

The Jewish Parents Almanac
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SHALOM—PEACE

In a world becoming smaller every day, the Jewish imperative to be *rodef shalom*, a pursuer of peace, is more important than ever.

SHELOM BAYIT: DOMESTIC PEACE

Seeking peace begins with domestic harmony and radiates outward in ever-widening circles. *Shelom bayit* is the traditional Jewish ideal of creating a peaceful, loving atmosphere in our own homes. Rabbi Simon Glustrom, author of *The Language of Judaism*,² has pointed out that *shelom bayit* does not necessarily mean a hushed, quiet atmosphere. A home may seem peaceful on the surface, but be seething with anger beneath. Conversely, a noisy, vibrant, communicative family may experience a

great measure of confidence, inner peace, and mutual respect.

Of course, *shelom bayit* cannot be reduced to a formula or an activity, but constitutes an entire approach to family life, which means, among other things:

- A commitment to home and family as priorities, in deed as well as word,
- Quantity and quality time with our own families,
- Learning effective ways of resolving family conflict and creating intimacy,
- Nurturing Jewish values in the home, such as respect and kindness.

A Few Ideas

- Make your home into a warm, safe, loving place of peace by frequent positive interactions that involve touch, eye contact, and focused attention. Bedtimes, wake-up times, homecomings, and other transitions of the day are key opportunities for loving interaction. Jewish holidays and especially Shabbat provide regular, reliable times for being together. A family hug, holding hands and singing around the Shabbat table, and other loving traditions let family members know they matter.

- Small children will also respond to the occasional use of positive reinforcements; for example, cut out a heart or a house from construction paper and attach it to the refrigerator or bulletin board. (You can even write *shelom bayit* on it.) Then, whenever you catch each other being considerate or interacting peacefully, attach a heart-shaped sticker to the large shape—until you fill it up (children should be allowed to do this, too), then reward yourselves with an activity together.

- Encourage cooperation rather than competition among family members: avoid comparisons between siblings; strive to let each one know that she or he is valued as an individual. Good-natured, playful competition may be appropriate in some situations, but in general cooperation should be stressed and cooperative activities fostered. The Torah has many stories that illustrate the destructive potential of sibling rivalry and discrimination.

- Regular family meetings can create a framework in which communication lines stay open, problems are tended to early on, and family harmony is

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encouraged. Openly discuss the needs of the individuals involved in normal (nonemergency) family conflicts and brainstorm creative win-win solutions wherever possible. Shabbat meals also provide plenty of opportunities for more informal family discussion sessions.

- The parents' marital relationship, their mutual respect and love, set the tone for *shelom bayit* for the entire family. It's easy to make one's marriage a secondary priority when there are children; however, nurturing the marital relationship is one of the most important things that parents can do for their children. As the experts are always reminding us, parents need time alone as a couple, and they need shared activities and interests.

- One ingredient for *shelom bayit* is nurturing the spiritual needs of the marriage. Many couples learn some Torah (or any Jewish text) together for a few minutes each evening or half an hour every Shabbat. Reading and discussing books on marriage and family life together can also be a meaningful Shabbat afternoon activity. Praying together for strength and wisdom to deal with family concerns is also valuable; it's unfortunate that many of us see this form of prayer as foreign to Judaism. Many contemporary Jewish couples have discovered the observance of the traditional Jewish sexual disciplines revolving around the *mikveh* (see pp. 262-263) and feel that these add a greater measure of spirituality and commitment to their relationship.

- *Shelom bayit* is a concept that applies to all types of families, not only the two-parent, first-marriage type of family. Single-parent and blended families will often have many challenges to face in this area and will need to make *shelom bayit* a high, conscious priority. In the essay "Facing Divorce" in *The Hadassah Magazine Jewish Parenting Book*³ Marilyn Shlachter Berger points out the importance of *shelom bayit* after a divorce as the atmosphere of tranquillity and wholeness (*shalem* means whole) that should be cultivated for the children in each parent's home. She explains that after a divorce parents should not view the family as incomplete or "broken", but should perceive the single-parent-children unit as a whole, complete family, observing Jewish traditions together at home and with other families, and remaining involved in a larger Jewish community. (See chapter 7 for more detailed discussion of these issues.)

- Be aware of the issue of family violence in the Jewish community. The positive stereotype is that spouse and child abuse don't exist in our commu-

nities; would that it were so! Victims and perpetrators of battering and abuse require special counseling approaches that differ fundamentally from regular marital counseling. Not all violence is physical, either. Emotional, verbal, social, and economic abusiveness are simply more insidious forms of battering. An atmosphere where a spouse or other family members are not respected and honored destroys *shelom bayit*. Although some rabbis and Jewish counselors are not yet equipped to deal adequately with this issue, awareness of the problem is growing. Jewish Family Service agencies around the country are introducing counseling, support groups, shelters, and other programs to deal with this problem.

PEACE EDUCATION

- Listen to Jewish songs and learn the many Jewish prayers in the *siddur* (prayer book) about *shalom*, such as *Oseh Shalom*, *Sim Shalom*, and *Shalom Rav*. At home, illustrate and dramatize them through art, dance, and creative writing. Engage in Torah talk about the deeper meaning of *shalom*, that is, not merely a cessation of hostilities, but real wholeness and understanding.

- Discourage war play and don't buy toys that glorify violence. One family I know forbade toy guns because of the pervasiveness of guns as weapons of violence in modern society; however, they allowed toy bows and arrows and toy swords because of their more removed, historical connotation. This allowed their children an alternative way to act out their anxieties and aggressions through play. As to the occasional toy weapon received as a gift, they admitted to ambivalence: They didn't want to refuse these gifts outright. In the end, they made sure that the war toys their children received as gifts had a way of "disappearing" faster than other toys.

A friend of mine who lives in Israel said that she finally decided it was too hypocritical to forbid her son a toy gun when his father carried one to reserve duty and in his job as security officer for their Galilee *moshav*. But she still feels uncomfortable about it. (Her internal conflict is an interesting extension of the contemporary dilemma of Jewish military power.)

Although the subject is complex, parents should be aware of the way their children play and should be ready to discuss play issues with them. Be alert to a preponderance of war themes in children's

play, which may be an expression of underlying feelings of anger or fear.

- Parents should consider limiting their children's viewing of violent television and movies (including some cartoons, which can be surprisingly violent). Whether violence in the media reflects or encourages the violence in society is still up for debate, but it's hard to believe that watching thousands of murders on television doesn't harden children's sensibilities.

There are many strategies for keeping television viewing within bounds. Our silent television on Shabbat has had many unexpected benefits. Our Saturday mornings never include several hours of violent or overstimulating cartoons interspersed with seductive advertisements for questionable toys and sugary cereals. Throughout the day, learning, reading, interaction, and imaginative play take the place of isolated, passive television watching. (And it does seem to spill over into the weekdays, too.)

- Encourage peaceful, cooperative, life-affirming activities for children, such as caring for plants and animals, gently caring for younger siblings, parent-play with dolls for both sexes, creative art and music, and sports and active games that release energy in positive ways.

- Encourage nonviolent, educational television shows that broaden children's understanding of other people and of nature. Ask your librarian for suggestions from the many contemporary books that describe the lives of children from different cultural backgrounds. Learn about different cultures through music, art, and film.

- Seek diversity in your family's social interactions and in your children's experiences as well. Tolerance cannot be learned from books alone. In many locations, the Jewish community is more apparently homogeneous than the surrounding community in terms of socioeconomic status, race, and functioning, particularly for the child attending almost exclusively Jewish schools and extracurricular activities. (This should *not* be taken as a statement against Jewish day schools. Indeed, a child can be socially ghettoized without going to a day school, and a child who attends a school can have many extracurricular activities and neighborhood friendships with a diverse group of friends. The main purpose of sending a child to a day school ought to be Jewish education, not segregation.)

Often we assume a tolerance that is never

tested. A Jewish friend of mine with two adopted children of color tells me that her family's experiences with racism have been worse in the Jewish community than in the community at large. Others, sadly, find that their Jewish communities are not accepting of their children with mental or severe physical handicaps. Parents need to provide settings where children can interact naturally with people of other races, cultures, and generations, as well as people with physical and mental limitations.

- Discuss prejudice and intolerance in age-appropriate ways. There are plenty of examples in the media and in books. Obviously, pejorative labels for other religious and ethnic groups and racist "humor" do not belong in a Jewish home.

- Teach children how to acknowledge and express their feelings properly, rather than to repress or act out their aggressive feelings. Teach them by example and explanation how to express angry feelings without hurting others (for example, using "I language": "I feel angry when . . . What I want instead is . . ."). Provide healthy outlets for aggression, such as safe "roughhousing," a punching bag, fencing with "Nerf swords," tearing old papers or rags, drawing "mad" pictures, writing down angry feelings, punching clay or dough, and running.

- It may sound paradoxical, but self defense classes that foster self-confidence and self-control rather than violence (such as Kung Fu or Aikido) can be very positive. A good teacher will be skilled at helping students channel anger and aggression. Weakness does not equal peace; indeed, powerlessness can also foster rage. All teenagers can benefit from learning self defense.

- Support peace education in your children's school and your local school system. Peace education encompasses everything from teaching conflict resolution on the playground to learning about other countries, cultures, and different types of people, to artistic expression about peace.

- Jewish schools in particular need to deal with the many divergent *shalom* issues: *shelom bayit*, *ahavat Yisrael* (love for one's fellow Jews, harmony with other Jewish groups—a growing issue), *darkei shalom* (respect and good relations with non-Jews). The Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE) and the UAHC's *Keeping Posted* magazine are among those that have produced classroom materials on such important subjects as

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the nuclear threat and Israeli-Palestinian relations. Find out how your children's school deals with these topics.

SEEK PEACE

There are many levels on which we can support Jewish groups and other groups that promote peace and understanding: in our homes, in our Jewish communities, among Americans of various races and religions, in Israel—between Jews and Palestinian Arabs, and in other troubled areas of the world such as Central America and Africa. We can support groups that are dedicated to international understanding, human rights, *pikuah nefesh* (saving lives), worldwide peace, and nuclear disarmament.

Support can take many forms, such as monetary donations, letter writing, teaching, public relations, and volunteer work. Young children should know about their parents' work for *shalom*; older children can be actively involved. (See the Resource Guide on p. 338 for some specific organizations.)

Evaluate where your family's money is spent and invested by peace, justice, and human rights criteria.