

Shalom, Shlemiels & Shlemazels

- Basil Herring.

The Israeli Elections. What is the difference between the shlemiel and the shlemazel? Popular Jewish folk wisdom puts it this way: the shlemiel is a fellow who has no skill in coping with the challenges of life, throughout his life lacking in ability and intelligence. The shlemazel, on the other hand, is short of neither brains nor management skills: he simply has no luck in the card game of life.

There is a story about the rabbi who was disappointed in his son-in-law. He said to his wife, "Chaim is a shlemiel and a shlemazel! He doesn't know the first thing about drink or cards." "Is that a misfortune?" asked his wife, "may all sons-in-law be as ignorant about such things. So what is so bad?" "I'll tell you what's bad," said the rabbi, "he doesn't know how to drink, but he drinks nonetheless; and while he doesn't know to play cards, he has a regular game."

And that, dear friends, in the immediate aftermath of the Israel elections, is what, as I will explain in a moment, we might say about Shimon Peres. For what is the difference between the shlemiel and the shlemazel? Popular Jewish folk wisdom puts it this way: the shlemiel is a fellow who has no skill in coping with the challenges of life, throughout his life lacking in ability and intelligence. The shlemazel, on the other hand, is short of neither brains nor management skills: he simply has no luck in the card game of life. Try and he might, with dedication and sincerity, fate, as Humphrey Bogart would put it, seems always to take a hand. In short, the shlemiel is the waiter who clumsily spills a bowl of boiling hot soup in the lap of the shlemazel.

Shimon Peres, it would appear, is certainly not a shlemiel. Highly intelligent, educated, thoughtful, he is an intellectual and a visionary. Not lacking in ability, he has served his country well over the years, in many ways responsible for its military and nuclear preparedness, and at one time or another serving in every leadership position the country had to offer. And for all that has given the Jewish people as a leader in Israel we ought always to remain thankful. But, Shimon Peres, I would say, is indeed a shlemazel. He has no luck of the draw, always fated, it would appear, to be disappointed. He has never won an election. Never enjoyed the faith and confidence of his people, or for that matter, of destiny. For who could have imagined, in the days following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, and the vilification, if not downright revulsion, of the Israeli electorate for Binyamin Netanyahu, that Peres would have lost this election? Who could have imagined that with a commanding, and to some, insuperable, lead over the Likud in every opinion poll just a few short months ago, that Netanyahu would prevail? Certainly not the experts who counseled early elections to capitalize on the popularity of the moment, and the martyrdom of the Prime Minister of Israel. But Peres, with all his intellect and ability, had no mazel, he played his best hand, but luck was against him, and he lost by less than a minuscule 30,000 votes. The result: today the political vultures are picking over his bones in the aftermath of his failed campaign.

But perhaps there is room to argue, that nonetheless, Shimon Peres, in one sense at least, was a Shlemiel after all. Here I would make reference to today's parshah. For it is precisely here, in the context of the gifts brought to the new tabernacle, that we encounter another Shimon—not an

individual, but the tribe of Shimon, and its leader. His name? None other than Shelumiel ben Tzurishadai! Is there a connection between the biblical Shelumiel and the bumbling Shlemiel of Jewish folklore? According to the Gemara Sanhedrin 82b, as quoted by the H_oizkuni, this prince of Shimon was none other than Zimri ben Salu, the prince killed by Pinchas because he brazenly, and by way of idolatry, consorted with a Midianite princess, a man whom the Torah there identifies as a prince in the tribe of Shimon (Nu 25:14.) If so, we can understand the origin of the term shlemiel, for by his behavior, Shelumiel was a real shlemiel, a prince and leader who was too smart for his own good, and therefore lacked common sense, bereft of street smarts, acting as he did in contravention of all the rules of the game, a man who came a cropper because he did not know how to conform to the traditional expectations and mores of his people.

With that thought as background, perhaps one could say (even though I hesitate to say it for fear that I could be misunderstood), that in light of his defeat in the election, Shimon Peres is viewed by the voters of Israel, and certainly by the Jews of Israel who gave his opponent Netanyahu an 11% plurality, as a shlemiel as well, and for the following reason: it would appear that the people of Israel have issued their own judgment that in their view he was a kind of Zimri ben Salu: i.e., they saw him as, having been seduced by the allure of his dreams, so that he too enthusiastically embraced the traditional enemies of Israel and the Jewish people, the contemporary embodiment of the Midianite nation of old. It goes without saying that I in no way wish to imply that Shimon Peres deserves the fate of his namesake. I speak simply in terms of his political fate, as it has emerged over the last few days. In hindsight it is clear that Shimon Peres was too smart, too visionary, too intellectual, too much of a luftmensch, for his own good, or, as time might yet tell, for the good of his people.

But what of his vision of peace throughout the Middle East? Surely there was nothing wrong per se in working to embrace one's enemies, so as to put an end to the recurring cycles of war and conflict? Can we fault Peres for having gambled on peace, only to be rejected by an ungrateful populace? Is there yet hope for peace for the long suffering Jews and Arabs of the region? Or put differently: without this Shelumiel, can there yet be Shalom?

To answer these questions, I would like, very briefly, to engage in an excursus on the subject of peace, a subject which finds its major biblical treatment right here in our parshah. I refer to the familiar words of the Birkat Kohanim, the priestly blessing. The blessing, as everyone knows, consists of 3 verses: Yevarekhekha, Ya'er, and Yisa (Nu. 6:22-26.) Their structure is like that of a pyramid: the first or top one has 3 words, then 5 words, and at the bottom is 7. It is a structure that bespeaks strength and stability, and at its culmination, there is, of course, the blessing of peace. Why does the blessing of peace come last? Says the Netziv: peace is the one blessing that envelopes and holds all the others, "for without peace there is no satisfaction from any other blessing." First comes the substantive elements that must precede the peace. And when peace comes it allows every other blessing to become real and tangible. But for that very reason, I dare say, the Torah, by placing peace last, is teaching us that peace is a result not a precondition, not a means, but an end. Peace comes after a long process that involve many small steps and interim blessings. And before peace can be declared, a long and difficult road must be traversed, requiring detours and side roads, high points and low points, hills and valleys beyond number.

Thus the first stage toward peace is the verse "may God bless you and guard you." What is the

difference between them? Listen to the golden tongue of Rashi, quoting the Tanhuma: God's blessing here, *yevarekhekha*, refers to the blessing of material possessions. God's guarding us, *yishmerkha*, refers to His protecting us from people who would take our possessions from us. For a person who gives a gift to his servant cannot guard the gift from being taken by other people. And if violent men come and take it away from the servant by force, of what benefit will the gift be? Only God both gives possessions and safeguards them. Before there can be peace there must in the first place be material prosperity, but secondly there must be security from violent men who would take by force what God has given. Before peace comes prosperity; and before peace comes real, not imagined, security.

And then there is another precondition, one more stage before peace can emerge, and that is found in the second verse of the triad: *vi-yehōnekha*. It is Rashi again who explains: *yiten lekha hōen*: may God give you *hōen*, i.e., you must be judged fully acceptable, and find grace in the eyes of your erstwhile enemies. It is not enough that God is your shield or your fortress against your enemies. The enemies themselves must change their perception and attitude toward you. Your enemies must relate to you as a people of *hōen*, so that they treat you as a people or a person whom they consider "*hōenefdik*," a phrase which conveys the sense of being accepted without reservation, deemed genuinely wholesome and attractive. It is only when such a sentiment, such an attitude, occurs, that you can know that peace cannot be far behind. Those, at least as far as the *birkat kohanim* is concerned, are the essential steps toward peace: prosperity, security, whole-hearted acceptance, and only then peace.

In light of the events of these days past, I dare say that the people of Israel has spoken its mind, and what it has said is in agreement with the priestly blessing. The Jews want peace, but they also know that it cannot be a real peace without real security; and they were not convinced that, irrespective of Arafat's handshakes and oratory for the West, the broad masses of Palestinians, or for that matter Arabs, are not yet ready to grant the Jewish State in their midst the legitimacy, and the essential recognition that bespeaks acceptance, or *hōen*. Too many Palestinians still support the murderous terrorists of Hamas and its ilk; too many still rejoice at the killing and maiming of Jews; too many declare their intent to one day destroy the "Zionist entity"; too many obfuscate their real intentions when it comes to modifying the damning passages of the Palestinian Covenant that have called for the destruction of Israel.

And thus, while Peres and his Labor partners surely wanted peace, the verdict of the people is apparently that wanting peace is not enough, peace has got to be the end-product and outcome of much more than Oslo and the Rose Garden held forth.

In conclusion, paradoxically, I believe that, with the help of God, the events of this week will indeed bring about true peace. If Israel will stand strong under its new government; if its neighbors and allies will recognize its newfound determination to travel the long and challenging course before it, through thick and then, via the highways and byways, low roads and high roads that lay ahead, the blessings of God will indeed come to Jew and Moslem, Israeli and Arab alike, to enjoy the fruits of their labors, no longer *shlemiels* or *shlemazels* colliding in the dark, but rather blessed to live together with *mazel* and *brakhah*, secure in the true peace of the brave.