



# Hebrew Scriptures

## Shalom: The Hebrew View of Peace

*More than a dream or a polite greeting, Shalom strikes at every aspect of life*

Jacques B. Doukhan

**S**halom is one of the central concepts in the Hebrew Scriptures. The word itself occurs 237 times, and throughout the *Tanakh* it is attested with its derivatives more than 350 times (not including proper names). The word derives from the word *shalem* meaning “whole,” “complete,” suggesting a holistic perspective. Thus, *shalom* not only concerns human relationships; it reaches, in fact, all aspects of human existence.

### **Shalom Means Health**

The first and most elementary meaning of peace concerns life at its basic level: peace in the human body. Significantly, the first occurrence of the word *shalom* is found in Jacob’s enquiry about Laban’s health (Genesis 29:6). The word *shalom*, incidentally, is used 13 times with that connotation. King Hezekiah calls his recovery from sickness the restoration of his *shalom* (Isaiah 38:17). It is, then, understandable that *shalom* be sometimes rendered “health.” For example, Psalm 38:3, “There is no *shalom* in my bones”\* is translated with the phrase, “There is no health in my bones” (NRSV). In the book of Proverbs, *shalom* is associated with “length of days and

long life” (Proverbs 3:2). Peace is then first of all to be achieved on the physical level. But there is more than the body involved in this physical peace. This *shalom*, which implies strength of body, is conceived as the result of an intellectual and spiritual process. Our text of Proverbs was clear enough: “My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands; for length of days and long life and peace [*shalom*] they will add to you” (Proverbs 3:1-2). This biblical psychosomatic view of health is explicitly expressed later in the same passage: “Fear the Lord and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, and strength to your bones” (Proverbs 3:7-8). All the aspects of human existence play a role in the health of the human person. No dimension should be ignored.

### *Shalom is the result of an intellectual and spiritual process.*

The ethical, the spiritual, the mental, and the physical dimensions belong together. This truth has convincingly been demonstrated recently by many psychiatrists and ethicists. On the basis of the psychological test (called

*Tsedeq*), made essentially of ethical questions, psychiatrist Henri Baruk has been able to determine the mental sickness of his patients.

Likewise the works of the Swiss professor Tournier have revealed a definite connection between some physical diseases and a mental or moral problem. Philosopher Sisela Bok from Harvard University has observed the same relationship from a broader perspective; lies, she says, affect the health of our society. The lesson of this first observation, found already in the old Hebrew Bible, is still valid today and nurtures our primary reflection about peace. Before being a process involving another person, peace, *shalom*, should be, first of all, worked out within ourselves. Only a healthy person, in peace with himself (herself), can make peace with the other.

### **Shalom Means Justice**

The previous remark does not mean, however, that peace is understood as a mere inner spiritual state of the individual. In the Bible, *shalom* most often describes the ideal relationship in the life of the community. *Shalom* is, therefore, an essential ingredient of the biblical concept of covenant. Thus, the Hebrew

prophets often refer to “a covenant of *shalom*” (Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26; Isaiah 54:10). The words “covenant” and “*shalom*” are even often used interchangeably (Genesis 26:28; 1 Kings 5:26, Hebrew; Psalm 55:21, Hebrew). This is why justice plays such an important part in the process of peace. One cannot construct peace without being fair to one’s partner. King Solomon, whose name means “peace” and who was, indeed, remembered as a provider of peace (1 Chronicles 22:9), uses the word justice (*tsedaqah*) as a synonym of the word peace (Psalm 72:3-4). Later in the same prayer the king emphasizes that righteousness and peace shall flourish together (Psalm 72:7). This association is found again in Psalm 85 where the poet describes “righteousness and *shalom* kissing each other” (Psalm 85:10). Many related concepts such as truth, equity, honesty are connected to *shalom* (Psalm 37:37; Zechariah 8:16, 19; Esther 9:30). *Shalom* is not just an emotion, a good wish, or a feeling of the heart. *Shalom* implies the hard duty to be just and right. The prophet Isaiah sets justice as the only path leading to *shalom* (Isaiah 59:8). Many other biblical passages attest to the importance of righteousness and justice as the condition for *shalom* (Isaiah 48:18; 57:2; 60:17). *Shalom* is thus the experience of the one who has “nothing false in his mouth . . . and walks with uprightness” (Malachi 2:6, NIV; cf. Zechariah 8:19). Obedience to the law of God constitutes a prerequisite to the “*shalom* in the land” (Leviticus 26:3-4, 6). The effect of righteousness will be peace (Isaiah 32:17). Thus the two ideas are often combined (Psalm 72:7; 85:10; Isaiah 48:18; 57:2; 60:17). To be sure, this view that relates peace to righteousness has significant bearing on the Hebrew idea of salvation, since

peace is salvation (Isaiah 52:7; Nahum 1:15). The *shalom* which is given by God as an act of salvation is then accompanied with His judgment (Psalm 85:7-13). God does not save without judgment. This idea is very deeply enrooted in Hebrew traditions.

### *One cannot construct peace without being fair to one’s partner.*

Along the same line, Rabbi Simon b. Gamaliel goes as far as to anchor the salvation of the world precisely upon the connection between judgment and *shalom*. “By three things the world is preserved, by truth, by judgment and by peace” (*Avot* 1:18).

Peace with God and peace between people, just as peace within the human person, cannot be achieved without the effort of intelligence and the difficult choice of obedience to God’s law in the daily concrete actions. Peace is not a flight from reality, some kind of beatitude out of the flesh and away from the violent confrontation with evil. Furthermore, *shalom* would hardly tolerate compromise with evil. *Shalom* (peace) implies *shalem* (total, whole). The Hebrew peace is not achieved easily. The lesson strikes hard in the heart of natural human inclinations towards mediocrities and half measures. The prophet Jeremiah warns us against this temptation of an easy peace which characterizes the preaching of false prophets: “They have also healed the hurt of My people easily, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ But there is not peace” (Jeremiah 6:14). The ideal of peace is high and the construction of peace is, therefore, difficult and particularly demanding on all sides. *Shalom* is a struggle.

#### **Shalom Means Love**

Yet, *shalom* is also a gift of love

and not only the logical reward for justice. It is also obtained without any merit. The Bible calls this miracle “grace” (*hanan*), “mercy” (*rahamim*), or “love” (*hesed*). *Shalom* is not possible without these notions. The two thoughts are associated in the ancient priestly benediction:

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
The Lord make His face shine upon you,  
And be gracious [*hanan*] to you;  
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you,  
And give you peace [*shalom*] (Numbers 6:24-26).

Grace (*hanan*) flows in parallel with peace (*shalom*). The prophet Jeremiah associates *shalom* with love and mercy (Jeremiah 16:5). When *shalom* is withdrawn, steadfast love (*hesed*) and mercy (*rahamim*) disappear with it. In other words, one cannot initiate and build a solid peace without consenting to surrender, to lose something, without the will to give. The ideal outlined here goes beyond the practical necessity of the give-and-take process of the negotiation. Conceived as a free gift, *shalom* implies the risk of love. The enemy is not only the one with whom we have to deal, because of his power and the menace he represents. So understood, real peace will always be threatened and even broken when power and opportunity will present themselves. This is why the Bible recommends the unbelievable duty to seek the enemy’s interest. Exodus 23:4-5 urges the man who finds his enemy’s ox or ass or any loss to return it to him. Saul defines righteousness in terms of repaying good for evil (1 Samuel 24:17-19). The suffering Job claims that he never rejoiced over the misfortunes of his enemy (Job 31:29). The book of Proverbs puts this principle in the

form of a commandment, “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls” (Proverbs 24:17). The same thought is, by the way, expressed in Passover celebration which does not allow for the completion of the Hallel; for, according to the Talmud, God did not rejoice when Pharaoh and his armies drowned themselves in the Red Sea, and so forbade the angels and the Israelites to sing further: “My creation are drowned in the sea and you want to sing praises about that” (*b. Sanhedrin*, 39b). It is, therefore, not correct to oppose the so-called Old Testament and New Testament on the basis of the contrast drawn in the Sermon on the Mount between loving and hating one’s enemies (Matthew 5:23-44). On this matter, there is no difference between the two testaments. The ethical standard is the same. In fact, the apostle Paul expresses the same thought by reference to a passage of the book of Proverbs (Romans 12:14-21; cf. Proverbs 25:21-22). Indeed, love is implied in the Hebrew concept of peace. Actually the ultimate goal of *shalom* is not peace *per se*, it is love. For peace cannot be ensured as long as love is not there. The pertinence of this view was pointed out in the *Abot de-Rabbi Natan* (23), “Who is strong? He who converts an enemy into a friend.”

### **Shalom Means God**

The task of *shalom* seems, indeed, difficult if not impossible. Therefore, besides the reciprocal duty of righteousness and love, the biblical *shalom* implies a third dimension, namely the religious one. God is also a part of the *shalom* process. First of all, because peace is received as a gift from God. The source of *shalom* is announced in the blessing of the Cohen (Numbers 6:26). The Bible affirms over and over again that only God could “make *shalom*” (Isaiah 45:7). Job even speaks of God as the one who

“makes peace in His high places” (Job 25:2). Only God’s *shalom* can bring to resolution a conflict between enemies (Proverbs 16:7; Psalm 4:8). God and *shalom* are so closely related that Gideon identified the one with the other, “the Lord is *shalom*” (Judges 6:24, NIV). Peace is not feasible without this third Partner. From the biblical perspective, the mere humanistic approach to *shalom* is weak. The reference to the great “Other,” as Martin Buber liked to put it, is necessary in the dif-

## *The ultimate ideal of shalom is of a cosmic nature.*

ficult reconstruction of the broken “whole.” It is because our secular civilization has forgotten this bold reference to the “Father in Heaven” that men and women are no more able to see each other as brothers and sisters. Interestingly, the first biblical injunction against killing the human person appears in the book of Genesis in relation to the observation that every human being has been created in God’s image (Genesis 9:6). Thus, peace does not just concern the human realm; ultimately it involves the divine dimension. To achieve peace and to reconcile with one another brings about the recovery of the original divine imprint.

### **Shalom Means Hope**

No wonder then that *shalom* finds its most complete expression in the prophet’s vision of the future. Jacob dreams of the coming of the perfect King and describes him as the *Shiloh*, that is, the one who will bring *shalom* (Genesis 49:10). The prophet Isaiah announces an era of peace ushered in by the Messiah whom he calls “Prince of *Shalom*” (Isaiah 9:6-7). Isaiah dares to see this era of peace as an age when war will

be abolished:

They shall beat their  
swords into plow-  
shares,  
And their spears into  
pruning hooks;  
Nation shall not lift up  
sword against nation,  
Neither shall they learn  
war anymore (Isaiah  
2:4; cf. Micah 4:3).

Even the natural order will be affected by the presence of *shalom*:

The wolf also shall dwell  
with the lamb,  
The leopard shall lie down  
with the young goat,  
The calf and the young  
lion and the fatling  
together;  
And the little child shall  
lead them (Isaiah  
11:6).

The ultimate ideal of *shalom* is then of a cosmic nature. It is the hope of a “new order,” a radical one; the prophet speaks of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17). *Shalom* is here sung as the greatest promise from God and is conceived like an unbelievable miracle, something unheard of, which contains all the other *shaloms*. *Shalom* as health, *shalom* as complete justice, *shalom* as complete love, *shalom* as God in our life, *shalom* as fulfillment of all hopes. In this world of diseases, of injustice where hatred reigns and hope has been lost, *shalom* is more than ever needed. The thought of *shalom* haunts the minds of every human person. This is the essence of every cry and of every prayer. According to the Midrash, every prayer or blessing in Jewish liturgy (the Amidah, the Kaddish, the Priestly Blessing, the grace after the meal, etc.) concludes on *shalom* (*Leviticus R* 9:9). For the prayer for *shalom* contains all the prayers.

---

\*All biblical quotations are from the New King James version unless specifically indicated.