



חבורת מהות היהדות

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From the Chabura (Chazara)
By: Adam Friedmann

Reading the Shema in Other Languages

Over the last couple of weeks, we've dealt with arguments surrounding the word *shema*. Does it mean to physically hear something, or to understand it? Another outgrowth of this debate is the question of whether the Shema can be read in languages other than Hebrew. The Tannaim argue about this issue (*Berachot* 13a). According to Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, the Shema must be read in the original text from the Torah (*kektavam*). According to the other Sages, it can be read in any language that a person understands (*bekol lashon shehu shomea*).

The majority view is that the halachah follows the Sages (*Tosfot*, *Berachot* 13a s.v., *vebachamim*, Rosh; *Berachot* 2:2; Rif, *Berachot* 7a; *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:10; *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayim* 62:2). According to this view, a person can read the Shema in any language, provided that they understand the entire translation (*Mishnah Berurah* 62:3, though see *Peri Megadim*, *ibid.*, *Eshel Avraham* 1). This idea fits nicely with the philosophical understanding that the purpose of the Shema is to constantly remind ourselves about the fundamentals of Judaism. If the Shema is about ideas, then it shouldn't matter what language those ideas are presented in.

At first glance, this topic seems fairly clear cut. However, the position of many Acharonim on this halachah raises some interesting debates about its nature and the concept of translation as a whole. Both the *Mishnah Berurah* (62:3) and the *Aruch Hashulchan* (*Orach Chayim* 62:4) argue that despite the Shulchan Aruch's explicit statement that the Shema can be read in any language, we should not do this today. This is because there are many ambiguous words in the text of the Shema such as *veshinantam* which may refer to study through repetition, or to the sharpening of an idea. There are other words, such as *et*, which don't appear in the syntax of other languages. Finally, there are words whose meaning we don't really know such as *totafot*. According to this position, words like these make it impossible for us to translate the Shema effectively today, even though this used to be possible.

One may question this position by noting that if the ambiguous words prevent us from understanding,

and therefore reading, the Shema in other languages, shouldn't this be true in Hebrew too? If we don't unambiguously know what these words mean, why does it work for us to read them in Hebrew? The Acharonim answer that Hebrew has a special status. When we read the Shema in the original Hebrew we can fulfill the mitzvah even without understanding all the words. This is provided that we at least understand the first verse of *Shema Yisrael*, which virtually every Jew does.

The Mishnah Berurah (*Beur Halachah* 62, s.v., *yachol*) adds another interesting condition to this halachah. He writes that aside from Hebrew the Shema can only be read in a language that's commonly spoken in the place where it's being read. Reading the Shema in Italian in Israel, for example, does not work.

The position of the Acharonim raises some questions:

- Every translation takes liberties with the meanings of words. If we are allowed to translate the Shema, why would we expect that ambiguous words or syntactic features like the word *et* should be captured by the translation?
- Why should translation be limited to the local language?

According to these Acharonim, it seems, when the Torah told us we could read the Shema in other languages, it meant to create a new “official text” of the Shema in the other language. This text must remain as close in meaning and structure as possible to the original. This is why even something like the loss of the word *et* is problematic. This may also explain why only a local language, which is used to create other official texts, can be used. Over time, we lost the ability to carry out this precise translation. As a result, we must stick to the original “official text”, in Hebrew.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 8:4 — Man vs Food: Competing Value Hierarchies

This mishnah records a fascinating debate between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel about the proper sequence of two actions after a meal: cleaning the table of leftover food and performing the ritual washing of hands (*mayim acharonim*). Beit Shammai insist that the table must be cleaned first to prevent leftover crumbs from becoming defiled by the washing water, while Beit Hillel contend that the hands should be washed first, relying on a servant to ensure that no significant crumbs are present. Both schools share a deep concern for the respectful treatment of food, but their differing solutions reveal competing value hierarchies.

Beit Hillel safeguard the integrity of the food from the outset. By requiring their servant to also be a *talmid chacham*, they ensure that crumbs larger than a *kezayit* are removed before handwashing. This approach prevents the possibility of crumbs being ruined by water, reflecting a proactive stance on avoiding waste and disrespect. However, this system comes at a cost: it diminishes the dignity of the scholar, who must perform tasks more commonly associated with a common servant. For Beit Hillel, this trade-off is acceptable because it achieves the practical goal of protecting the food in the most effective way.

Beit Shammai, on the other hand, prioritize the honor of Torah scholars. They argue that it is improper to use a *talmid chacham* as a servant, even for an essential task such as this. Instead, they place the responsibility on the diners themselves, requiring them to clean the table before washing their hands. Though this may introduce a greater likelihood of error or a delay in concluding the meal, it affirms the centrality of honoring those who embody Torah wisdom.

This debate highlights a tension between competing Torah values. Beit Hillel champion an efficient system where all aspects of the process are handled by an expert servant, ensuring the highest level of respect for food. Beit Shammai, by contrast, make the case for a more demanding but arguably more ideal system, where the honor of scholars remains intact, even at the cost of added responsibility for the diners.

Tosafot Yom Tov offers an insightful explanation for why, in this rare case, the halacha follows Beit Shammai, despite the general principle of following Beit Hillel. The dignity of Torah scholars is paramount, and even though Beit Shammai's system requires more vigilance, it better reflects this critical value.

Our mishnah illustrates the nuanced balancing of values in halacha. While both schools agree on the importance of respecting food and avoiding waste, they diverge in how these values intersect with the honor due to Torah scholars. The ruling in favor of Beit Shammai underscores the paramount importance of the Torah and its human conduits, an ideal powerful enough to displace Beit Hillel's precedence in halachic rulings.

Sforno on the Parsha
By: Nochum Spiegel

“Neither Here Nor There”

After twenty-two years of self imposed mourning which prevented his receipt of prophecy (see Sforno 37:35), Yaakov once again merits divine communication. News of Yosef’s survival and the upcoming family reunification brings renewed vitality along with a pressing concern. Upon surviving the threats posed by Lavan and Esav, Yaakov has maintained the spiritual integrity of his family. They are established and prosperous in the Land of Canaan. Yosef’s proposal that they come en masse to Egypt to survive the famine appears to be quite troubling. When a previous drought occurred in the days of Yitzchak, he was explicitly commanded by Hashem to not travel to Egypt but to remain in the Land (26:2). Additionally, the spiritual character of the place was the complete antithesis of the perfection Yaakov had spent his life striving for.

Before leaving the Land, in preparation for renewed prophecy (see Radak) Yaakov offers sacrifices to the **G-d of his father Yitzchak** (46:1). Following this Hashem reveals himself: “I am the G-d, **G-d of your father**. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there” (46:3). Why do Yaakov and Hashem both focus on mentioning Yitzchak at this juncture? Furthermore, why is it necessary to go to Egypt at all? Why can’t Yosef just support the family from afar? Hashem however provides Yaakov with no alternative to Yosef’s plan.

Sforno explains (Peirush; Amar HaGaon) that originally Yaakov intended to just visit Yosef – “Let me go **and see him** before I die” (45:28) – not to dwell there. He now invokes his father’s name in sacrifice to inquire whether there is divine permission to live there. Hashem responds, He is the G-d of Yitzchak who was instructed to stay, but new circumstances warrant a change of course to ensure national continuity. “For I will make you into a great nation **there**”. Yaakov is informed that if his descendants remain in the Land of Canaan they will eventually marry the daughters of their fellow countrymen and assimilate amongst them. In chapter 34, we saw how the citizens of Shechem were willing to marry with the family of Yaakov. However, in Egypt this would not occur. When the Shevatim arrive there, they must eat separately “because the Egyptians would not eat bread with the Hebrews for it was an abomination to the Egyptians” (43:32). The nature of the culture prohibited socialization with their Jewish guests, preventing the possibility of future intermarriage. It is specifically “**there**”, where the framework exists for B’nei Yisrael to coalesce, forming a nation possessing the distinct spiritual identity of the Avot. Hashem further reassures Yaakov that his own personal levels of holiness will be preserved as “Yosef will set his hands upon your eyes”. He will care for your needs and you will be protected from interacting with Egyptian society.

To preserve *Am Yisrael*, Hashem chooses methods seemingly counterintuitive to the observer but which ultimately lead to growth and success.