Aspiring to Personal Sheleimut (Wholeness), by Rabbi Jack Bieler

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Jewish thought generally understands human beings to be beset by a form of dualism arising from the spiritual and material components with which they were created.[i] These antithetical influences typically cause people to vacillate between extremes of altruistic (attributable to their spiritual dimension) and self-indulgent (the result of their "earthiness") behavior. The forces that dialectically interact within each of us and are thought to be outgrowths of the components with which we were created, are referred to in rabbinic literature as the *yetzer haTov* and the *yetzer haRa* (the good and evil inclinations).[ii] In the spirit of Maimonides' "Golden Path" (*Mishneh Tora, Hilkhot Dei'ot* 1:3), each of us seeks to maintain a balance between these two powerful tendencies over the course of our lives—with some of us achieving better and more consistent results than others.

The experience of one notable biblical figure, Yaakov, who is singularly described, at least for a short time, as having successfully integrated *all* aspects of his life, including inner as well as outer influences and responsibilities, offers us an ideal equilibrium toward which to aspire.

> And Yaakov came ***shalem*** (as a balanced, whole being) to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-Aram, and encamped before the city. (*Bereishit* 33:18)[iii]

The most widely-known interpretation for the term *shalem* in this verse is found in Rashi's commentary, based upon Rav's (175–247 bce) understanding of the term recorded in *Shabbat* 33b:

1. “*Shalem*” with respect to his body, because he recovered from his limp;[iv]
2. “*Shalem*” with respect to his finances, because he did not lose anything from offering a considerable gift;[v]
3. “*Shalem*” in his Torah, because he forgot none of it while in the house of Lavan. (Rashi (1040–1105) s.v. *shalem*)[vi]

Various Rabbinic sources add additional dimensions to the concept of Yaakov’s “wholeness,” for example,

> …4) “*Shalem*” with respect to his children, Yaakov’s having been afraid that Esav would kill members of his family to such an extent that he divided everyone into two groups (*Bereishit* 32:8–9). (*Tanhuma Yashan*, Parashat vaYishlah #9)[vii]

5. “*Shalem*” with respect to his wives… (*Me’Ein Ganim*, manuscript)[viii]

One could understand these various aspects of being *shalem* in strictly *quantitative* terms, i.e., Yaakov 1) was physically well; 2) his possessions were intact; 3) he remembered all that he had studied with his father and grandfather as well as anything he may have learned while at the Yeshiva of Shem veEiver; [ix] 4) his children were alive and well, 5) as were his wives to whom he was still married. And it is easy to understand how such a state of affairs could lead one to being very content with where he finds himself in his life.

But a source from the Zohar implies that there is another, more existential manner in which to approach these elements from a global perspective:

> 6) “*Shalem*” “above” and “below”; “*Shalem*” in Heaven and “*Shalem*” on earth. (*Zohar Hadash*, *Helek* 1, #172b)[x]

Rather than looking at Yaakov's life as merely replete with the various things that he loved and cared about, the Zohar suggests that his s*heleimut* was a state of mind that informed both his this-worldly (day-to-day actions and responsibilities) as well as his other-worldly (spiritual life and divine service) activities. Although the Zohar's understanding still allows for a compartmental approach whereby interpersonal commandments (i.e., monetary and domestic matters) and between humans and God (i.e., Torah study and its subject matter) exist in pristine isolation from one another, it nevertheless minimally promotes the conception that at least all this-worldly endeavors are not to be viewed as separate from one another, but rather as part of a complementary whole, with the same being said for other-worldly activities.

I would argue that Rabbi S. R. Hirsch takes advocacy for the integration of the ostensibly disparate aspects of one's entire life one step further, when he writes,

> 7) "*Shalem*"—in full harmonious, undiminished completeness, not only in material matters, but also above all in moral and spiritual matters, especially considering the moral dangers that beset a man who has to make the most strenuous efforts to secure material independence…
>
> "*Shalem*" is the expression of the most complete harmony, especially the compete agreement of external matters with internal ones. All true peace worthy of the word "*Shalom*," even of civil strife, is not one made according to stereotypical external patterns, but must come from inside, from the nature and ideal of the harmonious order of the matters of life.

R. Hirsch was well-known for advocating an approach to life as a whole that he referred to as "*Torah im Derekh Erets*" (Torah along with the way of the world)—see, e.g., *Avot* 2:2.[xi] In addition to legitimizing an observant individual's participation in general society in order to meet his financial obligations to his families and communities, the ideational aspect of this perspective was to claim that additional value was created when ideas of Torah interacted with high secular culture and vice versa. Therefore, R. Hirsch's understanding of Yaakov's, and for that matter all of humanity's, ultimate "wholeness" would reflect a similar complementarity of the physical and spiritual worlds on personal, psychological,

philosophical, domestic, and political levels. Furthermore, “harmony,” a blending of pronouncedly different sounds in order to create from such a “mix” an even more profound aesthetic and artistic achievement, becomes an evocative metaphor for the combining and coordinating of what appear to be varied and even dissonant components of an individual life.

R. Hirsch’s perspective seems to me to extend to human “wholeness,” to even a theological dimension as a fulfillment of *Imitateo Dei* (emulating God).[xii] Although it is a particular challenge for humans to coordinate the various components of their makeup and experience, which, left to their own devices, appear to be in constant conflict with one another, “Oneness” is part and parcel of the definition of God:

> This God Is One. He is not two or more, but One, Unified in a manner which (surpasses) any unity that is found in the world; i.e., He is not one in the manner of a general category which includes many individual entities, nor one in the way that the body is divided into different portions and dimensions. Rather, He is unified, and there exists no unity similar to His in this world…. (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah* 1:7)

Yet for all of God’s “Oneness,” one of His subsidiary Names is “*Shalom*”:

> The following dictum of R. Hamnuna on Ulla's authority: A man may not extend a greeting of “*Shalom*” to his neighbor in the baths, because it is said, (*Shofetim* 6:24) “And he called it, ‘The Lord (Is) *Shalom*.’” (*Shabbat* 10b)

While this could be understood as indicating that God is so much “of a single piece” that He is the ultimate example of “*Shalom*” or “*sheleimut*,” the Name could also represent the exquisite level of integration of diverse forces and qualities that are by definition parts of God’s makeup. For example, when considering how God describes His attributes to Moshe (*Shemot* 34:6–7), one notices that there is a distinct dichotomy regarding the list of divine qualities:

Terms Associated with the Attribute of Mercy	Terms Associated with the Attribute of Justice
HaShem HaShem	*Keil*
rahum veHanun *erekh apayim* *veRav hesed*	*veEmet*
notzer hesed leAlafim *veNoseh avon vaFesha veHata'a veNakeh*	*Lo yenakeh* *pokeid avon avot al banim veAl benai banim veAl shileishim veAl ribei'im.*

Therefore, when a person attempts to unify his or her own tendencies, predilections and qualities, it could be said that on some level, that person is emulating the divine. By trying to be as *shalem* as we can, we achieve ever-greater holiness, as defined by approaching one of God's fundamental qualities.

A perspective such as that of R. Hirsch would reframe the five categories of Yaakov's "*sheleimut,*" mentioned in the Talmud and Midrash as follows:

1. His body was not merely functioning well to the point that he didn't notice any aches and pains, but his physical being was completely "in sync" with all aspects of his life;
2. As opposed to Hillel's observation in Avot 2:7 that "*marbeh nekhasim, marbeh da'aga*" (the more possessions one has, the more concern and distraction he will experience), Yaakov felt privileged and happy that he could live such a comfortable existence, and was at peace with respect to what was his;
3. Yaakov was confident that he was living consistently with the values and directives that had comprised his formative religious education, despite the challenges posed by the likes of Esav and Lavan, as well as the responsibilities arising from taking care of a large family consisting of four wives and 13 children;
4. The sharp sibling rivalry that had marked his children's interactions while they were growing up had at long last dissipated and everyone seemed to be getting along;
5. Even Rachel and Leah, as well as their handmaidens Bilha and Zilpa, instead of continuing to bicker and compete for Yaakov's love, had accepted their respective places within the family, only adding to Yaakov's overall sense of well-being and domestic tranquility.

Thinking about Yaakov in these terms points out how all of us, at certain moments throughout our lives, feel that circumstances are such that everything "comes together" in the spirit of James Joyce's concept of "epiphany" first in his novel *Stephen Hero,*[xiii] and later in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

Yet, what also makes such moments particularly poignant—and it was as true for Yaakov as it is for us—that however perfect these special times may seem, they are relatively short-lived. In Yaakov's case, the trauma of Dinah's rape follows shortly after the text attributes to him "*sheleimut*" (*Bereishit* 34:1 ff.), along with the death of Rachel (*Ibid*. 35:16–20) and the disappearance of Yosef (*Ibid*. 37:1 ff). In short order, Yaakov is beset by shock, a sense of violation, mourning, and an ongoing experience of loss when his family is disrupted beyond repair. One wonders about how these events impacted upon his belief in God, if not also his Torah observances.

I remember once hearing an evocative parable from R. Avi Weiss that encapsulates the realization that the best times of our lives simply don't last forever:

> A father, who had just married off his last daughter, was overheard appealing to God, saying, “Just a nail; please give me a nail!” A rabbi explained the father’s strange plea:
>
> This man recognizes that life is like a giant wheel, upon which one is either going up or going down. He feels he has reached the height of his happiness and therefore wishes to affix the wheel in place to assure that nothing will change.

Sadly we only know too well that such a plea is futile, and the wheel continues to rotate with all of us “simply along for the ride,” holding on for dear life.

The relatively stark metaphor of life being like a “wheel,” whereby there are only two options, up or down, is in my view somewhat ameliorated by an alternate image offered by R. Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, in his work, *Peri HaAretz*:[xiv]

> …(Life can be compared to a pendulum.) A pendulum cannot move to only one extreme. If it swings far to the left, it must also swing back to the right in equal measure…. It is impossible to constantly ascend. Everyone inevitably experiences descents and falls… each person in his own way…. One cannot ignore the dark side inherent in a life of dramatic ascents and jumps: equally dramatic descents and falls…

Whereas the metaphor of the wheel is dependent upon the object’s rotation, with one spin possibly encompassing an entire lifetime, a pendulum is more likely to swing back and forth repeatedly. In the case of Yaakov, certainly all that he lost cannot be restored, but high points come again, albeit without the terminology of “*sheleimut*,” when he hears that Yosef is alive, he is reunited with his beloved son, and he lives to see the offspring of his children.

Finally, a disconcerting rabbinic comment suggests that not only does our inherent mortality prevent even the best of situations from reaching a state of unremitting constancy, but that God prefers us to be in a state of disorientation and uncertainty rather than calm, self-satisfaction and completeness:

> …And there is a further homiletic interpretation concerning it: "And Yaakov dwelled"—Yaakov wished to dwell in peace and quiet. The aggravation of Yosef sprang upon him. "The righteous wish to live in peace and quiet?" Said the Holy One, Blessed be He. "Is it not enough that a place has been reserved for the righteous in the World to Come, that they also wish peace and quiet in this world?" (Rashi on *Bereishit* 37:2 s.v. *Eileh Toledot Yaakov*)

According to this view, Yaakov's loss of *sheleimut* was actually orchestrated by God Himself in order that he continue to strive to improve his own as well as other's physical and spiritual conditions. Consequently, it can be asserted that striving to reach a state of *sheleimut* is a meta-value for every observant individual. However, to expect that this is a state of affairs or even a state of mind that will inform an individual's entire life is simply unrealistic. It sets up each human being, however righteous and admirable, for deep disappointment and frustration. Life then is clearly about "process" rather than "product," and true joy can be achieved, at least from time to time, once we realize and embrace our existential and religious realities.

[i] "Then the LORD God formed man of the *dust of the ground*, and breathed into his nostrils *the breath of life*; and man became a living soul" (Bereishit 2:7).

[ii] See, for example, *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* 16:

> …What is the *yetzer haRa*? They said: The *yetzer haRa* is (always) 13 years older than the *yetzer tov*. [The source suggests that the latter is dormant until such a time when spiritual maturity is begun to be reached. The "older" *yetzer haRa* therefore is thought to typically yield more influence over an individual's decision making.] The former is already with a person from the time that he is in his mother's womb. He begins to violate Shabbat and no one objects. He kills people(!) and no one objects. He goes to commit a sexual transgression (!) and no one objects. After the age of 13, the *yetzer tov* is born. Now if he violates Shabbat, he is told, "Empty one! The Torah states, (*Shemot* 31:14) 'Ye

shall keep the Sabbath therefore, for it is holy unto you; every one that profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whosoever does any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.'" If he kills people, he is told, "Empty one! The Torah states, (*Bereishit* 9:6) 'Whoso sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made He man.'" If he goes to commit a (sexual) transgression he is told, "Empty one! The Torah states, (*VaYikra* 20:10) 'And the man that commits adultery with another man's wife, even he that commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death'"…

[iii] Although the commentators RaShBaM (1085–1158) and Hadar Zekeinim (R. Asher b. Yechiel, the "Rosh" 1250–1327) posit that *Shalem* was actually the name of a city to which Yaakov came, rather than a description of Yaakov's physical, emotional, and spiritual state, effectively rendering our point moot. Almost all other interpreters of the Torah disagree with them. It is possible that RaShBaM and ROSh were unwilling to attribute even to someone like Yaakov the status of being "*shalem*" even for a short time!

[iv] Yaakov was injured during the course of his struggle with his mysterious assailant in *Bereishit* 32:32. Rav posits that between the time of the incident and the point recorded in 33:18, Yaakov regained his health.

[v]Due to his fear of encountering Esav after having cheated him of a blessing those many years before, Yaakov endeavored to give his estranged brother gifts in an attempt to assuage his anger—see *Bereishit* 32:14–22. Even though in the end, Esav accepted the gifts (33:9–11), Yaakov was not adversely affected by having given his brother such a substantial amount. Whether there was a miraculous restoration of these possessions, or, in the spirit of Ben Zoma in *Avot* 4:1, Yaakov simply wasn't all that materialistic and therefore at least in Yaakov's mind, he was "*Shalem*," Rav states that 33:18 indicates that Yaakov was not lacking in terms of possessions.

[vi]Despite spending considerable time in dishonest Lavan's encampment, while working, marrying, and having children, Rav states that according to 33:18, Yaakov did not experience a drop-off in spiritual sensibility and knowledge.

[vii] Quoted by R. Menachem Kasher, *Torah Shleima*, Parashat VaYishlah, fn. 57.

[viii] *Ibid*.

[ix] See Rashi on *Bereishit* 28:9 s.v. *Ahot Nevayot*.

[x] *Ibid*.

[xi] See “The Relation of General to Specially Jewish Education” in *Judaism Eternal: Selected Essays from the Writings of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch*, Vol.1, trans. Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld, The Soncino Press, London, 1976, pp. 203–220, particularly endnote 1.

[xii]Jews are commanded to strive to live their lives in accordance with this principle in several verses in *Devarim*:

> *Devarim* 8:6: “And you shalt keep the Commandments of the LORD thy God, *to walk in His ways*, and to fear Him.”
>
> *Ibid*. 19:9: “If thou shalt keep all this Commandment to do it, which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and *to walk ever in His ways*—then shall you add three cities more for you, beside these three.”
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> *Ibid*. 26:17: “You have avouched the LORD this day to be your God, and that you would *walk in His ways*, and keep His statutes, and His commandments, and His ordinances, and hearken unto His voice.”
>
> *Ibid*. 28:9: “The LORD will establish you for a holy people unto Himself, as He has sworn unto you; if you shall keep the Commandments of the LORD your God, and *walk in His ways*.”
>
> *Ibid*. 30:15–16: “See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil, in that I command you this day to love the LORD your God, *to walk in His ways*, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances; then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God shall bless you in the land whither you go in to possess it.”

[xiii] “First we recognize that the object is *one* integral thing; then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure, a *thing* in fact; finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its *epiphany*.” (eds. John J. Slocum and Herbert Cahoon, New Directions Press, New York: 1959.)

[xiv] Quoted by R. Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Talks on the Parasha*, Maggid-Shefa, Yerushalayim, 2015, pp. 40–41.