The Construction and Implementation of Shalom Bayit: Women’s Empowerment and Disempowerment Through Judaism

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Shalom Bayit is a concept with Judaism which revolves around the idea of Martial Harmony. In English, Shalom Bayit directly translates into the term “Peace in the house”. Within many Jewish communities today, Shalom Bayit is used as a goal by married couples to help with “maintaining a successful and harmonious marriage [including] work, commitment and dedication” [Chabad.org]. Within some Jewish communities, this is believed to be the only usage of Shalom Bayit. Although Shalom Bayit is supposed to help married couples keep peace within the home, this concept can be misused to where the responsibility for keeping the peace in the home involves women’s submission.

In the course of my research, I found key texts that form gender roles within marriage and within the conception of peace of the home. I then devised and disseminated a survey assessing the concepts and implementations of Shalom Bayit in contemporary Jewish community, and how the responses related to the empowerment and disempowerment of women within a marriage. This study proposes to reveal ways in which the construction and implementation of Shalom Bayit can be formed and used. The purpose of this study is to find the reasons behind why the Jewish concept of Shalom Bayit has different interpretations and implementations, and how these different constructions of Shalom Bayit can take part in empowerment and disempowerment of women.

How Can Shalom Bayit be Misused?

One major way Shalom Bayit can be misused is through a Get, a divorce document used within Judaism. Within this practice of divorce, a get can only be served by the husband. Within some Jewish households and communities, a problem can be found where the wife will want a divorce as a result of an unhealthy marriage, but the husband will refuse to grant a get. His refusal will many times be based on his perception of the Jewish principle of Shalom Bayit. Instead of using Shalom Bayit as goal to keep peace within a marriage, the husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine”.

Exodus 21:22

“If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman’s husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine”.

In the original Hebrew text, passages and commentary such as the example above use words such as “ba’al’ (to possess) and “Lakach” (to acquire), which are used to describe a woman as property.

How Can Shalom Bayit be Misused?

Within Jewish culture, there is a large emphasis on men to spend a large portion of their lives studying Jewish scripture at an academy, such as a Yeshiva (Graetz, 4). Biblical texts, rabbinical commentary and the implementation of teachings can be connected to the shaping women’s roles within the home and within the community.

Textual Sources for Women’s Empowerment

“nobody can be expected to dwell in a cage with a serpent” [Tosef. Dem III]

This analogy can be found in both Talmud Ketubot 72a & Talmud Ketubot 77a

Interpreted as “no man or woman can be compelled to live with an obnoxious consort” (P. 569, Jastrow).

Through the use this analogy, one is able to take away that although one might be married, one shouldn’t be required to stay in that marriage if it does not work and cannot be fixed.

Within both Talmud Ketubot 72a & Talmud Ketubot 77a, this analogy is used to justify the need to end a marriage.

Survey on Shalom Bayit in Daily Life

Analysis of Responses

Within this survey, there were three questions pertaining to Shalom Bayit:

1. What does Shalom Bayit mean to you?
2. How do you use Shalom Bayit in everyday life?
3. Is there a right and wrong way to interpret Shalom Bayit? If so, what is the right way and what is the wrong way?

To analyze the responses to these questions, I separated the answers into five main categories:

• Answers that show the empowerment of women
The content of these answers will contain one (or more) of the following:
1. Positivity
2. Signs of submission towards spouse
3. Willingness to overlook laws & principles in order to keep peace within the house
4. Equality between both spouses

• Answers that show the disempowerment of women.
The content of these answers will contain one (or more) of the following:
1. Negativity
2. Signs of submission towards spouse
3. Willingness to overlook laws & principles in order to keep peace within the house
4. Answers that can be interpreted as showing either the empowerment of women or the disempowerment of women.
The content of these answers will contain one (or more) of the following:
1. Content that suggests putting effort/care toward the spouse’s needs, either over their own needs or feelings or without mentioning their own needs.
2. No mention of the spouses working together or being seen as equal
3. The spouse(s) feeling restricted from sharing their own beliefs and thoughts in order to protect the other spouse.

Survey Findings

How do you use Shalom Bayit in everyday life?

1. Do you use Shalom Bayit to keep the peace in the marriage?
2. How do you use Shalom Bayit in everyday life?
3. Is there a right and wrong way to interpret Shalom Bayit? If so, what is the right way and what is the wrong way?

What does Shalom Bayit mean to you?

1. Is there a right and wrong way to interpret Shalom Bayit? If so, what is the right way and what is the wrong way?

Is there a wrong way and a right way to interpret Shalom Bayit?

• Empowering
• Disempowering

Total answers organized by category

Empowering 57%
Disempowering 43%

Conclusion

The Construction of Shalom Bayit through text and the survey on the concept and implementation of Shalom Bayit gives insight on how the implementation of Shalom Bayit can be used to where it can take part in both the empowerment and disempowerment of women. This conclusion challenges the belief that there is only one way to use Shalom Bayit, and that Shalom Bayit can not be misused. Through this research, I hope to assist in thinking about the improvement of structure within educational initiatives and programs being created to end to the suppression of women’s rights within sheltered Jewish households and communities.

References


Mishnah, Ketubot 5:5

“...and her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman’s husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine”.

The Construction and Implementation of Shalom Bayit through text

Shalom Bayit

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