

A TORAH OF NONVIOLENCE

Rabbi Victor Hillel Reinstein

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The sound of the shofar still hovered in the air above Mitzpah, a small town northeast of Jerusalem, when the brutal blade of the assassin found its mark. Rosh Hashannah had scarcely ended, so many prayers still in ascent, pushed back now by Heaven's tears. It was 582 B.C.E. The Holy Temple/ theBeis Hamikdosh lay in ruins, destroyed four years earlier by the Babylonians. The smoke of the new year offerings and the sweet smell of incense no longer rose on wings of the Levites' songs. Gedaliah ben Achikam had been appointed Jewish governor by Nevuchadneztar, to rule over the anguished survivors of his people in this time of national torment. On the third day of the month of Tishrei, the day after Rosh Hashannah, Gedaliah was assassinated.

The sword of a zealot had shredded any remaining hope for national survival in the Land of Israel, in the kingdom of Judah. Whatever glimmer of consolation had bravely flickered in the midst of misery was now snuffed out. A member of the peace party, whose clarion voice was the prophet Jeremiah, Gedaliah was one of those who had counseled a nonviolent response to the invading Babylonians, urging creative cooperation, however grudging, and long-term spiritual resistance rather than engaging militarily with the overwhelming force of Babylon. In opposition to these "pacifist" realists were those of the war party, led by princes of the royal house. Similarly cognizant of the futility of engaging a superpower alone, they sought alliance with Egypt through which to foment a battle of the titans.

Chronicled in the Book of Jeremiah, the politics of his time echo eerily in ours. Internecine strife rips apart the soul of a nation. Blinded to new possibility by glint of fire on sword, war is embraced, even so long ago, as the already weary way of national salvation. Those who seek the way of peace as the way of survival are condemned. Speaking truth to power, Jeremiah cries out, "Behold, Pharaoh's army, which is come out to help you, shall return to Egypt, into their own land. And the Chaldeans shall come back, and fight against this city, and take it, and burn it with fire (Jer. 37:7-8)." His patriotism challenged, Jeremiah is arrested, taunted, "you are deserting to the Chaldeans." From the depths of heartfelt love for his people, Jeremiah shouts with wounded cry, "It is false, I am not deserting to the Chaldeans." The narration continues,

Biblical verse become like the morning newspaper, "The princes were furious with Jeremiah; they beat him and put him into prison...; The princes said to the king, We pray thee, let this man be put to death: for thus he weakens the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words to them: for this man seeks not the welfare of the people, but their harm (Jer. 37:13-15, 38:4)."

Failing to heed the counsel of Jeremiah, the nation was doomed. The Temple destroyed, Gedaliah hoped to save the remnant of Judah who had not been carried off into exile. Negotiating terms with Babyon, he sought to rebuild cities and farms and to restore a semblance of national identity and infrastructure, carefully planting the necessary seeds of rebirth. In the aftermath of destruction, Gedaliah, as a leader of the peace party and protector of Jeremiah, was a logical choice to be governor. Drawing on the Biblical text, the nineteenth century historian, Heinrich Graetz, imagines Gedaliah's character: "Gedaliah was a man in every way fitted for the difficult post; he was gentle and peace-loving.... In order to heal the still bleeding wounds, a gentle hand was wanted, that of a man capable of complete self-devotion and abnegation." And then, Graetz offers ominous editorial, "Gedaliah was, perhaps, too gentle, or he relied too much on the grateful feelings of men." In this setting, amidst raw tensions, surviving leaders of both parties streamed to Mitzpah to take counsel with Gedaliah. Among the princes of war and their generals who came, even to sit at Gedaliah's table, was Yishma'el ben Netanyahu. Moved by jealousy and rage at Gedaliah's appointment, Yishma'el was already in league with Ammon, a bitter enemy of Babylon, to overthrow Gedaliah and resume the fight. Acting from his own nationalist zeal as judge and executioner, the violent act of one was about to set the stage for complete destruction. On the day after Rosh Hashannah, the third day in the month of Tishrei, the zealot raised his sword and slew a prince of peace.

Little known and barely recognized in Jewish calendars, the day after Rosh Hashannah, two days from today, is traditionally observed as צום גדליה / the Fast of Gedaliah, a day mandated by the rabbis to remember Gedaliah ben Achikam and the cascade of tragic events surrounding his death. In an article in the current issue of Tikkun Magazine, Rabbi Everett Gendler, a friend and mentor to me, draws our attention to a compelling coincidence of dates this year. *Tzom Gedaliah* corresponds to October 2nd, the date of Mahatma Gandhi's birth, designated last year by the United Nations as the International Day of Nonviolence. A fragile expression of hope in a violent world, and probably as little known as *Tzom Gedaliah*, the resolution adopted by the General Assembly begins with a striking acknowledgment, especially given the failure of virtually every nation to reject war and militarism: "Bearing in mind that nonviolence, tolerance, full respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, democracy, development, mutual understanding and respect for diversity are interlinked and mutually reinforcing; Reaffirming the universal relevance of the principle of nonviolence, and desiring to secure a culture of peace, tolerance,

understanding and nonviolence...." The resolution then calls on nations, organizations and individuals to commemorate the International Day of Nonviolence "in an appropriate manner and to disseminate the message of nonviolence, including through education and public awareness." The subtle challenge of the resolution, perhaps not even grasped by its framers, is how to move beyond nonviolence as a "principle," and how to disseminate not only the message of nonviolence, but its practice.

Tzom Gedaliah is the first stop on the Jewish calendar after Rosh Hashannah, the very first non-Yontev day of the year. As we leave the warm embrace of prayer and friendship, returning to the world of day to day striving, we immediately encounter the reverberating echo of ancient violence in the memory of one who was slain for putting aside the sword. Parallel is easily drawn to the slaying of Yitzchak Rabin in our time, a Jewish leader who put aside the sword to accommodate a new reality, and met death at the hand of a fellow Jew. The story of Gedaliah is complex. He responds after the fact in the face of horrifying brutality. He is naïve in his failure to acknowledge the evil designs of Yishma'el, concern about which had been reported to him. He is not a pacifist, but one who has learned the limits and the ultimate futility of violence. This little known incident in our history as a people, an explosion of violence both against us and among us, offers a framework within which to consider violence in all of the ugly ways of its expression. More importantly, it offers an opportunity to wrestle as Jews toward alternatives to violence. In the confluence this year of *Tzom Gedaliah* and the International Day of Nonviolence, as highlighted by Rabbi Gendler, we can begin to explore both the unique challenges of nonviolence for us as Jews, and its sacred sources in Jewish tradition.

What does nonviolence mean for us as Jews?

As a people long oppressed, it is often hard for Jews to talk about nonviolence. Yet, out of our own intimate experience on the receiving end of violence we have much to offer toward an understanding of spiritual resistance and the transcending of violence. It is one of the tragedies of our history that so many Jews have been cut off from some of the most life-affirming expressions of our being as a people, ways of thought and deed that could so enrich us individually and collectively, and give much needed succor to the world. Fear continues to oppress and we fall back on unexamined assumptions. Powerless for so long in the geo-political world, in exile violence was confined to pages of text, whose reading enabled a sad catharsis. Our own survival was a day to day challenge, and the wider world was left to fend for itself. In the shadow of the Holocaust, concern for Israel and pride in the image of the Jew as warrior made a discussion of nonviolence virtually taboo. That which was noble in the nonviolent demeanor and spiritual striving of the "ghetto Jew" was threatening and came to be ridiculed, alas to our detriment. Ours is a very different reality today. For all of the legitimate concerns for the well-being of our people, unduly amplified by shrill voices, and while anti-semitism is real, our physical survival is not threatened. The physical

survival of the world and all of its peoples, including Jews, is threatened. Our voice is needed now to help create a more nonviolent world whose survival shall be our promise. In the United States, we have the political power to offer of our influence for good or for evil. We have the opportunity as Jews to help reshape the national character and vision of this country, whose shining ideals have so often been sullied by the glorification of violence and power. Through the blessing of the establishment of the State of Israel, we also have the relatively new responsibility to wrestle in a painfully personal way with the curse of state violence.

Offering a poignant and inspiring response to the violence we have suffered as a people and reminding us of who we are meant to be, the nineteenth century German rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, comments on the attack by Amalek, the Biblical paradigm of evil: "For the final leaf will drop from Amalek's sham laurels only when Amalek's sword will be broken by a mightier weapon, a national entity that flourishes only by virtue of its loyalty to God's moral law.... Persevere in the humanity and justice that your God has taught you. It is to these virtues that the future belongs. Justice and humanity will forever triumph over brutality and violence, and you yourself have been sent to proclaim that future by your fate and to help bring about that future by your personal example." Called to such noble purpose by God and our history, we have a responsibility as Jews to draw on our own rich teachings of nonviolence and respond with all people to the prophetic warning by Martin Luther King: "It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence, but between nonviolence and nonexistence."

Nonviolence is a broad term that refers both to an encompassing way of life, a way of being in the world, and to a creative and courageous technique for challenging an unjust status quo and bringing change. Both of these dimensions are rooted in recognition of the same essential truth, the common humanity of all people. For us as Jews, this recognition is expressed at the very beginning, in the first chapter of Genesis, with the creation of the human being **בצלם אלקים** / *in God's image*. Descended from **אדם** / *Adam*, the first mortal, whom the rabbis say was both male and female, every human being without qualification is created **בצלם אלקים**. At the root of what it is to be human there is more that joins us than divides us. For all of our differences as citizens of this planet, we know the same loves and yearnings, the same hopes and fears. There is no word in English that expresses the absence of violence as a positive reality. Gandhi used the Indian word *ahimsa* to refer to the encompassing nature of nonviolence as a way of life. He used the word *satyagraha*, meaning "truth force," to refer to the moral power of nonviolence as a means of social change. The most common and universally known word in Hebrew, so modest in the depth of its meaning, conveys the essential truth of nonviolence. **שלום** / *Shalom* is derived from the root **שלם** / *shaleym*, meaning "whole" or "complete." There can be peace only when there is wholeness, when we are one with each other and within ourselves.

What are the meta-sources that form the foundation for a Jewish teaching of nonviolence?

Peace as an ultimate ideal is easily agreed to. The challenge is in getting there. It is the ever thorny issue of means and ends. Rosh Hashannah celebrates the creation of the world. In that very first breath of God that hovered over the birth waters and breathed life, there was envisioned a world that reflected the awesome mystery of that moment's wholeness. It would be for people now, as God's partners, to fill the world with a human spirit that was worthy of our creation in God's image. The rabbis saw an intrinsic and inseparable link between beginning and end. In a simple verse that we sing every week in לכה דודי, "come beloved to greet the Shabbos bride," we enter the holy day aware of the vision and the way. We sing of Shabbos as מקור הברכה / *source of blessing*, her purpose to remind from the beginning of time: סוף מעשה במחשבה תחילה / *the end deed is in the first thought*. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches of means and ends from these words of Shabbos welcome: ואין הפרש, ואזי הכח והפועל נקשרים ביחד, וביניהם / *So it is that the potential and the real are joined together, and there is no separation between them*. To live the way of nonviolence in all-encompassing embrace, not only as tactic for change but as change itself, that is the way of pacifism; to join together the potential and the real with no separation between them. It is to live with full awareness of the ultimate ideal lived in the present moment, of the vision and the way, of means and ends. The one who strives toward pacifism strives to live the ultimate ideal now in order to help bring the world to that time, as imagined at the very beginning, the goal of Creation's promise that we celebrate today.

All of this is the meaning of Shabbos, her teaching and challenge. Shabbat shalom is more than a greeting, but a prayer expressed in the essence of a day. Shabbat is one day that reflects the "end of days," the time of swords turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks." Shabbat is to be lived in the moment as though we were already there. On Shabbat we are there, a future time made real now. We are to live one seventh of our days in a state of vision made real, of first thought become end deed. Shabbat as a day expresses the pacifist way, of harmony with ourselves and with each other, with the earth and with time, vision of beginning and end made real in the moment. This is what it means to pause on Shabbos, to be at one, to open our doors and hearts, to put aside the ways and means of competition. In the beautiful words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, Shabbos is "a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction..., a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with others and with the forces of nature...; a truce in all conflicts, personal and social, peace between people and people, people and nature, peace within ourselves...." Too often lost sight of amidst the detail, the ways of traditional Shabbos observance are an expression of ultimate hope that these ways shall not be the ways of one day, but the way of every day. That is the essential prayer of Shabbos that is prayed in the prayers of the day, that we come to *the day that is all*

Shabbos / יום שכולו שבת.

This is the Torah of Nonviolence that is beyond words on parchment, the breath of God that hovers beneath the words. There are words and commandments on the surface made of quill and ink that guide us toward the deeper Torah that flows beneath as a river of peace, כנהר שלום. We are commanded, "justice, justice shall you pursue." It is not an abstraction, nor a vision separate from the way. Toward a vision of economic justice, of a time when there shall be no inequity of wealth, the corner of one's field is to be left unharvested, for the poor, the stranger, the landless to gather unmolested. In the sabbatical year, the land unplanted and given her rest serves to remind of human equality upon God's earth. The landowner then, gathering shoulder to shoulder with the landless, humbly reminded that all are of one station in God's eyes. The orphan, the widow, the stranger become synonymous for the vulnerable of society whom we are not to oppress, the Torah reminding thirty-six times that we were slaves in Egypt. The collective memory of oppression's violence impressed in our psyche, a reminder not to do as was done to us.

It is not only about a society's responsibility for the justice due its citizens, but of the nonviolent way to be lived by each one of us in the interpersonal relations of day to day: *If you encounter the ox of your enemy, or donkey, straying, you shall take it back each time. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its load, you shall not permit yourself to leave it; instead, you shall let all else go and hasten to give aid* (Ex. 23:4-5). Beyond the screen of progressive words and ideals, we are all called to live in our own lives the change we seek in the world. In very simple ways we help or hinder the greater flow of peace out into the world from the rich tidal pools of our own lives. We have all experienced the impact of respectful speech in response to the harsh words of another, or in response to our own words of anger. With fair and respectful treatment of others, we affirm the common humanity whose recognition by nations we seek. In his warning of looming catastrophe, Jeremiah sees the source of his people's demise in their mistreatment of each other: *Woe to one who builds a house by unrighteousness, and upper rooms by injustice; Who makes a neighbor serve for nothing, And does not give due wages...; You have eyes and heart only for dishonest gain, For shedding innocent blood, And for practicing oppression and violence* (Jer. 22:13, 17). When the heart of the nation stopped beating, the Holy Temple destroyed, it was, the rabbis said, due to hatred of one for another, סינת חינם. It is in all realms of life that we are called to be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace.

In all the realms of life..., that is what is meant by "all her paths are peace," the words we say when returning the Torah to the Holy Ark, כל נתיבותיה שלום. But what about when they are not? There are times when these words of song have stuck in my throat, at those times when the words of Torah that we have read seem so filled with violence.

Over time, I have come to see what Heschel calls the "harsh passages" of Torah as representing the difficult road to peace, harshness encountered along the way that we cannot avoid, that cuts our feet and tears our souls and demands that we respond. "All her paths are peace" refers to the ethos of Torah, the breath of God that affirms life in the midst of chaos and allows creation to emerge. Such is the teaching of a Torah of Nonviolence that runs beneath the surface, where all her paths lead to peace. We can only encounter the Torah of Nonviolence, however, when we are prepared to wrestle in love and tears with the Torah of letters on parchment. The reward for our wrestling comes with insight gained of struggle, as in life, a kiss of hope upon the tear stained page.

In the Torah portion *Pinchas*, we encounter a violent zealot who slew an Israelite man and a Midianite woman. Acting on his own initiative to stem assimilation and decline, Pinchas is regarded in some strands of the tradition as a hero. Even God appears to honor and reward Pinchas, saying; *Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace*. Not to wrestle with and challenge interpretations that give honor to the violence of a Pinchas is to participate in textual violence, a frighteningly short step for the zealot to violence against real human beings. Read with greater care, there is a message in the text of violence transformed. Hope begins with a simple instruction to every scribe who writes a Torah scroll. The small vertical letter *vav* in the word *shalom*, as in *b'riti shalom/My covenant of peace*, is to be written as a broken letter, a small space separating the upper and lower parts of the letter. So it is in every Torah scroll, and in the entire Torah this is the only place where a *vav* is written in this way. In the Talmud, the broken *vav* comes to speak of a covenant deferred. Of God's promise to Pinchas of a *b'rit shalom*, Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel, *Keshehu shaleyem v'lo keshehu chaser / when he is whole, not when he is wanting*. Pinchas is challenged to transcend the violence in his soul, only then becoming whole and worthy of a covenant of peace.

A number of years ago, as the school rabbi at the Solomon Schechter Day School I was teaching the Book of Samuel to sixth graders. One day I came in and very calmly read a particularly violent passage to the students. There was no response. In uncharacteristic fashion, only in part for effect, I slammed the book shut and asked incredulously if no one was upset. The Torah is not sanitized, nor the Tanach. The harsh passages demand engagement, soul searching, critical self-examination. It is too easy to say it is an ancient text and turn away. We dare not avert our eyes, any more than to the violence carried in the daily newspaper. If we do not respond to violence in the book in the calm of a classroom or shul, will we and our children remember to respond to violence in the worlds around us?

And while to war the Torah is no stranger, ultimate meaning and glory are not attached to the sword. Even a dress sword is not to be worn on Shabbos, an affront to the day

that celebrates swords turned to plowshares. Immediately following the words in Deuteronomy, chapter 20, *When you go forth to battle...*, laws are given that govern the conduct of war. That there are laws of warfare in the Torah would seem the greatest challenge to the pacifist reading. But reading closely, the Torah of Nonviolence pulsates beneath the surface. As though to acknowledge the futility of seeking to regulate it, condemnation seems to be hurled at war itself. Deferments are to be announced before the battle, officers to call out and tell each one to go home who has built a new home and not yet dedicated it; each one who has planted a vineyard and not yet enjoyed its fruit; each one who has betrothed a wife and not yet consummated the marriage; and each one, as usually translated, who is "afraid and fainthearted." Indicated by an asterisk and relegated to a note in the margins in some *chumashim*, acknowledgment is made that allows for alternate translation and very different understanding of this verse. Each of these deferments represents an affirmation of life in the face of death. This verse too can be read in the way of the other exemptions, as an affirmation of life. The young recruit here is described in the text as, הַיָּרֵא וְרַךְ הַלֵּב. These words can quite literally be translated as, "the one who is of reverential and tender heart." ירא means "awe" or "reverence" as well as "fear." רך means "soft," "tender," or "gentle." And still before the battle could begin, offers of peace were to be proclaimed. Even once engaged, the final challenge to war itself is in the commandment not to destroy the "tree of the field." Understood to refer to fruit trees not to be cut down for siege-works, the full phrase reads, כִּי הָאָדָם עַץ הַשָּׂדֶה, most often translated as something to the effect, *Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you...?* So different is the literal translation and its implication; *for the human being is the tree of the field*. This is how the words are understood in Kabbalistic/mystical tradition, where the Torah of Nonviolence comes readily to the surface. If the human being is the ultimate tree of life, how can we engage in war at all?

The Torah herself is a tree of life, as we sing when returning the Torah to the holy ark, עַץ חַיִּים הִיא לְמַחֲזִיקֵי בָהּ / *She is a tree of life to those who hold fast to her*. So begins the verse that ends with "all her paths are peace." A Torah of Nonviolence is a way of reading Torah to see more clearly her paths of peace. It is a way of reading Torah to see the human that is each one of us reflected in the Tree of Life that is Torah, and to see Torah reflected in the tree of life that is the human. A Torah of Nonviolence is the fruit of Torah that awaits us on her paths of peace.

With the hope of national renewal, Gedaliah ben Achikam came to dwell in Mitzpah. He urged the survivors of his people to help create the future by engaging in what Gandhi would have called "constructive program," the necessary work of building up society, what the rabbis called "tikkun ha'olam," repair of the world: *As for me, behold, I will dwell at Mitzpah to stand before the Babylonians who will come to us; but as for you, gather wine, and summer fruits, and oil, and put them in your vessels, and dwell in your cities... (Jer. 40:10).*

Her first blossoms cut down by the sword, renewal was not yet to be the fruit of Mitzpah..., but it still can be for us, as we look to the meaning of *Tzom Gedaliah* and the International Day of Nonviolence. Mitzpah is not only a place on the map of the Land of Israel that Gedaliah made his capital, it is a place in time. The root, **צָפָה**, of the word **מִצְפָּה** means *to look forward, to anticipate, to hope*. **מִצְפָּה** is a watch tower, a look-out point. The place from which Gedaliah chose to stand before the Babylonians and pursue nonviolent renewal is a place of vision from which to look forward with hope. May we choose to stand there with Gedaliah; and soon hear the sound of the great shofar that signals the turning of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, the fulfillment of Creation's first breath that we celebrate today.