You Shall Love Truth and Peace

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Rabbi Daniel Bouskila is the International Director of the Sephardic Educational Center (SEC), and the rabbi of the Westwood Village Synagogue in Los Angeles. This article appears in issue 36 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

You Shall Love Truth and Peace

By Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel
translated from the original Hebrew by Rabbi Daniel Bouskila

Translator's introduction: Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel (1880–1953) was a visionary rabbinic leader and the twentieth century's most authentic embodiment of the classic Sephardic rabbinic tradition. He was the *Haham Bashi* (Ottoman-appointed Chief Rabbi) of Jaffa-Tel Aviv (1911–1939), and the *Rishon L'Zion* (Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel) of the pre-state *Yishuv* under the British Mandate (1939–1947) and then of the State of Israel (1948–1953). He authored multiple volumes of groundbreaking Halakhic Responsa (Jewish legal rulings on practical matters), as well as original books of Jewish philosophy, theology, and ethics. From his earliest moments as a young rabbinic leader, all the way to his famous "Spiritual Will to the Jewish People," written a few weeks before his death, Rabbi Uziel was a strong advocate for Jewish unity. This essay, "You Shall Love Truth and Peace," originally appeared in his classic work of Jewish thought *Hegyonei Uziel* (volume 2, pages 33–34). It is one of his most eloquent statements on unity, and beautifully encapsulates his creative blend of classic rabbinic scholarship with responsible leadership.

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In his grand vision describing the redemption of Israel, the prophet Zechariah declares:

Thus said the Lord of Hosts: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month shall become occasions of joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah, but you shall love truth and peace. (Zechariah 8:19)

From here we learn that the redemption of Israel is contingent upon their loving truth and peace, for much like the two bronze pillars *Yachin and Boaz* upheld King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, so, too, do truth and peace uphold the entire universe of Israel.

The God of Israel is a God of truth and peace. God's Torah is a book of truth, and one of God's names is "peace," as taught by the rabbis: "Great is peace, for the name of the Holy One Blessed be He is *Shalom* (peace), as it is written, "and He was called Hashem-Shalom" (Judges 6:24).

In addition to being a book of truth, the Torah is also a book of peace, as it is written, "Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peaceful" (Proverbs 3:17).

Our rabbis declared that peace is one of Judaism's most beloved principles, for "The entire purpose of the Torah is to bring about peace in the world" (*Gittin* 59b).

Jerusalem is comforted in the language of peace ("My people shall dwell in peaceful homes," Isaiah 32:18), God blesses Israel with daily blessings of peace, and "Shalom" is the national greeting of one Jew to the other.

One of the most powerful expressions on the importance of peace is learned from the teachings and deeds of our rabbis:

> Come and hear: Although Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel disagreed on several legal issues related to family matters—such as rival wives and sisters, an outdated bill of divorce, a doubtfully married woman, the case of one who divorces his wife and later she lodged together with him at an inn, money and its equivalent in valuables, a *peruta* or the equivalent value of a *peruta* (for the purposes of establishing a betrothal). Nonetheless, Bet Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Bet Hillel, nor did Bet Hillel refrain from marrying women from Bet Shammai. This serves to teach us that despite their differences, *they practiced love and friendship between them*, to fulfill that which is stated: "You shall love truth and peace." (BT *Yebamot* 14b)

The parallel teaching in the Jerusalem Talmud says:

> Although Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel disagreed on several legal issues related to family matters…nonetheless…*they practiced truth and peace between them***,** as it is written, "You shall love truth and peace." (JT *Yebamot* Chapter 1).

With Shammai and Hillel having practiced both "love and friendship" and "truth and peace," we learn that love and truth are one and the same, and any love that is not grounded in truth is false. It goes without saying that falsehood and lying are abominable in the eyes of God, as it is written "Keep away from anything false" (Exodus 23:7) and "Do not lie to one another" (Leviticus 19:11).

The Nation of Israel is commanded to live by the two great pillars of truth and peace, for doing so will eternally distinguish them for blessings and praise, no matter what the circumstances. These pillars are especially needed in the State of Israel, for truth and peace will help create an atmosphere of pleasantness and tranquility throughout the land. Each individual in Israel must internalize truth and peace, thus fostering a true love for the State of Israel and for its internal peace. This internal peace within Israel will ultimately lead to our making peace with all nations and kingdoms.

We are taught how to achieve this desired internal peace through the Torah and its commandments, "whose ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."

The achievement of internal peace through the Torah is promised by the Torah itself: "If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments…I will grant peace in the land so that you will sleep without fear" (Leviticus 26: 3–6).

Let us place this message upon our hearts, removing from our midst any hint of evil inclination, divisiveness, or hatred of the Torah and its commandments. Let us clothe ourselves with an elevated devotion and sense of love for one another, as commanded by the Torah, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18).

By the same measure, let us also love the stranger in our midst, as it is written, “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens, you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34).

This is not the place to explain in depth the details of this important Jewish law (of loving the stranger), but let us all recognize that all of us were strangers in the four corners of the earth. Therefore, in addition to the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself,” we have another commandment of love that obligates us to accept and welcome all immigrants to our land, regardless of their ethnic community or country of origin. We must accept them from a place of genuine love, both the love of “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” *and* “you shall love him (the stranger) as yourself.”

From this same place of genuine love, let us conduct ourselves in the paths of true peace, respecting each other’s opinions and feelings, as well as respecting the differences amongst the factions in our country. Let us remove all language of hatred, animosity, and provocation from our midst, so that we may fulfill amongst ourselves that which our enlightened rabbi Maimonides commanded us: “Accept the truth from whatever source it comes.” Let us also live by the enlightened deeds of our rabbis, Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel, who behaved with love and respect toward one another and respected each other’s opinions, fulfilling the verse, “You shall love truth and peace.”

From a sincere place of love and devotion, let us come closer to our Holy Torah and all of its laws and commandments. For the Torah is our life and the length of our days, here in this land that God has given to our ancestors and to us as an inheritance. This is all for our own good and for the good of our children, forever and ever.

May God, the King of Peace, bless us with peace, and may we merit to see the fulfillment of the great prophetic vision for the End of Days for world peace, as it is written: “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not take up sword against nation, they shall never again know war” (Isaiah 2:4).

I conclude my words by quoting the beautiful words of Maimonides from the end of his “Laws of Kings” (at the very end of his *Mishneh Tora*h):

> The Sages and the prophets did not yearn for the Messianic era in order to have dominion over the entire world, to rule over the gentiles, to be exalted by the nations, or to eat, drink, and celebrate. Rather, they desired to be free to involve themselves in Torah and wisdom without any pressures or disturbances, so that they would merit the world to come, as explained in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*.
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> In that era, there will be neither famine nor war, envy, or competition, for good will flow in abundance and all the delights will be freely available as dust. The occupation of the entire world will be solely to know God.
>
> Therefore, the Jews will be great sages and know the hidden matters, grasping the knowledge of their Creator according to the full extent of human potential, as Isaiah 11:9 states: “The world will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the ocean bed."