



# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

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From the Chabura  
By: Adam Friedmann

### The Shema and "The Camp": Holy Thoughts or Sanctified Spaces?

Last week we began learning about the *halachot* of not reading the Shema in the presence of repulsive things. This week we'll continue on this topic, considering the definition of what constitutes excrement and urine for the purposes of these *halachot*. In the course of this discussion, we'll come closer to understanding one of the philosophical tensions that lies at the core of these *halachot*.

The Torah (*Devarim* 23:10-15) outlines the extra level of sanctity demanded by the Jewish war camp. The Torah states that Hashem's presence is constantly in the camp. As a consequence, certain activities are forbidden within the camp in order to maintain its sanctity. Failure to follow these rules may result in expelling Hashem's presence. Chief among the forbidden things are relieving oneself. The Torah describes this in two different verses:

- And you shall have an area outside the camp, where you shall relieve yourself. (23:10)
- And you shall have a peg, in addition to your weapons, and when you sit outside [of the camp, to relieve yourself], you shall dig with it and cover up your excrement. (23:11)

Why did the Torah need to make both of these statements? It's possible that the first verse establishes the need to designate a "bathroom" area outside of the camp, and the second one establishes the need for the peg. In the Gemara (*Berachot* 25a), Rabbi Yonatan moves in a different direction. He understands that the second verse refers to a case involving excrement, which is why it needs to be covered up, whereas the first verse refers to a case involving urine, which is why no covering up is necessary. From this Rabbi Yonatan learns that exposed excrement violates the prohibition of "keeping the camp sanctified" and similarly prohibits reading the Shema. With regards to urine, however, once it is on the ground, there is no longer any prohibition. This is why the Torah doesn't demand covering it up. However, the Gemara adds, Chazal prohibited reading the Shema and other holy speech even at this point, until the urine is absorbed into the ground.

This distinction leads to a discussion of what's considered excrement and what's considered exposed urine. Over time, excrement dries up and turns to dust. Also over time, urine absorbs fully into the

ground. At what point in these processes is there no longer a prohibition? The Gemara presents a range of opinions for each case. Because exposed excrement is a de'oraita prohibition, the tendency among Rishonim is to be more strict (see Rosh, *Berachot* 3:49 and *Birur Halachah* to *Berachot* 25a). Therefore, the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 82:1) rules according to the stringent view that it must dry up to the point that it disintegrates when thrown or, according to Rema, when it's turned over. The approach to urine is more lenient. In this case, it's no longer prohibited once it's been absorbed enough that touching the ground will merely moisten the hand (*matfiach*). Rema is even more lenient and rules that there's no prohibition even when touching the ground moistens the hand enough to moisten something else (*tofe'ach lehatfiach*).

The fact that we source these *halachot* from the Torah's discussion of the Jewish war camp raises a question about the fundamental purpose that drives them. The Torah is guarding us against banishing Hashem from our midst. What exactly is it that causes this to happen?

On the one hand, the things prohibited from being in the camp, excrement and urine, are instinctively repulsive to people. On that basis, we might say that the issue is focus. A relationship with Hashem requires constant awareness of the kind that the Shema and other related mitzvot are meant to engender. The presence of repulsive things in the environment undermines this awareness. This is true in the war camp and in our lives when we're trying to do things like read the Shema. We saw this concern reflected in last week's discussion about reacting to the smell and sight of excrement.

On the other hand, the Torah is also concerned about sanctifying the space of the war camp. This is reflected in the Torah's insistence that camp itself must be holy (*Devarim* 23:15, see *Sifri* ad loc.). On this basis, we might say that the issue is about preparing a space for encountering Hashem. A holy space, at the minimum, is separated from the repulsive and the impure. This perspective is reflected in other details of the *halachot* that prohibit reading the Shema in the area around repulsive things, regardless of whether they can be sensed in any way.

We will, G-d willing, continue exploring more evidence of this basic tension next week.

## Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

### By: Dovid Campbell

#### **Berachot 8:6 — Turn From Evil and Do Good**

This week's mishnah addresses two of the blessings recited during *Havdalah*: the blessing over a flame (*borei me'orei ha'eish*) and the blessing over a fragrance (*borei minei besamim*). The subject is not the meaning of these blessings, nor their proper wording, but rather the quality and source of the flame and fragrances themselves. This special focus suggests profound insights into Judaism's unique approach to ritual and *avodat Hashem*, particularly within the context of our transition from the sanctity of Shabbat to the demands of the workweek.

The mishnah disqualifies three categories of flames and fragrances: those used for labor on Shabbat, those used for the sake of the dead, or those used for idolatry. In each of these cases, the object remains essentially unchanged; it has simply become associated with something improper. In this way, the mishnah asks us to view purpose and intentionality as constitutive elements of otherwise mundane objects—a worldview that naturally imbues everyday realities with lofty ideals.

The mishnah's requirements highlight another fascinating principle: it is not enough for these objects to be free of negative associations. They must have a specific, positive purpose. Even a candle placed for the honor of a deceased person or a fragrance used to mask their smell—usages that would seem to be admirable—are disqualified because their purpose is other than the illumination and scent required for the *Havdalah* service. There is a reflection here of a broader Torah principle: *sur me'rah v'aseh tov* —“Turn away from evil and do good” (Tehillim 34:15).

*Havdalah* encapsulates this duality of divine service. On the one hand, it calls for rejecting that which is tainted by sin or a lack of proper purpose. On the other, it demands actively infusing ordinary life with a positive vision, motivated by the right intentions. This dual project is uniquely tangible during Shabbat, when the twin injunctions of *shamor* and *zachor* operate in tandem to create a heightened spiritual environment. Without both complementary aspects, even our best efforts are likely to fall prey to temptations, rationalizations, or simple oversights.

In a world where productivity often overshadows purpose, these laws of *Havdalah* remind us that true sanctity requires more than bare functionality. By not only aligning our intentions with divine values, but even demanding that our ritual objects reflect the same alignment, we illuminate and enrich the entirety of our lives. The light and fragrance of *Havdalah* carries Shabbat's elevated sensitivity into the often coarse world of the mundane, transforming it into a realm of potential sanctity.

**Sforno on the Parsha**  
**By: Nochum Spiegel**

## **Out of The Water**

With the deaths of Yosef, his brothers, and the remaining seventy who had settled in Egypt, the circumstances of their descendants changed drastically. No longer exposed to the positive influences of their great fathers, their spiritual stature slowly dwindled as they fell into sin. As a result, slavery ensued and continued to intensify, increasing in accordance with Bnei Yisrael's drift from the ideals and actions of their Avot (see Sforno *Shemot* 1:1-14). The loss of fitting leadership has had tragic consequences, but Hashem now sets in motion the process for the emergence of a new leader.

As Pharaoh's daughter stares at the crying child set before her, she is struck by his handsome physical appearance and advanced development. This is not some abandoned child, the product of an illicit relationship. She feels compassion, unable to allow such a unique child to float to his death (Sforno 2:6). Even after realizing he is a Jew, she chooses to raise him in the royal palace. She names him Moshe and says, "For I drew him from the water" (2:10). There is a grammatical difficulty with the name. If she intends to commemorate her act of saving him, then the appropriate name should be Ma'shui —"the one who was drawn out"—stressing that he is the recipient of her kindness. Sforno explains that Moshe means "one who **will save and draw others out** from their pain and distress". Pharaoh's daughter recognized that the events surrounding the child's rescue had been orchestrated by Hashem for a distinct purpose. This child would play a role in freeing a nation from oppression. She therefore declares, "I pulled him from the water" so that he can grow and become "the savior of others".

This role of Moshe is not only fulfilled during the eventual Exodus from Egypt. It is expressed by the Torah in the few recorded events of his life before he is chosen by Hashem. In three events we are shown Moshe's foundational traits and character. When witnessing an Egyptian man severely beating a Jew, he intervenes to protect his brother and exact judgment. Upon seeing two Jews fighting, he steps in, rebuking their behavior to prevent further escalation. When Midianite shepherds chase away Yisro's daughters, Moshe comes to their aid, again protecting a victim from their aggressor. In this last incident, Moshe is both in a foreign country and on the run from Pharaoh's sword. The last time he had intervened in Egypt resulted in his becoming a fugitive. Nevertheless, Moshe does not hesitate, even at the risk of further harm (see *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:45).

It is after these events that Hashem reveals himself to Moshe, appointing him to the historical role he will play in the development of Am Yisrael. After falling in Egypt, the Jewish people once again merit to be guided by a selfless leader—one willing to sacrifice to preserve "the way of Hashem to do righteousness and justice" (*Bereishit* 18:19) in the world.