

'Shalom Aleichem' to Three People During Kiddush Levanah

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The blessing recited over seeing the new moon is found in the Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 42a.

R. Aha said to R. Ashi: In 'the West,' they pronounce the following benediction: 'Blessed is He who renews the moons.' Whereupon he retorted: Such a blessing even our women folk pronounce! But [one should rather use the following], in accordance with R. Judah, who gives it thus: Praised etc. who created the Heavens with His word, and all their hosts with the breath of His mouth. He appointed unto them fixed laws and times, that they should not change their ordinance. They rejoice and are glad to do the will of their Creator. They work truthfully, for their action is truth. The moon He ordered that it should renew itself as a crown of beauty for those whom He sustains from the womb, and who will, like it, be renewed in the future, and magnify their Maker in the name of the glory of His kingdom. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who renews the moons.

In addition to the basic blessing, additional prayers were added, including a series of statements that are each repeated three times. The earliest source for these repeated statements is *Masechet Soferim*, 10:2.

ואומר שלש פעמים: סימן טוב, סימן טוב לכל ישראל. ברוך יוצרך, ברוך עושך, ברוך קונך, ברוך בוראך. ורוקד שלש רקידות כנגדה ואומר שלש פעמים: כשם שאני רוקד נגדיך ואיני נוגע בך, כך אם ירקדו אחרים כנגדי לא יגעו בי. תפל עליהם אימתה ופחד, ולמפרע. אמן, אמן, סלה, הללויה. ואומר לחברו שלש פעמים שלום, וילך לביתו בלב טוב.

Then one says three times, 'A good sign, a good sign, shall it be for all Israel. Blessed is He Who formed thee, blessed is thy Maker, blessed is thy Possessor, blessed is thy Creator.' Turning in the

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direction of the moon, he jumps three times and exclaims three times, 'As I jump towards thee but do not touch thee, so if others should jump against me to hurt me, may they not touch me. Let terror and dread fall upon them and may this be retrospective, Amen, Amen, Selah. Praise ye the Lord.' He then says 'Shalom' (peace) three times to his fellow and goes home with a cheerful heart.

These additions do not appear in *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*,¹ and are absent from some early Ashkenazic *siddurim*,² but found in others.³

Machzor Vitry,⁴ Rokeach,⁵ Or Zarua,⁶ *Shibolei HaLeket*⁷ and Tur⁸ all copy these prayers from *Masechet Soferim*, based on the version of the text that has the greeting 'Shalom Alecha' (peace be with you). Rabbi Yoel Sirkes, in his commentary to the Tur, specifically notes that 'Shalom Alecha' is the correct form of the greeting.⁹ This is also the formula brought by Rabbi Moshe Isserles in the *Shulchan Aruch*.¹⁰

The greeting as found in these sources differs from current practice in two significant ways. First, today printed prayer books use the plural form of the greeting, 'Shalom Aleichem.'¹¹ This is also the form of the greeting brought in the relatively recent halachic works, *Eliya Rabba*,¹² *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*¹³ and *Aruch HaShulchan*.¹⁴ The greeting 'Shalom Alecha' is found in various contexts in the

¹ *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*, ed. Daniel Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2004) p. 90.

² *Siddur of R. Solomon ben Samson of Garmaise*, ed. Moshe Hershler (Jerusalem: Hemed, 1971) p. 196.

³ *Pirushbey Siddur HaTefilah LaRokeach*, eds. Moshe Hershler, Yehudah A. Hershler (Jerusalem: Machon HaRav Hershler, 1992) p. 605.

⁴ *Machzor Vitry*, vol. 1, p. 183.

⁵ *Rokeach*, Laws of *Rosh Chodesh*, 229.

⁶ *Or Zarua*, vol. 2, Laws of *Rosh Chodesh*, 456.

⁷ *Shibolei HaLeket*, *Rosh Chodesh*, 167.

⁸ Tur, *Orach Chayyim*, 426:2.

⁹ Bach, *Orach Chayyim*, 426:2.

¹⁰ Rema, *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayyim*, 426:2.

¹¹ See for example, *Siddur Beit Yaakov*, p. 220, *Siddur Avodat Yisrael*, p. 338, *Siddur Rinat Yisrael*, p. 373, *ArtScroll Siddur*, p. 614.

¹² *Eliya Rabba*, 426:4.

¹³ *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, *Piskei HaSiddur*, *Kiddush Levana*.

¹⁴ *Aruch HaShulchan*, *Orach Chayyim*, 426:4.

Talmud,¹⁵ while we never find the plural form, 'Shalom Aleichem,' to address an individual in the Talmud. This has led to some discussion over the reason why the plural form 'Shalom Aleichem' is commonly used in *Kiddush Levana*.¹⁶

The second major difference is that it is common practice to greet three different people during *Kiddush Levana*. The early sources above indicate that you greet one friend three times, just as the other statements in the prayer are repeated three times. The practice to greet three different people is found in some contemporary prayer books.¹⁷ This custom has also been the subject of a certain amount of discussion,¹⁸ with some authorities deciding that it is of recent vintage, and not necessary.¹⁹

From where did the current common practice develop? The earliest source for the custom of greeting three different people during *Kiddush Levana* is from the 13th century, in the writings of R. Chaim Eliezer, the son of the Or Zarua. While Or Zarua does not mention that different people should be greeted, R. Chaim Eliezer writes, "He greets three people, and if there is only one person, he greets him three times."²⁰ This practice is next mentioned in the 14th century, among the customs of Rav Shalom of Neustadt, teacher of the Maharil. He states, "Three people must be greeted, and if they are only two people (the person saying the blessing and one other) he says to his friend three times 'Shalom Aleichem', and if they are three he says to one friend twice 'Shalom Aleichem' and to the other once."²¹ This is also the earliest source for using the plural form of the greeting, 'Shalom Aleichem,' in this prayer. This then is the

¹⁵ For example, *Middot* 1:2, *Berachot* 3a, *Bava Kamma* 73b.

¹⁶ Bezalel Stern, *Ohalecha BeAmitecha* (Jerusalem: 2005) p. 218, chapter 22, note 9.

¹⁷ *ArtScroll Siddur*, p. 614.

¹⁸ Seriah Devlitzky, *Zeh HaShulchan* (Bnei Brak: 1958) *Orach Chayyim*, p. 38, no. 426, and Efraim Greenblatt, *Rivivos Ephraim* (Brooklyn, NY: Mazel, 1995) *Orach Chayyim*, vol. 7, no. 134.

¹⁹ Yisrael Feinehandler, *Arnei Yashpeh* (Jerusalem: 1999) vol. 3, no. 50:2, p. 88.

²⁰ *Derashot MahaRaCh Or Zarua*, ed. Isaak S. Lange (Jerusalem: 1972) *Eikev*, p. 67.

²¹ *Halachot U'Minbagei Rabbenu Shalom of Neustadt*, ed. Shlomo Spitzer (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1997) no. 364.

earliest record of the popular custom to greet three different people by saying 'Shalom Aleichem.' This custom is mentioned in the 16th century work *Mateh Moshe* by R. Moshe of Przemysl: "He says three times 'Shalom Aleichem' and if there are not three people with him he greets one person three times."²² Since the earlier works of R. Chaim Eliezer and R. Shalom of Neustadt were not readily available for many years, *Mateh Moshe* is commonly referenced as the source for the custom.²³

Why did the custom shift from 'Shalom Alecha' three times to one person to 'Shalom Aleichem' one time each to three different people? The first aspect of the custom to examine is what is the reason that there is a greeting at all during this blessing? Maharil explains, "since this is such a great mitzvah, and is considered like greeting the Shechina, it is appropriate to greet one another out of joy and good feeling..."²⁴ *Mateh Moshe* gives the explanation of Maharil, and adds an explanation in the name of the kabbalist R. Herz, that "after cursing [our enemies] by saying 'Let terror and dread fall upon them,' it is appropriate to say to his friend 'Not on you, only peace and peace.'"²⁵ This explanation is found in the commentary of R. Herz to the siddur, first printed in 1560. There he states that after praying for the coming of the Messiah by saying 'David, King of Israel, is alive and enduring,' "since the birth pangs of the Messiah are many, it is incumbent upon us to pray and say each person to his friend 'Shalom Aleichem, Aleichem Shalom.'"²⁶ These reasons, popularized by their inclusion in *Mateh Moshe*, are associated with those who advocate saying 'Shalom Aleichem' to three different people. The Maharil was the student of R. Shalom, and *Mateh Moshe* follows the approach of R. Shalom as well. Even though R. Herz does not say explicitly that the greeting should be said to three different people, by being included in the *Mateh Moshe* that reason

²² *Mateh Moshe*, no. 540.

²³ Yissachar Dov Eichorn, *Pi Koben, Brachot* (Jerusalem: XXXX) vol. 3, 12:1.

²⁴ *New Responsa of Rabbi Yaacov Molin – Maharil*, ed. Yitzchok Satz (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1977) no. 47, p. 57.

²⁵ *Mateh Moshe*, no. 540.

²⁶ *Siddur HaMekubbal HaRav Herz Shliach Tzibbur Zatzal* (Bnei Brak: Morgenstern, 1971) p. 277.

became attached to greeting multiple people as well.²⁷ It may be that since the greeting was understood to be an expression of joy or reassurance, it makes more sense to greet many people rather than only one, in order to spread happiness and comfort to more people. The popularity of *Mateh Moshe* contributed to the spreading of the custom to greet three different people.

On the other hand, the early sources that write to say 'Shalom Alecha' three times to one person did not give a reason for this practice. Still, a threefold repetition is typical of acts with supernatural significance, as found for example in the prayers said for protection from evil at the bedtime Shema and at the end of *Tefilat HaDerech*.²⁸ If the greeting is understood to be a mystical statement, like the prayers that precede it, there is no need to greet many people, just to repeat the special phrase three times. The reasoning of R. Herz, as stated in *Mateh Moshe*, gained popularity by being brought in the *Perisha*²⁹ and *Magen Avraham*.³⁰ Since no specific reason was brought to greet only one person three times, and since the popular reasons for the custom of greeting at all were associated with the custom of greeting three different people, the custom to greet three different people gradually seemed more reasonable.

The question now is why did the form of the greeting itself change from the singular to the plural? This has to do with the development of the use of the plural form in Hebrew to denote respect. As noted above, the Talmud does not record the use of the plural form to greet an individual, even an individual who is due great respect, like a teacher.³¹ Use of the plural form as a sign of respect, called *vouvoiement* in French, is not originally found in Hebrew or Aramaic, but rather was borrowed from French and German.³² The Jewish community adopted this form of greeting as well. There was a

²⁷ Note that in the *Siddur* of R. Herz, while the commentary speaks of the greeting as 'Shalom Aleichem,' the text of the prayer itself uses the form 'Shalom Aleicha.' There are no instructions regarding how many people to greet in the *Siddur*.

²⁸ See Rashi, Shabbat 66b, *kol minyanei*. Also, Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Athenium, 1984) pp. 119, 156, 256.

²⁹ *Perishah*, *Tur Orab Hayyim*, 426:4.

³⁰ *Magen Avraham*, *Orab Hayyim*, 426:11.

³¹ *Sanbedrin*, 98a.

³² *Peace in the Plural*, *Forward*, January 26, 2007.

certain amount of opposition to greeting people in the plural. R. Yair Chaim Bachrach (d. 1702) in his *Mekor Chaim* writes, “ ‘Shalom Alechem’ that is commonly said is not correct for an individual in Hebrew, and the error comes from foreign languages.”³³ He notes that the Rema preserved the original Hebrew expression ‘Shalom Alecha’ when writing about *Kiddush Levana*, and that R. Yosef Caro used the singular Hebrew form when writing about greeting a rabbi.³⁴ Despite this, over time the plural form of greeting became accepted as appropriate. Various reasons were given to explain the special spiritual significance of greeting in the plural form, for example, as a greeting to both body and soul.³⁵ Eventually the foreign influence was forgotten and the plural form became normative. By the 19th century, R. Yechiel Epstein simply states that “in ancient times people would always speak to each other in the second person, saying ‘Shalom Alecha Rabbi,’ but today we address an honored individual in the plural form and say ‘Shalom Alechem.’”³⁶

The original custom to say ‘Shalom Alecha’ three times to one person has been transformed over time. The influence of foreign languages and shifting perceptions of the reason for the greeting have led to the current popularity of the custom of R. Shalom of Neustadt, to greet three different people by saying ‘Shalom Alechem’. ❧

³³ *Mekor Chaim*, ed. Eliyahu Dov Pinchas (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1984) vol. 2, no. 110, at the end.

³⁴ *Rema, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayyim*, 426:2, *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah*, 242:16.

³⁵ J. D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Dinim u-Minbagim* (Tel Aviv: Shilo, 1975) p. 417.

³⁶ *Aruch HaShulchan, Yoreh Deah*, 242:38.