

PARASHAS NASO

A Drink of Wine

What is the greatest blessing to which a person can aspire in this world? For Jewish people, at least, the answer seems to be peace. How do people in Israel greet and take leave of each other? *Shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace. What is the traditional Jewish greeting? *Shalom aleichem*, let there be peace unto you. Peace, always peace. Jewish people know full well that without peace there is nothing.

The roots of this awareness go back thousands of years. In this week's Torah portion, we read about the priestly blessing, whose climactic words are, "Let Him establish peace for you." Peace is the ultimate blessing. But let us take a closer look at these words. What is the significance of Hashem's "establishing peace for you"? Would it not have been simpler to say, "Let Him give you peace"?

Perhaps we can find the answer in the topic that immediately precedes the presentation of the priestly blessing - the laws of the Nazir. At certain times, when a man feels himself drawn by worldly temptations, the Torah allows him to make a Nazirite vow whereby he accepts upon himself an abstemious life style for a specified period of time. He may not drink wine or cut his hair, and he must maintain himself on a high level of ritual purity. When the term of the vow expires, these restrictions are removed, and then, the Torah says, "the Nazir shall drink wine."

"The Nazir shall drink wine." It almost seems as if the Torah is instructing him to drink wine, not just permitting it. But why? Furthermore, the Torah tells us that at the end of the Nazirite period he is required to bring certain sacrifices, one of which is a sin offering. What was his sin? Our Sages explain that his sin was his voluntary abstention from wine. What is so important about drinking wine?

The answer touches on one of the most fundamental tenets of Judaism. The Torah does not want us to withdraw from the physical world and pursue a monastic life. On the contrary, the Torah insists that we find a harmonious balance between our spiritual and physical sides. The Torah does not want us to shun the gorgeous world Hashem created but rather to enjoy it in a civilized manner, to integrate our physical pleasure into our spiritual connection to our Creator. That is the ideal mode of living. The Nazir felt himself out of balance, drawn to worldly temptations to an inappropriate degree. Therefore, the Torah allows him to go temporarily to the opposite extreme in order to regain

his balance. Once that period is over, once he recaptures his inner harmony, he “should drink wine.”

This is the essence of peace. True peace is not achieved by hiding from the disruptive forces of life but by finding an inner harmony which integrates physical needs and spiritual aspirations. This sort of peace is not just the absence of conflict but the positive presence of harmony, a state that Hashem helps us “establish” so that we can truly benefit from all His other blessings. As our Sages tell us, “Hashem found no vessel capable of containing and preserving blessings other than peace.”

A teacher and his principal were discussing a young troublemaker who consistently disrupted the class.

“I would like to have him removed from my class,” said the teacher. “Maybe then we could have some peace.”

“Indeed?” said the principal. “Do you think removing him will bring you peace?”

“Of course it will,” said the teacher.

The principal shook his head. “I’m afraid you are wrong. Removing this troublemaker from your class will bring you silence. Making him a functioning, contributing member of the class would bring you peace.”

In our own lives, we all crave that moment of peace. We dream of the time when our lives will become peaceful and happy. But more often than not, our concept of peace is the removal of irritating factors. The obnoxious co-worker will hopefully find a different job. The troublesome teenager will mercifully grow up and get married. And so on. But that is not true peace. It is escape. Why hitch our happiness to the shallow satisfactions of an illusive escape that may never come? But if we learn to live in harmony with the people and the circumstances in the here and now, we will surely find happiness in the profound satisfactions of inner peace.