Shalom""

(a broken peace; a letter broken into pieces)

Numbers 25:12

Many years ago, when I was a member of a Temple Youth Group we played a game. Perhaps some of you have played a version of this game. It goes something like this. You and ten Jewish friends find yourselves lost on a desert island and you want to create your own Jewish community. If you could only take with you 5 objects for making this community what would you choose? I still think this is a great question. When we played the game we had a list of about 20 items - a seder plate, a shofar, Hanuka menorah, a big jar of Gefilte fish with a little jar of horse radish, red of course, a rabbi, a Torah scroll. You get the idea. The group would then work out which are the 5 most important objects that you need to make a Jewish community. Then comes the rub. In the second round of the game there is an unfortunate, unforeseen catastrophe and you can only keep one of the objects. You have to narrow it down to one. Quickly falls the rugalach, the macaroons, often even the rabbi. Can you guess which is the last object that the community holds close and tries never to give up? Having observed this game played out over many years in different places, the most beloved object of a Jewish community is the Torah. It tells about our past, it challenges us to live ethical lives now, and asks us to dream of a future that is morally responsible.

The Zohar, a mystical commentary on the Torah teaches - some people look at a person and see their clothes and think they now know everything about that person based on their external appearance. Others say you must look at the face of a person and then you can know who they are. Yet there are those who go deeper and say you must go beyond the external of one's face – you must look deeper to encounter a person's soul - that is where you discover the truth of that person.

So too says the Zohar about Torah. Some people read the simple narratives of the Torah stories and think they know all there is to know. Others look deeper and discover symbols, and metaphors that speak about the life of all people in all times. And then there are others who go even deeper and try to discover the soul of Torah - its values, its complexities and its hopes.

This week's Torah portion, Pinchas, is an amazing example of the Torah commenting upon itself; actually giving a self-critique – that as a modern Jew gives me tremendous pride for what the Torah and Judaism has come to be.

Let me explain. In our portion there is a young impressionable and hot-headed man named Pinchas who commits a bloody and shocking act of violence. After which it says he is given a Covenant of Peace. The Rabbis of the Talmud are so troubled by this story of Pinchas that they create special rules for how the letters of the Torah must be written in the scroll for this story. For example, when the name of Pinchas is written (24:11) the letter yud in his name must be written tiny. The teaching is that the letter *yud,* comes from God's name *Yud Hay Vav Hay,* and one who sheds blood, like Pinchas, the presence of God in him is diminished, it has become tiny.

Some of you may have heard that to be a kosher Torah scroll, all the letters must be perfect. You cannot have even one broken letter. This is true everywhere in the Torah, except right here in our portion. In fact, a Torah scroll can only be kosher if one of the words in this portion is written with a broken letter. The word is "*Shalom*", Peace (Numbers 24:12) which the Talmud says must be written with a broken letter Vav. If the vav is not broken, then the scroll is not fit for Jews to read and learn from. Why? Because this broken letter *vav* teaches us that a peace (a shalom) that is attained through violence will always be a broken peace, a flawed peace, one that cannot last. Pinchas' Covenant of Peace is not accepted by the tradition. Pinchas' priesthood does not last.

The Talmud teaches - all that is written in the Torah is for the sake of peace. This is the highest aspiration of Judaism. The word shalom comes from the Hebrew root *shalem* meaning – wholeness. And so it is appropriate that each of us, myself included, ask ourselves what can I do to bring wholeness, *shalom,* understanding to our corner of the world? Not a hot-headed illusion that the ends can ever justify the means.

Peace, Shalom is about healing the divisions in society and understanding that we all have a shared destiny. The way to improve our lives is never through hatred of certain groups, like the mentality of Pinchas which is deeply flawed. True peace is achieved through openness, inclusion and a sense of connection with all humanity. This is the message of the broken letter of Torah that points us to the path of wholeness. *Oseh Shalom Bimrovav Hu Ya'aseh Shalom, alenu, v'al kol yisrael vimru amen.*