While Parshat Tzav discusses all of the main categories of sacrifices, its discussion of the Shelamim sacrifice is the most extensive. In relation to the laws of the Shelamim, the Torah stresses the necessity of maintaining purity of the sacrificial meat and purity of anyone who eats it. Anyone impure who eats sacrificial meat will be liable for karet, the punishment of excision from the Jewish people. The Torah also warns not to eat the sacrificial meat after the allotted two days. Anyone who eats from the korban after this time will also be liable for karet.

These rules actually apply to all korbanot: All korbanot must be eaten in purity. All of them must be eaten by their allotted time. Why does the Torah bring them in the context of Shelamim? I think that this is because of the unique nature of the Shelamim. Only the Shelamim can be eaten by laypeople, people who are not kohanim. It seems that Torah assumes that kohanim will be meticulous with purity (after all, they need to be pure to enter the Temple) and with eating the sacrifice within the allotted time. When laypeople are granted access to the sacrifices, however, there is a concern that they will not consume them appropriately. The warnings and punishments that the Torah adds regarding the Shelamim, therefore, reflect the added risks in allowing laypeople to partake in the korbanot.

This is connected to the name of the korban, “Shelamim,” which is tied to shalom, complete, or shalom, peace. Shelamim are a peace offering to God, and they also bring peace and connection between God and the people, even the laypeople, who eat from this sacrifice themselves.

In Midrash Vayikra Rabbah (Chapter 9), an aggadic midrash from the time of the Amoraim, the discussion of Shelamim invokes thirteen homilies on the “greatness” of peace, שלום. For example:

בר קפרא אמר זדו שלום שדבהי הקנתים זרי בדיאת ביהואishment אשרי, כי הוא דٻבר (ביאשי הת): ולאו בידת קהתו, והזקן אל אמור ולאברת הי.

Bar Kappara said: Great is peace, for the scriptures spoke false words in the Torah to cast peace between Abraham and Sarah. That is what is written: “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old” but to Abraham he did not say that, rather: “for I am old.”

בר קפרא אמר זדו שלום,込まれ אסוי שלום, אני אני אמור או אדם שלום, אני אמור או אדם שלום, אני אני אמור או אדם שלום, בין המתלקות nghỉי רעך רעך, אני אני אמור או אדם שלום, אני אני אמור או אדם שלום.

Bar Kappara said another statement: Great is peace, for if the higher ones (i.e., angels), who do not have jealousy or hatred or competition, or quarrel, or evil speech, or disagreement, or evil eye, need peace, that is what is written “He imposes peace in his heights,” the lower ones (i.e., humans), who have all these traits, so much more so.

אמר רבי שלום: אני אני אמור או אדם שלום, אני אני אמור או אדם שלום, אני אני אמור או אדם שלום.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: Great is peace, for the scriptures spoke false words in the Torah to cast peace between Joseph and his brothers, that is what is written “So shall you say to Joseph, Forgive, I urge you, the offense” and we do not find that Yaakov ordered anything.
R. Yose said: Great is peace, for even during a time of war, we open only with peace, that is what is written “When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace.”

The rabbis say: Great is peace for when the anointed king (the Mashiach) comes, he will not open with anything but peace. For it says: “How welcome on the mountains are the footsteps of the herald announcing peace.”

In these derashot peace is something both small and grand. Both private and public. Human and divine. Peace is desired in the home, between man and wife, and in the heavens, between the angels; between the higher and lower elements – the sky and the earth, and within the family, between siblings. Peace is invoked even during wartime with Israel’s enemies, and it will be the first message of the mashiach.

Some of the derashot also describe compromises or even lies that God or the Torah make, for the sake of peace. Peace is so important that it is worth it. We learn this also from the korban Shelamim, the peace offering: the Shelamim are the most vulnerable of korbanot, but this vulnerability allows a connection, a “joint meal,” so to speak, between God and Israel.

To achieve peace and to cultivate relationships, we need to take risks, we need to give space for vulnerability and to trust that the other party will not abuse that vulnerability. There is a chance that we will be hurt and violated or defiled, but we also open ourselves for the opportunity of an unmediated and real connection.

I end with a prayer for peace in Ukraine, and around the globe.

Shabbat Shalom

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