



Why do the Righteous Yearn for Tranquility?

Can We Ever Attain Serenity?

We all yearn for serenity. Yet, what is serenity, and can it really be attained? It seems as if our lives are filled with one challenge after the other: troubles at work, troubles with neighbors, troubles finding a soulmate, health issues, worries about money, family feuds and above all problems with our children. Who can, in all honesty, claim to live a life devoid of anxiety and stress? We are in this world to grow, and growth requires going through hardships and overcoming challenges, so why even bother yearning for serenity? If serenity means 'peaceful,' perhaps, serenity implies coming to peace with being unable to attain serenity? My google dictionary defines serenity as tranquility, the state of being calm, peaceful, and untroubled. Serenity is the opposite of anxiety, agitation and disruption. It is "an oasis of serenity amidst the bustling city." Thus, we advertise that "Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin is located in the pristine setting of the Judean Hills, where you will enjoy nature hikes, farming, stunning sunsets and prayerful serenity." Ahh, 'prayerful serenity!' I want to breathe it in – please Hashem – help me bring some prayerful serenity into every fiber of my being. Looking forward to Shabbat is yearning for even just a glimpse of this serenity – when all electronics are turned off. For me, serenity is basking on a hammock in the sun, without any pressure to write my blog, organize a schedule, advertise a program or reply to the emails overflowing my inbox... Basking in the sun, listening to the chorus of the various birdsongs, or even relaxing on the couch with a book on a windy or rainy Shabbat – these are glimpses of serenity for me. Just as Shabbat is a glimpse of the world to come. "Rabbi Ya'acov would say: This world is comparable to the antechamber before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the antechamber, so that you may enter the banquet hall" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:16). This is why it is good to work so hard on the eve of Shabbat, in order to prepare ourselves to enter the serenity of Shabbat – even if it's just a glimpse – a tiny foretaste of the real thing.

Let Us not Turn Serenity into Complacency

In our yearning for serenity, we are often diverted into fleeting pleasures. Therefore, we must grow up from being a kid in the candy-store, and realize that our purpose and main work on earth is not to enjoy all the tempting pleasures of this world, which have no eternal existence, but evaporate like the steam from our tea kettle. Rather, we are only placed in this world to serve Hashem – through which we tap into the source of life and gain eternity (Bat Ayin, *Parashat Shemot*). We must never become complacent, even if we achieve the highest level. We should always be concerned to avoid receding and down sliding. This is what David exclaimed, "I said בְּשָׁלוֹם/veshalvi – in my tranquility, 'I will never falter'" (*Tehillim* 30:7). This song was written in his childhood. However, from the day David became a man, until his old age, he never allowed himself to dwell in tranquility and serenity, for he was always concerned about backsliding. Therefore, we must put all our strength and energy into staying on the Torah path without slipping. We must train ourselves to transform even our smallest attraction to anything but the mitzvot, to keep ascending on the path of emunah (Menachem Tzion, *Parashat Vayikra*). Yet, to maintain free choice, it is impossible to completely draw down Hashem's kingdom into this world, until the future-to-come, when Hashem will remove the spirit of impurity from the land (Ohev Yisrael, *Likutei Chadashim Parashat Vayeshev*). Darkness and impurity are necessary in this world of tikkun, in which we must struggle against the many temptations to choose light and life over darkness and death. Thus, serenity is a rare commodity in our current world, as there is always the danger that it will revert into its flipside of complacency.

Yearning for Serenity Results in Rectified Relationships

The word 'serenity' translates as to שְׁלוֹה/shalva in Hebrew, as well as רִגָּע/roga – 'tranquility' and שְׁקֵט/sheket – 'peacefulness.' The word שְׁלוֹה/shalva connects us to *Parashat Vayeshev*:

ספר בראשית פרק לז פסוק א וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

"Ya'acov dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan" (*Bereishit* 37:1).

רש"י על בראשית פרק לז פסוק ב ועוד נדרש בו וישב ביקש יעקב בשלוה קפץ עליו רוגזו של יוסף צדיקים מבקשים לישב בשלוה אומר הקב"ה לא דיין לצדיקים מה שמתוקן להם לעוה"ב אלא שמבקשים לישב בשלוה בעוה"ז:

When Ya'acov sought to dwell in שְׁלוֹה/shalva – tranquility, the troubles of Yosef sprang upon him. The righteous seek to dwell in tranquility. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, "What is prepared for the righteous in the world-to-come is not sufficient for them, but they seek [also] to dwell in tranquility in this world!" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 37:2).

The very name of *Parashat Vayeshev* "settling down" – intimates a yearning for serenity. Yet, the righteous even in the world-to-come do not rest. As it states, "They go from strength to strength..." (*Tehillim* 84:8). So, how come Ya'acov, the progenitor of the righteous of Israel, yearned for serenity? Rabbi Matis Weinberg explains that the word שְׁלוֹה/shalva is often mistranslated as peace, serenity, rest and relaxation. Rather, שְׁלוֹה/shalva is the opposite of strife, as in "Better a piece of dry bread and tranquility with it, than a house full of sacrifices of strife" (*Mishlei* 17:1). It denotes being free from emotional disturbances and agitation. Thus, rather than referring to 'peace,' שְׁלוֹה/shalva means peaceful relationships. The petty demands brought by unpeaceful interpersonal relationships, distract us from focusing on the real battles for overcoming evil. This is why Ya'acov yearned for shalva (Rabbi Matis Weinberg, *Frameworks, genesis* pp. 220-222).

The Constant Struggle for Serenity

Ya'acov's life was indeed replete with challenging relationships. He managed to deal with numerous difficult people, and avoid being exploited by his father-in-law, Lavan, the trickster. Ya'acov also accomplished to make peace with his jealous brother, Esau, who planned to kill him. Other interpersonal challenges that Ya'acov struggled with included educating his children, who suffered from sibling rivalry, dealing with the abuse of his daughter, Dina, and lastly with the sorrow of being separated from his favorite son, Yosef. Ya'acov, as the archetypal father of the Jewish people, encapsulates the struggles of his descendants, the children of Israel. The very meaning of the name Yisrael "you have struggled with [an angel of] G-d and with men, and you have prevailed" (*Bereishit* 32:29), embodies the constant struggle for peaceful relationships that we must undergo. I, personally, experience this ongoing struggle in my life. Despite, the many hours I spend in solitude at the computer, in a kind of social distancing mode, challenges in interpersonal relationships dominate my life, which is all about how to deal with people in peaceful ways. These challenges span from expressing love in intimate marital relationships, dealing with young or adult children, connecting with parents and siblings, facing challenges with co-workers, employees, students and clients, to respecting Rabbis and community leaders. There is always a new challenge to handle, a recent misunderstanding to clear up, an emotional reaction to diffuse, an angry email to delete and a petty desire to transform. Thus, the yearning for שְׁלוֹה/shalva – 'peaceful relationships' is indeed the struggle of personal growth – the very struggle against our own pettiness that impedes us from achieving the true good of rectified relationships – which is the crux of serving Hashem. We learn this from Hillel, the sage, who taught, "...That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 31a).