



# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

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פרשת שלח  
כ"ג סיון תשפ"ד

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From the Chaburah  
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### Reading the Shema in Other Languages

Over the last couple of weeks, we've dealt with arguments surrounding the word *shema*. Does it mean to physically hear something, or to understand it? Another outgrowth of this debate is the question of whether the Shema can be read in languages other than Hebrew. The Tannaim argue about this issue (*Berachot* 13a). According to Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, the Shema must be read in the original text from the Torah (*kektavam*). According to the other Sages, it can be read in any language that a person understands (*bekol lashon shehu shomea*).

The majority view is that the halachah follows the Sages (*Tosfot*, *Berachot* 13a s.v., *vechachamim*; *Rosh*, *Berachot* 2:2; *Rif*, *Berachot* 7a; *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Keriat Shema* 2:10; *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chayim* 62:2). According to this view, a person can read the Shema in any language, provided that they understand the entire translation (*Mishnah Berurah* 62:3, though see *Peri Megadim*, *ibid.*, *Eshel Avraham* 1). This idea fits nicely with the philosophical understanding that the purpose of the Shema is to constantly remind ourselves about the fundamentals of Judaism (see last week's newsletter). If the Shema is about ideas, then it shouldn't matter what language those ideas are presented in.

At first glance, this topic seems fairly clear cut. However, the position of many Acharonim on this halachah raises some interesting debates about its nature and the concept of translation as a whole. Both the *Mishnah Berurah* (62:3) and the *Aruch Hashulchan* (*Orach Chayim* 62:4) argue that despite the *Shulchan Aruch*'s explicit statement that the Shema can be read in any language, we should not do this today. This is because there are many ambiguous words in the text of the Shema such as *veshinantam* which may refer to study through repetition, or to the sharpening of an idea. There are other words, such as *et*, which don't appear in the syntax of other languages. Finally, there are words whose meaning we don't really know such as *totafot*. According to this position, words like these make it impossible for us to translate the Shema effectively today, even though this used to be possible.

One may question this position by noting that if the ambiguous words prevent us from understanding, and therefore reading, the Shema in other languages, shouldn't this be true in Hebrew too? If we don't unambiguously know what these words mean, why does it work for us to read them in Hebrew? The Acharonim answer that Hebrew has a special status. When we read the Shema in the original Hebrew we can fulfill the mitzvah even without understanding all the words. This is provided that we at least understand the first verse of *Shema Yisrael*, which virtually every Jew does.

The *Mishnah Berurah* (*Beur Halachah* 62, s.v., *yachol*) adds another interesting condition to this halachah. He writes that aside from Hebrew the Shema can only be read in a language that's commonly spoken in the place where it's being read. Reading the Shema in Italian in Israel, for example, does not work.

The position of the Acharonim raises some questions:

- Every translation takes liberties with the meanings of words. If we are allowed to translate the Shema, why would we expect that ambiguous words or syntactic features like the word *et* should be captured by the translation?
- Why should translation be limited to the local language?

According to these Acharonim, it seems, when the Torah told us we could read the Shema in other languages, it meant to create a new “official text” of the Shema in the other language. This text must remain as close in meaning and structure as possible to the original. This is why even something like the loss of the word *et* is problematic. This may also explain why only a local language, which is used to create other official texts, can be used. Over time, we lost the ability to carry out this precise translation. As a result, we must stick to the original “official text”, in Hebrew.

As we will, G-d willing, see next week, this is not the only way to understand this halachah or the act of translation.

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## **Berachot 5:3 — The Reasons for the Commandments**

This week's mishnah is arguably our source text for one of the most important debates in Jewish thought—the subject of *taamei hamitzvot*, the underlying reasons for the commandments. The Mishnah states: *One who says “Your compassion extends to a bird’s nest”... we silence him.* The mishnah is specifically discussing an individual who incorporates this rationale for the mitzvah of *shiluach haken* into his prayer. As we will see, this has major ramifications for how we understand the broader discussion of *taamei hamitzvot*.

In his commentary to this mishnah, Rambam offers a straightforward explanation for why the statement is so problematic. If the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird was truly a consequence of Hashem's compassion, how should we explain the numerous commandments which *require* us to slaughter animals? Rather, *shiluach haken* is simply a received commandment, without a reason. According to Rambam, it seems that we silence this speaker because he is simply mistaken about the nature of the commandment.

Tosafot Yom Tov offers a broad treatment of this subject, beginning with the observation that Rambam and Rashi seem to forbid this statement specifically in the context of prayer. He proposes that this is because one who says it during prayer makes the matter definitive, as if this is the clear and singular reason for the commandment. By contrast, to simply offer this as a possible explanation for the mitzvah is not problematic at all.

Tosafot Yom Tov then tackles what seems to be a more problematic aspect of Rambam's comment—the idea that the mitzvah actually has no rationale. In his *Moreh Nevuchim*, Rambam writes the exact opposite, implying that the halachah does not follow our mishnah. *Taamei hamitzvot* are actually a major component of Rambam's philosophy, and it is difficult to take his comment to our mishnah at face value. Perhaps, specifically in the context of prayer, one must behave as if the commandments lack reasons. Or, perhaps Rambam was simply explaining a view in Chazal that he believed to be a minority position.

Tosafot Yom Tov concludes by citing the explanations of two other Rishonim. According to the Ran, we silence this speaker because he is clearly wrong about the reason for this mitzvah. After all, the birds can be taken and eaten! The commandments *do* have reasons, but we do not know them. For the Ramban, the speaker's mistake is not in recognizing the mitzvah's underlying quality of compassion, but in attributing it to Hashem's compassion. Rather, the purpose of the mitzvah is to teach *us* compassion.

Throughout this series, we have attempted to abstract philosophical insights from each and every mishnah, often by probing subtle distinctions or underlying premises. This week's mishnah suggests that philosophy was occasionally an explicit focus of the Mishnah; an essential component of our study of the Torah.

## **Sending the Spies — Where Did It All Go Wrong?**

"Send for yourself men, that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I give to the Children of Israel. One man, one man, for every tribe of their fathers you shall send, each a prince among them" (*Bamidbar* 13:2).

The sending of the spies into the Land of Israel is one of the most tragic and perplexing episodes in the Chumash. As a result, the generation that left Egypt is condemned to perish in the desert, unworthy of entering the Promised Land. But what exactly went wrong? This opening verse even seems to provide a divine stamp of approval for the mission, and the commentators therefore offer various explanations for where everything went wrong.

Rashi cites the Gemara in *Sotah*. The Israelites had received Hashem's promise to bring them into a good and fruitful land. As soon as they requested a scouting mission, they demonstrated a severe lack of trust in that promise. Hashem's acquiescence to the mission was really just a pretext, giving them the opportunity to further demonstrate their rebelliousness and forfeit their inheritance of the Land.

Ramban finds this explanation problematic. In *parashat Devarim*, Moshe says explicitly that he looked upon the spies' mission favorably. He thought it was a good idea. If we accept Rashi's approach, then we have to say that Moshe also sinned! Ramban therefore offers an alternative. In truth, there was nothing intrinsically problematic about organizing a scouting party and creating a plan of action. After all, this is how an invading army normally behaves, and we do not rely on miracles to exempt us from making normal efforts. The tragic error was not the mission itself but the Israelites' response to it, when they chose to take a negative view of the Land.

Ralbag offers a third possibility. Like Rashi, he notes that the people should have trusted in Hashem, but like Ramban, he acknowledges that sending spies to report on the goodness of the land and plan an invasion was a reasonable request. The value of the mission was ambiguous from the start, and Hashem therefore commanded Moshe to send enlightened individuals who could best resist the mission's perils. Unfortunately, this was not enough, and even these exceptional leaders made a severe error in judgment.

In analyzing this episode, there is a strong emphasis on Hashem's role in how it unfolds. For Ralbag, Hashem actively attempted to avert the tragedy. But in Rashi's explanation, it almost seems that Hashem engineered the mission and its failure. Was there still a possibility that the spies would do the right thing? And how might Rashi answer Ramban's challenge regarding Moshe's acquiescence?