Sifre Numbers 42 (part two)

How great is peace  
Date: 3d CE  
Place: Syria Palaestina  
Language: Hebrew  

Category: Jewish  

Literary genre: Midrash  

Title of work: Sifre Numbers  
Reference: 42  
Commentary:  

This text from Sifre Numbers includes twenty teachings on the concept of peace and the nature of its greatness (for more on the literary structure of this midrashic unit, see Katz, “Peace”; Kahana, Sifre, II, 346-347). Immediately prior (Sifre Numbers 42 [part one]), this midrash presents several explanations for part of the Priestly Benediction (Num 6:22-27), which asks God to bring peace upon Israel (v. 26). That discussion attempts to define that peace, namely, the purpose of this blessing. The source examined here further develops notions of the importance and greatness of peace. The word peace (shalom), appears in numerous contexts in the Tanakh, which enabled the sages to develop various ideas by selecting from an array of biblical verses. In this text, peace is applied to several facets of life, including: between spouses, among Israelites, at times of war, in death, and even among heavenly beings.

Peace also played a central role in Roman imperial ideology. As Christopher J. Fuhrmann puts it, “diverse voices produced a rhetoric of imperial peace, and anyone who handled a coin stamped pax or concordia was exposed to it” (Policing the Roman Empire, p. 89). Rome and the emperor, in particular, were presented as bringing peace to the empire. This peace, the Pax Romana, was secured by military power, a legal system and, in many cases, the acceptance of this rule by local populations (Wengst, Pax Romana, p. 14, 37, 42). While the peace midrashim were produced by rabbis who lived under Roman rule (and, later, Christian rule), they do not mention Rome. Thus, scholars who study these sources have generally overlooked this context. However, I consider the omission of Rome from this midrash (and the other peace midrashim) significant. In the remainder of this commentary, I examine whether this passage from Sifre Numbers reflects an indirect dialogue with Roman notions of peace and whether these concepts influenced rabbinic thinking about shalom (more on these issues in Wilfand, “How Great Is Peace”).

Section A is comprised of seven maxims on the subject of peace: Passages 1-3 discuss the difference between Sarah’s words in Genesis 18:12: “So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’” (NRSV) and the attribution to her in Genesis 18:13: “And the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, “Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?”’” According to this midrash, peace is so important that Sarah’s words were altered for presentation to Abraham for the sake of preserving peace between husband and wife. Passages 2 and 3 offer different opinions regarding the source of this change. Passage 4 continues on the theme of peace between husband and wife: here God agrees that his name, written in holiness, may be dissolved in water. This image refers to Numbers 5:11-31, which discusses the case of a man who suspects that his wife has committed adultery. When the husband brings his wife to the priest, “Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, ‘If no man has lain with you, if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while under your husband’s authority, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings the curse. But if you have gone astray while under your husband’s authority, if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has had intercourse with you,’ —let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse and say to the woman—the Lord make you an execration and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge; now may this water that brings the curse enter your bowels and make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!’ And the woman shall say, ‘Amen. Amen.’ Then the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness. He shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter her and cause bitter pain” (Numbers 5:19-24, NRSV). This ceremony aims to re-establish peace between husband and wife since, if the wife remains unaffected, this test will have demonstrated that she did not have sexual relations with another man. Mishnah Sotah 2:3 details the formula that the priest would write, which included God’s name. In this midrash, God agrees that his holy name
may be dissolved in water during this ritual to affirm the importance of restoring peace between husband and wife. This consent is especially meaningful since rabbinic law prohibits intentional destruction or casually discarding a text that includes God names, even if it is no longer in use (see Mishnah Shabbat 16:1 and Tosefta Megillah 2:16). As Galit Hasan-Rokem explains: “In Jewish culture, which prohibits any visual representation of the divinity, the name of God had become a sacred emblem of divine power” (Tales of the Neighborhood, p. 63). Passage 5 cites Rabbi Eleazar, a fourth-generation tanna who was active in the mid-second century, particularly after the Bar Kokhba revolt. According to this teaching, the prophets instilled nothing but peace in the mouths of all Israelites; despite its enigmatic message, the value of peace is surely underscored here. Passage 6 cites Rabbi Shimon ben ?alaftah, a fifth-generation tanna who was active in the final third of the second century. According to this teaching, peace is the sole “vessel that can receive blessing” (Kahana, Sifre, II, p. 330). Thus, peace is a pre-requisite for all other blessings, based on the verse: “The Lord will give strength to his people! The Lord will bless his people in peace!” (Psalms 29:11, based on NRSV; this teaching also appears in Jerusalem Talmud 2:1, 5a and in a late addition to Mishnah Uqtzin 3:12). Here and in the next passage (7), which also quotes Rabbi Eleazar, God alone may confer peace upon his people. In Passage 7, Rabbi Eleazar proclaims that peace is great because it provides the conclusion for every blessing. As an example, he quotes the Priestly Benediction, which closes with “The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Numbers 6:26, NRSV). To summarize, this section discusses the greatness of peace by emphasizing God as its source.

Section B presents three teachings that each open with the words: “Great is peace, for even (‘afi'lu)…” Passage 1 cites Rabbi Eleazar, son of Rabbi Eleazar Haqapar (also known as Bar Qapara), who was active in the first decades of the third century, the transitional period between the tannaim and amoraim. This teaching states that, even if the people of Israel practiced idolatry, they would be protected if there were peace among them, and concludes by articulating the dichotomy between peace and discord: “great is peace and loathed is division.” It is significant that, in Roman imperial ideology, peace (pax) refers not only to the relationship between Rome and the nations under its rule but it also “represents the unity of the Roman people” (Woolf, “Roman Peace,” p. 178; Weinstock, “Pax,” p. 45). Passage 2 cites three biblical references to prove that, even in wartime, peace is required. One verse illustrates peace as giving a city the option to surrender before waging an attack. As Stefan Weinstock, points out that, for the Romans, pax denotes “submission to Rome, just as pacare began to refer to conquest.” This submission “guaranteed peaceful life and the Romans liked to stress this point” (“Pax,” p. 45). This passage from Sifre Numbers (and Sifre Deuteronomy 199-200, even more strongly), cites Deuteronomy 20:10 to present peace as surrendering to Israel. Passage 3 presents the idea that even the deceased need peace, referring to possible means of death: by the sword (or, other violent actions) versus naturally, in old age.

Section C conveys seven adages that are introduced by the phrase: “Great is peace for it is given…,” and in one case “Great is peace for it is not given.” These teachings present the role of peace in the divine system of reward and punishment. According to these teachings, peace is granted to those who repent, the pious, lovers and students of Torah, the poor (or, the humble), and those who give charity; however, God does not bestow peace on the wicked. Neither Rome nor its peace are acknowledged here: rather, this section describes a world where God confers peace that corresponds to each person’s merit, as expressed through piety, engagement with Torah, and generosity to the poor. It is not clear whether this peace is granted in this world or in the world to come. The use of the word ?eleq (“portion” or “share”), may point to the latter, as in Mishnah Sanhedrin, Chapter 10 (see Lieberman, Greek in Jewish Palestine, p. 72-75, on a possible Greek parallel to this idiom).

Section D offers three axioms that, according to Menahem I. Kahana, provide metaphysical evidence for the greatness of peace by drawing from God’s name, the works of creation (ma’aseh bereshit), and the heavenly hosts (Kahana, Sifre, II, p. 347). At this point, I would like to comment on the assertion that “Shalom” is one of God’s names. Our midrash cites Judges 6:24 to prove this point. However, in the biblical context of this verse, shalom is part the altar's name, not God’s name: “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die.’” So Gideon built an altar there to the Lord, and called it The-Lord-Is-Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah on the obverse side (for example, Sestertius depicting the head of Vespasian and Pax, the personification of peace). Roman emperors used the Templum Pacis (Temple of Peace) built by Vespasian, which stood inside the Forum of Vespasian, as a site for “promoting the cult of pax” (Woolf, “Roman Peace,” p. 177). I would suggest that, by asserting that shalom was one of God’s names, the sages were emphasizing the message that true peace can only originate from the real and sole God of peace. Moreover, in the New Testament, Christ is associated with peace: “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall,
that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:14-18, NRSV). Whereas in Sifre, adherence to the Torah is essential for receiving peace and God is called peace, in this passage from the New Testament, Christ abolished Jewish law (Torah) to establish peace and he will unite humanity. According to this Letter to the Ephesians, “Peace” does not yet appear to be among Christ’s names. In the fifth century, however, at least one Church father claimed that Christ was called “Peace” (Severian, On Peace 1; see Ando, Imperial Ideology, p. 272).

The fact that Rome does not appear in this extensive shalom midrash does not preclude the possibility of reading these teachings in the context of the Roman world in which its authors lived, and suggesting that the rabbis intentionally offered an alternative to the imperial ideology of peace and the notion of Pax Romana (and, perhaps, to Christian discourse on this theme as well). Thus, the passage about God’s name (D 1) may have emerged – with the absence of any explicit mention of Rome and the emphasis on the role of God in bringing peace – as a rejection of Roman rhetoric on peace. The fact that God is called “Shalom” in rabbinic texts reinforces this message. Moreover, the composition of extended units that develop a discourse on the greatness of peace may similarly be traced to a desire to address the Roman ideology of peace.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- Abraham
- Bar Qapara
- blessing
- charity
- Christ
- heavenly creatures
- holiness
- idolatry
- imperial ideology
- Pax (goddess)
- Pax Romana
- peace
- piety
- portion
- priestly benediction
- Rabbi Eleazar
- Rabbi Shimon ben Halaftah
- Sarah
- shalom
- share
- Torah
- Torah study
- wicked
- works of creation
- world to come


Other sources connected with this document: Text

**Sifre Numbers 42 (part one)**

The meaning of the priestly blessing for peace and the Pax Romana
Leviticus Rabbah 9:9

Great is peace

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