



HILLEL'S JOSEPH MEYERHOFF  
CENTER FOR JEWISH EXPERIENCE



# shalom

## BACKGROUND

What does it mean to be whole?

The word shalom is one of the first Hebrew words that many Jewish children learn; they can recite the “three meanings of shalom - hello, goodbye, and peace” readily. But the word shalom is much more textured, much more interesting, than just meaning peace. “Shalom” is used very frequently in the Jewish Bible, almost too many times to count. In many of these times, “peace” is too simple a definition to use. Shalom refers to the wellbeing of individuals or of cities, to safety, and to the messiah’s bringing of peace when the world is complete.

This “Jewish Conversation” offers us an opportunity to explore the relationship between peace and wholeness, between peace and completion, between “*shalom*” and “*shalem*.” It helps us explore the relationship between our own, internal struggles and the struggles around us and to relate the importance of our own inner calm to peace in our world.





## SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO DO THE LEARNING

**MAKE THE CONVERSATION PERSONAL.** Remind everyone when appropriate that since any identity is possible, they can intentionally choose to act on their Jewishness. Ask them to apply what they are discussing and learning to their own lives.

**PUT MANY IDEAS IN FRONT OF PARTICIPANTS** and help them find what is right for them. Many conversation participants will bring varied ideas about what it means to be Jewish - for example, that being Jewish is a *halachic* (Jewish legal) category that it is established by God. This and other ideas should all be part of the conversation.

**SHARE FROM YOUR OWN STORY.** Personal stories - though not too many- are a great way to make it safe for other participants to share.

**MIX TEXTS AND ACTIVITIES.** Depending on where the group is, you may want to start with an activity, turn to a text, turn back to an activity, and so on.

**IT'S ALL ABOUT THEM.** In looking at the texts, keep in mind that this is about the students and their ideas, not your ideas (sorry!). Your job is to be facilitator of their own realizations, not instructor of your conclusions.

**ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS WHEN STUDYING TEXTS.** Don't fish for "correct answers" or for what you think. Instead, try asking "What do you think? What is your reaction to this? How does this strike you? What questions, comments, or concerns does this raise?"

Activity/Questions for Conversation:

1. When do we feel most at peace? Most complete?
2. What gives us a sense of completion and peace?
3. How are we pursuing our peace?
4. What obstacles stand in the way of achieving personal peace?  
Are they imposed by ourselves or by others?
5. When does our personal definition of peace conflict with the peace of others?
6. How are we contributing to the peace of our community and world?
7. Make a list of the different kinds of "peace" and "wholeness" referenced in this conversation.  
Draw a picture that shows how these different ideas relate to each other.



## TEXTS

### “SHALOM/ SHALEM IN THE BIBLE”

*Jacob arrived whole (shalem) at the city of Shechem ... and he encamped before the city. (Genesis 33:18)*

Having taken his birthright, left home, been blessed by an angel, and encountered Esau and his tribes, Jacob arrives at a resting place.

*He (Joseph) inquired after their welfare, and he said, “Is your aged father of whom you spoke at peace (shalom)? Is he still alive?” (Genesis 43:27)*

In Genesis, Joseph, son of Jacob, is living in Egypt when his brothers come to him, asking for food. He asks his brothers about the welfare of his own father, wondering if he - his father - is still alive.

*Seek the peace (shalom) of the city to which I have exiled you and pray for it to God, for through its peace you will have peace. (Jeremiah 29.7)*

A prophet in the kingdom of Judah, Jeremiah was called to prophecy in 626 BCE and continued prophesizing through the fall of the Temple in 587 BCE. Jeremiah understood his job to be to warn the people of impending tragedy and to explain them the reason for the tragedy: that they have abandoned God and even worshiped foreign gods.

*Pray for the peace (shalom) of Jerusalem; those who love you will be serene. (Psalm 122.6)*

Psalms, a book in the “Ketuvim” (Writings) section of the Bible, are attributed to David; many of them were signed by him. Psalm 122 is part of the “Songs of Ascents,” Psalms that were recited by those bringing tributes to the Temple as they made their approach to the Temple. They were often sung from the Temple’s steps.

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#### For discussion:

- ◆ How is “peace” used in each of these cases? How are they similar - how are they different?
  - ◆ Peace applies here to both individuals and cities. How are these states of peace related?
  - ◆ What seems necessary for peace, according to these texts?
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## A CLOSE LOOK AT JACOB

*Jacob arrived whole (shalem) at the city of Shechem ... and he encamped before the city. (Genesis 33:18)*

Jacob has gone through a great deal during the time before he arrives at Shechem:

- He traded with Esau, his older brother, a lentil stew for Esau's birthright as the older brother (Esau was starving, having just come in from the fields)
- He tricked his father into blessing him rather than Esau by wearing animal skins (Esau was fairly hairy)
- Jacob runs from his brother Esau, who is furious at Jacob's deception, and spends twenty years away from his childhood home, in the home of Laban
- He meets his wives and bears 13 children
- He receives a blessing from God and a promise that he will found the house of Israel (and, in doing so, wrestles with an angel and is maimed)
- He meets his brother Esau and, now both adults, his fear becomes gratitude at Esau's greeting him with affection; he gives Esau a significant gift from his own belongings

And then, Jacob arrives at Shechem.

Rashi, the great medieval commentator on the Bible, said that Jacob arriving "*shalem*" at Shechem meant that he arrived:

"Whole in his body, as he was cured of his limp; whole in his financial resources, as he lost nothing by his munificent gift to Esau; whole in his Torah, as he forgot nothing of his learning in Laban's house."

Avivah Zornberg comments:

...An implicit tension is exposed at each level of the description. Physical health is a matter of being injured - limp with which Jacob emerges from his night of wrestling with the man-angel - and of having been cured of his injury. Financial health follows on a moment when Jacob is compelled to sign away a large chunk of his property to Esau; in spite of this... his holdings suffer no loss. Intellectually, too, the claim is that Jacob loses none of his learning in the course of twenty years in Laban's house. From all three descriptions, a tension of loss and gain becomes manifest. To be whole, apparently, means to have been in great danger and to have been saved. Jacob's integrity has been significantly assailed on many levels, but losses have been recouped, injuries healed, the erosion of memory successfully fought.

... The midrash gives us the troubled dynamic of loss and gain, sickness and health, oblivion and awareness.

*(In The Beginnings of Desire: Reflections on Genesis)*

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### For discussion:

- ◆ What are the tensions that Zornberg is describing?
  - ◆ What is the relationship between these tensions that Zornberg outlines and the concept of "*shalem*"?
  - ◆ What kind of wholeness are we talking about? Did Jacob really lose his limp or maintain his wealth - or was this another kind of wholeness entirely?
  - ◆ What is the role of these kinds of tension in our lives? What dualities do we feel? When do we feel loss and gain, oblivion and awareness? How does this make us whole?
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## ON THE DUAL NATURE OF GOD (RABBI RAMI SHAPIRO)

*Rabbi Rami Shapiro writes in the voice of the fictional Reb Yerachmiel ben Yosef, a Hasidic character with whom he debates the nature of God and the religious life.*

Consider a bar magnet. The magnet has two poles, one positive and one negative. A magnet cannot be otherwise and still be a magnet. The two poles go together and only when they are together can there be a magnet. Even if you cut the magnet in half and in half again, it will always manifest these two poles. No matter how small you slice the magnet, its oneness necessitates the duality of positive and negative poles.

Can we say that one pole precedes the other? Can we say that one pole creates the other? Can we say that the poles create the magnet, or that the magnet creates the poles? No to all of this. The poles and the magnet are of a greater whole.

*Yesh* (Being) and *Ayin* (Emptiness) are the poles of God. God cannot be God without them, they cannot be themselves without each other and God. This teaching is called *shlemut*, the nonduality of God that is the greater whole encompassing unity and diversity, *Ayin* and *Yesh*. These three terms, *Yesh*, *Ayin* and *Shlemut*, are crucial to understanding God and almost everything else.

Why did God create the world? Because it is God's nature is to manifest *Yesh* and *Ayin*, Being and Emptiness. Creation is the way God is God in time and space. Thus we read: "Be holy for I, the Source and Substance of All Being and Emptiness am Holy," (Leviticus 19:2). Holiness is the natural state of creation. We are holy because God is holy, and we are God manifest in time and place. The Torah's command is to be true to our holiness and to honor the holiness of all other things.

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### For discussion:

- ♦ What is the unique kind of *shlemut* that develops when *Yesh* and *Ayin* come together?
  - ♦ Even if one doesn't believe in a transcendent God (a God that is supernatural), what can one gain from this text? What is the message here?
  - ♦ How do we apply this kind of *shlemut* to our own lives?
  - ♦ In this kind of *shlemut*, what do we do with the complexity of the two opposites?
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## ON COMMUNITY (REB CHAIM SOLOVEITCHIK)

*Born in 1853, Chaim Soloveitchik, or Chaim Brisker, lived in Eastern Europe and led the Brisker Yeshiva and the Brisker method of Talmud study.*

"...Praying alone and praying with the community are like two different forms of prayer. Praying alone takes a lot less time, and I do not experience the same depth of emotion as when I pray with the community."

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### For discussion:

- ◆ How is prayer an individual act or a communal act?
  - ◆ What does Soloveitchik seem to gain from communal prayer?
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