

Shifrah Tobacman

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Hannah Dresner and Heena Reiter)

**THE TALMUD ON GREETING:
COMMENTARY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE RABBIS
AND OUR OWN TIME**
By Shifrah Tobacman

When we greet people in much of U.S. culture we ask, “How are you?”

Or we might say, “How’re you doing?” “Que pasa?” Or “What’s up?”

We offer salutations showing our interest in the other person’s overall well-being.

Many times this is a mere formality. We don’t necessarily want to know the real answer. We don’t want to enter into a long conversation or hear about all the personal misfortunes of our co-worker or store clerk. But still we ask.

We generally expect the answer to be something like, “Fine, thank you” or, “Can’t complain,” or at worst “Oh, hanging in there.”

We engage in this ritual because it is a way of holding the seams of our tenuous social fabric together. We do it because we care about the other person even if we don’t know them well enough to ask personal questions or share intimate details about each other’s lives. We do it to be polite, to show that we have manners. We do it to maintain social intercourse.

The times we are living in raise questions about how to greet one another. What if someone asks how we are when life seems unbearably difficult, such as shortly after the loss of a loved one? How do we greet someone who just found out she’s lost her job, or that the bank is foreclosing on his house? How should we greet each other when things are hard for everyone in a particular place, such as a workplace where many people are being hurt by lay-offs and others are left with too much work as a result? What should we expect of ourselves, and each other, when we are in pain?

In the times of the Talmud people offered a greeting of well-being as well, one still used by some Jews today. “*Shalom aleichem*”, they would commonly say, “Peace upon you.” This simple statement held within it the question, “Are you at peace?”

The social building blocks of greetings are there in every culture I know of, and that of the Talmudic rabbis is no different. In spite of its age and regional specificity, the Talmud provides important food for thought on universal questions of social interaction.

It is useful to note that the Talmud has certain particular things in common with our modern reality as a tool for accessing knowledge, information and ideas. First, the interactions portrayed don't happen in real time. Commentators in one part of a discussion on a certain topic found in one chapter may have been in early third century Jerusalem under Roman rule, and those in another part of the conversation may have been in the diaspora of Persia in the Sasanian period any time from the third to sixth century.¹ And while the rabbis were grappling with issues only as they applied to their own communities, the realities of commerce, farming and basic survival put them in regular contact with their surrounding societies and their discussions were influenced by this. (This will be discussed more below.) Plus, even if the rabbis thought they were only addressing their own *chevre* or people in their own time, many of the issues they address are so universal that the discussions, when looked at for any length of time, can easily be applied to our own situations even if we do so by contrasting the talmudic situation to our own. As the exploration below indicates, the Talmud is both far-ranging and in many ways universal despite its authors' attempts to describe the particular responsibilities of Jews. So a search through the Talmud on "greetings of peace" exposes some interesting aspects of the rabbis' thinking in their times and places, and some potentially helpful perspectives for us in our own.

Over the centuries during which the Talmud was written and redacted the issue of asking about another person's peace was raised dozens of times. It was raised in relation to when a person is mourning [B. Moed Katan 21]; when a person is doing particular *mitzvot*, such as putting on *tefillin* or reciting the eighteen daily prayers considered a core part of religious practice (what many Jews know today as the *amidah*) [B. Shabbos 10]; when a person is at the public baths in either the part where people are naked or where some people are clothed [B. Shabbos 10]; when in the public outhouse [B. Shabbos 10]; when one sees a teacher or person more knowledgeable about torah [B. Divrei Hayomin 12]; when one sees someone they think is less worthy [B. Taanit 20]; when one sees someone that is an authority from the reigning government [Y. Berachot 13].

The issue is examined of the difference between a greeting asking about someone's "peace" and asking about someone's "faithfulness." [Shabbos 10] The greeting is such a basic aspect of language that it is even used to denote how long certain things can take. For example, if a group of people is taking a vow together, such as the Nazarite oath, it was argued there should not be too long a break between one person saying, "I do undertake this vow" and another person saying it. And how did they determine what is too long a break? The amount of time it takes to say, "*Shalom aleichem, rabbi*," or "Peace upon you, my teacher." Or, some would say, just the time it takes to say "*Shalom aleichem*." [B. Nazir 20-21]

¹ Rubenstein, Jeffrey L. *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*. Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, 2003. pp 85-87; 186, fn29.

My particular journey through this complex material began as my study partners and I struggled to translate and make sense of a particular teaching on mourning in a tractate of the Babylonian Talmud (B Moed Katan 21 Beit.) I have chosen to explore this and some parallel texts in terms of how they point to certain themes. All of these themes can be viewed through both rabbinic and contemporary lenses on questions of greeting. Because of this I also offer some of my own insights on these themes at the end of the essay along with ideas for spiritual practices with which people might experiment.

- (1) Human beings are vulnerable to pain, suffering, embarrassment and ethical breaches. Asking about someone's peace is like asking about their sense of wholeness. It is the humane thing to do...except when it isn't. When our fragility is either too great or too apparent, we need to be particularly tender with one another and careful with ourselves. We may need to face each other gently or cautiously, or there may be a particular boldness required of us. We may need to use different ways to acknowledge one another's situation or be true to our own experience than we would under other circumstances.
- (2) Peace, to the rabbis, comes from God, and one name for God is Peace. All blessings flow from this peace, from this Peace.
- (3) Social status or role was, and often is, a factor in how and when people greet each other.
- (4) The threat of dangers posed by a harsh or oppressive government effect how people utilize the etiquette agreed to by that society. Greetings offer a good example of this.

Times of Vulnerability

Emotional, physical and spiritual suffering are part of human life. We love people and lose them to death or separation. We take on physical, emotional or spiritual challenges that demand a great deal of us and don't know if we are up to the task, or have such challenges forced upon us. Our health suffers, or we are injured by another person. We question the meaning of our lives, or don't know where to turn for spiritual sustenance. We feel tortured by an ethical breach or dilemma of our own, or are hurt by unethical or immoral actions of our communities or society.

Sometimes our vulnerability is more mundane. We drive in traffic, have to make a presentation to a new group at work, or are in the locker room at the gym after a long time not exercising and the person at the next locker has a body that spurs us to feel inadequate.

When we face each other in all our human vulnerability, how should we say “hello?” Should the way in which we greet someone be different depending on whom we are greeting? Under what circumstances should we and shouldn’t we offer greeting? How does our greeting relate to the ways we think about the sacred? What does rabbinic commentary on the subject mean to us in everyday twenty-first century American life?

These are some of the questions explored in this paper.

Greetings When a Person is in Mourning

Rabbinic commentators had a good deal to say about the issue of mourning and what is involved in the process of recovering from such a loss. Their discourse included this section on the expectations of both the mourner and those around them during the days and months following the death of a close family member.

Our Rabbis taught: A mourner is forbidden during the first three days to give greeting [of peace];³ after three and to seven [days], he responds but does not give greeting [of peace]; thereafter he gives greeting [of peace] and responds in his usual manner. (B Moed Katan, 21Beit)²

That is, one in this earliest stage of mourning would be expected *not* to give the customary greeting of “*shalom aleichem* / peace to you.” Nor would a mourner be expected to give the customary response of “*aleichem shalom* / upon you, peace.”

The tractate goes on to discuss how a person should act from the third to the seventh day, and how others should or should not greet the mourner during the first twelve months following the death of a loved one.

[It was stated above] ‘After three to seven [days]; he responds but does not give greeting [of peace]; thereafter, he gives greeting [of peace] and responds, in his usual manner’. Some contrasted this statement with the following: ‘One who meets his fellow mourner within thirty days, tenders him [words of] consolation but enquires not about his peace; after the thirty days he enquires about his peace, but tenders him not [words of] consolation.¹⁴ (ibid.)

The rabbis also discussed how others might act in relation to the mourner in a variety of circumstances.

² All Talmud translations in this essay are from the Soncino edition of the Babylonian Talmud (electronic version) unless otherwise indicated. The Soncino Talmud [electronic resource]. [Chicago, IL] : Institute for Computers in Jewish Life ; Davka Corp. ; Judaica Press, c1995.

If his [friend's] wife had died and he married another [formally],¹⁵ he is not allowed to call at his house to tender him [there,¹⁶ words of] consolation; if he meets him in the street he expresses [his condolence] to him in a low voice and with downcast looks!¹⁷ — Said R. Idi b. Abin: The mourner enquires about the peace of others [within his period of mourning]¹⁸ because others are abiding in [p. 137] peace; others enquire not about the peace of the mourner, because he is not abiding in peace [but in sorrow].¹⁹ But then, since it states [in the former Baraitha]: [After three to seven days] 'he responds. . .', does this not imply that others may enquire [about the mourner's peace]?²⁰ — Where they are unaware [of his bereavement]. If so, does not the same apply also to the other earlier period?²¹ — [No,] then²¹ he is obliged to acquaint them [of his sorrow] and makes no [further] response, whereas here²² he need not acquaint them [of it]. (ibid.)

The thoughtfulness that went into the rabbinic arguments on greeting for a person in mourning is scrupulous in its detail. The rabbis' thoughts in this case reflect the realities of many people's grieving process. It is often most difficult and problematic for mourners to relate to others in the first few days after losing a loved one. A mourner needs to be free of the obligation to ask about others' well-being when feeling so broken, so like a piece of one's self has been lost.

In the days immediately following this first period, people may already start to feel that they can at least respond to others, and so the rabbis seem to be saying that from three to seven days the mourner may respond when asked, but not greet others in this way. It gets somewhat easier after that, they imply, but one can still feel quite alone for many months, and the Talmudic teachings reflect this.

Thereupon some contrasted [this latter Baraitha] with the following: One who meets another mourner within a twelvemonth tenders him [words of] consolation, but does not enquire about his 'peace';²³ after a twelvemonth, he enquires about his 'peace and does not tender him [words of] consolation, but may refer to his sorrow indirectly.²⁴ Said R. Meir: If one meets another mourner after a twelvemonth and tenders him [then words of] consolation, to what can he be likened? To [the case of] a man who had his leg broken and healed when a physician met him and said to him, Come to me and let me break it and set it [again], to convince you that my medicaments are good? (B Moed Katan, 21Beit)

The rabbis are not only saying to take care when greeting a mourner, but also suggesting when and how to offer consolation.

Holy Acts and Human Limitations

These thoughts are still reflected in many of today's Jewish practices related to greeting people during the period of mourning.³ This in and of itself is a topic on which I could comment for many more pages. But after hours of exploration into rabbinic thoughts on greeting, what I am struck with is not only how much we need each other in times of mourning. It is how much we need each other all the time. It is how the early rabbis thought about human frailty and human connection. And it is how they viewed sacred acts.

For example, in the rabbis' time and place, people bathed at public bathhouses. The Roman bathhouses had a sort of sauna where people were naked and bathing, and a dressing area where people might be naked, dressed, or in the process of dressing or undressing. The rabbis thought that holy acts, such as asking about another person's peace or saying certain prayers, were dependent upon people being clothed. I read this in part as being about a kind of vulnerability.

When we are undressed we don't have the physical or emotional protection offered by our garments. We can't hide or protect ourselves in the same way. Social norms may also influence us to feel shy or embarrassed. To the rabbis, offering a greeting of peace was in itself a holy act representing a connection to God. One needed to be conscious about when and where to make such an offering or do such a *mitzvah*. It was not only one's relationship with humans that was at stake, but one's relationship with the Divine.

R. Adda b. Ahabah said: One may recite his prayers [the Eighteen Benedictions] at the baths. An objection is raised: If one enters the baths in the place where people stand dressed,²⁹ both reading [the *shema'*] and prayer [the Eighteen Benedictions or *amidah*] are permissible, and a greeting of 'Peace'³⁰ goes without saying; and one may don the phylacteries⁴ there,³¹ and it goes without saying that he need not remove them [if already wearing them]; in the place where people stand undressed,³² a greeting of 'Peace' is not permissible there³³...
[B Shabbos 10a]

Another aspect of greeting was what greeting to offer when. For example, the text above leads into a conversation about the difference between asking about someone's

³ See also Lamm, Maurice. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. Jonathan David Publishers Inc., New York; 2000.

⁴ The "phylacteries" (known to Jews as *tefillin*) were apparently worn by the rabbis all day, as opposed to those worn today by some Jews which are put on only during morning prayers. See Soncino commentary, Moed Katan. The Soncino Talmud [electronic resource]. [Chicago, IL] : Institute for Computers in Jewish Life ; Davka Corp. ; Judaica Press, c1995.

“peace” and asking about their “faithfulness.”⁵ This is discussed in terms of how to address someone at the public outhouse.

The word *shalom* carries some critical meanings that to the rabbis made it an inappropriate greeting in this setting. First and most importantly, Peace was seen as a name for God. It was not only a word descriptive of a certain human or even divine quality. Second, though we translate the word *shalom* as “peace”, its linguistic root brings to it a sense of wholeness, of completeness.⁶ So the Godly name *shalom* represents God as something perfectly whole and complete. To associate it with something as basely human as the things one does or sees at an outhouse was considered unseemly at best.

“Faithfulness”, on the other hand, carried with it the weight of a religious person’s everyday life of striving to be true to the word of God. Faithfulness was within human control in a way that peace might not be. Bodily functions were a result of being in imperfect earthly bodies. An intention of faithfulness was considered better suited to such a moment than a question of one’s peace.

A privy is different, because it is offensive.¹
‘A greeting of ‘Peace’ is not permissible there’. This supports the following dictum of R. Haninuna on ‘Ulla’s authority: A man may not extend a greeting of ‘Peace’ to his neighbour in the baths, because it is said, And he called it, The Lord is peace.² If so, let it also be forbidden to mention, By faith!³ in a privy, for it is written, the faithful God?⁴ And should you answer, that indeed is so: but R. Hama b. Goria said in Rab’s name, By faith! may be mentioned in a privy?-There the Name itself is not so designated, as we translate it, God is faithful; but here the Name itself is designated ‘Peace,’ as it is written, and he called it, The Lord is Peace.⁵
[B. Shabbos 10b]

As we will discuss later, this wasn’t the only circumstance under which the rabbis used greetings other than *shalom aleichem*. But the shift in greeting here raises interesting questions about how the rabbis might have viewed their relationships to their bodily functions, to each other and to God.

Interrupting Holy Acts

The simple greeting *shalom aleichem* may well have been taken for granted at times, much like our greeting, “Hi. How are you?” But using a greeting of peace as the norm seemed to have a holy purpose to the rabbis, as well as some relationship to other holy acts. For example, it was thought by some of the rabbis that one shouldn’t offer such a greeting in the middle of reading the *sh’ma* and the paragraphs associated with it from Torah. Exceptions could be made, however, under certain circumstances. This seemed

⁵ According to Soncino, the Aramaic *hane’eman* is an adjective meaning “faithful.” The word *shalom* is a predicative referring to God. Soncino Talmud. Notes on Shabbat 10b fn5.

⁶ Brown, Francis; Driver, S.R.; Briggs, C. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew English Lexicon*. Hendrickson Publishers Inc.; Peabody MA; 2001 (sixth printing). Pages1023-1024.

especially true when a person was between readings of the various portions of the *sh'ma* text. The Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud) includes this teaching from a section in Berachot on appropriate ways to recite the *Sh'ma* and its associated paragraphs.

In the breaks, one may give greeting out of respect and return greeting. In the middle [of a section] one may give greeting out of fear and return it, so Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Judah says: in the middle one may give greeting out of fear and return it out of respect, in the breaks one may give greeting out of respect and return greeting to anyone. The breaks are as follows: between the first blessing and the second, between the second and "Hear (Shema)", between "Hear" and "and it shall come to pass", between "and it shall come to pass" and "and the Lord said" and between "and the Lord said" and "true and firm". Rabbi Judah says, between "and the Lord said" and "true and firm" one should not interrupt. [Y Berachot 13a]⁷

When the rabbis talked about giving or responding to greetings out of “respect” they were most likely referring to issues of social status. When they talked about “fear” they were probably referring to when a person from outside the community showed up, such as an authority from a reigning and possibly punitive government.

In human life there is often a fine line between “respect” and “fear.” People are often afraid of those in power. We may act respectful out of fear of the consequences of not doing so even when someone has been disrespectful to us, or we may be fearful of someone who deserves our respect.

The social context for the commentary may shed some light on how it came to be written in this way. According to Adin Steinsaltz in *The Essential Talmud*, Rabbi Meir was from the early generations of rabbis that lived during the Bar Khokhba uprising and the fall of the second Temple in 70 BCE.⁸ He was the disciple of the great R. Akiva and was married to his daughter Beruryah, who was also famous in her own right. Meir was from a family of proselytes associated with the Roman empire. No one would have understood better than he the complex needs of a community whose status was in question. No one would understand better that there were times when fear was based on an accurate assessment of potential harm to be inflicted by the hands of government officials. And no one would understand better that there were times when officials could be allies worthy of respectful recognition. The R. Judah referred to here is probably Judah Ha-nasi, who was of the same generation as R. Meir. Rabbi Judah had high standing as both a scholar and political figure. He, too, would have been in a position to know that the community’s relationship with the government was tenuous at best, perilous at worst.

The implication of the Talmud is that the rabbis did not want to interrupt the holy act of reciting the portions of text known as the *sh'ma*. But they knew there might be

⁷ Guggenheimer, Heinrich W. *The Jerusalem Talmud: First Order : Zeraim*. (Tractate Berachot) Published online by Walter de Gruyter, 2000.

⁸ Steinsaltz, Adin. *The Essential Talmud*. Translation by C. Galai. Basic Books, USA, 1976. pp30-31.

times when their circumstances would require interrupting a *mitzvah* for the safety of individuals or the community as a whole.

Greeting the “Other”: Cautions About Separation

There are also other times when the rabbis discuss dispensing with the usual manner of greeting. For example, in the sabbatical year when the Jews would let their fields lie fallow, the question arises of how to greet non-Jewish neighbors.

ASSISTANCE MAY BE GIVEN TO HEATHENS IN THE SABBATICAL YEAR. Assistance may be given to them? Has not R. Dimi b. Shishna said in the name of Rab; It is not right to hoe with heathens in the Sabbatical year nor to give a double greeting¹⁶ to heathens? — It is quite correct; what is meant is, just to say to them, Ahzuku!¹⁷ Thus R. Judah used to say to them, Ahzuku! R. Shesheth used to say to them, Asharta!¹⁸ (Gittin 62a)⁹

What the rabbis did here, whether it was their intention or not, was recognize the need for good relations with those whose spiritual practice differed from their own. They also did so in a way that allowed them to feel they were maintaining their own integrity by not plowing the field with non-Jews during this time. To offer the customary blessing of Peace might have felt like a betrayal to their own beliefs about what God wanted of them. But to offer no greeting would not have been right either.

There are many ways that people find to separate ourselves from one another, to treat each other as somehow less worthy than we are. There are also many cautions in the Talmud about this. For instance there is a story about one of the rabbis’ treatment of a man he thought was “ugly.”

Our Rabbis have taught: A man should always be gentle as the reed and never unyielding as the cedar. Once R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon was coming from Migdal Gedor,²² from the house of his teacher, and he was riding leisurely on his ass by the riverside and was feeling happy and elated because he had studied much Torah. There chanced to meet him an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, ‘Peace be upon you, Sir’. He, however, did not return his salutation but instead said to him, ‘Raca,¹ how ugly you are. Are all your fellow citizens as ugly as you are?’ The man replied: ‘I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, “How Ugly is the vessel which you have made”.’ When R. Eleazar realized that he had done wrong he dismounted from the ass and prostrated himself before the man and said to him, ‘I submit myself to you, forgive me’. The

⁹ For translations of *ahzuku* and *asharta*, see Jastrow, Marcus. *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA, 2005. pp 130; 444.

man replied: 'I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to him, "How ugly is the vessel which you have made".' He [R. Eleazar] walked behind him until he reached his native city. When his fellow citizens came out to meet him greeting him with the words, 'Peace be upon you O Teacher, O Master,' the man asked them, 'Whom are you addressing thus?' They replied, 'The man who is walking behind you.' Thereupon he exclaimed: 'If this man is a teacher, may there not be any more like him in Israel!' The people then asked him: 'Why'? He replied: 'Such and such a thing has he done to me. They said to him: 'Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a man greatly learned in the Torah.' The man replied: 'For your sakes I will forgive him, but only on the condition that he does not act in the same manner in the future.' Soon after this R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon entered [the Beth Hamidrash] and expounded thus, A man should always be gentle as the reed and let him never be unyielding as the cedar. And [p. 101] for this reason the reed merited that of it should be made a pen for the writing of the Law, Phylacteries and Mezuzoth.² [B. Taanit 20b]

This implies that if our discomfort with another makes us prone to treating them impolitely it is important not to let that happen, especially when our discomfort is based on superficial things. For example, the discomfort I may feel on encountering a homeless person in my community should not stop me from responding when he or she greets me. I should have the flexibility to recognize the humanity of that person even if my defense mechanisms are threatening to stiffen me against my own kinder nature.

Shifrah's Commentary and Directions for Practice

It's my feeling that the rabbis offered us ideas that might be explored, expanded, or in some cases transformed so we can use them to successfully enrich our social and spiritual lives.

To put the texts into terms that we can use, we'll revisit the themes set out at the beginning of this piece. I also offer some ideas for practices with which people might wish to experiment. They are all built on practices I have done, but are adapted for this purpose.

(1) ... *When our fragility is either too great or too apparent, we need to be particularly tender with one another and careful with ourselves. We may need to face each other gently or cautiously, or there may be a particular boldness required of us. We may need to use different ways to acknowledge one another's situation or be true to our own experience than we would under other circumstances.*

Our society's economic system is in dire straits and many people are suffering as a result. My wife and a dear friend of ours both work in social services for a county in our state. They were talking recently about the mood at their offices, which is grim. At least thirty percent of workers have been laid off in recent weeks and caseloads for frontline social workers have exploded. A personnel policy allows for people who are being laid off to take a position in another program within their job category and bump someone else from that position. This has caused new workers and supervisors to be placed in positions in which they are uninformed on critical subjects and poorly equipped to deal with the issues that arise. Social service workers often deal with matters that can be life-threatening for community members, so replacing experienced supervisors and field workers with inexperienced ones can have serious consequences.

My friend and wife talked about how the niceties of normal greeting etiquette have been playing out for them there. One said that people are so frazzled that their greeting often consists of meeting one another in the hallway, looking at each other with an expression of panic, rolling their eyes and moving on. I understand. When I am having an especially harried day and someone asks, "how are you today?" I frequently answer something like, "hanging in there," or "could be better," rather than saying "fine, thank you," as some people might expect. Then I move on, keep walking, plow through the next task at hand.

What I wonder is how we can maintain our own integrity, help each other do so in difficult times, and also be true to our own reality? How can we meet one another in ways that leave the possibility open for things to go well even when the odds seem stacked against us? How can we nurture the possibility of us doing well personally even if the system around us is in chaos?

When we are stressed we are more prone to illness and more likely to make decisions that we regret later. Is it possible to use brief encounters with one another, like the sacred act of greeting, as an opportunity to interrupt the stress and even counteract it? Is this possible even when stress is the norm of a particular environment?

The rabbis' conversations might hold interesting ideas for practices to try. For example, we discussed earlier that R. Judah and R. Sheshet had particular ways of greeting non-Jews who were working their land during the sabbatical years when Jews let their land lie fallow. These prominent *amoraim* offered greetings of strength and health to their neighbors during this time.¹⁰ This allowed them to treat their neighbors as they would want to be treated while not betraying the truth of their own situation. It also allowed them to differentiate themselves as Jews.

And what if we take that one step further? What if we read this as an invitation to hold one another with an assumption that strength is available to us and a sense of wellness is possible for us as individuals? And what if we could trust that this is true in

¹⁰ See fn 9 on *Ahzuku! ... Asharta!*

part because we hold each other up? In our own multicultural settings, what if we make this assumption across lines of ethnicity, religion, class or job category? For example, what might happen if people in my friend's workplace decided that when they face each other in the hallway that few seconds will be an opportunity to look at each other squarely in the eyes, take a breath, wish one another strength and clarity for the next thing at hand, and offer a hope for health and well-being in the long haul?

PRACTICE IDEA FOR DEALING WITH STRESS IN CHAOTIC ENVIRONMENTS

Find a practice partner. Agree to see each other once a day when you are in the environment that is contributing to your stress. When you meet, look at one another with open-hearted admiration. Try taking a deep breath and letting it out completely. Allow this to slow you down for a moment. Ask each other, "What quality do you need to get through the day with a sense of wholeness and integrity?" Offer one word that represents this, such as peace, determination, patience or strength. Using what the other person tells you, say to each other, "I wish you (that quality)." After a week check in with each other to see how the practice has affected you.

(2) *Peace, to the rabbis, comes from God, and one name for God is Peace. All blessings flow from this peace, from this Peace.*

In the minds of the rabbis the common greeting *shalom aleichem* seems to have been a particularly Jewish one. Yet its implications are universal. What person of any spiritual tradition wouldn't want to feel connected to a divine flow of blessings that creates such a peace? Likewise a person who is not spiritually oriented might relate to a wish for peace and wholeness.

The word *shalom* plays a ubiquitous role in modern Hebrew as well. In contemporary Israeli society a standard greeting is also "*shalom*." It means both hello and goodbye and can be used at any time of day. While for most Israelis the word in this context has little more meaning than our "hello," it is nonetheless interesting that it has held up as part of basic discourse. Even in a culture where many people continually feel that they are under the threat of attack, the rabbinic wish for peace filters its way into daily life.

In subcultures of the secular U.S. people have also invoked the quality of peace in the face of noticing the lack of it around them. At the risk of painting cultural brush strokes that are far too broad, here are a couple of examples. "Peace" was a way hippies of the 1960's and 1970's often addressed each other, especially in saying goodbye. This might be said to have developed as an expression of a group's values, which included defying the war machine of the Vietnam era and creating a more harmonious world. Similarly, in African American hip-hop culture people have sometimes said "peace, out"

as they are leaving a place or ending a conversation. In this case we are looking at a subculture that at its inception was heavily influenced by urban violence and the effects of poverty from within, as well as racism and classism imposed upon it from without. By leaving another person with the statement “peace, out,” one might be asserting peace as something sorely needed in light of the absence of peace experienced all too often for some members of the community. It’s like saying, “I know it may not be how you feel right now, or what you think is possible in this moment, but this is what I hope for you.”

That the rabbis thought of *shalom aleichem* as a hope for the divine blessing of Peace also reminds me of when some Christians say, “Have a blessed day.” It makes me stop to think about the abundance of blessings that are possible and sometimes reminds me to pay attention to those already present in my life. “Thank you. You, too,” I often say. But at the same time I sometimes feel vaguely uncomfortable with the salutation. It challenges me as a Jewish spiritual person to trust that my Christian neighbors and co-workers want the best for me even if my religious beliefs are different from theirs. In my rational mind I do believe that most of the time this is the case. Still the weight of anti-semitic history sits on my Jewish psyche in ways that are hard to cast off. So I have gotten into a habit of trying to invoke joy at being wished a blessed day, joy of connection with someone I usually don’t know very well, joy at living in a place and time where the blessing of this connection is possible.

Greetings and their companion farewells in and of themselves don’t change our realities or the histories that brought us here. But they do offer an opportunity for us to tap into a wellspring of human and divinely inspired good will. If we can offer and receive them with that intention, perhaps the connection made in those moments can nurture the best in us rather than serving primarily as a source of tension or a matter of mere formalities.

PRACTICE IDEA TO INVOKE BLESSINGS OF PEACE

Find a quiet place. Close your eyes. Take a moment to notice your breath coming in and out. Think of someone you love very much, and wish them *shalom*. Think of someone with whom you have a difficult time, and wish them *shalom*. Take a few more breaths. Think of an aspect of yourself or your life that you are happy with, and wish yourself *shalom*. Think of an aspect of yourself or your life that makes you uncomfortable, and wish yourself blessings of *shalom*. Take a few more breaths. Think of a place in the world that you love, that is special to you, and wish for that place the blessing of *shalom*. Think of the place where you are at this moment and wish for this place blessings of *shalom*. Take a few more breaths. Imagine the next person you are likely to meet, and wish them the blessing of *shalom*. Take a few more breaths. Open your eyes. Notice the blessings in your life. Set an intention to greet the next person you meet from a mindset of *shalom*.

(3) *Social status or role was, and often is, a factor in how and when people greet each other.*

(4) *The threat of dangers posed by society's missteps or the ravages of harsh or oppressive governments effect how people utilize the etiquette agreed to by that society. Greetings offer a good example of this.*

At no time in history have societal structures and norms been in greater need of re-examination and re-organization than they are right now. This is true whether we are considering the over-consumption of those in the US and other nations with bloated market economies, or about corrupt dictatorships, or failed attempts at socialism. All have contributed in some way to the degradation of human society and/or the planet that sustains us.

The *sh'ma* calls us to listen, to hear the Unity of the Divine and do what will keep our world in balance. Its themes are those of wholeness and the kind of truth that emerges from paying close attention to the needs of the earth and the people and other beings living on it. What if we transform the rabbis' warnings not to interrupt the *sh'ma* except out of "respect" or "fear"? What if we treat their admonition as an invitation to stop from time to time as we pray, especially when we pray in community? What if we stop to notice those around us and meet them open-heartedly and with the highest regard as we pray together? What if we take the rabbis' words as a challenge to stand up collectively in a spirit of Peace and connection to people we might find worrisome, who might make us uncomfortable, or even those who might wish to hurt us?

What if we did what Gandhi asked of us, to be the change we wish to see in the world?

IDEA FOR PRACTICE WHEN RECITING THE SH'MA IN COMMUNITY

Recite the blessing, "*Sh'ma Yisrael, YHVH eloheynu, YHVH echad*" (Listen, God-wrestling people, Being-ness is Godliness, YHVH is One.)

Sit in silence, letting the collective voice remind you to listen to the people and world around you. Look around at who is in the room with you. Appreciate their presence in your life at this moment.

Recite the words, "*V'hayah im sh'moa*" (And it will be that if you listen...)

Think of a place, a person, a community or a nation that you feel is in particular need of healing. Imagine sitting in the presence of that need. Offer a blessing for compassion and listen. What does that person, place or society sound like? Listen to your own body and

how you respond. If you find your mind wandering or your body tensing, just notice that without judgment and turn your attention to your breath. Then turn your attention again to what needs healing. And listen. Do this for several minutes, allowing your attention to go back and forth between your own sensations and those of your listening heart. Listen again to your own breath. When you are ready, open your eyes and look again at those around you.

Ask yourself, “What is true for me right now?”

Stay open to the answer as you move to the next parts of the communal prayer service.

A Concluding Blessing

May we greet one another always with love, appreciation and the highest of regard. May we trust that we deserve this blessing.

May we live up to the prayer:

“V’ahavta l’reacha kamokha.”

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Or, as a friend of mine translates it:

“Love your neighbor. Love yourself.”

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(aka Janet Tobacman).
Emeryville, CA, USA