



The Meaning of *Shalom*

Shalom, meaning “peace,” has become a word so interconnected with the Jewish faith that it has become almost iconic, a symbol of Judaism.

This isn’t surprising considering how often we use the word *shalom*. We use *shalom* to say hello or goodbye. Essentially, we are wishing each other “peace.” In Hebrew, to ask someone how they are doing, we say “*Ma shlomcha?*” Literally translated, this means, “How is your peace?”

When the Sabbath arrives, the holiest day of our week, we wish one another *Shabbat shalom*, a Sabbath of peace. *Shalom* is the last word of important prayers such as the priestly blessing (Numbers 6:24–26), the *Amidah* (Judaism’s central daily prayer), and the Grace after Meals.

The Jewish sages explained the importance of *shalom* poignantly. They said: “Great is peace, for God did not find a vessel that could hold blessings other than *shalom*.” In other words, *shalom* is the blessing that makes it possible to receive all other blessings.

With such great importance ascribed to *shalom*, it’s essential that we understand what it really means – and what it does not.

People typically define peace as the absence of war or conflict. But this is not the definition of *shalom* in Judaism. *Shalom* is rooted in the Hebrew word *shalem*, which means “whole” or “complete.” *Shalom* is so much more than the absence of turbulence. *Shalom* is the presence of wholeness.

True *shalom*



The Blessings of *Shalom*

In the 1st century BCE, Judea was ruled by a queen called Shlomtzion. Her name had been Alexandra, but because she brought peace to a nation fraught with violence, she became known as “she who makes peace in Zion” – in Hebrew, *shlomtzion*.

Shlomtzion’s life was mostly turbulent. She was married to an evil monarch who imprisoned his own family, paranoid that they might usurp his throne. Moreover, the Jewish people were also in the midst of a ruthless internal battle between those who favored a secular lifestyle and those who remained faithful to the Bible and its laws. When Shlomtzion’s husband died, the first thing she did was free his family in an attempt to make peace.

She married her deceased husband’s brother, but as it turned out, Shlomtzion’s second husband was just as bad as the first. The country continued to be racked with violence and internal strife. Eventually, that husband died too, and Shlomtzion became the ruler of Judea. For nine years until her death, Judea enjoyed unprecedented peace.

Queen Shlomtzion succeeded at restoring *shalom* among her people. The sages say the produce grown during that brief time was unnaturally abundant. Wheat grew to the size of kidney beans, oats to the size of olives, and lentils to the size of large coins. The blessing of abundance that was showered on the land was attributed to the peace, *shalom*, that Queen Shlomtzion brought to her people.

This small window of time gives us great insight into what is possible with the blessing of peace. It’s no wonder that when the Israelites received the *Torah* at Mount Sinai, we read “*Israel camped there*” (Exodus 19:2) written in the singular form, prompting the teaching from the Jewish



Shalom Bayit: Peace in the Home

Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel, was second to Moses in terms of authority and importance among the people. Even so, Aaron was permitted to do things that even Moses could not do. As the High Priest, only he could enter the Holy of Holies and perform certain rituals. And what was this most holy man involved in on a daily basis? Instead of ruling above the people, he was among them, establishing peace between them.

The Jewish sages teach: “Be among the students of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace.” According to Jewish tradition, if Aaron saw someone behaving improperly, he would approach that person, and instead of rebuking him, Aaron would befriend him, pretending not to see his faults. Eventually the person would feel remorse and repent, feeling that it would be a betrayal to his good friend Aaron if he continued to act inappropriately.

Similarly, Aaron was known for going between husbands and wives, working to restore peace in struggling relationships. Many children were named for Aaron during that time because it was only because of him that these children came to be!

Aaron understood that peace, especially in the home, was of utmost importance. This was the holy work that he chose as most important to do.

We often overlook the importance of peace in our homes or with our family and friends. We think we can get by without it. However, it is only when we have peace in our homes that we can hope to have peace within ourselves and in our world.

Children model what they see, and if they see a home of peace,



Personal Peace

The Elder of Kelm, a 19th-century rabbi in Russia, was known to say:
“A person who has mastered peace of mind has gained everything.”
Jews believe that *shalom* is what allows us to receive and experience all other blessings that God wants to give us. God can give us money, health, children, and everything else we might possibly wish for, but if inside we are not at peace, we cannot enjoy any of it.

The reality, however, is that a person can live a problem-free life and still be in shambles on the inside. By the same token, a person can live a life full of challenges and difficulties, and yet, through it all, can remain calm, rooted in *shalom*. This idea is best illustrated in the following story:

A number of years ago, an art gallery ran a contest to see who could create a painting that best portrayed the idea of peace. There were many worthy submissions – one a magnificent painting of a sun setting over the tranquil waters of a pristine beach, another depicting lush pastures with rolling green hills and a placid lake. Yet another submission was a beautiful landscape of fresh snow out in the mountains with a small log cabin glowing with the light of a warm fire within.

But none of these peace-inspiring scenes won the prize. Instead a most unlikely contender was awarded first place. It was a painting depicting a storm, with lightning flashing and winds blowing through the trees of a rocky cliff. But if you looked a bit closer, you could see why it was the winner. In the cleft of the rocks was a mother eagle with her wings spread out over her six



Think About It...

1. **Physics tells us that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.** For example, the same two pieces of wood can hold more weight when joined together than as separate pieces. Likewise, we learn in the Book of Ecclesiastes, “*two are better than one,*” and “*a cord of three strands is not quickly broken*” (4:9, 12). How do these illustrations enhance your understanding of *shalom*?
2. **What areas in your life are most turbulent right now?** How might you infuse those areas with more *shalom*?
3. **How do you think you could become a more peaceful person while going through difficulties?** How could you use the challenges in your life to help you learn how to stay at peace all the time?
4. **Think about the people you live with, work with, and or interact with on a consistent basis.** How can you foster more *shalom* with these key people?
5. **What might you be willing to “give up” for the sake of *shalom*?** Think about all the blessings that come with peace and consider putting aside hurt feelings, pride, or anything else that might hinder achieving *shalom* with others.
6. **Consider how our homes, communities, and**

