

CONCEPTS

A COMPLETE HOME

The Hebrew word שלום (Shalom) comes from the root *shalem*, which means complete or whole. While we translate one of its meanings as “peace,” the vision expressed in the Hebrew is not the same as the Latin word *pax*, from which the English was taken. *Pax* literally means quiet. *Shalom* means whole or complete. This is a more dynamic conception of peace.

Sh’lom bayit—a complete home—is an ideal vision of a family at peace with itself. Yet, family harmony is not always the easiest goal to achieve. During the hectic work week pressures build, tempers are frayed, and the opportunity to recognize and appreciate family members is often long in coming. The traditional Shabbat celebration brings us a way of actively building a dynamic sense of family Shalom. The individual blessing of family members is a ritualized expression of this opportunity.

BLESSING OF CHILDREN

The first of the family blessings are those for the children. The tradition of blessing children is quite old. The Bible itself records several parental blessings for children. We have Isaac’s blessings of his sons and Jacob’s blessing of his sons. The actual blessing formula still used for boys today refers to the blessing Jacob bestowed on his grandchildren Ephraim and Menasseh, Joseph’s sons. We bless our sons with the formula: “May God make you like Ephraim and Menasseh.” A *midrash* teaches that this benediction attests to their unique strength. These two boys were raised in Egypt, sons of an Egyptian nobleman, yet they refused to give up their identity as Jews. Rather than assimilate into the dominant culture, they openly identified with their alien relatives, the nomadic Israelite immigrants. Ephraim and Menasseh are symbols of the loyalty of children to their parents and their faith.

The blessing formula we use for daughters refers to the shining examples of Jewish womanhood, the ancestral mothers: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. We bless our daughters: “May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.” Sarah was a woman of courage whose response to adversity was laughter. Rebecca, even more than Abraham, is the biblical model of hospitality and human concern. And Rachel and Leah are the two biblical characters who fully model being “their sibling’s keeper,” showing real sisterhood. These are the values we wish on any child.

The children’s blessings are concluded with the ancient “Priestly Benediction,” the same formula that was recited by the High Priests in the Temple. This is the first of several echoes of the Temple service found in the Shabbat Seder. Parents preside over the Shabbat table as the priests presided over the altar in the Temple. The benediction itself asks God’s blessing for protection, kindness and peace.

The Art of Jewish Living: The Shabbat Seder
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