

פרשת נצבים וילך
כ"ה אלול תשפ"ד

From the Chaburah

By: Adam Friedmann

Throughout the Mishnah and Gemara, Chazal look at many novel scenarios where a person might be

reading the Shema. They consider reading the Shema in a tree (*Berachot* 2:4), while walking along the road (*Berachot* 13b) and while consoling mourners (*Berachot* 3:2). In none of these situations do the people involved seem to be in shul, reading the Shema as part of an organized prayer service. In fact, the only time (that this author could think of) where Chazal instruct a person to go to shul to read the Shema (*Berachot* 4b) is for the tangential goal of ensuring the person doesn't fall asleep before reading the evening Shema. All of these cases lead to a question. Were people in the time of Chazal regularly reading the Shema in shul?

Usually, we would say the cases discussed in the Mishnah and Gemara aren't proof about what people actually did in Talmudic times. These cases are abstractions designed to outline the limits of halachah. However, in our particular case the Talmud also includes many stories that depict the Tannaim and Amoraim actually reading the Shema. These stories would seem to be better proof about what the common practice was. Here are a few:

- Rabbi Tarfon read the evening Shema while traveling on the road (*Berachot* 1:3).
- Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria read the Shema during a meal (*Berachot* 11a).
- Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria read the morning Shema in the course of their daily activities (*Tosefta*, *Berachot* 1:4).
- Rabbi Abahu read the Shema as he was walking with Rabbi Yochanan through the city streets, including passing the occasional filthy alleyway (*Rosh Hashanah* 34b).

These are real stories about our rabbinic sages. Why weren't they reading the Shema in shul? We should note that there was at least one group in the Talmudic period that was likely doing this. The Gemara (*Berachot* 9b) describes the *vatikin* who would be careful to juxtapose discussing the redemption in the final paragraph of the Shema and the blessings afterwards with prayer. This practice, which informs our current halachah, likely occurred in shul. But the, perhaps unsettling, implication of the majority of evidence from the Talmud is clear. Most people, including Chazal themselves, did not regularly read the Shema in shul.

This common practice was not a matter of convenience. It was a matter of conviction. We've discussed before Beit Hillel's ruling (*Berachot* 1:3) that when the Torah says to read the Shema "while you are walking on the way" it means that it can be read as the person finds themselves at the moment. This doesn't just apply to being in a standing or reclining position. The Gemara (*Berachot* 11a) expands this to include reading the Shema while standing, sitting, walking, or working. In other words, the Shema is not something that happens in the rarified setting of shul. It's something that's supposed to be integrated with the thinking and acting that we do throughout the day.

This gives us a new perspective on our original question. If reading the Shema is integrated with one's daily activities, it's a lot more reasonable to allow interruptions for greeting others. This is not just a matter of insulting someone. It's aligned with a particular understanding of what the Shema is. Over time, our practice and understanding of the Shema shifted. It moved from the street and workbench into the shul and became an extension of the regular prayer service. Perhaps it was this shift that triggered the changes in sensitivity and etiquette that resulted in today's application of the halachah.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Rosh HaShanah 1:2 — A Shepherd and His Flock

Our mishnah teaches that the world is judged regarding four distinct matters at four distinct times of year. On Pesach, it is judged for agricultural produce, on Shavuot for fruit trees, and on Sukkot for water. But when the mishnah comes to the lofty judgment of Rosh HaShanah, it does not simply tell us that it is the judgment day for mankind. Rather, it employs a fascinating metaphor and makes reference to a verse in *Tehillim*.

“On Rosh HaShanah,” teaches the mishnah, “all of the denizens of the world pass before Him like members of a flock, as it says, ‘Who forms together their heart; Who understands all of their deeds’ (*Tehillim* 33:15).” Why does the mishnah choose the particular image of a flock, and what is the connection to the verse in *Tehillim*? Rabbi Yisrael Lipschitz, in his *Tiferet Yisrael*, tackles these questions directly.

R. Lipschitz explains that shepherds generally count their sheep by creating a narrow exit from their corral that the sheep must pass through, one at a time. In this way, none of the sheep can slip past and evade the scrutiny of the shepherd. There is an obvious parallel here to the intense and unavoidable scrutiny that each of us will receive on the day of judgment. But R. Lipschitz offers a second explanation of the metaphor as well.

None of these sheep can escape the pen without the help of the shepherd, who creates a narrow space for them to squeeze through. Similarly, on Rosh HaShanah, none of us can truly escape judgment without Hashem, who creates the opportunity for our escape if we are willing to push ourselves through it.

Based on this second approach, R. Lipschitz offers a moving explanation for the inclusion of the verse from *Tehillim*. True, Hashem “understands all of our deeds” and knows exactly how far short we’ve fallen of our obligations. But, as the beginning of the verse states, Hashem is also the creator of our hearts and desires, and He knows that our purest desire is to fulfill His will. This reflects the prayer of Rav Alexandri in *Berachot* 17a—Hashem knows that our will is to fulfill His will, and it is only the *yetzer harah* that stops us.

This reality is what justifies the unique, divine assistance that we all receive on Rosh HaShanah. Hashem chooses to focus not on our superficial faults, but on our deeper spiritual essence. By focusing on this essence ourselves, we can come closer to the lofty ideal that Hashem has in mind for us.

Eilu v'Eilu
By: Dovid Campbell

Not in Heaven — How to Fulfill, Understand, and Pursue the Torah

“It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up for us to heaven, and take it for us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?’” (*Devarim* 30:12)

The idea that the Torah is no longer in heaven seems to be a general statement of Judaism’s this-worldly focus. Yet, Moshe conveyed this idea within a particular context, reassuring the Jewish people that the Torah would not be too difficult for them to accomplish. It is within this context that our verse opens up to a range of possible interpretations by the commentators.

The most straightforward interpretation of “not in heaven” may be that of Ibn Ezra. In his view, our verse is simply Moshe’s explanation of what he meant in the previous verse when he said that the Torah is not too wondrous or too lofty for the Jewish people to fulfill. In other words, the Torah does not require supernatural abilities. R. Yosef Bechor Shor explains similarly. Nothing that is commanded by the Torah is so difficult that it would require us to ascend to heaven to accomplish it.

The approach of Ibn Ezra and Bechor Shor is focused on our fulfillment of the Torah. The mitzvot are not beyond our ability to accomplish. However, other commentators understand the verse to be addressing our ability to understand or study the Torah. According to Ralbag, Moshe was explaining a fundamental principle of the Jewish faith—that prophecy has no influence on the halachic process. No matter how difficult a particular halachic question might be, we do not allow a prophet to resolve the issue through prophecy. Sforno explains similarly, although he understands our verse to be referring specifically to the process of teshuvah. One need not seek the input of a prophet in order to correct one’s ways and repent.

A final and very different approach is offered by Rashi. He chooses to highlight not what the verse is explicitly teaching but what it is subtly implying. Had the Torah *not* been given, we would indeed be required to ascend to heaven to retrieve it. Under no circumstances could we endure without it.

None of these approaches are necessarily opposed, but they each represent different points of focus. Whether we are struggling with the performance of a commandment or the meaning of a particular verse, we should feel confident that its solution is already here with us. And we should certainly not allow ourselves to be convinced that updated “revelations” are necessary or relevant. Particularly as we approach the *Yamim Noraim*, it is encouraging to remember that Hashem already gave us all of the tools that we need to return to Him.