

חבורת מהות היהדות

Weekly Newsletter

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פרשת צו
כ אדר ב' תשפ"ד



From the Chaburah
By: Adam Friedmann

A New Way to Look at the Shema

In our last discussion about the Shema we considered several activities that are forbidden while reading different parts of the Shema. The halachah is as follows:

- One who is walking must stop while reciting the first verse of the Shema. This is required in order to ensure the proper intention while reading this verse.
- Workers must stop their work while reciting the first paragraph of the Shema. This is in order not to make the Shema seem mundane or unimportant (*leshvei lei ke'arai*).
- One may not make hand gestures or other communicative gestures during the first paragraph of the Shema. This is for the same reason as the previous rule.

Last time, we concluded with two questions about these rules:

1. If the Torah says that the Shema must be read with intention, and the Torah says that the Shema can be read while walking (*uvelechtechu baderech*), how can the halachah be that walking while reading the Shema undermines intention?
2. Why does the concern about making the Shema seem unimportant apply only to the first paragraph? Aren't the other paragraphs important too?

This week, we'll answer these questions.

Question 1: Intention vs. walking

There are two approaches to the first question.

According to one view (*Tosfot Berachot 13b s.v. Al levavecha, Tzelach ibid., s.v. Amar Rav Natan*), it must be fundamentally possible to read the whole Shema while walking. This is explicitly stated in the Torah! However, walking is at least somewhat distracting and does detract from the proper intention for the Shema. Therefore, the Rabbis decreed that we should refrain from walking while reading the first verse.

Rashi (*Berachot 13b s.v. be'amidah*) introduces a second approach. He argues that there are two fundamentally different obligations in the Shema. The first is the obligation to read with intention (*mitzvat kavanah*). The second is just to read without intention (*mitzvat keria*). The Torah's permission to read the Shema while walking only applies to *keria*. But *mitzvat kavanah* requires such a high level of focus that one may not walk while performing it.

Question 2: First vs. second paragraphs

Sefer Eshkol (section 6) takes up the second question. He explains that we need to understand the concern of making the Shema seem unimportant (*leshvvei lei kea'rai*) more precisely. The term *arai* here shouldn't be translated as "unimportant" but rather as "spontaneous". This is as opposed to *keva*, something that occurs in a fixed framework. The first paragraph of the Shema commands "you should speak about them". *Sefer Eshkol* interprets this as referring to fixed learning. By contrast, the second paragraph of the Shema commands "teach them to your children to speak about them". This refers to talking about the Torah in everyday speech, outside of a formal framework. The Shema is therefore commanding us to engage in two different types of Torah learning. The first paragraph requires a fixed study of the text. The second paragraph asks us to incorporate Torah into our everyday speech. Given this distinction, we can see why the concern of making the Shema seem *arai* only applies to the first paragraph.

A new understanding of the Shema

If we combine Rashi's answer to the first question with *Sefer Eshkol's* answer to the second we end up with three distinct "speech actions" in the Shema:

1. The first verse, which we must read with such full concentration and intention that all other activity is blocked out.
2. The first paragraph, which must be treated as fixed Torah study.
3. The second paragraph, which is an attempt to bring Torah into our regular speech.

This breakdown points to a very different philosophy of the Shema than the ones we've considered before. Those approaches all presented the Shema as monolithic.

What does this three-part breakdown mean? The three different parts seem to denote different modes of religious experience.

- Sometimes we have direct and powerful experiences of G-d. This is what we try to recreate in the first part of the Shema. There we try to focus on emotional and intellectual attachment with G-d.
- Other times, our interactions with G-d come through His commands. These are external to and sometimes at odds with the normal routines of life. This is what we reenact in the first paragraph of the Shema. We read G-d's words and try to absorb them.
- Finally, there are times when we encounter G-d within our daily lives. This is what we stress in the final paragraphs of the Shema. Here we emphasize that a consciousness of G-d should permeate even our mundane experiences.

Taken in this way, the Shema is a twice-daily exercise in rehearsing the different ways that we experience G-d and the Torah. This way, we're primed to make the most of these kinds of experiences when they happen throughout the rest of the day.

Are you enjoying this newsletter? Join our weekly chaburah!

When: Thursday nights at 8:45 (following Maariv)

Where: Kehillas Shivtei Yeshurun, Nachal Dolev 12, Bet Shemesh

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 3:4 — Idealism and Pragmatism

Our mishnah discusses the special enactment regarding a *baal keri*, one who experiences a seminal emission. As Bartenura explains, the enactment dates back to Ezra, who prohibited a *baal keri* from studying Torah until he immersed himself in a mikvah. The first position in our mishnah indicates that this enactment even extends to commandments like Shema and *birkat hamazon*, and this encourages us to explore a number of interesting questions about the goals and parameters of Ezra's original decree.

Bartenura highlights that these laws have nothing to do with the general principles of ritual impurity, *tumah* and *tabarah*. Rather, Ezra sought to instill a higher level of moral conduct among Torah scholars, who would certainly limit even their permitted marital intimacy in order to remain free to study Torah. Let's reflect on that for a moment. Ezra's decree was directed at Jews whose love of Torah was already so great that it could effectively deter their physical desires. These were certainly spiritual individuals! Nevertheless, Ezra believed that these same Jews needed strengthening or refinement in their approach to intimacy. This is a powerful reminder that a love of spiritual things does not necessarily preclude a love of the physical as well. Ezra recognized that even the sages needed a reorientation back towards their priorities.

Ezra's enactment also raised some profound legal questions. Was it really appropriate to delay biblical commandments like Torah study and Shema until one could immerse oneself? What if a mikvah was not available? Our mishnah therefore explains that regarding these *mitzvot deOraita*, one can "recite" them mentally, without articulating them in speech. In this way, Ezra's enactment is upheld and the commandments are still fulfilled, albeit in an inferior way. In earlier *mishnayot*, we saw the importance of articulating the words of the Shema audibly and precisely. But what arises from our mishnah is that thought is essentially comparable to speech from a halachic perspective. Later *poskim* even discuss the possibility of mentally reciting the blessing for water when one's hands are dirty and it would be difficult to wash them before drinking. All of this encourages us to reflect on speech as a preferable but not strictly necessary criteria in the performance of certain commandments.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the afterlife of Ezra's enactment. As Bartenura explains, it was simply nullified, and a *baal keri* no longer requires immersion before Torah study. *Tiferet Yisrael* addresses how this could be so, given the principle that a rabbinic court cannot overturn the ruling of a greater court that preceded it. In this case, however, the enactment could be nullified because it never spread and achieved wide acceptance. Despite the valuable ideals of Judaism's leaders, the Torah demands that these ideals be checked by the will and resolve of the people. Idealism and pragmatism therefore find a healthy balance in our mishnah.

Eilu v'Eilu
By: Dovid Campbell

Aharon and His Sons — Careful Followers or Mistaken Innovators?

“And Aharon and his sons did all the things that Hashem commanded through Moshe” (*Vayikra* 8:36).

Our verse, the final one in the *parashah*, seems to lack a clear lesson or takeaway. After all, would we have thought that Aharon and his sons *violated* Hashem's commands? The *mefarshim* therefore draw subtle inferences from the verse that reveal powerful but conflicting views of Aharon and his sons.

Rashi explains that the verse comes to praise them, since they did not stray from Moshe's instruction “to the right or to the left.” *Gur Aryeh* elaborates on this Rashi, explaining that since the service in the Mishkan was extremely detailed and exacting, it is indeed praiseworthy that they did not depart from it, even one iota.

But *Gur Aryeh* notes that the verse is explained differently in the Sifra. There, Aharon and his sons are praised for a different reason. Highlighting the words, “through Moshe,” the Sifra says that Aharon and his sons rejoiced in accepting the commands of Moshe as if they had received them from Hashem Himself. *Gur Aryeh* believes this is a better explanation of the praise conveyed by our verse, since it is quite natural for a great person to feel resentful when commanded by another. Aharon and his sons transcended this natural tendency of the ego.

While these approaches take our verse as a subtle praise of Aharon and his sons, Ramban believes that it actually conveys a veiled reproach. He explains that we would have expected the verse to say simply that Aharon and his sons did “as Hashem commanded Moshe.” By adding the clause, “all the things,” the verse suggests that they did not precisely follow Hashem's instruction — they did all the things, *plus* other things that were not commanded. This is a reference to the foreign fire offering later brought by Aharon's sons. According to Ramban, the Torah already foreshadows this tragedy in our verse.

As *Mizrachi* notes, Rashi's explanation has a foundation in the Mechilta, and we have already noted the interpretation of the Sifra. Given that both of these Tannaic sources interpret our verse as a praise of Aharon and his sons, what might have compelled Ramban to explain it so differently, especially when his explanation entails a more disparaging view? Also, whether we understand the verse as a praise or a reproach, what should we make of the fact that the Torah chooses to convey this lesson so subtly? Why not praise or reproach Aharon and his sons more directly?

Questions, comments, and concerns: contact@essenceofjudaism.com

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