



חבורת מהות היהדות

Weekly Newsletter

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פרשת בא
י שבט תשפ"ד

From the Chaburah
By: Adam Friedmann

Intention When Reading the Shema

The Mishnah (Berachot 2:1) records a halachah about a person who happens to be reading the paragraphs of the Shema in the Torah when the time for reading the Shema arrives. If he focuses his heart (*mechaven libo*), then he fulfills the mitzvah. The mishnah indicates that we need to say the Shema with a specific type of intention in order to fulfill the mitzvah. What is that intention?

The Gemara (*Berachot* 13a) first raises the possibility that the necessary intention is to fulfill the mitzvah. According to some, this is a universal requirement for all mitzvot. The gemara offers an alternative explanation. The mishnah is talking about the intention to read the words, as opposed to one who is simply checking the text (*kore lehagihah*).

There are several positions amongst the Rishonim about what the necessary intention is:

Intention to fulfill the mitzvah

Some Rishonim hold that there's a universal requirement to intend to do any mitzvah. For these Rishonim, the most straightforward reading of the mishnah is that it's talking about this kind of intention. The Tur (*Orach Chaim* 60) ascribes this position to the Ba'al Halachot Gedolot and the Rosh. According to this view, there is no obligation to understand the meaning of the Shema, as long as one intends to fulfill the mitzvah when reading the words.

Correct reading

According to Tosfot (*Berachot* 13a s.v. *kore lehagihah*), all the mishnah requires for intention is to read the words of the Shema correctly. Someone who is "checking the text", as the Gemara mentions, isn't reading the text with the proper vowels.

Intention to read

According to Rashi (*Berachot* 13a s.v. *bekore lehagihah*), the main requirement is to intend to read the text. Someone who is checking the text doesn't have this intention. Rashi's

description is very terse. It's not clear what exactly makes reading to check the text different from other forms of reading.

Focus

The Rashba (*Berachot* 13b s.v. *shema yisrael*) argues that the Shema and Amidah are unique among other mitzvot since they involve the important tasks of accepting the yoke of heaven and asking G-d for mercy. Because of this, they require an extra level of focus. We need to take care that our thoughts are not distracted while performing these mitzvot. According to the Rashba, this is the intention that the mishnah refers to.

Declarative speech act

The Rambam (*Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:1) rules that the first verse of the Shema needs to be said with intention. The subsequent parts of the Shema can be fulfilled even if one reads them normally (*kore kedarko*) or is checking the text (*magiha et haparshiyot*). There's a debate about what kind of intention the Rambam is talking about (see *Kesef Mishneh* ad loc., and *Chidushei Harashba* ibid.). Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitz (*Yad Peshuta*, Introduction to *Keriat Shema*, *Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:1) suggests that the Rambam is distinguishing between different types of speech acts.

When someone says the words of the Shema, their intention changes the way we interpret what they are doing by saying the words. They may be reading the Torah as a narrative (*kore kedarko*). In this case, they are using the text of Shema to tell the story of things that Moshe Rabenu said to Bnei Yisrael. They may be reading the text of the Shema to learn or practice pronouncing the vowels (*magiha et haparshiyot*). In this case there is no intent to convey meaning with the words at all. The mishnah is telling us that the Shema requires a specific speech act, namely to read the text of the Shema as a declaration of belief. According to the Rambam, when a person reads the Shema, they must declare their belief that G-d is one (see *Sefer Hamitzvot*, *aseh* 5). This is the intention that the mishnah requires.

These different views present a broad range for the internal orientation required of us when we externally recite the words of the Shema. In the coming weeks, we'll also focus on the content of the Shema. What are the beliefs that we are supposed to be declaring, focusing on, or reading about when we say the Shema?

Are you enjoying this newsletter? Join our weekly chaburah!

When: Thursday nights at 8:45 (following Maariv)

Where: Kehillas Shivtei Yeshurun, Nachal Dolev 12, Bet Shemesh

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 2:4 — The Speed of Conviction and the Slowness of Connection

Reciting Shema and praying the *Amidah* are core components of our daily *tefillot*, but they seem to differ in important ways. Perhaps no mishnah highlights this difference better than our own, but in the mishnah's characteristic manner, this difference is taught through a very particular halachic circumstance.

Our mishnah teaches that if a worker finds himself at the top of a tree or edifice during the time for *keriat Shema*, he need not descend in order to recite it. Rather, he pauses his work and recites Shema right where he is. The rationale is that since Shema only requires *kavanah* for its first verse, this worker will surely be able to fulfill his obligation, even in his precarious position.

However, this is not the case for tefillah. The mishnah teaches that the same worker must descend from the tree or building when it comes time for his daily prayers. At first glance, this seems strange. Many hold that prayer is only a mitzvah *derabanan*, and even for those who consider it *deOraita*, the lengthy *Amidah* is certainly rabbinic. Why should we require the worker to interrupt his work for what seems to be a lesser obligation?

The difference stems not from the level of obligation but from the nature of the mitzvah itself. Prayer, explains R' Ovadia Bartenura, is a request for Divine mercy. One cannot make sincere requests if he lacks the necessary peace of mind and focus. This reality justifies even an extended interruption of his work.

It is difficult to come away from this mishnah without the sense that the contents of Shema are somehow less fundamental to our lives. Even though the practical halachah is that one must recite the entire first paragraph in the tree, the Rosh explains that this is only so that our recitation of Shema does not appear flippant. While certainly not ideal, proper intention is only required for the first verse, and the rest can be recited absent-mindedly. How do we reconcile this with the overwhelming importance we attach to Shema as an expression of our beliefs and our acceptance of the yoke of heaven?

This mishnah draws our attention to something important about the nature of beliefs and convictions. They can come extremely quickly. Throughout history, great thinkers have described obtaining their greatest epiphanies in an instant, when all of the confusion and complexity of life melted away and was replaced by a profound clarity. To express and recall such convictions does not require lengthy recitations. It just requires a quiet moment in the midst of life's distractions.

This is quite different from the way we build genuine relationships in life. One cannot create a harmonious relationship with one's spouse in the blink of an eye. To truly connect, we have to express ourselves clearly, slowly, and with deep sincerity. Our mishnah's halachic distinction between Shema and tefillah reminds us to always differentiate between our approaches to conviction and connection.

Eilu v'Eilu
By: Dovid Campbell

Inside Until Dawn — Avoiding the Plague or the Egyptians?

“And you shall take a bundle of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the vessel and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the vessel. And as for you, no man shall leave the entrance of his house until morning” (*Shemot* 12:22).

Why were the Jews confined to their homes until morning? Rashi, drawing on the *Mechilta deRebbe Yishmael*, explains that once the destroying angel has been given permission to harm, it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. According to this approach, the Jews were told to stay inside for their own safety. Only the sign of the blood on the doorposts of their homes would protect them.

Ralbag explains similarly but emphasizes that it was their *contemplation* of this sign that would protect them. By slaughtering an animal that the Egyptians worshiped and spreading its blood on their doorposts, the Jews symbolically demonstrated their rejection of Egyptian beliefs. Contemplating this conviction made them worthy of Hashem's protection.

However, other *mefarshim* explain this home quarantine without reference to the destroying angel. R' Yosef ibn Kaspi believes that the command has “many reasons” and chooses to highlight a few. Staying in their homes ensured that the Jews would neither get into fights with the Egyptians nor become depressed by the devastation of the plague. In an even more pragmatic possibility, ibn Kaspi suggests that remaining in their homes ensured that the Jews would not become scattered and could leave Egypt in an organized fashion.

Abarbanel similarly highlights the benefit of not fighting with the Egyptians and adds that remaining at home enabled the Jews to completely immerse themselves in the mitzvah of the *Korban Pesach*. Also, incorporating the position of Chazal that the Jews circumcised themselves that night, Abarbanel explains that going out into the night air would have been physically dangerous for them.

The various explanations here seem to center on two very different types of concerns: the supernatural and the mundane. Why might Rashi and others have preferred to focus on the threat posed by the destroying angel, rather than the threat of the Egyptians themselves? For Ralbag, would a Jew who left his home but continued to contemplate his rejection of Egyptian idolatry be saved? And lastly, why might *mefarshim* like ibn Kaspi and Abarbanel have preferred their own explanations to the one provided by the *Mechilta deRebbe Yishmael*?

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