

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



*The LORD gives
strength to his
people;
the LORD blesses
his people with
peace.*

— Psalm 29:11

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 shalomcha?*” 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.

Obviously, *shalom* is a paramount value in the Jewish faith. Likewise, the Christian Bible calls peace the fruit of a person who has God's spirit in him (Galatians 5:22). Jesus spoke of the importance of peace when he preached in the Sermon on the Mount that people who make peace will be known as children of God (Matthew 5:9). And many Christian church services today include a time to “pass the peace” to one another. Clearly, peace is foundational to both our faiths.

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. In addition, the sages taught that the Bible was given for the purpose of bringing *shalom* into the world.

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.

Again, peace is seen not just as a lack of conflict, but as an entire paradigm or way of life – one that pleases God. We see this understanding of peace as a way of life echoed in Jesus' teachings in the Christian Bible when he told his followers, “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid*” (John 14:27).

Moreover, true *shalom* implies that diverse parties are purposely setting aside their differences and agreeing to see the good in one another, not just living alongside but among one another for a higher calling or purpose. Working together as one whole entity, we are able to achieve far more than we could on our own. Like a beautiful mosaic, all the diverse pieces are needed for the picture to be complete.

In Psalm 29:11, we read, “*The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.*” When God blesses us with *shalom* He simultaneously gives us strength. As individuals, a community, or as nations around the world, when we have *shalom*, we are whole and complete – stronger, better, and able to accomplish great things.

Together we will study in this *Limmud* the different aspects of *shalom*, and how we can work to achieve peace in our own lives, in our homes, with others, and in the world.

Rabbi Eckstein



Randolph Caldecott, Engraving, J.D. Cooper, 1883

The Blessings of *Shalom*

““The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace.”” — Numbers 6:24–26

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 sages that Israel was “as one man with one heart.”

Indeed, the greatest accomplishments of humanity occur when we have *shalom*. When we are one, when we are united, we are greater, and that is reflected in everything – from our ability to withstand attacks from the outside, to our connection with God, to our relationships with family and friends, even to nature.

This theme is continued into the Christian Bible as well. The book of Acts mentions that the early Christian church flourished and grew during a time of peace (9:31). Calls for peace and unity among the members of the early church can be found throughout the writings of the Apostle Paul. For example, on several different occasions, the Apostle Paul urged the churches in Ephesus, Colossae, and Thessalonica to live at peace with one another. (See Ephesians 4:13, Colossians 3:15, and 1 Thessalonians 5:13.)

This concept also helps explain the Jewish understanding of messianic times to come. Many believe that the only major difference between that time and our time is that there will be peace throughout the world. On the other hand, the Bible also speaks of many miracles that will take place during that time.

When we understand what is possible with *shalom*, we can comprehend how world peace will quite naturally lead to miracles, such as when the prophet Isaiah wrote: “*The LORD will surely comfort Zion . . . he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD*” (51:3); and “*The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food*” (65:25).

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 world would be different when we have true *shalom*. How might that inform the way you interact with others today?
7. After completing this study, how has your understanding or definition of *shalom* changed? What one thing will you start or stop doing to bring more peace into your life?



Shalom Bayit: Peace in the Home

*“May there be peace within your walls
and security within your citadels.”*

— Psalm 122:7

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.

Additionally, when Aaron saw two people arguing, he would approach one and tell that person he had just seen the other person beside himself with grief, too embarrassed to face the one with whom he had been arguing. Then Aaron would approach the other party in the argument with exactly the same story.

Yes, Aaron compromised truth for peace, but it was permitted and it worked; when the two friends next saw each other, more often than not, they would embrace and apologize to one another. 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.

Likewise, the Christian Bible is filled with admonitions to live at peace with one another. While the Apostle Paul offered the daunting instruction to the early Christians to do everything they could to live at peace with *everyone* (Romans 12:18), he also specifically addressed the closest, most intimate relationships. He taught often about the importance of peace with fellow believers and family members, and penned an entire passage in his letter to the Ephesians about Christian households and how husbands and wives, as well as parents and children, were to maintain peace in the home (Ephesians 5–6).

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, it is far more likely that they will treat others with the same kindness, forgiveness, and respect that they grew up with.

Ultimately, if we cannot overcome our differences with those we love, how can we possibly come to terms with those we have far less of a connection to? Our homes can be a wellspring of peace in the world, or God forbid, contribute to the disharmony that is all too prevalent. The psalmist captures this beautifully in Psalm 133:1, “*How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!*”

Moreover, once we understand the full meaning of *shalom*, we can appreciate that when there is *shalom* in the home, family members aren’t just tolerated; they are appreciated. The focus becomes on what is good about each person and how he or she completes the family, rather than on what is lacking. The same is true in our relationships with friends and even strangers. Eventually when we focus on the good in others, we will bring out the good in them – and that is something from which we can all benefit.

Considering we worship the God of peace, who goes out of His way to offer us peace with Him, how could we offer anything less to the people He puts in our life?

apply it...

- 1. Make peace a priority.** Just as we have learned that in the Jewish tradition peace is the foundation of all blessings and Christians are taught that peace is a “*fruit of the spirit*,” consider how you might increase the importance of peace in your life and relationships.
- 2. Appreciate differences.** True *shalom* is when we can share with and receive from one another. Strive to appreciate what makes those around you unique.
- 3. Pursue peace.** Whether it’s in our own personal relationships or in a relationship between two other people where it’s appropriate for you to get involved, look for ways to act as a peacemaker.
- 4. Stay in peace.** No matter what storms may come your way today, this week, this month, or this year, know that it’s possible to take shelter in the peace of God – and try your very best to do so.

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Personal Peace

*You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.*

— Isaiah 26:3

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.

Indeed, in the Christian Bible, Paul wrote to the church at Rome that the hallmark of God’s kingdom on earth is peace: “*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval*” (Romans 14:17–18). Clearly, God intends for us to be at peace and to live in peace — no matter what our circumstances may be.

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 sleeping chicks. It was the very essence of peace.

Friends, the truth is that in this life there will always be storms that come and go. *Shalom*, peace, is the ability to remain tranquil through the storms while taking shelter under the wings of the Lord.

Another good depiction of this idea would be a painting of Noah in the ark floating above the waters of the flood as described in Genesis 7. All around Noah, the waters were raging. Death and destruction surrounded them, but Noah and his family were safe and secure aboard the refuge of the ark. Appropriately, the name Noah means “comfort” and also “rest.” Noah was able to stay at rest during the storm because he had obeyed God.

This is a great illustration of how we can weather the storms of our own lives. There can be great tumult going on around us. The economy might be in the dumps, war on the horizon, trouble at work, a bad medical report. Yet, through it all, we can stay at rest in our ark, floating above it all.

Friends, peace isn’t the absence of difficulties in our lives. Christians know that Jesus made this clear in his teachings to his followers as well: “*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33). He came right out and told his followers that they would experience trouble in their lives. And instead of offering to take away the trouble or offer them a way around it, he offered them a paradigm of peace: a reminder that God has already overcome whatever power or difficulty they could ever face.

There will always be challenges that come and go. *Shalom* is the ability to remain tranquil throughout the turbulence by placing our trust in God and resting in His peace. As the prophet Isaiah reaffirms, “*You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you*” (Isaiah 26:3).

apply it... (continued from previous page)

- 5. Pray for *shalom*.** Don’t just ask God to take away war and conflict. Pray that He establish *shalom* – a reality where all nations of the world work together for the sake of God’s glory and making our world a better place.
- 6. Extend peace through kindness.** When we do something kind for others, their feelings of peace increase, our own personal peace is stronger, and we strengthen our bonds with others.