

# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

Vol. 1, Issue 58

פרשת וארא  
כ"ה טבת תשפ"ה

Feedback? [contact@essenceofjudaism.com](mailto:contact@essenceofjudaism.com)

From the Chabura  
By: Adam Friedmann

### “Your Camp Shall Be Holy” : Final Thoughts

For the last couple of weeks, we’ve been studying the rules about reading the Shema near repulsive things. Last week we noted a fundamental tension in what motivates these halachot: is it a concern that a person might lose focus in the presence of repulsive smells or sights, or is there a need to create a holy space when thinking about and speaking to Hashem? This week, as a way of rounding out this discussion, we’ll look at some further halachot and other sources that seem to further delineate this tension. Broadly, we can sort these sources into three groups: the location of a repulsive thing, seeing a repulsive thing, and smelling a repulsive thing.

#### Location

Some sources state directly that the prohibition for repulsive things is to be with them in the same halachically defined zone. The Gemara (*Berachot* 25a) cites a *beraita* that states: **A person may not recite Shema opposite human excrement...However, if the filth were in a place ten handbreadths above or ten handbreadths below him, he may sit alongside it and recite Shema**, as a height disparity of ten handbreadths renders it a separate domain (Koren translation). The Rosh (*Berachot* 3:46) reasons that on this basis one may read the Shema even if the only thing separating them from a repulsive thing is an open doorway. This is because a doorway is also considered a separate halachic domain. The halachah from the *beraita* and the Rosh’s reasoning are cited by Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chayim* 79:2), though with some notable caveats that we’ll discuss below.

#### Sight

The same *beraita* notes that when a person is in the same domain as a repulsive thing and that thing is in front of them, they must distance themselves until they can no longer see it (*melo einav*) before reading the Shema. This seems to indicate that *seeing* the repulsive thing is inherently problematic and supports the view that the concern is about losing focus. This is the position of the Rashba (*Berachot* 25a s.v., *haya*) who writes that seeing a repulsive thing always prohibits reading the Shema, even if it’s in a different domain. The Shulchan Aruch (*ibid.*) rules that one should try to follow this position.



However, the idea that the halachah of *melo einav* is about focus is complicated by two other halachot:

1. The Yerushalmi rules that the distance of *melo einav* applies even at night when one can't actually see the repulsive thing. One must still distance themselves the same amount as they would have to during the day. Some Rishonim (see Rashba *ibid.*) expand this to include someone who can't see at all.
2. The Gemara (*Berachot* 25b) rules that one can read the Shema in sight of excrement that's covered by glass or a translucent sheet (see Rashi *ibid.*, s.v. *be'ashashit*).

These rules indicate that even the prohibition of *melo einav* is somehow related to being in the same domain as something repulsive.

### Smell

The Gemara (*Berachot* 25a) cites a debate about reading the Shema near something with a foul smell. According to Rav Huna, one needs to move 4 *amot* away from the object. According to Rav Chisda, one should move 4 *amot* away from the point where they can no longer smell the object. At first glance, this debate seems to revolve around reacting to the foul smell. But on closer inspection, that's not the case. According to Rav Huna, one can read the Shema at a distance of 4 *amot* whether or not they can still smell the item. Even according to Rav Chisda, the defining line isn't where the smell ends, it's beyond that point. It's as if the smell of the object expands the range of its "domain".

The Rishonim debate whether a repulsive thing's smell prohibits reading the Shema even if that thing is in a separate halachic domain. According to *Rabbanei Tzarfat* (cited in *Talmidei Rabenu Yona*, *Berachot* 16b s.v. *ve'im haya* and in *Rosh Berachot* *ibid.*), if the repulsive thing is in a different domain one may read the Shema even if they still smell it. According to the Rambam (*Keriat Shema* 3:9) and the Rosh (*ibid.*) a bad smell always prohibits reading the Shema. The Shulchan Aruch (*ibid.*) cites both views, but in this case it seems the latter one is the basic halachah.

As we've seen, the details of these halachot make their primary motivation unclear. This likely contributed to the debates in the Rishonim about sight and smell. In the end, the Shulchan Aruch urges us to take both views into consideration. When reading the Shema, or engaging in other holy speech, we should both limit the distractions of overwhelming sensory stimuli, and be careful to create a holy space for interacting with Hashem.

## Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life By: Dovid Campbell

### Berachot 8:7 — A Bag of Gems vs A Big Inconvenience

*Berachot* 8:7 returns us to the debates of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. If you accidentally left a meal without reciting *birkat hamazon*, what should you do? Must you return to the place of the meal to *bentch*, or can you *bentch* wherever you currently find yourself? As in previous mishnayot, this debate echoes the divergent worldviews of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel and offers us valuable insights into the dynamics of our *avodat Hashem*.

The *Mishnat Eretz Yisrael*, a valuable modern commentary on the Mishnah, draws on the Talmud Yerushalmi to explain the underlying premises of this debate. Beit Shammai compares the forgotten *birkat hamazon* to a lost bag of precious gems—certainly one would return to claim that, and all the more so for a precious mitzvah! But Beit Hillel takes a radically different stance: We should all agree that one who was working in a precarious location, such as at the top of a palm tree, would not be required to return to *bentch*. That being the case, and given that we cannot gauge inconvenience on a case by case basis, we must be lenient. Both of these premises suggest something fascinating about the hierarchies of our religious values.

*Mishnat Eretz Yisrael* claims that Beit Shammai adopts a theocentric worldview, prioritizing obligations to God above human convenience or limitations. Their position reflects a sense of absolute reverence for mitzvot, viewing them as non-negotiable duties that demand significant effort, even if inconvenient. The analogy to retrieving a lost bag of precious gems underscores their belief that the act of blessing God is no less valuable or urgent than retrieving irreplaceable treasures. For Beit Shammai, one's obligation to God transcends personal circumstances, reflecting a principled and uncompromising commitment to divine service.

Beit Hillel, by contrast, embodies a more anthropocentric worldview, which places greater weight on accommodating human needs and limitations. They argue that while divine obligations are significant, the mitzvot are given to humans in their lived reality, and the observance of these commandments should not impose undue burden. Their derivation from the case of a laborer at the top of a tree highlights their concern for practical difficulties, reflecting an emphasis on accessibility and flexibility in the performance of mitzvot.

This debate carries implications for both our religious experience and the underlying theological emphasis that animates it. For Beit Shammai, mitzvot are opportunities to transcend human limitations and demonstrate unwavering devotion to God. For Beit Hillel, mitzvot are integrated into the rhythm of daily life, meant to sanctify human activity without creating excessive hardship. Beit Shammai's stance reflects a theology centered on divine majesty and the human obligation to rise to its demands. Beit Hillel's approach highlights the Torah's role in elevating and sanctifying human life as it is. Ultimately, this dispute reflects a deeper debate about how to navigate the tension between divine idealism and human reality in the observance of the Torah.

## Sforno on the Parsha By: Nochum Spiegel

### The Great Equalizer

Our G-d given ability to choose freely between good and evil, right and wrong, life and death is one of the foundations of Judaism. Rambam describes it as “a primary principle which is the pillar of Torah and mitzvot” (*Teshuva* 5:3). It is one of the qualities we possess which makes us similar to G-d in a certain respect (see Sforno *Beresbit* 1:26). Hashem does not decree a person’s behavior in these matters. However, when approaching this week’s *parsha* we encounter an anomaly. Amidst the *makkot* in Mitzrayim where Hashem displays his utter authority over all aspects of the natural world, we see this control encompassing man’s moral decisions as well. With the advent of the sixth plague (*shechin*), we witness Hashem continuously being *mechazek* or *maksheh* (strengthening, hardening) Pharaoh’s heart, preventing him from allowing the Jews to leave Egypt. Subsequently, he and his people must endure further plagues and punishment without recourse. How do G-d’s actions align with our previously stated fundamentals?

(For various approaches see Rambam *Teshuva* Chpt.6, *Shemoneh Perakim* Chpt 8, Ramban *Shemot* 7:3).

Sforno’s explanation (7:3) illustrates a guiding principle in his thought. Hashem desires that man after failing, return to Him, as he informs Yechezkel, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (33:11). Pharaoh and his people had drifted far from G-d’s ways. A function of the plagues, these great “signs and wonders,” was to stimulate the Egyptians to teshuva. By witnessing G-d’s total mastery over creation they could achieve the highest levels of awe and reverence for Him, acknowledging His supremacy over all other “gods”. In the face of Pharaoh’s repeated rejections of His will, Hashem sends Moshe time after time. They see that this G-d is not like the ones they worship. In place of threats of immediate destruction, they experience tolerance and patience which can inspire feelings of love and connection towards the One who wants their return to Him. Additionally, Am Yisrael, bystander to these events, will learn and instruct their children in these ways of Hashem (*Shemot* 10:2).

As the sixth plague passed, Pharaoh was ready to throw in the towel and free the Jews. How much suffering can one endure? However, the motivation to avoid further pain would not suffice. To balance the scales, Hashem “hardens his heart”. Hashem’s desire is for Pharaoh to reject his old ways. By submitting himself and regretting his rebellious behavior, he was to be a symbol of teshuva for his nation. A “hardened heart” now gives him the strength to tolerate, the ability to make an unbiased decision, unaffected by past pains and by those looming in the future. Pharaoh can now objectively decide whether he finally accepts Hashem as his G-d.

For Sforno, G-d’s “interference” with Pharaoh’s heart was intended to preserve the sacred concept of *bechirah* and provide further opportunities for Egypt to return their hearts to Hashem.