**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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***MIDRASH* ON THE *PARASHA***

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***Parashat Naso*:**

**“Great is Peace”**

**The Collection of *Derashot* on “Great is Peace”**

Throughout Rabbinic literature we find collections of *derashot* dealing with central themes in the spiritual world of the beit midrash. One of these collections is the "Great is peace" collection, which is integrated into the Tannaitic *derashot* in *Sifrei Bamidbar* on the priestly blessing:

1. Great is peace, for the sake of which He modified Sara's act, as it is stated: "And I am old" (*Bereishit* 18:13).
2. Great is peace for the Holy [One, blessed be He,] modified [Sara's words] for the sake of peace.
3. Great is peace for the angel modified [Sara's words] for the sake of peace.[[1]](#footnote-1)
4. Great is peace, for the [Divine] name that is written in sanctity is erased in the water for the sake of peace, in order to create peace between husband and wife.
5. Rabbi Eliezer said: Great is peace, for the prophets planted in the mouths of all the people, only for the sake of peace.[[2]](#footnote-2)
6. Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta said: Great is peace, for no vessel receives blessing except for peace.

As it is stated: "The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace" (*Tehillim* 29:1).

1. Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar said: Great is peace, for all the blessings conclude only with peace.

As it is stated: "The Lord bless you, and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord raise His countenance upon you, and give you peace" (*Bamidbar* 6:24-26).

1. Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar said: Great is peace, for even if Israel worships idols, but there is peace among them, God says, as it were: Satan will not touch them.

As it is stated: "Efrayim is joined to idols; let him alone" (*Hoshea* 4:17). But when they are divided, what is said about them? "Their heart is divided; now shall they bear their guilt" (*Hoshea* 10:2). Surely, great is peace, and hated is division.

1. Great is peace, for even in a time of war, peace is required.

As it is stated: "When you draw near to a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace to it" (*Devarim* 20:10); "And I sent messengers out of the wilderness of Kedeimot to Sichon king of Cheshbon with words of peace, saying" (*Devarim* 2:26); "And Yiftach sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites, saying: What have you to do with me, that are come to me to fight against my land? And the king of the Ammonites answered to the messengers of Yiftach." What does he say? "Now therefore restore those cities peaceably" (*Shofetim* 11:12-13).

1. Great is peace, for even the dead require peace.

As it is stated: "But you shall go to your fathers in peace" (*Bereishit* 15:15). And it is stated: "You shall die in peace; and with the burnings of your fathers" (*Yirmeyahu* 34:5).

1. Great is peace which was given to those who repent.

As it is stated: "Peace, peace, to him that is far off and to him that is near" (*Yeshayahu* 57:19).

1. Great is peace, which was given as the lot of the righteous. As it is stated: "He enters into peace, they rest in their beds" (*Yeshayahu* 57:2).
2. Great is peace, which was not given as the lot of the wicked. As it is stated: "There is no peace, says the Lord, concerning the wicked" (*Yeshayahu* 48:24).
3. Great is peace, which was given to those who love the Torah. As it is stated: "Great peace have they that love Your law" (*Tehillim* 119:165).
4. Great is peace, which was given to those who study the Torah. As it is stated: "And all your children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of your children" (*Yeshayahu* 54:13).
5. Great is peace, which was given to the humble. As it is stated: "But the humble shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in the abundance of peace" (*Tehillim* 37:11).
6. Great is peace, which was given to those who practice righteousness. As it is stated: "And the work of righteousness shall be peace" (*Yeshayahu* 32:17).
7. Great is peace, for the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, is peace.

As it is stated: "And he called it: God is peace" (*Shofetim* 6:24).

1. Rabbi Chananya, the deputy High Priest, said: Great is peace, as it is equal to all of creation.

As it is stated: "I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace" (*Yeshayahu* 45:7)

1. Great is peace, for those who dwell in the heavens require peace.

As it is stated: "Dominion and fear are with Him; He makes peace in His high places" (*Iyov* 25:2). And regarding the matter there is an *a fortiori* argument: If in a place where there is no enmity, competition or hate, opponents require peace, all the more so in a place where all of these qualities are found.

(*Sifrei Naso* 42)[[3]](#footnote-3)

This collection has undergone textual-scientific examination by contemporary scholars of Rabbinic literature. Menachem Katz points out that the collection is comprised of twenty short statements opening with the formula, "Great is peace," which are divided into two sets of ten statements. Each group of statements is comprised of two sub-sets — an opening series of seven statements and a closing series of three statements.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Set I:**

1.

Great is peace for the sake of which He modified Sara's act

Great is peace for the Holy [One, blessed be He,] modified [Sara's words] for the sake of peace

Great is peace for the angel modified [Sara's words] for the sake of peace.

Great is peace, for the [Divine] name that is written in sanctity is erased in the water for the sake of peace

Rabbi Eliezer said: Great is peace, for the prophets planted in the mouths of all people, only for the sake of peace.

Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta said: Great is peace, for no vessel receives blessing except for peace.

Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar said: Great is peace, for all the blessings conclude only with peace.

2.

Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar said: Great is peace, for even if Israel worships idols…

Great is peace, for even in a time of war, peace is required

Great is peace, for even the dead require peace

**Set II**

1.

Great is peace which was given to those who repent.

Great is peace, which was given as the lot of the righteous.

Great is peace, which was not given as the lot of the wicked.

Great is peace, which was given to those who love the Torah.

Great is peace, which was given to those who study the Torah.

Great is peace, which was given to the humble.

Great is peace, which was given to those who practice righteousness.

2.

Great is peace, for the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, is peace.

Rabbi Chananya, the deputy high priest, said: Great is peace, as it is equal to all of creation.

Great is peace, for those who dwell in the heavens require peace.

Katz points out the unique characteristics of each set, which is highlighted above by the different color markings. In the first section, most of the statements end with the word "peace," like the priestly blessing itself, and the first three statements contain the word *shinna*, "modified." The second section makes repeated use of the phrase, "great is peace, for even," which relates to issues which the reader would not have thought were connected to peace. The third section is marked by the phrase, "great is peace, which was given," whereas the fourth section relates to metaphysical matters beyond this world.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Menachem Kahana, in his commentary to *Sifrei Bamidbar,* addresses two additional general matters which touch upon the careful edition of the collection of *derashot* under discussion.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The first matter is the motif of *asiya*, "action, doing," that appears in the opening statement in the collection: "Great is peace, for the sake of which He modified Sara's act (*ma'aseh*)," and in the closing statement: "He makes (*oseh*)peace in His high places." So too, the motif characterizes the first four statements, which relate to action on the part of God or His angel.

The second matter addressed by Kahana is the large number of *derashot* appearing in the collection. He demonstrates that not only is the collection exceptional in size, but the number of *derashot* relating to the priestly blessing in the *Sifrei* is very large in comparison to the number of *derashot* to the rest of the *parashot* in this work. There are precisely sixty *derashot* in this collection — the number of letters in the priestly blessing.[[7]](#footnote-7) Kahana suggests that this be regarded as an editorial act.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**The Effort to Bring Peace**

Let us develop Kahana's observation regarding the motif of *asiya* that appears in the collection. First, note should be taken of the fact that *asiya* appears also in statements 11 and 17: "Great is peace, which was given to those who repent (*osei teshuva*)," and "Great is peace, which was given to those who practice righteousness (*osei tzedaka*)." These statements serve as a framework for the third sub-set (statements 11-17), which include a series of people to whom peace is given or not given: those who repent, the righteous, the wicked, those who love the Torah, those who study the Torah, the humble and those who practice righteousness. This stands in contrast to the rest of the statements in the *derasha*, which relate to the actions of God or his agents, the commandments or style of the Torah, the structure of reality and the ways of providence.

If so, peace is presented in the *derasha* in two circles, the Divine circle and the human circle. The structure of the *derasha* reflects the relationship between them: The Divine circle surrounds the human circle. Peace is given to people who strive to increase blessing and goodness in the world, each person in his or her own realm. This is part of the Divine presence in the world that bestows harmony upon it.

However, the nature of the world is contrary to peace. The first three parts of the *derasha* contain components that express this fundamental truth. In the first sub-set (statements 1-7), God changes things for the sake of peace (between Avraham and Sara), and in the extreme case of a woman suspected of adultery (*sota*), the Explicit Name of God must be written down and dissolved in water in order to bring peace between husband and wife. Causing peace to rest in the world sometimes involves concealing the Divine revelation and the truth.

The second sub-set deals entirely with difficult situations of division and detachment, and the appearance of the element of peace is surprising: idolaters (detachment from God), war (division between peoples), and death (detachment of the soul from the body). In the first two sub-sets, it is the middle statement that addresses the greatest tension: the erasing of the Explicit Name in the case of a *sota* (statement 4 out of 1-7), and the call for peace in wartime (statement 9 out of 8-10).

So too in the third sub-set, we find disharmony in the image of the wicked, who have no peace (statement 13). The message that emerges from the structure seems to be that despite the principles in the world that oppose peace, peace will prevail if one exerts oneself in that direction, to resemble the Creator and be active in the world. According to this, the third sub-set, which is addressed to a person who works for blessing and goodness in the world, is the heart of the entire *derasha.*[[9]](#footnote-9)

Five of the twenty statements in the *derasha* are attributed to the Tannaim Rabbi Elazar; Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta; Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar; Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar; and Rabbi Chanina (Chananya), the deputy high priest — most of them members of the fifth generation of Tannaim,[[10]](#footnote-10) The rest of the statements in the *derasha* are reported anonymously.

**The *Derasha* in the *Sifrei Zuta***

Let us compare this *derasha* to another Tannaitic source dealing with peace:

Rabbi Shimon would say: Precious is peace, for had the Holy One, blessed be He, created an attribute more beautiful than peace, He would have given it to the righteous.

For when they depart from the world, three sets of angels of peace greet them. The first one says: "He enters into peace"; the second one says: "they rest in their beds"; and the third one says: "each one that walks in his uprightness" (*Yeshayahu* 57:2).

And these do not suffice for the righteous whose death is in the hands of glory, as it is stated: "And your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear-guard" (*Yeshayahu* 58:8). What is more, they offer praise before them and say: "He enters into peace, they rest in their beds, each one that walks in his uprightness."

Another explanation:

You say that precious is peace, for had the Holy One, blessed be He, created an attribute more beautiful than peace, He would have kept it from the wicked.

For when they depart from the world, three sets of angels of destruction greet them. The first one says: "There is no peace"; the second one says: "says my God concerning the wicked" (*Yeshayahu* 57:21); and the third one says: "you shall lie down in sorrow" (*Yeshayahu* 50:11).

And these do not suffice for the wicked whose death is in the hands of destruction, as it is stated: "His soul draws near to the pit, and his life to the destroyers" (*Iyov* 33:22); "He shall be driven from light into darkness, and chased out of the world" (*Iyov* 18:18); "Let them be as chaff before the wind, the angel of the Lord chasing them" (*Tehillim* 35:5). What is more, they vex them and say: "There is no peace, says my God, you shall lie down in sorrow."

Another explanation:

Rabbi Shimon would say: Great is peace, for the nature of the affairs of the King of kings’ kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, is not like the nature of human affairs.

It is the nature of man that when he goes out to war, he goes out with troops and legions, but when he goes out in peace, he goes out alone.

But it is the nature of the King of kings’ kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, that when He goes out in peace, He goes out with legions and troops, as it is stated: "Thousands upon thousands ministered to Him" (*Daniel* 7:10). And it is stated: "He makes peace in His high places; is there any number of His armies" (*Iyov* 25:2-3). And it is stated: "The chariots of God are myriads, even thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in holiness" (*Tehillim* 68:18).

But when He goes out to war, He goes out alone, as it is stated: "I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the peoples there was no man with Me; I trod them in My anger" (*Yeshayahu* 63:3)…

Another explanation:

You say that precious is peace, since for all the actions and meritorious deeds performed by the patriarch Avraham, God rewarded him only with peace. As it is stated: "But you shall go to your fathers in peace" (*Bereishit* 15:15).

And similarly you find regarding the patriarch Ya’akov, who asked nothing of God except for peace. As it is stated: "So that I come back to my father's house in peace" (*Bereishit* 28:21).

And similarly you find regarding Aharon, who was praised before God only for peace. As it is stated: "My covenant was with him, of life and peace" (*Malakhi* 2:5).

And similarly you find with Pinchas, who was rewarded by God only with peace. As it is stated: "Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace" (*Bamidbar* 25:12).

And similarly you find that the Torah was likened only to peace. As it is stated: "And all her paths are peace" (*Mishlei* 3:17).

And similarly you find that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave as a reward for Torah study only peace. As it is stated: "Great peace have they that love Your law" (*Tehillim* 119:165).

And so you find that God gave as a reward to those who practice righteousness only peace. As it is stated: "And the work of righteousness shall be peace" (*Yeshayahu* 32:17).

And similarly you find that Jerusalem was likened only to peace. As it is stated: "Peace be within your walls" (*Tehillim* 122:7).

And similarly you find that the Holy One, blessed be He, will in the future console Jerusalem only with peace. As it is stated: "And My people shall abide in a peaceable habitation" (*Yeshayahu* 32:18).

And similarly you find that the Holy One, blessed be He, established the kingdom of the house of David only on peace. As it is stated: "That the kingdom may be increased, and of peace there be no end" (*Yeshayahu* 9:6).

And similarly you find that God punished the Ammonites and Midianites only by withholding peace. As it is stated: "You shall not seek their peace" (*Devarim* 23:7)

(*Sifrei Zuta* 6, 26)

This *derasha* is comprised of four *derashot*, three of which open with "Precious is peace" and one which opens with "Great is peace." Two of the *derashot* are attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and two are reported anonymously. The first three *derashot* relate to peace as a heavenly reality: a heavenly entourage that greets the righteous and the opposite with the wicked, God's host that goes out with Him for peaceful purposes. By contrast, the fourth *derasha* relates to peace as the reward received by the nation's elite during their lifetimes: Avraham merits dying without seeing the calamities that will befall his descendants; Ya’akov merits returning in peace from Charan; the blessing of peace is given to Aharon; the Ammonites and Midianites do not merit Israel's seeking their peace.

This suggests that the conceptual trend that emerges from the *derasha* as a whole parallels that which we have seen in the "Great is peace" *derasha* discussed above: In both of them, there is a transition from the Divine plane to the human plane. However, whereas the *derasha* in the *Sifrei* emphasizes the need for action on all planes in order to achieve peace, the *Sifrei Zuta* relates more to Divine activity.

A careful examination of the two sources reveals linguistic and substantive parallels between the two.

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| *Sifrei Naso "*Great is peace" | *Sifrei Zuta* |
| Great is peace, which was given as the lot of the righteous.As it is stated: "He enters into peace, they rest in their beds" | Precious is peace, for had the Holy One, blessed be He, created an attribute more beautiful than peace, He would have given it to the righteous. For when they depart from the world, three sets of angels of peace greet them. The first one says: "He enters into peace"; the second one says: "they rest in their beds"; and the third one says: "each one that walks in his uprightness" (*Yeshayahu* 57:2). And these do not suffice for the righteous whose death is in the hands of glory, as it is stated: "And your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear-guard" (*Yeshayahu* 58:8). What is more, they offer praise before them and say: "He enters into peace, they rest in their beds, each one that walks in his uprightness." |
| Great is peace, which was not given as the lot of the wicked.As it is stated: "There is no peace, says the Lord, concerning the wicked." | Precious is peace, for had the Holy One, blessed be He, created an attribute more beautiful than peace, He would have kept it from the wicked. For when they depart from the world, three sets of angels of destruction greet them. The first one says: "There is no peace"; the second one says: "says my God concerning the wicked."  |
| Great is peace, which was given to those who love the Torah. As it is stated: "Great peace have they that love Your law" (*Tehillim* 119:165). | And similarly you find that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave as a reward for Torah study only peace. As it is stated: "Great peace have they that love Your law" (*Tehillim* 119:165). |
| Great is peace, which was given to those who practice righteousness. As it is stated: "And the work of righteousness shall be peace" (*Yeshayahu* 32:17). | And so you find that God gave as a reward to those who practice righteousness only peace. As it is stated: "And the work of righteousness shall be peace" (*Yeshayahu* 32:17).  |

It seems reasonable to say that the *derasha* in the *Sifrei Zuta* is the source of the *derasha* in the *Sifrei Naso*, and that parts of it are integrated into the *derasha* of "Great is peace."

Another connection between the two *derashot* is the rule brought in *Sanhedrin* 86a that "anonymous statements in the *Sifrei* may be attributed to Rabbi Shimon." In light of this rule, the anonymous *derashot* that appear in the *derasha* in the *Sifrei* may also be attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

The connection between the phenomena occurring in our world and the upper worlds is one of the characteristics of the world of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Peace too appears in these *derashot* in this manner. This awareness is not intended to neutralize the human act, but rather to raise the awareness of the great need for such activity.

In this study we have outlined several features of the collection of Tannaitic statements headlined "Great is peace," but we have not examined the full content of the each of the statements. I invite you to continue to study this issue and delve more deeply into the words of the Tannaim about peace.

*Chag Sameiach* and *Shabbat Shalom!*

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Menachem Kahana (see reference to his book, n. 5 infra), pp. 328-329, explains this statement as referring, like the one that precedes it, to the tidings about the birth of Yitzchak at the beginning of *Parashat Vayera.* He points to the fact that no verse is cited in these statements as supporting the argument that we are still dealing with the same incident. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kahana, ibid. p. 330, brings a collection of explanations of this statement. In *Midrash Lekach Tov*, it is explicitly stated that we are dealing with the fact that the prophets accustomed the people to inquire about the peace and welfare of others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The main parallels of this *derasha* are: *Sifrei Zuta* 6, 26; *Vayikra Rabba* 9, 9; and *Massekhet Derekh Eretz*, “Chapter of Peace.” In *Massekhet Derekh Eretz* and in *Vayikra Rabba*, Amoraic *derashot* are integrated into those of the Tannaim. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Menachem Katz, *Derekh Aggada* II (1999), pp. 80-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Katz, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Menachem Kahana, *Sifrei Bamidbar: Mahadura Mevu'eret*, Vol. II (Jerusalem: 2011), pp. 347-350. See his comprehensive commentary on all of *Sifrei Bemidbar,* 42, ibid. pp. 323-350. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. pp. 348-349. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In support of his suggestion, he brings *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 3, 6:

“Behold, it is the litter of Shelomo; sixty mighty men are about it” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 3:7). Rabbi Bibi said in the name of Rabbi Elazar be-Rabbi Yosei: Interpret the verse as referring to the priestly blessing… “Sixty mighty men are about it” — these are the sixty letters in the priestly blessing.

See his comments, p. 349, note 193. In his article, "*Tapuchei Zahav Be-maskiyot Kesef*: *Ha-Mishna Ve-sidrei Sedareha*," *Tarbiz* 76 (2007), pp. 29-40, he points to the precise editing of the Mishna in sixty tractates that are divided into six orders. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The one who will be given peace is not necessarily the one who is occupied specifically with bringing peace to the world, but rather the one who is connected to the good and the Divine. In this way, the *derasha* connects peace and perfection. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Unless specified otherwise, Rabbi Elazar is Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua, one of the last students of Rabbi Akiva. The exception is Rabbi Chanina, the deputy high priest, who belongs to the first generation of Tannaim. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)