



# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

Vol. 1, Issue 6

פרשת מקץ  
ד טבת תשפ"ד

**From the Chaburah**  
**By: Adam Friedmann**

### Reading the Shema Between Dawn and Sunrise

We read the evening Shema when people are sleeping (*beshochvecha*). We read the morning Shema when people wake up (*bekumecha*). These time periods are mostly distinct. But they do overlap in the period between dawn (*amud hashachar*) and sunrise (*hanetz hachamah*). Can one read the Shema at this time? Which one?

The Gemara (*Berachot* 8b-9a) cites two rulings on this issue in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. According to one, the evening Shema can be read until sunrise because some people are still sleeping at that time. The morning Shema, however, can only be read after sunrise. According to the other ruling, the morning Shema can be read just after dawn because some people are already getting up. The evening Shema, however, must be read before dawn. The Gemara records a practical case where Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi relied on the first ruling saying that one may rely on Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in extenuating circumstances.

The two rulings of Rabbi Shimon seem to contradict. Do we follow either of them?

The Rif writes (*Berachot* 1b-3a) that we follow both rulings, depending on the circumstances. Therefore, even though fundamentally one can only read the evening Shema until dawn, one may rely on Rabbi Shimon in cases of *ones*. Similarly, one should not read the morning Shema until just before sunrise. However, in certain extreme cases one may read it earlier.

The Rosh (*Berachot* 1:10) rules similarly, but explains that actually Rabbi Shimon's rulings don't contradict. In each ruling there is a statement about the fundamental halachah and about what to do in extenuating circumstances. Therefore, everyone agrees that the time for the evening Shema ends at dawn and that the time for the morning Shema begins at sunrise. Everyone also agrees that in extreme cases either Shema can be read in between these times.

The Rif and the Rosh agree about the final halachah, but have different ways of understanding how it arises from the *sugya*. The Rosh's interpretation is not the smoothest reading of the Gemara. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says that we can rely on Rabbi Shimon in extenuating circumstances. This sounds like he thinks that Rabbi Shimon allows reading the Shema between dawn and sunrise even *lechatchilah*. We generally reject this position except in extreme cases. This fits nicely with the Rif's reading. Why did the Rosh insist that everyone agrees?

Perhaps the debate revolves around an issue in the philosophy of halachah. Namely, what are we doing when we rely on a leniency in cases of extenuating circumstances? According to the Rif, these cases allow us to temporarily adopt a halachic position that we usually reject fundamentally. This is what we are doing when we "rely" on Rabbi Shimon. According to the Rosh, this is impossible. If we really held that Rabbi Shimon's position was wrong, we could never adopt it, even in extreme situations. Therefore it must be that there's no fundamental debate, and that even Rabbi Shimon was talking about extenuating circumstances.

There is another possible explanation of the Rosh. The Ba'al Hamaor (2a in the pagination of the Rif), takes the Rif to task for accepting the contradictory rulings of Rabbi Shimon. He argues that this is illogical. We must pick either one or the other. The Rosh may simply be defending the halachic position of the Rif against something like the Ba'al Hamaor's attack. However, even if our first explanation of the Rosh isn't correct, it still invites some interesting reflection about the nature of the halachic process.

## Marei mekomot for this coming week's chaburah

### הבנת הצורך לזמני קריאת שמע

ספר החינוך, מצוה תכ  
ערוך השולחן אורח חיים נח: ו  
מורה נבוכים א: סח, ג: נא  
משנה תורה הלכות תשובה י: ב,ג,ו  
Aristotle, De Anima iii 5  
יד פשוטה, הקדמה להלכות קריאת שמע  
עין איה, ברכות י: "גדול קריאת שמע בעונתה"

# Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

## Berachot 1:4 — The Fixity and Flexibility of Our Blessings

Sometimes, in the places where we would expect the most rigidity, the Torah shows a remarkable openness. Our mishnah outlines the laws of *birkot keriat Shema*. Specifically, we are told that the morning Shema is accompanied by three *berachot* (two before and one after), while the evening Shema is accompanied by four (two before and two after). Regarding those that precede the Shema, one *berachah* must be “long,” while the second must be “short.” The mishnah concludes by teaching us that one may not alter the format of the various *berachot* instituted by Chazal. For example, one may not turn a long *berachah* into a short one, or vice versa. It's all very strict and regimented.

The structure of these blessings is clearly purposeful, but it is not entirely clear what types of alterations Chazal were concerned about. Bartenura explains “long” and “short” *berachot* in terms of whether they both begin and end with a “*Baruch atta Hashem*” formulation. Following this approach, R’ Akiva Eiger explains that our mishnah's ruling is simply a particular case of a more general rule, i.e. a *berachah* immediately following an earlier *berachah* does not begin with Baruch. Once we have said the first of the *birkot keriat Shema*, all of the rest are considered adjacent to it and only require the short format.

But the Vilna Gaon interprets the mishnah quite differently (*Imrei Noam* to *Berachot* 11a). The long blessings are long not because they open with Baruch, but because they include numerous subjects. The short blessings, by contrast, mention only the subject of Torah study. According to the Gra, when Chazal warned against altering these formats, they were not merely reiterating the general rule of adjacent *berachot*. They were emphasizing that the unique subject matter of each blessing is purposeful and therefore fixed.

But just how fixed? In his comments on our mishnah, Ritva seeks to justify the widespread practice of inserting piyutim, liturgical poetry, right into the middle of *birkot keriat Shema*. This would seem to be a clear violation of our mishnah! Ritva therefore suggests that the mishnah never meant to forbid occasional insertions. Only an attempt to permanently change the language of the *berachah* was forbidden.

Our *berachot*, and particularly those accompanying the Shema, convey some of our deepest religious values and theological commitments. They were precisely formulated by the *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah* and are beyond our ability to alter or second-guess. At the same time, Ritva teaches us that these Sages never sought to curtail our spiritual self-expression. They recognized the human need to imbue our fixed prayers with personal reflections, based on the needs of our times. In the blessings of Shema, we find that even our most structured laws retain a space for poetry.

**Eilu v'Eilu**  
**By: Dovid Campbell**

## The Descent to Egypt — Fear of Famine or Social Sensitivity?

“And Yaakov saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Yaakov said to his sons, ‘Why do you show yourselves?’” (*Bereishit* 42:1)

What exactly was Yaakov asking his sons? Rashi offers three explanations. The first, based on the Gemara in *Ta'anit*, suggests that the family still had food at that time. Yaakov's concern was not starvation but appearances. “Do not show yourselves before the children of Yishmael and the children of Esav as if you are satiated,” Yaakov warned his sons. The Gemara teaches this in the context of being sensitive to the hardships of others and not arousing their jealousy.

But Rashi's preferred *peshat* suggests a very different concern. Yaakov was encouraging his sons to take proper precautions. “Why should everyone stare and be astonished at you that you do not seek food before what you have is depleted?” Rashi's third possibility, which he says he heard from others, is that the words *lama titrau* can be interpreted as “Why should you become lean?” According to this, Yaakov was indeed worried about the onset of hunger and starvation.

Like Rashi's first explanation, R' Yosef Bechor Shor highlights the issue of appearances. Yaakov's concern was that if the family became weakened through hunger, people would say, “Have you seen the sons of Yaakov, who were wealthy and beautiful, how they have become darkened with hunger?!” Unlike the Gemara cited by Rashi, the primary concern here is not the jealousy of others, but the reputation of the family. Presumably, Yaakov was concerned for the *chilul Hashem* that would result from their sudden poverty.

An entirely different approach is taken by R' Avraham ibn Ezra and elucidated by Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam and Ralbag. According to them, the verse can be interpreted as, “Why do you quarrel?” The brothers had begun to fight with one another – but why? Rabbeinu Avraham suggests that none of them wanted to descend to Egypt, each suggesting that a different brother should go. Ralbag believes that they were fighting over the food itself, each preventing the others from taking too much, as is common in times of famine.

Not all of these explanations are mutually exclusive, but each of them emphasizes a different concern and a unique sensitivity. How do these diverse approaches underscore the numerous challenges, both material and spiritual, that accompany poverty? And what do they say about the particular challenges facing Yaakov, his family, and any group that is held to a higher standard of conduct?

**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