

NOT LEAH

“Leah? Leah?”
I turned to the woman in line behind me. Shaking my head, I said, “Sorry, not Leah. Deborah.”
“Oh,” she blushed slightly, her disappointment clearly evident. “Sorry. You look just like...”

“Yeah, I get that a lot.” I am often told I look just like someone else. I guess I have a fairly typical Jewish face.

The anonymous woman and I exchanged a small, awkward smile. Then she went back to looking at her phone and I turned toward the cashier, awaiting my turn.

But my mind drifted to Leah. Who was she? Was she friendlier than I, not such an introvert? More put together? Was she someone this woman knew well, maybe a long-lost friend? By the surprise mixed with delight in the woman’s voice when she called Leah’s name, it was clear she would have been quite happy to meet up with her on this sunny Friday morning at a local grocery store.

As I stood in line, a strange feeling crept over me. I felt uncomfortable that I’d disappointed this person, who had probably thought, *Wow, there she is! It’s been so long.* But then her excitement dissipated like a deflated balloon.

Not Leah.

If I had been Leah, right now the woman would be having a jovial catch-up conversation with her about their family and jobs, passing the time in line with animation rather than boredom. Now she just looked at her phone. Maybe she was sending a text to a mutual friend: *I just thought I saw Leah. Remember her? But it wasn’t Leah.* ☹️ *Do you know how she’s been all these years?*

What struck me most about this otherwise forgettable interaction wasn’t the woman’s disappointment — it was my delight at receiving such a warm greeting, the type of greeting we are supposed to give others.

In his book *The Code of Jewish Conduct*, Rabbi Yitzchak Silver writes that *she’eilas shalom*, typically translated as “greeting,” in fact means inquiring about someone’s well-being.¹ (Perhaps that’s how “How are you?” became the colloquial way to greet someone.)

Further, the *Gemara* usually refers to greeting someone with the word *shalom*, since this is one of the names of Hashem.² Greeting someone in this manner (“*Shalom*,” or “*Shalom aleichem*”) is more than just a salutation; it’s a blessing that Hashem should help him.

What’s more, we are implored to receive each person we meet with a pleasant face.³ This applies even if we haven’t yet had our first cup of coffee when we hit the carpool line or the office, or even if we are bleary-eyed when we happen upon a family member at six a.m.

Chazal also say that one is supposed to be the first to greet people — any people, not just close friends and neighbors.⁴ Rabi Yochanan ben Zakkai was renowned for being first to greet everyone he met, Jew and non-Jew alike, with a warm greeting.⁵

Although the intended greeting I had received was not really mine, it showed me that I could work on improving my own “giving *shalom*.” What if I had greeted this woman first? So what if I didn’t know her; we were two Jewish women in line on Erev Shabbos. In the midst of my shopping rush, I could have said good morning and chatted about the sale on tangerines, or we could have played a little Jewish geography.

There is a Rebbetzin I know who excels in this *mitzvah*. Whenever she sees me, or anyone else, it sounds something like this: “Deborah, it’s so good to see you! How are you doing?” This is said with a big smile, eye contact and a pause, which means she’s actually waiting to hear the response.

This woman does what I’d like to emulate: She uses the opportunity of a greeting to build relationships. As Rabbi Silver writes, such a greeting is compared to a thread: Just as thread sews two pieces of cloth together, so too, “giving *shalom*” is the “thread that ‘sews people together.’”

After I paid, I turned back to the woman. “Anyway,” I said, “have a great day.”

She looked up and gave a perfunctory, “You too, and good Shabbos.”

I walked out to the parking lot with the unsettled feeling that I’d missed an opportunity for connection. Yet I realized, in fact, that it was good I wasn’t Leah. Not being Leah had taught me a thing or two about being Deborah. But what I learned applies equally to Sarah or Ayelet or Rebecca. The particular identity doesn’t matter. A greeting is a greeting; a smile is a smile.

And a person is a person, whose presence deserves to be acknowledged, no matter what. ■

1. *The Code of Jewish Conduct*, Rabbi Yitzchak Silver, p. 57

2. See Rashi, *Shabbos* 10b

3. *Avos* 1:15

4. *The Code of Jewish Conduct*, Rabbi Yitzchak Silver, p. 59.

5. *Ibid*