How To Turn War Into Peace

While in high school, I did not dwell on world events, except the Vietnam war. My fellow students and I worried about being drafted and fighting in a war we didn’t understand. I didn’t attend anti-war protests, but I created a piece of art that expressed my feeling and hopes for peace.

My sign, carved out of wood, depicted the transformation of war into peace by raising the letter “a” out of the word “war” and placing it in the middle of the word “peace.”

Transformation is also a theme in this week’s Torah portion Terumah (Exodus 25:1-27:19), which describes the building of the Tabernacle that accompanied the Jewish people in the desert for 40 years. With its colored curtains, wood beams, and sacred vessels, this temporary Tabernacle stood for 440 years in Israel until King Solomon built a permanent Temple in Jerusalem.

Our sages explain that the materials of the Tabernacle were elevated from the mundane to the holy. This transformation explains why the Tabernacle was not discarded. According to 2 Chronicles 5:1, Solomon stored the Tabernacle and its vessels in tunnels under the Temple Mount. Recent archeological discoveries validate the existence of underground passages as described in the Talmud Sota 9a.

Transforming and elevating the material world into spirituality is not limited to the Tabernacle and the Temple. Based on the passage, “make for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell in them” (Exodus 25:8), our sages explain that the use of the plural “them” refers to every individual’s responsibility and ability to transform themselves and their surroundings to holiness.

While attending college, besides classes and concern about the Vietnam war, I also explored my Jewish heritage. As I progressed in my learning, I discovered deep spiritual wisdom in Judaism. One of the teachings I learned reminded me of the wood carving I did in high school.
Since the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish people have experienced almost 2,000 years of exile. In Hebrew, “exile” is called “Golah - גולה.” However, this word also hints to the path to redemption. By inserting the letter “alef - א” into the word “Golah - גולה” this word is transformed into the word “Geulah - גאולה” which means redemption.

Since “alef - א” is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, its numerical value is one. The number one refers to the one God who is the "Master (Aluf - אלוף) of the World.”

As I contemplated the transposition of Hebrew letters, my high school artwork seemed like a premonition. However, now I had discovered the more profound Jewish secret of transforming a world of chaos and war into a world of harmony and peace.

By revealing the oneness of God in the world through the Torah’s teachings and practices, we contribute spiritually toward the ultimate redemption that will eventually “sprout forth” (Isaiah 11:1). Consequently, Judaism anticipates the messianic redemption occurring one time, “in the blink of an eye,” and not erroneously divided into a first and second coming.

This final redemption will be evident because it will be a time when “Nation shall not take up sword against nation; They shall never again know war” (Isaiah 2:4), and “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God” (Isaiah 11:9).

May this Shabbat provide a taste of the peace and spirituality the world will experience when the current exile is transformed into the final redemption.

Shabbat Shalom,

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