

# Saying “Shabbat Shalom”

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It was a Saturday morning a few years ago, when my father and I were on our routine walk to my synagogue's first minyan. It was about 7 am, so neither of us were very alert. When walking in front of Benny's Barber Shop on King's Highway, an elderly fellow dressed in traditional Ashkenazi garb walked by us in the opposite direction on his way to his shul. Neither my father nor I said anything to acknowledge him. Suddenly this man raises his voice and chastises us with the following diatribe: "How come you didn't say Shabbat Shalom to me? Don't you know that you're supposed to say Shabbat Shalom to every Jew that walks by you on Shabbat?"

My father and I were placid, but turned pale due to our crass error in judgment. My dad expressed remorse to this man and said "I'm very sorry, you are absolutely right. I simply didn't realize the significance of it." Sometimes when my dad and I walk to synagogue early on Saturday morning, we are oblivious to our surroundings. We realized that this was a mistake on our part and as a general rule, this scenario shouldn't happen again. This story has been repeated in my household countless times; as it teaches us a very valuable lesson.

A basic tenet of our faith dictates that one is supposed to say "Shabbat Shalom" to a fellow Jew on Shabbat. The expression means "Sabbath of Peace," and may have originated from the Kabbalistic circles of Safed in the 16th century spreading throughout the Middle East. The original practice, as described in the



*Hemdat Yamim Siddur* was to rush home after the Morning Services and exclaim "*Shabbat Shalom U'Mevorach*" (Sabbath of Peace and be blessed) to the members of the household. Later, this practice evolved to include saying it to everyone during Shabbat and even on Erev Shabbat (Friday). Far from being obsolete, this simple practice has an added significance in our society now more than ever.

Baruch Hashem, our community in New York is large in number, however, there is a lot of diversity and occasionally division. Some Jews are Sephardic, some are Ashkenazi, and some are Yemenite. Some are religiously observant according to

one school of thought, others are religiously observant according to other schools of thought, and others are not religiously observant in the traditional sense. All of these distinctions, classifications, and divisions may be "a necessary evil" and most probably sociologically inevitable when you have more than 50,000 different people in a given group.

Overall, the Syrian Jewish community is serene; most of the time there is peace. This is a tremendous blessing from Hashem that should not be taken for granted. Many other societies are not as fortunate. Throughout the history of the world,

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internal religious strife has plagued populations with violence, death and destruction. One only needs to read *The New York Times* or watch "Al Jazeera" each day to see what happens in Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan when religious sects of the same religion can't get along with one another. It seems like the natural progression in the world can be summarized as follows: religious arguments lead to grudges. Grudges lead to revenge, and revenge leads to bloodshed. All in all, what frequently happens today in the Middle East is unfortunate; a vestige of the past that should be left in the past, not brought into the 21st century.

Occasionally and on a much smaller scale, there might be some tension between members of the different groupings of our community. This tension, caustic to our atmosphere, usually occurs due to a series of miscommunications, misunderstandings, or disagreements that have developed over time. Sometimes these misunderstandings are augmented by the troublemakers amongst us on both sides of any given equation. These troublemakers enjoy embellishing the stories and vilifying the opposite group. The problem is not that we all have different opinions, but rather the slander and instigation that takes place as a result. There is nothing wrong with different groups disagreeing with one another and leaving it at that. To the best of my knowledge, in the times of the Talmud, disagreements on Halachah were not taken outside of the Bet Midrash into the social realm.

In my opinion, the cure to this problem that we occasionally face as a community is committing to say "Shabbat Shalom" to each Jew encountered on Shabbat, especially those that are different than us, and especially to those people that you don't know. This simple action, deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, can ameliorate the tension and will help put things into perspective for members of the community. By saying "Shabbat Shalom," we acknowledge that while there might be some differences amongst our people, at the end of the day, we are all Jewish, and viewed as equal by our Creator.

Unity has always been the greatest strength of our community. May we all merit to bring "Shalom" into our dwellings each Shabbat. Let us all say "Shabbat Shalom."□