Shalom Aleichem: What Are We Really Saying?

PARSHAS VAYEITZEI / SHABBOS MORNING DRASH / WESTMOUNT SHUL

01 A Greeting We Have Said a Thousand Times

Rabbosai, I want to begin this morning with two words that every Jew knows.

Shalom Aleichem.

We say them when we meet someone for the first time. We say them when we see an old friend whom we haven't seen in a while. Someone walks into shul on Shabbos morning, and we say, *"Shalom Aleichem!"*

And what does the other person answer?

Aleichem Shalom.

Now, isn't that interesting? I say *Shalom Aleichem*, and you say *Aleichem Shalom*. Why don't you simply say *Shalom Aleichem* right back?

Even when two Jews are wishing each other peace, apparently they cannot agree on the order of the words!

But seriously, why reverse them? Surely if I wish you peace, you can wish me peace using exactly the same words.

And there is another question. Why do we say *aleichem*—"upon you," in the plural—when we are often speaking to just one person? Why don't we say *Shalom Alecha*?

We use these words so frequently that we hardly stop to hear them. But they contain a beautiful lesson about human relationships—one that begins with Yaakov Avinu in this week's parsha.

02 What Was Yaakov Really Asking For?

Yaakov Avinu is leaving Be'er Sheva. His brother Esav wants to kill him. He is travelling toward Charan, toward the household of his uncle Lavan, and he has no idea what awaits him.

That night he lies down to sleep and sees the extraordinary dream of a ladder standing on earth and reaching heaven, with angels ascending and descending. Hashem appears to him, promises to protect him, to accompany him, and eventually to bring him back to his homeland.

When Yaakov awakens, he makes a neder. Among his words are these:

וְשַׁבְתִּי בְשָׁלוֹם אֶל בֵּית אָבִי

"And I shall return in peace to my father's house." — Bereishis 28:21

Of course, we understand why Yaakov wants to return safely. He is fleeing danger and entering a very uncertain future.

But the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, reveals another dimension in Yaakov's request. He sees in the word *b'shalom* a hint to **beis shalom—two forms of peace**.

Yaakov is not simply asking to get home without being harmed. He is asking to return having experienced ***two different kinds of shalom***.

What are these two forms of peace? And why would Yaakov need both?

03 The First Peace: The Argument Has Stopped

Imagine two people who have a serious disagreement. Perhaps it concerns a business arrangement, a misunderstanding, or a decision that affects them both.

They argue. Each is absolutely convinced that he is right. Neither is willing to give in.

Finally, someone with authority intervenes: a dayan, a rav, a parent, or perhaps a respected individual whom both parties have agreed to consult.

The matter is heard. A decision is reached. One of the people is disappointed, but he accepts the ruling.

He says, *"Fine. I don't agree, but I'll go along with the decision. I'm not going to argue anymore."*

And the fighting stops.

Is that peace?

Yes! Absolutely. That is a form of peace.

There is no longer an open conflict. The parties know how to proceed. A destructive situation has been contained. We should never underestimate the value of that achievement.

But let me ask you something: what has happened inside the person who accepted the ruling?

Has he changed his mind? Not necessarily.

Does he now think the other person was right? Perhaps not at all.

Has he come to understand the other person's point of view? Maybe he hasn't even tried.

He has accepted the outcome because he recognizes the authority of the decision, or because the circumstances leave him no alternative.

The argument has ended—but the disagreement may still be alive in his heart.

That is the first kind of shalom: a peace in which behaviour has changed, even if the inner attitude has not.

04 The Second Peace: I Want the Agreement Myself

Now imagine another possibility.

The same two people sit down. One begins explaining his position. The other listens. Questions are asked. Misunderstandings are clarified.

And slowly, one of them begins to realize that the situation may not be exactly as he had understood it.

He listens again. He considers a fact he overlooked. He begins to appreciate why the other person sees matters differently.

Perhaps he even comes to agree with him.

And finally he says, *"You know something? I see what you're saying. I understand your point. I want to work this out."*

Look carefully at what has happened.

He has not simply surrendered because someone else is stronger, or because a judge has ordered him to do something.

He himself has become a willing participant in the peace.

The outcome may be the very same outcome as before. From the outside, both situations might look identical: the argument is finished, the people are cooperating, life moves on.

But internally they are worlds apart.

In the first situation, one person says, *"I have to accept this."*

In the second, he says, *"I want to be part of this."*

> ***The first peace ends opposition. The deeper peace creates willing participation.***

And there is something very important here. We are not saying that in order to have genuine peace, two people must agree about every last detail. People can continue to see matters differently and still choose a relationship of mutual respect. The crucial change is that the desire for a peaceful relationship now comes from within each person.

05 The Sanhedrin: A Decision and a Shared Understanding

Rabbosai, we find a fascinating illustration of these two kinds of shalom in the Sanhedrin.

The Torah tells us:

אַחֲרֵי רַבִּים לְהַטֹּת

"Follow the majority." — Shemos 23:2

When the judges of the Sanhedrin disagree, the ruling follows the majority.

Suppose eleven judges rule one way and nine rule another. The halacha is determined by the majority. The minority accepts the ruling and acts accordingly.

But does that mean that all twenty judges now agree?

Of course not!

The nine judges may still be personally convinced that their own reasoning was correct. They accept the law because that is how the Torah requires the court to reach a decision.

That is a genuine unity of action. They are able to function as one court, even though their individual opinions differ.

Now imagine a second possibility.

The judges who disagreed begin to reconsider. They hear the majority's reasoning again. They ask questions, examine the evidence, and suddenly notice something they had not seen before.

And they say, *"Now we understand. The majority's reasoning is correct."*

The ruling hasn't changed. But the nature of the agreement has changed completely.

Instead of merely accepting a decision made by someone else, they have come to understand it for themselves.

They are no longer united only in what they must do. They have become united in what they themselves understand.

That is a higher kind of shalom.

And with this distinction in mind, let us look at what happens when Yaakov meets Lavan at the end of the parsha.

06 Lavan: Peace Because Hashem Restrains Him

Think about Yaakov's twenty years in Charan.

He arrives at Lavan's home hoping to establish his family and build his future. Instead, he discovers what it is like to deal with someone whose word cannot be trusted.

Lavan deceives him on his wedding night. He changes the conditions of his employment again and again. Yaakov works faithfully, through heat and cold, by day and by night, and still has to protect what is rightfully his.

Finally, Yaakov takes his family and possessions and departs.

Lavan discovers that they have gone, gathers his men, and pursues Yaakov.

What kind of reunion do you imagine this will be? Lavan is angry. He believes he has been wronged. He catches up with the family after a long pursuit.

But before the confrontation, something dramatic happens. Hashem appears to Lavan in a dream and warns him:

הִשָּׁמֶר לְךָ פֶּן תְּדַבֵּר עִם יַעֲקֹב מִטּוֹב עַד רָע

"Beware lest you speak with Yaakov, from good to bad." — Bereishis 31:24

Hashem has placed a limit on what Lavan may do to Yaakov.

Now let me ask you: if Lavan refrains from harming Yaakov, does that mean he has become a wonderful, peace-loving individual?

Of course not!

He has been warned. He knows that there are consequences to crossing the line. The aggressor has been restrained by a power beyond himself.

That is the first kind of shalom.

The danger is contained. Yaakov is protected. But Lavan's own willingness to live peacefully has not yet become the basis of the relationship.

And then the Torah gives us an unexpected development.

07 Who Proposes the Covenant? Lavan!

When Yaakov and Lavan finally confront each other, Yaakov does not remain silent.

He tells Lavan exactly what those twenty years were like. He reminds him of his faithful labour, the difficulties he endured, the repeated changes to his wages, and the unfair treatment he received.

There is tension in every word of their exchange.

And then, after all the anger and all the accusations, listen to what Lavan says:

וְעַתָּה לְכָה נִכְרְתָה בְרִית אֲנִי וָאָתָּה

"And now, come, let us make a covenant, I and you." — Bereishis 31:44

Rabbosai, ***who is proposing the covenant?***

LAVAN!

The very man who pursued Yaakov. The very man who had to be warned by Hashem not to harm him. Now Lavan himself says, *"Let us make an agreement."*

Something important has changed.

Previously, the peace was a result of Hashem's warning. Lavan was prevented from doing harm.

Now he himself takes the initiative in establishing an arrangement between them.

We are certainly not suggesting that Lavan suddenly became a tzaddik, or that every resentment vanished. The Torah does not say that. Indeed, the covenant establishes boundaries. They are not about to become identical in outlook or best friends.

But that makes the point even more meaningful: ***peace can be genuine without requiring two people to become the same person.*** They can establish boundaries and still willingly commit themselves to a relationship without aggression.

The initiative for the covenant has come from Lavan himself.

And now Yaakov's earlier words take on a deeper meaning:

V'shavti b'shalom el beis avi.

He asks to return not only with the protection that stops conflict, but also with the greater shalom in which another human being contributes his own willingness to peace.

08 Now the Real Question: Why Do We Reverse the Words?

Now, Rabbosai, let us return to our opening question.

I meet you and say, *"Shalom Aleichem."* You answer, *"Aleichem Shalom."*

But why? Why not repeat my greeting word for word?

It is a very fair question. And I want to be precise about the answer.

Of course you could say "Shalom Aleichem" back to me. You could mean it with complete sincerity. There is no grammatical law that says returning the same words would be insincere.

The beauty of this explanation is that it finds a *remez*, a deeper suggestion, in the reversal we actually use.

When I say **Shalom Aleichem**, I begin with the word *shalom*. I am initiating the greeting. I am extending goodwill toward you.

You receive that greeting. You could simply repeat it as an echo. But instead, our customary response changes the order.

You answer **Aleichem Shalom**—you put the person to whom you are responding at the beginning of your own blessing, and return *shalom* toward him.

I began the encounter by offering peace in your direction. You now answer in your own direction, with an expression of goodwill coming from you.

The reversal does not magically prove what is in your heart. But it gives the exchange a wonderful shape: **it is not simply one greeting being repeated; it is one greeting being answered.**

> ***Shalom Aleichem: I am bringing goodwill to you. Aleichem Shalom: And I am bringing goodwill to you in return.***

The first person initiates. The second person reciprocates.

I cannot create our entire relationship by myself. I can open the door; you can choose to step toward me.

And that brings us to a question even more relevant to everyday life.

09 But We're Not Fighting With Anybody!

Think about the last time you said *Shalom Aleichem*.

Were you having an argument with that person? Did the two of you need a din Torah or a peace treaty?

Probably not!

Perhaps someone walked into shul. Perhaps you met a new neighbour. Perhaps you saw an old friend after a few months.

“Shalom Aleichem! How are you?”

Nobody was fighting. Nobody needed to surrender. Nobody was being forced to accept a decision.

So what kind of shalom are we creating?

Here is the answer: **shalom is not only the repair of a relationship that has been damaged. It is the creation of a relationship in the first place.**

Whenever two people meet, there are two distinct worlds standing face to face.

I have my thoughts, my experiences, my worries, my hopes. You have your thoughts, your experiences, your worries, your hopes.

Even if we are the closest of friends, we do not see every matter in exactly the same way.

That is the beautiful way this teaching understands the plural *aleichem*: there is more than one perspective involved. There are two people, each carrying a life of his own, and between them we want to establish shalom.

Shalom does not require us to erase our differences. It invites us to make room for each other despite those differences.

Two people can stand in the same room and barely acknowledge one another. They can exchange the right words while never really meeting.

Or, for one moment, they can make a genuine human connection.

The difference is not between fighting and not fighting. It is between merely noticing another person and truly making room for him.

10 From Polite Words to a Real Encounter

Think of a visitor walking into shul for the first time.

He doesn't know where to sit. He doesn't know whom to approach. Everyone else seems to know everyone. Perhaps he is wondering whether anyone will even notice him.

One person walks over and says, *"Shalom Aleichem! We're glad you're here."*

And imagine that he means it. He stops for a moment. He listens. He gives the visitor a chance to respond.

Two strangers have begun to establish a connection.

Or think of an old friend you haven't seen in months.

You say, *"Shalom Aleichem! How are you?"*

Do you really want to know? Will you give him ten seconds to answer—or are you already looking over his shoulder for the next person you have to greet?

And think of the person who seems a little distracted, or unusually quiet. You don't know what is happening in his home, in his health, in his family, or in his heart. Perhaps he doesn't feel ready to speak about it. Perhaps he simply needs to know that somebody has noticed him.

A warm greeting can communicate something remarkable: *"I see you. I'm glad you're here. You matter."*

The Mishnah teaches us:

הֱוֵי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסֵבֶר פָּנִים יָפוֹת

"Receive every person with a pleasant countenance." — Pirkei Avos 1:15

Notice, this does not only apply when someone has offended you. It applies to *every person*.

And it goes both ways. When somebody extends warmth to us, and we are able to respond, we can return it with warmth of our own: a smile, eye contact, a sincere word, a moment of attention.

The words matter—but so does the person standing in front of us.

Now, you might ask: can something as simple as a greeting really make such a difference?

I want to share with you an extraordinary account told by Rav Mordechai Burg about a young man in his yeshiva.

11 A Good Morning That Went Unanswered

Rav Mordechai Burg relates that several months before a new yeshiva year began, he interviewed a young man for admission. In his published account he calls him **Reuven**, explaining that the name has been changed.

At the interview, Reuven seemed like a wonderful boy—warm, engaging, with a beautiful smile. Rav Burg was looking forward to having him in the yeshiva in Israel.

But when Reuven arrived at the beginning of the year, something was terribly wrong.

On the first morning he came to Shacharis, sat near the front of the beis medrash, and stared ahead with a blank expression.

He didn't put on tefillin. He didn't open a siddur. He didn't daven. He didn't say a word.

At the end of davening, Rav Burg and the mashgiach, **Rav Daniel Glanz**, turned to him warmly.

"Good morning, Reuven!"

No answer.

He simply looked at them and walked away.

Well, perhaps he was jet-lagged. Perhaps he was having difficulty adjusting to yeshiva, far from home.

The next morning, the same thing happened. He sat through davening without opening a siddur or putting on tefillin. They greeted him warmly.

Again, no response.

The third morning—again, nothing.

Rav Burg understood that the boy must be going through something and decided not to push him. He would give Reuven his space.

But Rav Glanz did something different.

Every morning, as the mashgiach finished wrapping his tefillin, he would look at Reuven, smile, and say:

"Good morning, Reuven."

No answer.

The next day: *"Good morning."*

Nothing.

The following week: *"Good morning."*

Still nothing.

Weeks passed. Then months. Other people had stopped trying to draw him into conversation. Reuven remained silent and withdrawn.

But Rav Glanz never stopped saying good morning.

He didn't demand an explanation. He didn't insist on a response. He simply continued to recognize the young man with kindness.

And then, one morning, as Reuven was leaving after davening, Rav Glanz gave him the same warm smile he had given him every other morning.

"Good morning, Reuven."

And this time, Reuven answered.

“Good morning.”

That was it. Two ordinary words. He didn't stop to chat. He kept walking toward breakfast.

But Rav Burg, who had witnessed the exchange, was astonished. After all these months, the boy had spoken!

The following morning, Reuven answered again. And the next day, again.

Then, a few weeks later, something else happened. Reuven came to davening and began putting on his tefillin. He opened his siddur. He started to daven.

No one knew precisely what had changed. But everyone could see that something was beginning to open up inside him.

And when Reuven returned the morning greeting, there was now a smile on his face.

Then one day Reuven approached Rav Glanz.

“Rebbe, could I speak to you?”

Of course! The mashgiach had been hoping for this moment for months.

They went for a long walk together.

When Rav Glanz returned, Rav Burg immediately realized that something extraordinary had occurred. The mashgiach looked deeply shaken.

Rav Glanz would not disclose the private details of the student's experience. But he explained that between Reuven's admission interview and his arrival in yeshiva, something deeply traumatic had happened in the boy's life.

Reuven had been in such tremendous pain that he had seriously contemplated ending his life.

And why had Reuven now asked to speak to Rav Glanz?

To thank him for helping save his life.

Rav Burg relates that every morning's greeting had given Reuven a reason not to give up that day. Even when he could not answer, he knew there was at least one person who would not stop recognizing him.

And the young man had reached a remarkable conclusion: ***If this rebbi isn't giving up on me, perhaps I shouldn't give up on myself.***

Rabbosai, just think of it. The mashgiach thought he was offering a simple *good morning*. He had no idea how much that greeting meant.

> ***One man kept offering a good morning. Eventually, a young man found the strength to answer it—and to begin returning to life.***

12 Two People. One Moment of Shalom.

There is one important thing we must remember from this story: someone who is hurting may not be able to respond. A greeting is not wasted because it receives no answer. Rav Glanz's kindness was doing something even during the months of silence.

But when Reuven finally said *"Good morning"* in return, we could see that the connection had begun to open in both directions.

And that is the message hidden in two words we exchange almost without thinking.

We do not have to be in an argument to bring shalom into the world. Sometimes it begins when we see another person, look him in the eye, and genuinely welcome him.

And when someone offers that warmth to us, we too have an opportunity to bring something of ourselves to the encounter.

Shalom Aleichem: *I see you. I'm glad you're here. I wish you well.*

Aleichem Shalom: *I see you too. And I wish you well.*

Two separate people. Two expressions of goodwill. One beautiful moment of shalom.

Good Shabbos.

SOURCES AND ATTRIBUTIONS

- Torah teaching: "Shalom Mushlam," *Me'at Min Ha'Or*, Parshas Vayeitzei, printed pp. 64–67, drawing on *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 25. The explanation of the reversed greeting is a homiletic *remez*, not a grammatical requirement.
- Pesukim: Bereishis 28:21; Bereishis 31:24 and 31:44; Shemos 23:2. Mishnah: Pirkei Avos 1:15.
- Story: Rav Mordechai Burg, "Kindness Is Saying Good Morning," *Meaningful Minute* (December 5, 2022), https://meaningfulminute.org/kindness-is-saying-good-morning/. "Reuven" is explicitly a pseudonym. The boy's private circumstances are not disclosed in the original account.