



## “Looking for Shalom in all the Wrong Places”

Clifford Goldstein  
Editor and Author

**H**ow fascinating that *shalom*, far from meaning just “peace” (as commonly understood and translated) means so much more: “full, complete, safe, and secure.” Contrast this to what the world offers, the empty, vain, useless toil that so many people spend their lives pursuing, never finding *shalom* because they are looking for it in all the wrong places.

This is nothing new: the prophet Isaiah talked about this thousands of years ago.

“Ho, all who thirst, come to the water, and who doesn’t have silver—come, buy, and eat; come, buy wine and milk but not with silver and not with cost. *Why do you spend silver for what isn’t bread, and why do you toil for what cannot satisfy?*”

Here, as through *all the Bible*, the Lord is calling people away from wasting their time, energy, and lives pursuing what they think will make them happy, what they think will answer the deepest needs and yet don’t because they can’t. They spend silver for what can’t feed them, and toil for what can’t satisfy, what can never bring them *shalom*.

“Why does man feel so bad in the

twentieth century?” wrote novelist Walker Percy. “Why does man feel so bad in the very age when, more than in any other age, he has succeeded in satisfying his needs and making over the world for his own use?”<sup>1</sup>

Because he hasn’t satisfied his *real* needs, because doesn’t have true *shalom*. If he did, he’d feel good; he hasn’t, which is why he feels bad. He has toiled and spent silver for what

*The only thing that  
can satisfy takes no  
toil or money.*

isn’t bread, when Isaiah promises that through the Lord you can “eat well and pamper yourself in fatness” (Isaiah 55:2).

The irony in these Isaianic verses is that people toil (more literally, “weary themselves”) and spend money in pursuit of what’s ultimately empty, when the only thing that can satisfy takes no toil or money. God says Come, and He will feed us instead.

Isaiah’s brimming with words

that convey the emptiness, the void, the vanity, the nothingness and meaningless of so much of what people cling to, even as Isaiah calls them to reject those things for only things that could possibly fulfill their most insatiate longings.

“Behold you are *nothing*, and your work is of *nought*” (Isaiah 41:24). The word translated “nothing,” *ayin*, is a particle of negation; the closest to it in English is “not.” It’s often translated: “is not,” “were not,” “are not,” “was not.” For example, “And Enoch walked with God, and *he was not*, for God took him” (Genesis 5:24).

“No one calls for justice, nor judges in truth. They trust in *vanity* and speak *worthlessness*” (Isaiah 59:4). The word translated “vanity” is *tohu* (“and the earth was *tohu* and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep”). It means, essentially, “formlessness,” “emptiness,” “empty space,” “unreality,” “confusion.” Meanwhile, the word for “worthlessness,” *shav*, means “emptiness,” “vanity,” “nothingness.”

“When you cry, let your assembled ones deliver you; but the wind shall carry them all away, and *vapor* shall take them” (Isaiah 57:13).

“Vapor” here comes from *hebel*, which also means “vanity,” “vainly,” “to no purpose.” Solomon wrote “*Hebel of hebel*, all is *hebel*” (Ecclesiastes 1:12).

“And Egypt will help you in vain (*hebel*), to *no purpose*” (Isaiah 30:7). The phrase “no purpose” comes from a word (*rik*) meaning, essentially, “empty” “void,” “idle,” or “vainly.”

“Behold, all of them are *nothing*; their works are *null*; *wind* and *empty* their molten images” (Isaiah 41:29). “Nothing” here is again *ayin*<sup>2</sup>; the word for “null” is *efš*, which expresses nonexistence, meaninglessness, or ceasing. “There is none (*efš*) besides me; I am the Lord and there is no (*ayin*) other” (Isaiah 45:6). “Wind” is *ruach*, commonly “breath,” “wind” or “spirit.” “Empty” is *tohu* again.

“For thus saith the Lord, you have sold yourselves for *nothing*, and you will be redeemed without money” (Isaiah 52:3). “Nothing” (*binam*) means “for nought, or “without purpose” “or without cause.”

“Woe to them who draw iniquity with cords of *vanity* (*shaw*)” (Isaiah 5:18).

“All the nations are as *nothing* (*ayin*) before him; as *nothing* (*efš*) and *void* (*tohu*) they are deemed” (Isaiah 40:17).

“Those who make graven images; all of them are *vain* (*tohu*)” (Isaiah 44:9).

Each of these words expresses the futility of the world and worldly ways. In contrast, Isaiah in all its depth, richness, and power, is ultimately a book of salvation, about the promise of *shalom* that only the Lord, who alone can satisfy, can bring. For this reason, the emptiness, the vanity, the nothingness of these words, used so profusely in Isaiah, becomes even more apparent in contrast to what God offers for us now and in eternity, and that is *shalom*.

That last verse quoted—“Those who make graven images; all of them are *vain* (*tohu*)”—comes from a chapter that symbolizes the futility, the vanity, and the ultimate emptiness of the wrong choices so often made with our free wills, whether in

the 8th century B.C.E. or the 20th C.E.

The chapter begins with God’s promise to fulfill the needs of His people. “For I will pour water upon the thirst, and floods upon that which is dry; and I will pour out my Spirit upon your seed and my blessings upon your offspring” (vs. 3).

The Lord then states again, as He does through much of Isaiah, His supremacy. “Thus says the Lord, I am the King of Israel, his Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts. I am the first, and I am the last and besides me there is no (*ayin*) other God” (vs. 6). In the next few verses the Lord emphasizes

### *Everyone, in one way or another, worships.*

His power, His knowledge of the future and His ability to control it, which is why He then says, “Do not fear, do not be afraid” (vs. 8).

Isaiah then contrasts this affirmation of God’s Kingship, of His redemption, of His power, of His ability to satisfy the needs of His people, with the emptiness and meaninglessness of idolatry. He writes about a man who hews down a tree to build a fire, and then uses the rest of the wood to make an idol.

“Then it [wood] will be to the man for burning; he takes from it and warms himself; then he burns it and bakes bread; then he makes a god and worships it. He makes a graven image and falls prostrate before it. Part of it he burns with fire; with part he eats flesh; he then roasts meat and is filled. He’s warm and says, ‘I am warm; I have seen the fire.’ And with the rest he makes a god, a graven image, and he falls prostrate before it and worships it, and he prays to it and says, ‘Save me, because you are my god’” (vss. 15-17).

Isaiah’s point is the utter silliness, the futility of this false worship. This is the kind of man who “has shut his eyes from seeing” (vs. 18). Even with

the revelation of God, of His creative power and might, this man has chosen to go his own way, to worship his own gods, which either now, or in the end, cannot save. “He feeds on ashes; a deceived heart has turned him aside and will not deliver his soul, and he can’t say, ‘Is there not a lie in my right hand?’” (vs. 20). In other words, he’s been so deceived by his wrong choices that he can’t discern his error.

Of course, today, the particular doesn’t apply (most of us don’t worship statues of wood), but the universal behind that particular does, because everyone, in one way or another, worships. In today’s secular society, men worship themselves, or their institutions, their heroes, or their ideas. Perhaps, in his alienation, fears, and epistemological and existential ignorance, man needs to find something to give him meaning and purpose in life. That which does, or at least that which he thinks does, even if it’s only the creation itself, is what he bestows his adoration and praise upon. In short, it’s what he worships. It’s his god, and yet, just like the wooden one that Isaiah mocks in chapter 44—this god cannot bring *shalom*.

“For they have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, *shalom, shalom*, when there is no *shalom*” (Jeremiah 8:11).

Again, that’s only because they’re looking for peace in all the wrong places.

---

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Harper’s, “The Electronic Hive: Two Views” (May, 1994), pp. 18-19.

<sup>2</sup>The Masoretic text has the letters *ayin, vav, nun*, usually translated “iniquity.” The BHS critical apparatus, citing the LXX and the Syriac, has it as *ayin yod nun*, transliterated here as *ayin*, the negative particle. It appears to be a scribal error, in which the yod was mistaken for an ayin, two letters that are somewhat similar looking. This probably accounts for the minor textual discrepancy.