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From the Chaburah
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Can an Ashkenazi Read the Shema Like a Sephardi? Part 1

Last week, we considered the halachah that the Shema must be read with proper enunciation. If we look closely at the details of the halachah, we also gain some insight into the way that Chazal pronounced the Hebrew letters.

Two examples illustrate this well:

1. We are supposed to elongate the pronunciation of the letter *daled* in the word *echad*. (*Berachot* 13b)
2. We need to be careful not to combine together two adjacent words where the first one ends with the same letter that the second one starts with. One example of this in the Gemara is the words *kanaf* and *petil* in the third paragraph of the Shema which begin/end with the letter *peh*. (*Berachot* 15b)

Both of these rules are confusing given the way that most Jews pronounce Hebrew today. For all except Yemenite Jews, the *daled* is a short letter sound (a plosive) which can't be elongated. There are no Jews today who pronounce the *peh* at the end of *kanaf* and the one at the beginning of *petil* using the same sound. It seems clear that Chazal were working with a different set of rules when it came to pronouncing the Shema. This raises a bunch of questions. What exactly is our obligation when it comes to pronouncing the Shema and other prayers? Are any Jews today actually fulfilling this obligation? How is one meant to choose between the many different traditions that Jews have today for pronouncing Hebrew? Can one choose to switch from one pronunciation system to another?

Many of these questions were raised in the early days of the modern settlement of Israel, even in the pre-state period. At that time, Jews were coming to Israel from all over the world and there was a push to adopt a unified Hebrew pronunciation. This is what eventually became the pronunciation used in modern Hebrew. While this was happening, many poskim weighed in on whether it was permissible to make this kind of change for halachic Hebrew speech such as *Keriat Shema* and *tefillah*. This week we'll consider the stringent view, spearheaded by Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook. In subsequent weeks we may consider the more lenient view.

Rav Kook (*Kol Torah*, *Av* 5693) bases his analysis of this topic on the halachah we discussed last week. Namely, that one is supposed to enunciate the Shema clearly (*dikduk be'otiot*), but,

after the fact, one still fulfills the mitzvah even if they don't do this. Rav Kook posits two possible rationales for this rule. One option is that it's rooted in the meaning of the words. One cannot mispronounce anything that would lead to a change in meaning. However, this *would* allow for mispronunciations that aren't relevant to meaning such as emphasizing the sounds of certain letters. The second option is that this halachah is purely about pronouncing the language properly according to any and all linguistic rules. In this case, even mispronunciations that don't affect meaning would be a problem.

Rav Kook sees these two options as the subject of a debate between the Rambam and the Ra'avad (*Hilchos Keri'at Shema* 2:9). The Ra'avad follows the first approach. He argues that mispronouncing letters in a way that accentuates the meanings of the words might even be a positive thing. The Rambam follows the second approach. He writes that any deviation from proper pronunciation is a problem. Since the halachah follows the Rambam, Rav Kook concludes that the basic requirement is to follow all the linguistic rules when reading the Shema and pronounce the words perfectly. Fundamentally, this requirement is only *lechatchila*, but Rav Kook notes that some poskim emphasize its extreme importance (see *Bach, Orach Chaim* 62). He also notes that the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 61:22) applies the requirement of *dikduk be'otiot* to things other than the Shema including *Pesukei Dezimra*, *Shemone Esrei*, and reading Tanach.

Rav Kook goes one step further by quoting the *Sefer Hachinuch* (mitzvah 420). He writes that if someone mispronounces the Shema to the point that some letters or words are omitted then they don't even fulfill the mitzvah *bediavad*.

The importance of pronouncing the Shema and other "halachic Hebrew" is clear. But how does this relate to the various traditions for doing this? Rav Kook argues that each individual, or perhaps each community, is obligated to maintain the tradition in pronunciation that it received from its ancestors. This tradition forms the context for each person's fulfillment of *dikduk be'otiot*. Therefore, for an Ashkenazi Jew, pronouncing the words with the Sephardic pronunciation is considered a violation of *dikduk be'otiot*. According to Rav Kook, this means that such an Ashkenazi Jew is fulfilling the Hebrew pronunciation only *bediavad*. And, if the variance in pronouncing certain letters is extreme enough, it may be considered as though he has not said those letters at all. In this case, he may not have fulfilled mitzvot like the Shema at all, according to the Chinuch.

On the basis of this analysis, Rav Kook concludes that it's forbidden for any Jew to switch their tradition for pronouncing Hebrew. Interestingly, he writes that this is especially true for Yemenite Jews, since their tradition is the most accurate.

Rav Kook was the spiritual father of Religious Zionism. It's ironic therefore that his position on this topic was largely rejected by the Religious Zionist community, which has broadly adopted modern Hebrew pronunciation for things like the Shema. This is because there are other halachic opinions on this topic which we'll consider, G-d willing, in the weeks to come.

Berachot 6:1 — Molding Our Appreciation of the Natural World

While the previous chapters dealt primarily with Shema, prayer, and their associated blessings, chapter 6 introduces us to the blessings on various types of foods. These *mishnayot* offer valuable insights, not only regarding our appreciation of Hashem's gifts, but also regarding the Torah's contextualization of these gifts in a fascinating hierarchy.

Our mishnah begins with a seemingly straightforward question: How do we recite blessings on the fruits? But, as Tosafot point out, this question is actually somewhat perplexing. Who said anything about blessings on fruit? The mishnah seems to have assumed an obligation that was never introduced or established.

Tosafot's answer is illuminating. In their view, it is simply a *sevara*, a logical necessity, that we may not benefit from this world without reciting a blessing. The mishnah does not need to establish an obligation that logic already dictates. According to Tosafot, a basic recognition of our relationship with Hashem and His world should naturally express itself in the form of *berachot*.

But if the mishnah considers the general obligation of *berachot* to be self-evident, this is clearly not the case with their particular formats. The mishnah continues by delineating specific blessings for tree-fruit, wine, ground-fruit, bread, and vegetables. It is not sufficient to express gratitude; one must specify the *type* of benefit they have received. This yields an interesting and not entirely intuitive classification of natural species. In fact, Rebbe Yehudah and the sages debate whether vegetables should actually receive a unique blessing or whether they are essentially a type of ground-fruit.

These categories do not reflect our modern understandings of botany or agriculture. As we know, the halachah categorizes lettuce, potatoes, and bananas as ground-fruit, even though these represent three very different parts of a plant. Rather, the mishnah's categories are value-laden, reflecting a unique perspective on the natural world. In classifying the various types of food plants, the laws of *berachot* are primarily concerned with how these fruits grow. Is this a type of plant that must be replanted each year, emerging directly from the earth, or does it endure indefinitely, providing us a regular supply of fruits with minimal human assistance? Our enjoyment of these two types is fundamentally different, and this is reflected in their blessings.

Similarly, bread and wine receive unique blessings because they have been elevated through human agency. As the *Aruch HaShulchan* explains, in the context of *berachot*, the word *adamah* refers to soil while the word *aretz* refers to a nation. Abstracting from this, we might interpret the blessing on bread as, “Who produces bread through human civilization.” In these blessings and those we will explore in the coming weeks, the Torah actively molds our appreciation of the natural world and our unique role within it.

Bilaam's Misguided Mission — Divinely Approved or Not?

“And God came to Bilaam at night and said to him, ‘If the men came to summon you, get up and go with them—but the matter that I shall say to you, that shall you do’” (*Bamidbar* 22:20).

When the second group of Balak's emissaries arrive, Hashem seems to grant Bilaam permission to go with them, but with a caveat—Bilaam will not be free to fulfill Balak's requests. This makes it difficult to understand what exactly Bilaam hoped to gain from going. Furthermore, if Hashem's plan was always to use Bilaam as a tool for the blessing and praise of Israel, why not *command* Bilaam to go? It seems that the ambiguous permission granted to Bilaam is somehow essential to this episode, and the classic *mefarshim* attempt to explain why.

Rashi explains that Bilaam was granted permission to pursue his financial interests. If Bilaam believed that he would be well-paid for his participation, then it was permissible for him to go. But how could he expect a reward once Hashem had told him he would be unable to freely assist Balak? Rashi answers that despite Hashem's caveat, Bilaam hoped he could still entreat and persuade Hashem to curse the Jews.

Ibn Ezra explains that Hashem did not actually want Bilaam to participate. Nevertheless, like the case of the *meraglim*, Hashem is influenced by human requests to permit things that He does not truly approve of. Hashem warned Bilaam but did not stop him.

According to Ralbag, Hashem only granted Bilaam permission to travel to Balak, but certainly not to curse the Jews. In a similar approach, Sforno argues that the phrase “to summon you” in our verse has the connotation of giving counsel. Bilaam was granted permission to advise Balak *against* his wicked plan; not to assist it.

Chizkuni offers an additional and novel approach. Balak's emissaries had already been told that Hashem refused to allow Bilaam to participate. In Chizkuni's view, Hashem was effectively saying to Bilaam, “If they are such fools that they come to summon you a second time after I told you not to go with them, then get up and go with them, and they will see that it does not help them.” According to this approach, Bilaam's “permission” was a way of dramatically showing Balak what he had thus far failed to understand.

All of these approaches agree that Hashem never intended to allow Bilaam to curse the Jews. Nevertheless, they disagree about what Bilaam believed he was being permitted to do. For Ralbag and Sforno, Bilaam was well-aware that he had no permission to assist Balak in his plot. But for commentators like Rashi and ibn Ezra, Bilaam may have held onto the belief that he could change Hashem's mind. How do these alternative approaches affect the way we view Bilaam, his mission, and its outcome?