

חבורת מהות היהדות

Weekly Newsletter

Vol. 1, Issue 2

פרשת תולדות
ה' כסלו תשפ"ד



From the Chaburah
By: Adam Friedmann

What kind of mitzvah is reading the Shema?

The Rambam places the laws of the Shema in the second book of his *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Ahavah*. This book contains the laws of: Shema, Tefillah, Sefer Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah, Tzitzit, Berachot, and Milah. The Rambam explains what all these laws have in common. We perform them constantly, and they are aimed at reminding us about G-d and bringing us to love Him. (Introduction to *Mishneh Torah*)

What does it mean to love G-d? For the Rambam, it begins with philosophy. A person must deeply understand the metaphysical and natural worlds and G-d's interaction with them. Once a person understands these things, they are occasionally struck by the magnificence of G-d's creation and wisdom and are filled with the desire to draw close to G-d. (*Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah* 2:2, 4:12) The ultimate fulfillment of the mitzvah to love G-d is to transform this fleeting experience into a consistent awareness that informs our experience of the world. (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 10:3,6. See as well, *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:51) This is the purpose of the mitzvot in the Sefer Ahavah.

Not everyone is a philosopher like the Rambam. People can come to love G-d without studying metaphysics. But the structure that the Rambam introduces is still relevant. There are several mitzvot that are aimed at fostering a pervasive G-d consciousness, and the Shema is one of them.

Where does the Torah tell us to read the Shema?

The first paragraph of the Shema includes this sequence: We are commanded to love G-d. Then we are told that certain things we were previously commanded should be in our hearts. Finally, we are told to talk about those things constantly, tie them to our arms, and attach them to our doorposts. (*Devarim* 6:5-9)

Chazal understood that the later steps enable the earlier ones. In order to love God, we must have particular things in our hearts all the time. In order to accomplish this, we must take the other recommended actions. (*Sifri* 33:1)

Where in this sequence are we commanded to recite the Shema? According to one view in the Gemara, we aren't. The Shema is *miderabanan*. We accept the view the Shema is *mide'oraita* based on the Torah's requirement to talk about the "things". Reciting the Shema fulfills this requirement. (*Berachot* 12a, *Peri Chadash Orach Chayim* 67, *Sefer Hamitzvot Aseh* 10)

Which "things" is the Torah referring to? The plain interpretation seems to be all the mitzvot. (*Ibn Ezra* to *Devarim* 6:6) We are required to review all the mitzvot constantly. This enables them to enter our consciousness and brings us to love God. Reciting all the mitzvot twice a day is impractical. Therefore, we recite the paragraphs of the Shema that encapsulate the basic tenets of Judaism. They include the existence of God, His unity, and a general reminder about the other mitzvot. (*Yad Peshutah* - Introduction to the Laws of Shema)

Mar'ei mekomot for this coming week's chaburah

זמן קריאת שמע של ערבית

משנה תורה, הלכות קריאת שמע א: ט

משנה ברכות א: א

גמרא ברכות ד: - "לעולם כרבן גמליאל...וכל העובר על דברי חכמים חייב מיתה"

שם ח: - "אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: הלכה כרבן גמליאל"

שם ט: - "מעשה שבאו בניו...כדי להרחיק אדם מן העבירה (פעם ב)"

רי"ף ברכות א: ב. - "אמר רבי יהודה...חייב מיתה"

רשב"א ברכות ט: ד"ה ובני רבן גמליאל

כסף משנה, הלכות קריאת שמע א: ט

ירושלמי ברכות א: א - "רבי יסא בשם רבי יוחנן הלכה כחכמים", "רבן גמליאל אומר עד שיעלה עמוד

השחר...ולא היו יכולין לקיים דברי חכמים אמר לון עובדין עובד כותיה"

בית יוסף + שו"ע אורח חיים רלה: ב-ג

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 1:1 — No Time for Introductions

The Mishnah often seems to be *in medias res* – “in the midst of things” – as if the sources, contexts, and reasons for its arguments were already well-known. This tendency also extends to the types of scenarios it deals with. Compare it with the Chumash. Throughout the *Torah Shebiktav*, we find clear lists of *thou shalt*s and *thou shalt not*s. The Chumash speaks to an embryonic civilization, where everything is still in potential, and there is still time to avoid disaster. The Mishnah, by contrast, speaks to a world in which everything has already gone terribly wrong —

“One who leaves a jug in a public domain and another trips on it and breaks it...” (*Bava Kama* 3:1).

“One intended to kill an animal, but killed a person...” (*Sanhedrin* 9:2).

The Mishnah picks up the pieces of our worst-case scenarios. And because its focus is very often not on what we *should do*, but on what we have *already done*, it is uniquely revealing about our human nature — both our failings and our attempts to fix them. This theme is set from the very beginning of Shas.

Our mishnah deals with the time frame for reciting the evening *Shema*, including the rabbinic decree that it be recited before midnight. There are many ways one might think to present the concept of rabbinic “fences” or safeguards. The Mishnah could have transported us to the original *beit din* that proposed the enactment. It could have detailed the Jewish people's reception of the enactment, its early controversy, its ultimate success. But *Berachot* 1:1 does none of these. Instead, this great rabbinic innovation is taught through a story: Rabban Gamliel's children come home too late from a party, and they are unsure if they may still recite *Shema*. It is perhaps the most ordinary, inglorious introduction we could have imagined. But it is quintessentially *human*, and, therefore, quintessentially Mishnaic.

We often turn to the concept of law for a vision of a more ideal society. We imagine that if only we could all keep the law, our societies would be perfected. That may be so, but the Mishnah seems to have a different agenda. In the Mishnah, we find a system of law bent on highlighting our mistakes, our negligences, and our honest misunderstandings. If most law books provide a sort of utopian escapism, the Mishnah immerses us in the richness and messiness of our reality.

In this spirit, *Berachot* 1:1 reminds us that the essence of *halachah* does not reveal itself in courtrooms or study halls, in brilliant debates or between the covers of a book. All of these are invaluable, but they are not the thing itself. The essence of *halachah* occurs late at night, long past bedtime, with the squeak of an old door and a few sons returning home to seek out their father with a question.

Eilu v'Eilu
By: Dovid Campbell

Rivka Seeking Hashem — Faith during Crisis or Crisis of Faith?

“And the children jostled within her, and she said, ‘If so, why am I?’ And she went to seek Hashem” (*Bereishit* 25:22).

What was it about Rivka's pregnancy that so concerned her, and what did she mean by, “If so, why am I?” According to Rashi, the overwhelming pain of her pregnancy made her question why she had prayed for children in the first place. According to Ramban and Chizkuni, Rivka's pain was so great that she would have preferred death. According to these *mefarshim*, Rivka's choice to “seek Hashem” was a response to her pain and desperation.

But some *mefarshim* understand Rivka's question to stem not from her pregnancy's pain but from its strangeness. Ibn Ezra and Radak explain that Rivka went to ask other women if they had experienced similar jostling in their pregnancies. When she realized that her children's behavior was unique, she sought out a prophet who could explain its deeper significance.

A fascinating third possibility is proposed by the Kli Yakar: Rivka did not realize she was carrying twins. When she felt the children jostling every time she passed a place of Torah study or a place of idolatry (based on *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:6), she thought it was one and the same child, attracted to two radically different worldviews. This yielded a frightening theological possibility – could it be that there are in fact two deities? If so, reasoned Rivka, in what sense am I different from other women who serve idols? What advantage do I have over them?

According to the Kli Yakar, Rivka's choice to “seek Hashem” was an inquiry into the true nature of Hashem's existence.

Did you enjoy this newsletter? Join our weekly chaburah!

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

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

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