

Parashat Re'eh 5778, 2018:

*For the Sake of Peace*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Anshul Pinchas ben Chaya and Tzvi Yoel ben Yocheved and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains the obligation to physically destroy all objects used in the act of *avodah zarah* (idol worship):

You shall utterly destroy from all the places where the nations, that you shall possess, worshipped their gods, upon the lofty mountains and upon the hills, and under every lush tree. And you shall tear down their altars, smash their monuments, burn their asherim [living trees worshipped as idols] with fire, cut down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name from that place. (*Sefer Devarim* 12:2-3; these and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach.*)

Destruction of this nature must be total and without compromise. Every trace of *avodah zarah* must be expunged from every corner of *Eretz Yisrael*.

In stark contrast to these verses, we are enjoined to treat the Almighty's holy places in a decidedly different manner: “You shall not do so to the L-rd, your G-d.” (*Sefer Devarim* 12:4) One of the specific laws that is derived from this verse is the prohibition of physically obliterating even one letter of Hashem’s name. As such, we find the following statement in the *Sifrei*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Devarim*:

Rabbi Yishmael asked: “From where do we know that destroying even one letter of Hashem’s name causes an individual to violate a negative Torah prohibition? [This may be derived from the juxtaposition of:] ‘...and destroy their name from that place’ to ‘You shall not do so to the L-rd, your G-d.’” (Section 61, translation my own)

Paradoxically, however, *Sefer Bamidbar*, 5:11-26 presents us with the obligation to destroy Hashem's name. Part of the *Sotah* process (determining the status of a woman accused of marital infidelity) discussed in these verses entails writing the *Megillat Sotah*, a document that contains the name of the Almighty. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) in *Sefer Mishneh Torah*, basing himself upon *Talmud Bavli*, *Sotah* 17a, stresses that the name of Hashem, in its complete written form, is erased in the bitter waters of the *Sotah* ritual:

Afterwards, a scroll of ritually acceptable leather is brought forth...Upon this scroll is written all of the oaths that the *kohen* had her take letter-by-letter and word-by-word. In addition, the name of G-d is written thereupon as it is written in the Torah... and the *Sotah* scroll that was written specifically for her is crushed therein [i.e. in the bitter waters] The crushing of this scroll must be totally thorough so that there does not remain any impression whatsoever upon it. (*Sefer Nashim, Hilchot Sotah* 3:8 and 10, translation and underlining my own.)

We are met with a true contradiction. On the one hand, in our *parasha*, the Torah commands us to treat the Name of Hashem with all the holiness it deserves. We are warned against destroying even one letter of His holy Name. Yet, the *Sotah* process mandates the destruction of that very Name! How are we to understand this challenging inconsistency?

Not surprisingly, *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) wrestled with this problem. In my estimation, one of their clearest resolutions is found in *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Sotah* 1:4, where a conversation between Rabbi Meir and his students is recorded regarding a disturbing scene they witnessed between a woman and their beloved teacher. The students felt that their august rabbi had been woefully mistreated. Rabbi Meir, however, understood the interaction in an entirely different manner. He knew that the seemingly disparaging behavior that his students witnessed ultimately served a holy purpose – the reunion of the woman and her husband. He therefore responded to them:

The honor of Meir [i.e. he was speaking about himself in the third person without his rabbinic title] cannot be viewed as being on the same level as that of his Creator. As such, in regards to the Holy Name that was written in total holiness (*kedushah*), the Torah states that one [nonetheless] must obliterate it in the [bitter] waters in order to bring about peace between a husband and his wife, all the more so should we not act in the same manner regarding the honor of Meir? [i.e., can I possibly be “more important” than Hashem?] (Translation and underlining my own)

Rabbi Meir’s response to his students enables us to view the *Sotah* ritual, and its concomitant obliteration of Hashem’s name, in an entirely new light. Though at first glance it may appear to be a trial by ordeal, nothing could be further from the truth. In the vast majority of cases, the authentic purpose of the *Sotah* process was to reunite a couple in *shalom bayit* (marital harmony). Given the holy purpose of reconciliation of husband and wife, nothing could or should stand in the way. Even the destruction of the Divine Name itself is a small price to pay to achieve marital harmony and peace.

The Rambam applies Rabbi Meir’s explanation to clarify how one should act in the following halachic dilemma: “What should one do when there are insufficient funds to buy oil for both the Shabbat lights and the *Chanukiah* (Menorah)?” He answers in the following fashion:

The Shabbat lights take precedence since they bring about marital harmony. After all, G-d’s Name itself is obliterated [in the *Sotah* process] in order to bring about peace between a man and his wife. Great is peace (*shalom*), since the entire Torah was given to bring about peace in the world. (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Zemanim, Hilchot Chanukah* 4:14, translation and emphasis my own.)

Once again, peace in its broadest sense, and *shalom bayit* in particular, are prime imperatives within the authentic Jewish mindset.

The connection between the unique holiness of Hashem’s Name and the pursuit of *shalom* is a natural one, for as *Chazal* teach us, one of the names of G-d is “*Shalom*.” (*Talmud*

*Bavli, Shabbat 10b*). In his commentary on this Talmudic phrase, Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (1555 – 1631) explains that this is the case, since:

...this behavioral characteristic [i.e. *shalom*] is not found in man in any sense whatsoever. As such, the Name of the Holy One, may He be blessed, is quite fittingly *Shalom* because it is He and He alone who makes peace in our world. (*Maharsha, Chidushei Aggadot, Shabbat 10b*, translation and brackets my own)

Rav Eidels' words are reminiscent of the concluding words of the *Kaddish* that have echoed throughout the ages: "May He who makes peace in His high places, make peace for us and all Israel" (*The Koren Siddur*, translation and commentary, Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks)

With Hashem's blessing and help, may this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

## Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>  
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.