

Shalom Bayit
Yom Kippur 5772/2011
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When I was first learning Hebrew in Jerusalem, my friends and I had mnemonic devices to remember the Hebrew words. Like "Hey, lets Mitbach in the Kitchen. Word for kitchen? Mitbach. Or, "ow, there's a fork in *mazleg*." Fork? Mazleg. Or, " "masteek" of Gum is in the drawer. Gum, mastic. "That's-a-keen knife you have there." "I et a pen." But my favorite one? "That's a nice house, I think I'll *bayit*." The word is used thousands of times in our liturgy and the Bible and rabbinical literature, usually referring to a family, group of people, or a building. It is either Beit-El (house of God) Beit Ya'akov (house of Jacob), Beit Yisrael (house of Israel), Beit ha-mikdash (house of sanctification), that's THE temple. Synagogues are generally thought about as being three houses at one time: beit kenesset (house of gathering) beit t'filah (house of prayer), and beit midrash (house of learning).

There is one phrase in our tradition where the home is the subject: *Sh'lom Bayit*. Literally, it means "peace of the house," or "Peace *in* the home." *Shalom Bayit* can be defined as domestic harmony, or family peace, welfare of the family. It has been a part of Judaism for centuries, but it isn't found in the Bible anywhere. It isn't even found in the Talmud. The concept, however, is clear from the ancient sages to today. Harmony in the home is of the utmost importance.

I would venture to say that almost all of us, if we were asked to give one of the most important elements of life, might respond, "a happy and healthy family." And yet...over the years I have witnessed all combinations of relatives unable to treat each other with dignity or respect, and in many cases, unable to speak with each other or tolerate each other.

The idea that one's home should be a safe haven, and a place of peace has been a part of our tradition for nearly two thousand years. Imagine that the Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 20a) teaches: "Whoever acquires a servant, it is as if he has acquired a master." The sages argue that the servant should receive everything equal to the master: same food, same wine, that the master shouldn't sleep on a feather bed while the servant sleeps on straw. If that is what our tradition is telling us to do in the case of a servant, imagine how we should treat our spouses, or our children, or our parents, even our friends.

For them, the Talmud offers the followinga: about our spouse: "He who loves his wife as himself, but honors her **more** than himself, is reassured that his home is based on underpinnings of peace (Yevamoth 62)," And Husbands are under special directive "not to bring tears" to one's wife (Bava Metzia 59); Towards our children: "Parental love should be impartial, one child must not be preferred to the other." (Shabbat 10b); Regarding our entire family, We are told that we should not create an atmosphere of excessive fear in the home and that we should address our families in a quiet, gentle way (Gittin 6). Clearly, our tradition promotes peace, wholeness and tenderness towards all of our family members.

The most popular example of Shalom Bayit that is given from the Torah is in Genesis, when Sarah is told that she is going to have a baby, and they are both old (I don't mean 43 years old, old, where they would have to go to the desert fertility clinic of Jericho and give birth to all 12 tribes at once). She was about 90, and he was about 100. So she laughed and said, "Am I really going to feel sexual pleasure at my age, you know, my husband is very old, too?" (she might have added, "Viagra hasn't been invented, yet.") But when God relayed the words to Abraham, he said that Sarah said, "Am I really going to bear a child in my old age?" He mentions nothing about her ability to experience pleasure with her old husband. The reason given by our sages is that God left out that part about Abraham because it would have hurt him, and God was keeping "Shalom Bayit". Peace in the home is so important; God felt that it was not only permissible, but preferred to tell a little "white lie" to spare Abraham's feelings. This idea of "white lies" being all right to keep peace in the home is uniquely Jewish. I imagine that you may even find it surprising if you had never heard it before. Now I don't want everyone to run out of here saying: On Yom Kippur the rabbi told us that we should go around lying to each other in order to keep peace in our homes. But, yeah, I am kind of saying that. And I think you believe it, too.

The Talmud, of course, gives a fantastic example of when it is alright to withhold the truth with a "white lie." A bride on her wedding day. We are told that one should always tell a bride she is beautiful. No matter what she looks like...and by the way, in my experience, all brides are beautiful.

If something matters deeply to a person, don't hurt them. That's a part of Shalom Bayit.

Several years ago, I was officiating at a wedding, and the bride's grandmother and grandfather were there. Been married 62 years. Whenever someone is married that long, I always ask about the secret of a long marriage. A lot of times I get, "The secret is in two words: Yes dear." Which is, although appearing to be just a joke, is an example of *Shalom Bayit*. That day, the grandmother answered with words I will never forget, she said:

*We can make each other feel better than any other person in the world,
And we can also hurt each other more deeply than any other person in the world,
When we argue, we never bring in those things that we know will hurt them deeply.*

I would like to say at this point that there are those who have used Shalom Bayit to keep someone quiet about real abuse or dysfunction in the home. When I'm talking about "white lies" in Shalom Bayit, I'm talking about withholding the truth so that the people you love are not hurt, not about withholding the truth so that the people who hurt you can continue to do so. If someone ever told you to not tell anyone outside of your home in the name of peace *in your home*, it's not *Shalom Bayit*. Shalom Bayit is working to protect all members of our home from pain, and aiding in their well-being.

A second way of thinking about Shalom Bayit can be told with a story:

A husband and wife came to Rabbi Israel of Koznitz (the "Koznitzer Maggid," 1737–1814). They'd had a big fight and wanted a divorce.

"My wife," complained the man, "every week she makes for Shabbat a delicious kugel. I love that kugel! All week I work and shlep, just for that kugel! When I just think of that kugel, my mouth starts watering . . . But what does this foolish woman do to me? She torments me! After I recite the kiddush, do I get the kugel? No-o-o-o. First she serves the gefilte fish. Then the soup. Then the chicken. And the potatoes. Then a couple of other dishes, and then I'm full, I can't possibly take one more bite. Then she brings in the kugel! Now shouldn't I divorce her?" And he said a lot more that people normally don't say in front of a rabbi.

The wife explained that in her parents' home it was always done this way. She wouldn't budge.

So the Koznitzer Maggid decided that from now on she should make two kugels. One to be eaten right after kiddush, and one to serve after the fish and the soup and the chicken and the potatoes. The couple left, reconciled.

From that day on, the Koznitzer Maggid always had two kugels at his Shabbat table—one right after kiddush, and another one after the main course. They called it the Shalom Bayit Kugel ("harmony in the home kugel").

Ahhhhh. Compromise. That's what the Koznitzer Maggid was doing, right? That's usually what people imagine brings about Shalom Bayit. You give a little here, I give a little there, sometimes I get my way, sometimes he gets his, she gets hers, and it comes around again. I would like to suggest that it is another "c" word at work here. Several years ago, a therapist once told me that when people talk about compromise in relationships they are on the wrong track – it's really about collaboration. And I think that's what happened in this story: Nobody had to compromise. The man got to eat his beloved kugel every Friday night, and she got to respect her parents' tradition. The maggid did the work for them in that case, but if they had worked together, and collaborated to see how they could both be happy, they may have come to that conclusion, and, *voila*: Shalom Bayit. Peace exists in the house. Sometimes that might mean that it turned out differently than you had expected, but you didn't lose out, you worked it out. Collaboration.

A third ingredient for *Shalom Bayit* comes from this day of Atonement. This part of making peace in the home involves removing your ego, letting go when you may want to hold on, allowing yourself to be vulnerable. That is: forgiveness.

Today is about our mortality. We gather together for Yizkor on this day to remember family members who have passed from our lives. Our brothers and sister, mothers and fathers, even sons and daughters, all people who were precious to us. This whole day is a reminder that our life is finite, that this time, this family, this home, is what we have and who we are. Ecclesiastes said that we should relish life with the ones we love "each and every day of your precarious life. Each day is God's gift. It's all you get in exchange for the hard work of staying alive. Make the most of each one!"

I suggest that life is too short and so is the list of people who are included in our home – there simply isn't enough time to hold back forgiveness. It keeps life from moving forward, and stores anger inside of us, which can come out in the most unproductive

ways. We are all here because we recognize that we all have faults, and we are all human beings, and we are all, NOT perfect. Shalom Bayit is recognizing that in others, and giving them the same unconditional love that you would hope they would give you. But I'd like to suggest that in addition to unconditional love, unconditional forgiveness needs to be a part of our relationships to each other.

Home must be the place where we feel safest. Home must be the place where we can be ourselves. And we must recognize that life is all about making mistakes and learning and improving ourselves because of those mistakes. How can we learn if our bodies and our minds are consumed by anger? How can we move on in our lives if we are holding on to pain? It's not easy. It hurts to be hurt, and it can be grueling to open your heart so that it is vulnerable, and let someone who caused you pain back in, but we're talking about your home. Your life.

In the Torah, Jacob took everything from Esau. I tricked him out of his birthright, and he stole his blessing. Anger overtook Esau, and he vowed that he would kill Jacob when he saw him again. Jacob returned 20 years later – a lot of life had taken place in between – they both had families and had acquired much. When they met, Jacob bowed to Esau seven times – as if to say, “I know what I did to you. I come here now humbled.” Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, fell on his neck, kissed him, and they wept. That is love, that is forgiveness, that is Shalom Bayit.

Now I am fully aware that there are actions that just cannot be forgiven. I do believe, however, that most of our mistakes in life, most of the ways in which we hurt our friends and family are not unforgivable. But it's not a one-way-forgiveness, it's a collaboration of forgiveness and repentance. Forgiveness must be accompanied by the commitment of the one who hurt us to never do it again. It's the commitment of both parties towards peace, it's an understanding that both the one who caused the pain, and the one who was pained desire Shalom Bayit.

The world needs a dose of peace. Look at the news and you hear about war and disputes, famine and abuse, deception and hatred. The wholeness we seek in the world can never be achieved if our homes are not at peace, can never be envisioned until every home is filled with love, protection, respect, collaboration and forgiveness.

Lao-tse, the Chinese philosopher from the 6th century BCE, wrote:

If there is to be peace in the world, There must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations, There must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities, There must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors, There must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home, There must be peace in the heart.