

Parshat Ki Teytzey: Peace, A Theme of Shabbat and of the High Holidays Meditation by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

Every Jewish prayer service ends with a prayer for peace. Peace is a theme throughout the Jewish calendar and liturgy, but Shabbat and the High Holidays are particularly focused on this essential value. The prayers and practices for these holiest days of the year envision – and urge us to help create – a world at peace.

Shabbat recalls the beginning of Creation and the first Sabbath, when the Garden was whole and peaceful and God was refreshed (Genesis 2:1-3, Exodus 31:16). Shabbat also anticipates the Messianic age, when time will become “a continuous Sabbath day.” Shabbat is called “a taste of the world to come” in large part because, on that day, we are privileged to experience a sampling of the sense of peace that we will know fully and constantly only in a perfected world. It’s no coincidence that the greeting for the Sabbath day is: *Shabbat Shalom*, meaning “may you experience a Sabbath of peace.”

The Shofarot service of the High Holiday liturgy offers a utopian vision of a redeemed world. Mostly, however, the High Holidays are concerned with improving *this* world. We repent for sins that stir up strife and prevent peace here and now. Many of the Scriptural readings (particularly the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading about the family of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac and the Yom Kippur Haftarot from Isaiah and Jonah) focus on a lack of peace -- and the desperate need for it in our hearts, families, and society.

The Torah reading for the second Shabbat of Elul includes a discussion of war in chapter 21 and of divorce in chapter 24. It’s an acute reminder that we seek peace in the world and peace in our homes, but we’re not there yet. We need to heal and to become whole. The Hebrew root of *shalom* is *sh.l.v.*, meaning tranquil, but the word is often related homiletically to *shalem*, meaning “whole.”

The following are meditations, exercises, and discussion questions to help you contemplate peace this Shabbat and increase peace in yourself and in the world:

1. Use the word *shalom* as a mantra (phrase you return to in your mind during a period of silent meditation).
2. Conduct a sing-down or sing-along of Shabbat songs that include the word *shalom*.
3. What is the opposite of *shalom* to you? War? Strife? Fragmentation? Upset? Write on this theme in a journal or discuss the question with family and friends.
4. What can you do to increase peace in your home?
5. If you could make one change this year that would bring you great inner peace, what would it be?
6. (Where, with whom, or how) do you feel called to increase peace in your community or the wider world?