

Could It Be Any Worse? A Story of *Shalom Ba'yit* (peace in the home)

Abba and Ima lived with their large family in a small house on a small farm. There were so many people in the house! There were two children playing and two more children singing. There were two children running and two more children jumping. There were two children banging drums and two more children tooting horns. One day Abba turned to Ima and shouted loudly, “My head hurts from all the noise in this house! I can’t think one thought because it is so loud.” Ima tried to think of a solution to this problem. She thought and thought and then said to Abba, “Let’s go speak with the rabbi. Maybe he will have an answer!”

This classic story is great to use when children need encouragement sharing toys or respecting each others' block structures.

Later in the day, they went to see the rabbi. The rabbi looked at them and said, “Oy, what is wrong? You both don’t look well! Are you feeling ill?” Ima said, “Well, rabbi, truthfully, we are just plain tired! We have a wonderful family and we love them very much, but so many people in one little house is just too much.” The rabbi listened and said to them, “I know what you should do. Go to your barn and bring your rooster into the house.” Abba was surprised. “Are you sure that’s what you want us to do?” The rabbi nodded his head.

The rabbi is the *mara d’atra* – the final religious authority. When you ask a rabbi, you have to abide by his or her answer.

So Abba and Ima went back to their farm and brought their rooster into the house. “COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO! COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!” went the rooster. The children just played and sang more loudly. They just ran and jumped more loudly and they banged the drum and tooted their horns more loudly. Abba put his hands over his ears and shouted, “Could it be any worse?”

The next day they went back to see the rabbi. “Rabbi, it isn’t any quieter in our house!” Ima said. “Don’t worry,” said the rabbi. “Tonight I want you to bring your cow into the house.” Ima didn’t think this was a good idea, but the rabbi insisted.

So Abba and Ima went back to their farm and brought their cow into the house. MOO! MOO! went the cow. The rooster went COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO! The children just played and sang more loudly. They just ran and jumped more loudly and they banged the drum and tooted their horns more loudly. Abba put his hands over his ears and shouted, “Could it be any worse?”

The next day they went back to see the rabbi. “Rabbi, it isn’t any quieter!” Abba said. “Don’t worry,” said the rabbi. “Tonight I want you to bring your billy goat into the house.” Abba didn’t think this was a good idea, but the rabbi insisted.

The rabbi is doing the mitzvah of *ha-vah-at shalom ben adam v’chaver-ro* – bringing peace between people. How can the children in class do this mitzvah?

So Abba and Ima went back to their farm and brought their billy goat into the house. MAA! MAA ! went the billy goat. MOO! MOO! went the cow. COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO! COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO! went the rooster. The children just played and sang more loudly.

They just ran and jumped more loudly and they banged the drum and tooted their horns more loudly. Abba put his hands over his ears and shouted, “Could it be any worse?”

The next day they ran to the rabbi’s house. “Rabbi,” they said, “We are sorry, but your advice isn’t helping us at all! Our house is noisier than before! You must help us!”

The rabbi told Abba and Ima to go home and take the rooster, the cow and the billy goat out of the house and put them back into the barn. Abba and Ima ran back to their house and did exactly what the rabbi told them to do. Do you know what happened? There were two children playing and two children singing. There were two children running and two children jumping. There were two children banging drums and two children tooting horns. Abba turned to Ima and said, “Isn’t it wonderful? Everyone is busy doing something they enjoy, and it is so quiet!”

True Shalom ba’yit can come from being happy with what you have.

For discussion:

1. Why did Abba and Ima think the rabbi could help them?
2. Could you think of a way to help Abba and Ima?
3. Why did bringing in the animals to the house help Abba and Ima think the house was quiet?
4. What questions would you like to ask a rabbi?

For family life:

1. Be sure when you tell this story, children have plenty of opportunity to make the noises of the animals and children in the family.
2. Discuss ways children keep shalom ba’yit in your home. How do they make or keep shalom ba’yit in their school?
3. Acknowledge peaceful times in your home, not just quiet times but also times when family members are working together especially well.

This is a classic story. There are several picture books with different versions of this story, including *Terrible, Terrible!* by Robin Bernstein, *Too Small* by Ann Blades, *Could Anything Be Worse* by Marilyn Hirsh, and *It Could Always Be Worse* by Margot Zemach.