekh Eretz Zuta* 11.
- ⁵ *Kallah Rabbati* 3b.
- ⁶ Sifrei Bemidbar §42, commenting on Numbers 6:26.
- ⁷ *Derekh Eretz Zuta*, chap. 11.
- ⁸ *Kallah Rabbati* 3b. See Numbers 12:3 for the description of Moses as humble.
- ⁹ Simḥah Zissel Ziv, *Sefer Hokhmah U-musar* (ed. New York, 5717 [1956/1957]), p. 3. The quote from Rashi is taken from his Torah commentary to Exodus 2:11, s.v. *va-yar b'sivlotam*.
- ¹⁰ Shemot Rabbah 5.
- ¹¹ B. Yevamot 62a, Bava Batra 14b, and Menahot 99b.
- ¹² Aharon Shmuel Tamares, *Sefer Musar Ha-torah V'ha-yahadut* (Vilna: P. Garber, 5672 [1911/1912]), p. 126.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- ¹⁴ B. Bava Kamma 60.
- ¹⁵ Tamares, *Sefer Musar Ha-torah*, p. 44.
- ¹⁶ B. Sanhedrin 48b.
- ¹⁷ B. Berakhot 58a.
- ¹⁸ Rashi to Exodus 22:1, s.v. *ein lo damim*.
- ¹⁹ B. Sanhedrin 73a.
- ²⁰ B. Sanhedrin 74a.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego and London: Harcourt, 1970), p. 51.
- ²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (1969; rpt. Dordrecht [Netherlands]: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), p. 22.
- ²⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 4. The version published in *On Violence* was an expansion of the original essay as it appeared in the *Journal of International Affairs* (Winter, 1969), pp. 1–35, and the *New York Review of Books* 12/4 (February 27, 1969), pp. 19–31.
- ²⁵ Valerie Epps, "Civilian Casualties in Modern Warfare: The Death of the Collateral Damage Rule," in *Legal Studies Research Paper Series*, Research Paper No. 11–39 (September 16, 2011), and see especially the studies cited in nn. 53–63 on pp. 18–20.
- ²⁶ Isaiah 1:10–17, based largely on the NJPS translation.
- ²⁷ It is worthwhile mentioning that someone has researched whether armed resistance actually works in overthrowing tyrannies. The conclusion is that nonviolent revolutions succeed far more often than violent revolutions. Erica

Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan co-authored a book, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), which studied 323 violent and nonviolent conflicts between 1900 and 2006. Professor Chenoweth, a domestic terrorism expert by training, started out as a sceptic of nonviolent resistance. However, the facts changed her mind. Chenoweth and Stephan found that “nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts.” See *Why Civil Resistance Works*, p. 7. This includes the finding that 60% of nonviolent campaigns for regime change succeed while less than 30% of violent campaigns to overthrow regimes succeed.