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From the Chaburah
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Repeating the Shema: Mockery or Heresy?

The Mishnah (*Berachot* 5:3) records that someone who says “we give thanks, we give thanks” (*modim modim*) during the *Shemoneh Esrei* should be silenced. The Gemara (*Berachot* 33b) explains that the repetition makes it look like the person believes in some kind of dualism and is praying to two beings. Dualism is the belief in two equal and opposing god-like powers. It’s a feature of Zoroastrianism which was a popular religion in the Persian empire during the Talmudic era. The Talmud extends this rule of *modim modim* to apply to the Shema as well. According to R’ Zeira, anyone who says “*shema, shema*” should also be silenced. However, the Gemara counters, an earlier Tannaitic source rules that repetitions are considered improper (*meguneh*) but not heretical and certainly don’t require silencing anyone. If so, how can R’ Zeira’s statement stand?

The Gemara answers by distinguishing between someone who repeats the same *word* and someone who repeats a *whole pasuk*. The Gemara is ambiguous about which case is improper and which case is heretical. As a result, there’s a debate on this topic among the Rishonim. According to one school (*Rashi, Berachot* 33b s.v. *milta*; *Tosfot, Berachot* 34a s.v. *amar pesuka*; and others), repeating one word is merely improper. According to Rashi, repeating words over and over is mocking behavior and makes the Shema look like a joke. Repeating a whole *pasuk* is more serious. In this case we are concerned that a person is addressing two different deities. The second school (Rabenu Chananel and *Halachot Gedolot*, cited in *Tosfot* *ibid.*; *Rif* to *Berachot* 33b; *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:11) takes the opposite position. Repeating a single word is potentially heretical. Repeating a whole *pasuk* is merely improper.

This argument seems to be rooted in the question of what exactly triggers our concern for heresy. According to the first school, it has to look like the person actually prayed to two gods. This requires reciting a whole *pasuk* twice. Repeating only one word is meaningless. The second school holds that we aren’t looking for an actual prayer, just an indication of the

speaker's heretical mindset. This is how the Rambam explains the rule of *modim modim* in the other place where it appears in the Mishnah (*Megillah* 4:8-9). In that case, the Mishnah first discusses several cases where a person's behavior causes suspicion that they might be a heretic. For example, a person who refuses to be the shaliach tzibbur unless they are wearing only white clothing. The Rambam (*Perush Hamishnah*, *ibid.*, as recorded in the *Yad Nachum* edition) understands the rule of *modim modim* in the same way. Someone who repeats the word *modim* creates the suspicion that he holds heretical views and intends his prayers to be directed to two gods. We haven't actually witnessed him doing this, but it's enough for us to silence him. According to this second camp, someone who repeats a whole pasuk isn't suspect because the words of the text clearly indicate that they're referring only to one God.

The *Tur* (*Orach Chayim* 61) rules that we should be strict and follow both camps. Presumably this means that both repeated words and repeated *pesukim* should create a concern for heresy. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chayim* 61:9) writes that it's forbidden to repeat both the word "*shema*" and the whole first *pasuk*. He doesn't identify in which case we should silence a person who does the repetition. According to the Vilna Gaon (*Beur HaGra* *ibid.*, as interpreted in *Berur Halachah* to *Berachot* 33b), the *Shulchan Aruch* holds that we don't silence either repetition since there is a lenient view for each case. But we do forbid both cases since both schools agree that both types of repetition are forbidden, at least as improper prayer.

An interesting limitation on this halachah is that it may only apply to cases where other people can hear an individual's words but not to private prayers. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Berachot*, 5:3) rules this way explicitly. This seems to be the position of the *Shulchan Aruch* as well, though there is some debate about his position (see *Taz*, *Orach Chayim* 61:3 and *Peri Megadim* and *Mishnah Berurah* ad loc.).

Today, one is unlikely to encounter a closet Zoroastrian at shul. However, this halachah shows us the sensitivity that Chazal had for heretical ideas being spread in public. It also underscores, yet again, the importance of praying carefully and thoughtfully. The Shema and the other prayers are not magical incantations that can be repeated until we get them just right. They're also not rote scripts that can be rifled off carelessly. When we pray we are speaking to Hashem, and we need to behave accordingly.

Announcement

The newsletter will be on hiatus for the next two weeks. We'll be back in Elul for Parshat Shoftim!

Berachot 6:5 — From Culture to Cuisine

In this sixth chapter of tractate *Berachot*, we have already explored a number of fascinating categories that the halachah introduces to our experience of nature, food, and culture. Through the lens of these categories, the Torah guides us towards a more spiritual appreciation of these everyday encounters. In this mishnah, we explore the dynamics of a typical sitdown meal.

The mishnah's focus is on determining which parts of the meal are covered by which *berachot*. Since similar types of foods may be enjoyed repeatedly throughout the meal, it stands to reason that a blessing recited earlier will also cover any later instances of this same type. But the question becomes more complicated when we recognize that a combination of cultural norms and halachic practices has the effect of dividing the meal into distinct sections. Can a *berachah* pronounced during one section carry over into the next?

Underlying this question is the understanding that the laws of *berachot* are designed to follow the contours of our prevailing habits and customs. Rather than reflecting some halachically-ideal approach to dining, these halachot draw our attention to the patterns of behavior we have already adopted. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that some of these halachot are no longer applicable due to changes in our dining habits (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 177:2).

What is so important about this heightened attention to the way we eat? While conscious eating offers a range of benefits, we can highlight a couple specifics that seem to be suggested by the mishnah itself. The mishnah states that the blessing on the bread also exempts the *parperet*, defined by Bartenura as either supplements to the bread (meat, eggs, fish, etc.) or baked dishes that would generally receive a *mezonos* blessing. Here we have a reminder of the primacy of bread in the meal. Though likely not as tasty as the meat or dessert dishes, bread symbolizes mankind's active participation in its own sustenance—a complex reminder of both our ingenuity and our original expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

However, there is an important caveat to this bread-primacy. In Mishnaic times, it was the custom to remove the bread from the table before some final *parperet* was served. While the hamotzi blessing covered *parperet* eaten during the meal itself, this post-meal *parperet* requires a new *berachah* (see Tos. R' Akiva Eiger here). We tend to view dessert as a pleasure distinct from the meal itself, to the extent that the Gemara in *Megillah* 7b offers its own version of the popular maxim: There's always room for dessert! This psychological quirk has its advantages and disadvantages, and our mishnah keeps us mindful of its reality.

The Shema — A Statement of Monotheism, Eschatology, or Philosophy?

“Hear Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One” (*Devarim* 6:4).

The Shema has a special status in Jewish belief and practice. It is among the first verses that a Jewish child is taught and among the final ones spoken before a Jew passes away. Recited twice daily, the declaration of faith contained in its words brackets our days and focuses us on the guiding principle of our lives. But what exactly is this principle? What does the Shema even mean?

Though we have translated the verse's final clause as “Hashem is One,” major Rishonim argue that this is technically incorrect. Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, and R' Yosef Albo claim that the word *echad* in the Shema should be interpreted as “alone.” In their view, the clause is not speaking about Hashem's “oneness” but is simply emphasizing that it is Hashem alone who is our God. It is Judaism's classic statement of monotheism.

Rashi's interpretation veers even further from the standard translation. In his view, the verse is emphasizing neither Divine oneness nor monotheism, but is instead making a statement about the ultimate future of humanity. Although Hashem is currently only *our* God, someday Hashem will be the one God of all mankind. According to Rashi, when we recite the Shema, we are expressing an eschatological belief, a conviction regarding the final state of the world.

Rishonim like Rambam and R' Bachya ibn Paquda, author of *Chovot HaLevavot*, take a distinctly philosophical approach. In their view, the verse is indeed speaking of Divine unity, and a full grasp of its meaning requires sophisticated philosophical training. As R' Bachya says in the first section of his work, only a prophet or a philosopher can truly serve Hashem, since only they truly understand His unity.

In stark contrast to the philosophical approach, R' Yeshaya of Trani (Riaz) claims that the Torah never mandated a philosophical approach to Hashem's oneness, and even some Talmudic sages believed in a sort of divine corporeality (a position that Rambam would certainly consider heretical). In Riaz's view, the concept of Hashem's oneness should be understood according to tradition and the extent of one's personal intellectual sophistication.

It seems surprising that this central concept in Jewish belief should be open to such diverse and conflicting interpretations. The practical ramifications are significant. Should we attempt a philosophical understanding or intentionally avoid it? Does Judaism even require a belief in some sort of Divine unity? Perhaps most importantly, to what extent is Judaism concerned with belief at all?