

BS"D

SHALOM BAYIS IN THE JEWISH HOME

A GUIDE FOR FRUM WOMEN

SIMCHA GITTEL HERLITZ

contents

3

THE REAL POWER
OF SHALOM BAYIS

6

WHY SO MUCH SHALOM
BAYIS EDUCATION &
COUNSELING FAILS

10

ROLE OF A JEWISH
WOMAN IN HER HOME

15

TAKING THE LEAP

THE REAL POWER OF SHALOM BAYIS

Chazal tell us that no blessing in this world can materialize without shalom. Shalom is the kli, the holy vessel, that holds all the kinds of brocha- whether physical or spiritual- that HaShem can bestow upon us in this world, such as health, happiness, parnassa, children, and yishuv hadaas.¹

Shalom, of course, comes in many forms. But, one of the greatest is shalom bayis. The Jewish home lies at the very foundation of the Jewish people- a place where the Shechinah, the Divine Presence rests, as R. Akiva tells us “When husband and wife are worthy, the Shechinah dwells with them.” In fact, both the Mishkan and the Bais Hamikdash, the physical resting place for HaShem's Presence on earth, were modeled on and embodied in the Jewish home.²

When husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters live together “as one,” then there is abundant health, blessing, and joy. But when peace, harmony, and connection are replaced with discord and disconnect, everyone suffers, and it spills over on to those not even living under the same roof.

Without shalom bayis, instead of brocha, there is physical and spiritual sickness, distress, poverty, and galus. As Chazal tell us when a husband and wife are not worthy

¹ The end of Masechetes Uktzim

² For example, see this shiur by Rav Zev Leff (<http://www.shemayisrael.co.il/parsha/leff/archives/vaytzei.htm>)

fire consumes them.³ In fact, our present exile is a result of *sinas chinum* which is the exact opposite of *shalom*.⁴

But, *shalom bayis* is not something that comes easy. Every individual within a family is a unique entity. Each person comes into this world with his or her own strengths and weaknesses, experiences and perceptions, obstacles and opportunities in life. More often than not, the closest family members will possess qualities that are in direct opposition to the others around them. But, unlike those outside of our home, it is practically impossible to avoid the people in our family.

When things are working as they should, then these differences between people enhance each other. We see this with Yacov Avinu when he took 12 stones and placed them under his head and it became one stone.⁵ According to the Medrash, Yaakov knew prophetically that the Jewish people were to be composed of 12 tribes. Yaakov wanted a Divine sign that he would be able to become the father of the Jewish nation. He said, “If these stones miraculously merge together and can form a single unit, then I know that I will be able to father 12 tribes and merge them into a single people.” His goal was to build a nation — to take disparate individuals and blend them into one unit that would bring the Divine Presence into the world. If the 12 stones would come together, then that would be a sign to Yaakov that there could be unity among the Jewish people. The *shevatim* all had their own unique identity; they were mini nations

³ Sotah 17a

⁴ Yoma 9b

⁵ Bereshis 28:11

in and of themselves. Yet, they all fit into clal Yisrael; each tribe had a vital role to play. If even one of them were missing, or rebelled, then clal Yisroel wouldn't be complete.

On the other hand, without some unifying mission or meaning, differences can quickly degenerate into separation and discord. Most of us have experienced conflicts with our parents, siblings, spouses, and children. If these conflicts are ongoing the effects can be dramatic. It may at times feel like these strained relationships are taking over your life, compromising your health, simcha, and peace of mind.

So, how do you really overcome differences in order to build and maintain real love, friendship, and respect in your family relationships? How to do you set healthy boundaries, break negative habits, and ensure that your needs and those of your loved ones are met? How do you relieve distressful emotions, such as anger, resentment, fear, and anxiety? How do you create shalom in your home- especially if your relationships are reaching a breaking point?

WHY SO MUCH SHALOM BAYIS EDUCATION & COUNSELING FAILS

Take a look at the vast majority of shalom bayis education and therapies out there. Most of them focus on one or more of three areas: the differences between men and women, building constructive behaviors while minimizing destructive ones, and on the spiritual significance, importance, and goals of the Jewish home.

While all of these things are true, good, and important, most shalom bayis instruction and therapeutic approaches just end up treating the symptoms of the problem and not root of the ailment. While these techniques and approaches may provide some relief to the family or couple, often the symptoms will just pop up in other areas of their lives since the root of the problem remains.

If you have an infection in your toe, you can take something to help you with the pain; you can wear cushioned shoes; and you can try not to walk too much, you can distract yourself. But, doing all of this won't make the problem go away. In fact, if it is ignored for too long, it can spread to other areas of your body and become an even bigger problem than it was at the beginning.

We can see this in action. Some of the couples and families that “successfully” go through counseling may technically be more peaceful at home in the sense that the volume has been turned down. But while the tension may have been defused, a closer

look reveals that these same family relationships remain superficial, forced, or disconnected. Often, the members of the family will continue to have issues in other areas of their lives-whether within themselves or among friends, colleagues, and neighbors. While one relationship seems to be better, others continue to suffer or worsen.

So, the question is why does this happen?

While there are a few reasons for this, one of the biggest is that most shalom bayis therapy starts on the couple or family level instead of focusing on the people as individuals and on their personal work. Progress is often delayed or prevented outright as negative emotions keep bubbling up *even as* negative habits are replaced by “positive behaviors.” So, even when the couple or family members are “doing their homework,” there is nevertheless little real movement.

Most counselors and educators would agree that in order for there to be the chance for shalom bayis, each individual in the family has to want, and be committed to, positive change. The problem is that many of these same counselors and educators start and stop with this commitment.

For real change to actually happen, the family members have to be given the right hashkafa and tools in their personal lives that would help them attain a certain amount

of clarity about themselves, HaShem, and their unique tafkaid in this world.

There are two fundamental points that have to be in place:

1. They need to possess the basic emunah that HaShem has put them in this situation, and that these experiences are perfectly suited to them in order that they should find themselves, fix what they need to, and ultimately connect to HaShem through them.
2. They have to get in touch with their real potential and then figure out what internal blocks stand in the way of reaching it. They then need to slowly make the effort to break those barriers- all according to their level and abilities.

Where this process is lacking, no real movement can happen- both on an individual level and on a family level.

While this may seem like a lofty ideal, at the same time it is self evident that those who are not in touch with themselves and their purpose in the world, will not be fully in touch with anyone else, either.

This is where the issue of personal bias on the side of counselors and educators can, and often does, come in to inadvertently sabotage any progress. Chazal tell us that each Jew is obligated to say “When will my deeds reach the deeds of my forefathers

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?"⁶ Sometimes progress in shalom bayis therapy is stunted because *the counselors and educators* don't fully believe within themselves that the goal of this journey is possible. This may be an unconscious belief, but it can significantly affect their counsel. Without dealing with issues at their root, they and their patients just end up going around in painful, drawn out circles.

⁶ Taana D'vei Eliyahu Ch. 25

ROLE OF A JEWISH WOMAN IN HER HOME

All this being said, there is another very important point to consider: how much shalom there is in the home really depends on how well the woman in particular is able to fulfill her role within it. Her awareness, clarity, and commitment to positively change herself and bring those around her closer to their own potential is the foundation of shalom bayis. When this critical foundation is not in place, nothing will move.

Chazal say that the Jewish wife and mother is the sole source of blessing in the home.⁷ While every member of the family has their unique role and responsibility to play, it is the Jewish wife and mother who has the power to not only frame what is happening, but write the script. It she who sets the tone in the home. Who her family will become is to a large extent dependent on who she is, what she knows, and where she is going. This is a woman's strength and the key to shalom bayis.

Chazal compare a woman to the moon. The nature of the moon is that she really has no light of her own, she reflects the light that the sun shines. But interestingly not when the sun is out. At those times, she is hidden in the background.

Men are like the sun. They need to go out, be at the head, take the lead, shine bright,

⁷ Bava Metzia 59a

and give out of themselves.

That is the intrinsic nature of a man...

But... the minute it starts to get dark, the minute the night starts to set in and things get confusing or are hidden, a man's light tends to dim and fade out. Having emunah at these times is something that is extremely hard for a man.

On the other hand, davkah when it is dark, davkah in those moments of doubt, confusion, and hiddenness, that is when the moon shines bright. She takes the light that she receives from the sun and she reflects it out: for comfort, chizuk, and clarity. In fact, according to Chazal, women naturally have greater emunah than men.

This then is the nature of a woman at the most basic level: she takes the light that she picks up, that she senses, and receives from those around her, and she projects it back in a way that gives them clarity, builds them up, helps them to move forward and to properly see the challenges that lie ahead. This dynamic *always* exists when it comes to a woman.

But, there is an important principle that underlies this dynamic: to the extent that the woman is truly in touch with herself and the messages HaShem sends her way, to that extent she'll be successful in her mission.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that whatever happens to a person is also a mirror of his inner world. If you look upon another person and see a blemish, it is your own imperfection that you are encountering - you are being shown what it is that you must correct within yourself. This applies to everyone- man and woman alike. But, because of the woman's influential role as a wife, mother, and caretaker, it is even more vital that the woman is in touch with this principle.

If she is connected to who she is and where she is going in life, then she will naturally recognize and reflect back the best in those around her and bring them closer to HaShem. If she is not connected to who she is, then she will bring out the worst, *chas v'shalom*, to those around her and end up pushing them away not only from themselves, but from HaShem. As Shlomo HaMelech tells us, "The wise among women builds her home; the fool destroys it with her hands."⁸

Within her home, there are three main areas where a woman's strength, clarity, and wisdom make the greatest impact:

1. **With her parents.** A woman can take the qualities, values, and experiences- both the positive and the negative ones- that she received from her parents as a child, get some perspective about them, and then turn those same qualities,

8 Mishlei Chapter 14

values, and experiences into things that bring her closer to HaShem. She does this either by distancing herself from the attributes that in truth don't apply to her, or embracing them and expressing them within her own life.

2. **With her husband.** Chazal tell us: אשה כשרה עושה רצון בעלה, typically translated as, “The kosher woman does [according to] the will of her husband.”⁹ But, there is an alternative translation: “The kosher woman *makes* the will of her husband.” A man’s inherent nature is to give to his wife what she desires to receive. If she puts emphasis on certain qualities or actions, he will follow suit and try to give them to her. In cases where it is hard for a man give, like for example, in the situation where he has been conditioned to only receive, the woman then has the power to encourage him to give, to shine out his internal light- not only to her and their children, but to the world.
3. **With her children.** The child's role within the home is to receive. Children are physically and emotionally dependent on their parents and look to them as a source of comfort, chizuk, and clarity about themselves and the world. Though both the husband and wife share this role, a mother's bond with her children tends to be stronger, and she has a greater influence over them- especially in their younger years. Her job is to give to them in such a way that they learn about their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as about HaShem and the

9 Tanah Dvei Eliyau Rabbah 9

world they live in. The goal, and a mother's hope, is that all of her giving will help her children to eventually give out themselves to the world and to others later on as adults.

In summary, the success of the Jewish home depends on the woman's relationship with herself and HaShem as well as the atmosphere in the home that is created and sustained by her.

Chazal tell us that "Everything comes from the woman."¹⁰ The Midrash records the account of a righteous man and a righteous woman who were married but had no children. They eventually decided to get divorced. The righteous man married a wicked woman, and he became "wicked like her," whereas the righteous woman married a wicked man, and he became "righteous like her."

This brings us to a powerful idea: even though it is ideal for both the husband and wife to make a joint effort and accept equal responsibility for improving their relationship, on occasion it is only one partner who takes the initiative and responsibility. If that one partner is the woman, then she alone can still accomplish a complete transformation in the relationship even without her husband's initial full commitment, effort, or understanding. The Torah tells us that it simply won't work the other way around.

¹⁰ Bereishis Rabbah, Parashas Bereishis

TAKING THE LEAP

As Jewish women we have a tremendous role to play not only within our homes, but within the Jewish nation as a whole. We have the Divine ability to bring unity and shalom into the world, primarily by helping our husbands and children connect to themselves, HaShem, and each other. It's a big responsibility that elevates even the most mundane acts, like cleaning the floor, wiping a runny nose, or making dinner. In fact, Chazal tell us that the final Redemption will *only* come about in the merit of the righteous women of Israel.¹¹

But how do we get to such a lofty place when our homes resemble a physical and/or emotional battle field and our inner world doesn't look much better?

That journey starts within ourselves.

...And, the very first step in that journey is making the commitment to be as close to your true self as possible even if you don't know who she is yet.

Be yourself... not the person you think the other wants you to be... not the person who is merely a reaction to the people and experiences that surround her... not the person who has no space for others and their needs, thoughts, and opinions...

¹¹ Yalkut Shimoni, Ruth: 606

Sometimes the hardest part of the journey is to accept the fact that it always starts with *us*- not *them*. HaShem is running His world, no matter how many times we may forget or deny it. No one can do anything to us in our lives without HaShem willing it to be. They are merely messengers in HaShem's Hands.

We can choose to fight or ignore these Divine messages or let them guide us along the way. When we choose the latter, then even the smallest of movements on our end can open the floodgates of Heavenly assistance. As Chazal tell us, “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, 'My sons, open for Me an opening of teshuva like the eye of a needle, and I will open for you openings big enough for wagons and carriages to pass through [or like the gates of the sanctuary].'”¹² What this means is that for every bit of effort you make in an attempt to come closer to your true self and HaShem, HaShem responds with favor and assistance that is exponentially greater. As it says, “The one who sanctifies himself a little, Heaven helps to sanctify him a lot.”¹³

So, if you are having problems with a spouse, child, or parent or anyone in your extended family, then your job is to first and foremost take a look inside and figure out what's happening. Your internal dialogue is giving you vital information about the areas within you that are pulling you away from your true potential. These experiences are there to teach you about yourself and your unique חלק אלקי ממעל , the Divine Jewish

¹² Midrash, Shir HaShirim 5:2

¹³ Yoma 39a

spark within you that you, and only you alone, can bring into the world.

In closing, actions, such as giving, gratitude, respect, and good communication are essential elements of shalom baiys. But, the woman's self awareness and knowledge of her path in life are the vital foundation that will **naturally** promote and sustain these behaviors within the walls of her home. Even if those around her are at fault, the choice is in her hands to destroy or build, to create darkness or to make every effort to recognize and reflect the bright light that always surrounds her.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Free Shiur: [Defining the Role of a Jewish Woman](#)

- ➔ What exactly is a woman's purpose in Judaism?
- ➔ How does a woman come closer to HaShem without the mitzvah of learning Torah?
- ➔ What about single women or those without children?

