



On Offerings, Wholeness, and Peace

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Midrash Vayikra Rabbah offers an extensive homily on the *shelamim* (peace or well-being offering) based on the linguistic affinity between the Hebrew words *shelamim*, *sheleimut* (wholeness), and *shalom* (peace). By examining both the technical details of how the offering was brought and the linguistic potential inherent in its name, the *midrash* transforms a discussion of ancient ritual into an exploration of the very nature of peace.

I. A peace of many kinds

When summarizing the sacrificial taxonomy, the Torah places the *shelamim* sacrifice at the end: “This is the law of the burnt offering, the meal offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the consecration offering, and the sacrifice of the peace offering” (Leviticus 7:37). The *midrash* in Vayikra Rabbah wonders why this should be the case.

ויקרא רבה ט:ח

אמר רבי סימון: הדיא גרזמיתא אינה באה אלא באחרונה. למה? שיש בה מינים הרבה. כן, למה שלמים באחרונה? שיש בה מינים הרבה – דם ואימורים למזבח, חזה ושוק לפהנים, עור ובשר לבעלים.



Vayikra Rabbah 9:8

R. Simon said: This *gerizmita* (a dessert of fruit and nuts) is only served at the very end of the meal. Why? Because it contains many different kinds of ingredients. So too, why does the *shelamim* appear last [in the list of sacrifices]? Because it contains many different kinds: the blood and the inner fats are given to the altar; the breast and the thigh are given to the priests; and the hide and the meat are given to the owners.

This *midrash* compares the placement of *shelamim* at the end of the list to a kind of dessert—like a fruit salad, something made of different parts, that is distributed to multiple people. Similarly, the *shelamim* “contains many different kinds”—it is a composite offering comprised of many elements, that takes place across different domains, and benefits a diverse range of participants. The *midrash* implies that it is precisely this multiplicity that makes the offering “complete” (*shalem*). Indeed, the *midrash* links the *shelamim* to the concept of wholeness (*sheleimut*) in the sense that its components are varied and diverse. Because different parts of this sacrifice are consumed by the altar, others are given to the priests, and still others are kept by the owners, the various components converge to create something that can truly be called “complete.”¹

II. Between life and wholeness

The *midrash* goes on to link the *shelamim* to life, and death to deficiency:

רבי שמעון אומר: מי שהוא שלם מביא שלמים, ואין אונן מביא שלמים.

R. Shimon says: One who is whole (*shalem*) brings *shelamim*, but an *onen* (a person in the first stage of bereavement) does not bring *shelamim*.

¹ This idea is stated even more explicitly in a parallel passage in Midrash Lekah Tov (Vayikra 3:1): “for everything is ‘whole’ (*shalem*) within them: the blood and inner fats for the altar, the breast and thigh for the priests, and the hide and meat for the owners.”

This statement proposes a profound relationship between the “whole” person, the *shelamim*, and the encounter with death. The *midrash* defines what it means to be “whole” by pointing to its opposite: the *onen*. An *onen* is a person whose deceased relative has passed away but has not yet been buried. This is a person consumed by the immediate demands of burial and the raw impact of loss. According to our *midrash*, such a person cannot bring a *shelamim*.

There is, then, a fundamental gap between the preoccupation with death and the essence of the *shelamim*. The *shelamim*, by its very nature, demands wholeness, and wholeness is intrinsically linked to life rather than death. This *midrash* reflects a worldview in which life is the ultimate expression of the “whole,” or perhaps that life is defined by its capacity for wholeness. Dealing with death connects us to fragmentation and deficiency, creating a temporary boundary for our service of God. One simply cannot bring an offering of wholeness while standing in the presence of death.

III. A seal of peace

The *midrash* continues by strengthening the bond not only between *shelamim* and wholeness (*sheleimut*), but between *shelamim* and peace (*shalom*).

ויקרא רבה ט:ט

רבי מני דשאב ורבי יהושע דסכנין בשם רבי לוי: גדול שלום שכל הברכות וטובות ונחמות שהקדוש ברוך הוא מביא על ישראל, חותמין בשלום - בקריאת שמע 'פזר סכת שלום', בתפלה 'עושה שלום', בברכת כהנים "וישם לך שלום".

Vayikra Rabbah 9:9

R. Mani of She'av [said] R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin said in the name of R. Levi: Great is *shalom*, for all the blessings, good tidings, and consolations that the Holy Blessed One brings upon

Israel conclude with peace. In the Shema, God “spreads a shelter of peace”; in the Amidah, God “makes peace”; and in the Priestly Blessing, it ends with “and grant you peace.”

The *midrash* demonstrates that peace is “great” by pointing to the fact that, in Jewish tradition, so many of our essential prayers and blessings are “sealed” with the word *shalom*. For example, the evening Shema on Shabbat concludes with the blessing, “Who spreads a shelter of peace over us.”²

The *midrash* then poses a deeper question:

וְאֵין לִי אֵלָא בְּבִרְכּוֹת, בְּקִרְבָּנוֹת מִנִּין? (ויקרא ז:לז): "זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה לַעֲלֹה לַמִּנְחָה וְלַחֲטָאת וְלֶאֱשָׁם
וְלַמִּלּוּאִים וְלִזְבַּח הַשְּׁלָמִים."

I only know this is true regarding blessings; how do I know it is true regarding the sacrifices? [As it says]: “This is the law of the burnt offering, the meal offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the consecration offering, and the *shelamim*.”

As proof that the sacrificial system is also sealed with peace, the *midrash* cites the summary verse that concludes the entire description of the offerings. This is an underlying assumption that requires no further proof: the *shelamim* is the embodiment of peace.

The *midrash* further explains that this “seal of peace” applies not only to individual offerings, but also to the communal offerings brought by the entire congregation on festivals:

וְאֵין לִי אֵלָא בְּקִרְבָּנוֹת יְחִיד, בְּקִרְבָּנוֹת צִבּוּר מִנִּין, תִּלְמוּד לומר (במדבר כט, לט): "אֵלָה תַעֲשׂוּ לָהּ
בְּמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם, וּמִסֵּים בְּשָׁלָמִים."

² On the phenomenon of ending prayer with peace, see the essay of my colleague R. Elie Kaunfer, “The End of the Amidah: A Blessing from God,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/end-amidah-blessing-god>.



I only know this regarding the offerings of the individual; how do I know it applies to communal offerings? The verse says: “These you shall offer to God at your appointed festivals” (Numbers 29:39), and it concludes with *shelamim*.

In the language of the *midrash*, *shelamim* and *shalom* merge and become interchangeable. This becomes even more evident in the next stage of the *midrash*. It shifts seamlessly from the technical world of sacrifices to the cosmic state of the entire universe, without feeling any need to explain the transition. In the eyes of the *midrash*, this is not a change of subject, but a deepening focus on the theme that “Great is peace.”

וְאֵין לִי אֵלָּא בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, בְּעוֹלָם הַבָּא מִיָּיִן? (ישעיה סו, יב): "הִנְנִי נוֹטֶה אֵלֶיָּהּ כְּנָהָר שְׁלוֹם".

I only know this regarding this world. How do I know it applies to the world to come? [As it says]: “Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river” (Isaiah 66:12).

IV. *Shelamim*, *shalom*, and *shalem*

The concluding *midrash* of section 9 in Vayikra Rabbah expands the “seal of peace” beyond human rituals to the entire arc of history:

רַבֵּנָן אָמְרוּ: גְּדוֹל שְׁלוֹם שֶׁקִּשְׁמֵלֶךְ הַמָּשִׁיחַ בָּא אֵינּוּ פּוֹתֵחַ אֶלָּא בְּשְׁלוֹם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה נב, ז): "מִה נָּאוּ עַל הַהָרִים רַגְלֵי מְבַשֵּׁר מְשֻׁמֵּעַ שְׁלוֹם".

The Rabbis said: Great is peace, for when King Messiah comes, he will open with peace, as it is said: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger of good tidings, who announces peace” (Isaiah 52:7).

A careful reading reveals a fascinating shift here. Unlike the previous sequence of homilies that focused on peace as a “seal” or conclusion, this *midrash* ends by highlighting peace as an opening: “he will **open** with peace.” Peace is “great” not only because it is a fitting final chord or a proper bottom line, but because it is the very first word of redemption. This *midrash* describes the greatness of peace by returning to and expanding upon the concept of wholeness (*sheleimut*). Peace is great because it is all-encompassing; it is both the opening and the closing. It creates a “whole” by enveloping life from beginning to end. In this midrashic move, the *shelamim*, the whole (*shalem*), and peace (*shalom*) merge into three unified entities—interchangeable and perhaps even identical.

What, then, is the blueprint the *shelamim* provides for bringing peace? What does this sacrifice teach us about how peace is actually achieved? We must seal our actions with peace, but we must also strive to open with it—or at the very least, build toward a world where peace is our starting point. We must foster a reality where wholeness is understood as something complex—composed of different, diverse, and distinct parts that together build a complete whole. Finally, we must dedicate ourselves, as much as possible, to the realm of life and growth rather than the realm of death and deficiency.

