



חבורת מהות היהדות

Weekly Newsletter

Vol. 1, Issue 48

פרשת וירא
ט"ו מרחשון תשפ"ה

Feedback? contact@essenceofjudaism.com

From the Chaburah
By: Adam Friedmann

A Complete Acceptance of the Yoke of Heaven

Last week we discussed the halachah of washing hands before reading the Shema. In that context, we encountered the Gemara's statement (*Berachot* 14b-15a) that whoever wants to perform a "complete acceptance of the yoke of heaven" (*kabalat ol malchut shamayim shelemah*) should: relieve themselves, wash their hands, put on tefillin, read the Shema, and then pray. A person who does this is considered to have built a *mizbeach* and offered a sacrifice on it. Let's consider this statement in more detail.

Accepting the yoke of heaven

Accepting the yoke of heaven is the Talmud's way of referring to what's supposed to happen when we read the first paragraph (*Mishnah Berachot* 2:2), or possibly even the first sentence (*Berachot* 13b) of the Shema. This is the part of the Shema where we meditate on the existence of Hashem, His unity, and other related concepts. Our passage is saying that by means of the steps it outlines we can accomplish this meditation in the most complete way. What does it mean to accept the yoke of heaven in a "more complete" way, and how do these steps accomplish that?

Relieving oneself and washing hands

These are preparatory acts. The Ari z"l (quoted by *Ben Yehoyada*, *Berachot* 15a s.v., *kol hanifneb*) views them as symbolic of the preparation of the world of *Asiyah* for an ascent to holiness. First the waste material which cannot be made holy is removed, then what is left can be purified and sanctified. From a more rationalist perspective, we can look at these acts as preparation for the meditation of the Shema. The urge to relieve oneself can distract a person from the proper intention needed for the Shema. Washing hands may be an incidental step that happens after relieving oneself. Or it may be an act that creates a focused frame of mind by indicating that what's to come is something important. This depends on the debate among the Rishonim about whether one must always wash hands before the Shema, or if one only needs to do so when they relieve themselves.

Tefillin and prayer

In the passage preceding the one we're discussing, the Gemara (*Berachot* 14b) states that someone who reads the Shema without wearing tefillin is considered to bear false witness against himself. In the course of explaining this, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook (*Ein Aya*, *Berachot* 2:8) writes that wearing tefillin is a physical act that results from our meditations on Hashem and His unity. Tefillin serve as a constant reminder of Hashem's unity and relationship with the Jewish people. In this way, they are a concretization of the Shema meditation. Prayer can be viewed as an outgrowth of a deeply rooted recognition of Hashem's mastery over the cosmos. This is how the Rambam formulates the basis for prayer in his 13 principles of faith:

The fifth principle is that He, may He be blessed, is the one whom it is fitting to serve and glorify, and to make His glory known, and to fulfill His commandments. One should not do this for any being that is below Him in reality, whether from the angels, the spheres, the elements, or anything composed of them...Rather all thoughts should be directed to Him and one should set aside [thoughts] of any [power] besides Him.

When we recognize that Hashem is ultimately in control of everything we are impelled towards prayer. It seems then that both tefillin and prayer are the results of the meditation about Hashem that happens during the Shema.

We can now understand the Gemara's statement about the "complete" acceptance of the yoke of heaven a little better. The Gemara is describing a process. It begins with preparation. We remove distractions and prepare ourselves mentally to think about Hashem. The process ends with action. If our thoughts while reading the Shema are sincere and deep, then they will lead us to concrete actions. This process is symbolized by the sacrifice, the archetypal religious act. It too involves the preparation of the mizbeach, and the offering of a sacrifice, which combines mental contemplation with emotional resonance and physical action.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 7:3 — The Individual vs the Collective

Our mishnah further explores the concept of *zimmin*, the formal invitation to bless after a communal meal. The variations in the *zimmin* phrasing, depending on group size, reveal a profound engagement with a classic philosophical dilemma: the relationship between the individual and the collective. Is the value of a community directly related to the sum of its individuals, or does the collective itself hold a distinct and transcendent identity?

R' Yosei HaGalili holds that as the number of participants increases, the *zimmin* formula grows in complexity, incorporating more expansive language and invoking God's Name with greater specificity. While the formula for a group of three is simply, "Let us bless," the formula for ten thousand expands to: "Let us bless Hashem, our God, God of Israel, God of Hosts, Who sits upon the cherubim." R' Yosei HaGalili believes that blessings should scale in proportion to the group's size. He cites Tehillim 68:27, which praises God "in assemblies," suggesting that the size of the gathering amplifies divine recognition.

This approach resonates with Émile Durkheim's idea of "collective effervescence," where the act of communal worship or ritual does not merely reflect shared beliefs but creates a powerful, transcendent experience that surpasses individual contributions alone. By using progressively more elaborate wording in the *zimmin* as group size grows, the mishnah acknowledges this intensified spiritual dynamic, reinforcing the idea that the community generates something greater than the sum of its individuals.

A contrasting view might argue that the formula should remain the same regardless of the group's size, reflecting a perspective akin to methodological individualism. This philosophical stance, argued by figures like Max Weber, holds that social phenomena should ultimately be understood as arising from individual actions. According to this view, the formula of the *zimmin* would not gain complexity or significance with more participants; instead, it is the act of each individual blessing that carries the weight. The holiness of the collective emerges from the aggregation of individual actions rather than from a qualitatively unique communal entity.

The final halachah, articulated by R' Akiva and R' Yishmael, takes an intermediate position: From three to ten, the formula remains the same, with changes beginning only when the group reaches a size that distinctly qualifies as a community. This ruling offers a nuanced view of the individual within the collective, signifying that a group holds unique sanctity beyond the sum of its members, but this does not increase further with larger numbers. This balance speaks to the enduring value of each individual, as the group's holiness is rooted in the presence and participation of its foundational members. In the debate between Durkheim's collective effervescence and Weber's methodological individualism, the Mishnah suggests a middle path—acknowledging the power of communal experience to create something greater than individual actions, while also limiting the transformative effect of size alone, thereby preserving the intrinsic worth of each person's role within the collective.

Sforno on the Parsha

By: Nochum Spiegel

Avraham - From Student to Teacher

Human beings attempt to influence each other through different methods. One is of force and control, the unwilling imposition of a foreign entity; a second through education and instruction, the exposure to a path chosen by the recipient. In last week's *parsha*, with the wars between the four and five kings, we see a vivid example of the first option. What methods are implemented by Avraham in his journey to be a blessing for the people of the world?

The Torah lists various sites where Avraham chose to encamp in Eretz Yisrael. In Gerar, between Kadesh and Shur (20:1). Another spot is situated with Beit El to the west and Ai to the east (12:8). Is there any significant geographical feature which influenced these decisions? Additionally, a phrase used multiple times (12:8, 13:4, 21:32) in describing Avraham's activities in these locations is **vayikra b'shem Hashem**—and he called in the name of Hashem. What exactly did this entail? Was it simply his own personal prayers for the betterment of mankind?

Sforno explains that this calling in the name of Hashem was directed outwardly to his fellow countrymen. Avraham was teaching, countering the claims and ideologies of idol worship while sharing the knowledge and path to connect to the true G-d. The locations were strategic, between two large cities, affording Avraham the ability to maximize the amount of potential disciples he would have access to. After his stay in Egypt, he returns precisely to this prime teaching location (Sforno 13:2).

Following the *brit*, as Avraham advanced in prophetic level and understanding, Hashem revealed new insights which he was to then convey to the people. The revelation before the destruction of Sodom was to teach Avraham many facets regarding Hashem's method of applying *tzedakah* and *mishpat* to the world (18:19). There is absolutely no desire for the death of those who have committed sins. The presence among them of a group of *tzaddikim*, those capable of drawing them close and **instructing them** how to know G-d and walk in his ways will delay any punishment. The mere existence of this potential for *teshuva* will suffice. Hashem will then see if the sinners as well as the *tzaddikim* utilize this opportunity. This is an aspect of *tzedakah*. When a society lacks any members who arise to this task, as Sodom illustrated when every individual gathered for attack against Lot's hospitality, then *mishpat* must be implemented. The presence of unchecked brutality cannot be allowed to spread through civilization.

Avraham was the premier *tzaddik* in this regard. His efforts to both emulate and teach of G-d's presence and ways to his fellow man (**vayikra b'shem Hashem**) far surpassed his predecessors (see Sforno to 6:5 and 11:11). The blessing he brought to the world is manifest as mankind continues to learn and come closer to Hashem

To receive this newsletter via email visit www.essenceofjudaism.com/newsletter