



# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

Vol. 1, Issue 53

פרשת וישב  
כ כסלו תשפ"ה

Feedback? [contact@essenceofjudaism.com](mailto:contact@essenceofjudaism.com)

From the Chabura  
By: Adam Friedmann

### What Does It Mean for G-d to Have Names?

We are continuing our study of the Rambam's halachot about places where it's forbidden to read the Shema. Specifically, we're considering the expansion of the things that can't be said in these places to include other forms of holy speech.

In this context, the Gemara (*Shabbat* 10a-b) mentions that a person can't greet their friend (*she'elat shalom*) in the bathhouse or bathroom. The problem with this is that the word *shalom* is G-d's name, as indicated in *Sfofetim* (6:24): "and he (Gid'on) called Him Hashem Shalom". The word *shalom*, at least as part of a greeting (see *Yad Peshuta* to *Hilchot Keri'at Shema* 3:5), is an invocation of G-d's name, which is not allowed in repulsive places such as bathrooms or bathhouses. The Gemara asks, if this is so, then why are we explicitly allowed to say the word *heymanuta* (faithfulness) in the bathroom? This word is also ascribed to G-d in the Torah in the phrase "the faithful G-d (*bakel hane'eman*)" (*Devarim* 7:9). Why should *shalom* be forbidden but *heymanuta* and *ne'eman* be allowed?

The Gemara answers that there's a distinction between the two cases. The verse indicates that the name of G-d is *shalom*, whereas it does not indicate this regarding *ne'eman*. What does this distinction mean?

One possibility is presented by the Ritva (*Shabbat* 10b, s.v., *aval*). He explains that the verses indicate a linguistic difference between *ne'eman* and *shalom*. The former is a description of G-d's actions (*shem to'ar*). The latter is G-d's actual name, not a description. Speaking G-d's name in the bathhouse is not allowed. But a descriptive term isn't inherently about G-d. It can be applied to people as well. Therefore it isn't inherently holy and can be spoken in the bathhouse.

The Rambam himself mysteriously omits the Gemara's distinction altogether and substitutes a different one. He rules that names that describe G-d's actions (*kinuyim*) such as "merciful", "gracious", and "faithful" (*ne'eman*) can be spoken in a bathhouse or bathroom. However, the specific names of G-d that can't be erased when written (see *Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah* 6:2) can't be spoken.

Both the Ritva's and the Rambam's distinctions become difficult when we try to understand them in philosophical terms. The Rambam in the *More Nevuchim* (1:61) and R. Yehuda Halevi in the *Kuzari* (2:2, 4:1) write that almost all the names of G-d are effectively descriptions of G-d's actions in the world (*nigzarim min hape'ulot*). This includes names like *ne'eman* and the names which can't be erased. These names don't describe G-d directly, rather they describe the ways G-d chooses to interact with our reality. The only exception to this rule is the four letter name (*yud, heb, vav, heb*). This name somehow describes G-d directly, though it's difficult or perhaps impossible to understand how, exactly. According to the Ritva, *Shalom* also directly describes or at least denotes G-d. This doesn't make sense according to the philosophical description in the *More Nevuchim* and the *Kuzari*. The Rambam's distinction between *kinuyim* and the names that can't be erased is also difficult. The latter category includes the four letter name, but it also includes other names. That makes this distinction seem arbitrary from a philosophical perspective.

It's unclear how to reconcile the Ritva's and Rambam's understanding of our halacha with the philosophical treatment of G-d's names. However, this problem may have led some later commentators to explain the *shalom-ne'eman* distinction in other ways. The Maharsha (*Chidushei Agadot, Shabbat* 10b s.v., *gufei*) explains that something is considered G-d's name exclusively if it refers to an activity that only G-d does. He cites the Midrash (*Beresbit Rabba* 8:5) about the creation of man where the angel of peace argues that man shouldn't be created since he would be in a constant state of war. This midrash indicates that peace-making is not a human activity. Therefore, it is something that G-d alone does. As such, *Shalom* is a name that, while descriptive, really only describes G-d. This is why we have to be more careful about where we say the name *Shalom* as opposed to *ne'eman*.

The Maharal (*Netivot Olam, Netiv Hashalom* 1) takes this idea even further. He argues that G-d makes peace in the world because He Himself *is* the final state of the world in which all existing contradictions are resolved. Therefore, *Shalom* is a name that specifically relates to G-d's being, even more than other names, like *Emet* that describe something that only G-d does.

**Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life**  
**By: Dovid Campbell**

**Berachot 8:3 — The Theory and Practice of Practical Purity**

This week's mishnah continues the theme of ritual purity at mealtime and records an additional debate between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel: after washing one's hands before a meal, where should the towel be placed—on the table or on the seat cushion? While the practical implications may seem trivial, the debate reveals a profound philosophical divide about how halacha navigates uncertainty, prioritizes values, and balances theoretical ideals with practical realities.

Beit Shammai insist the towel be placed on the table. They are concerned that placing it on the cushion might lead to a chain reaction of impurity—the cushion might be a *rishon l'tumah*, which could transmit impurity to the moisture on the towel and consequently to the hands, compromising their purity throughout the meal. By requiring the towel to remain on the table, which Beit Shammai require to be ritually pure, they prevent this risk entirely.

This approach may reflect a broader worldview. Beit Shammai emphasize preventative action, striving to eliminate risks at their source. Halacha should aim for a state of theoretical purity, maintaining a pristine ritual environment even if it requires additional stringency or complexity. It is an idealistic approach, prioritizing long-term safeguards over immediate practicality.

Beit Hillel, on the other hand, instruct that the towel be placed on the cushion. They focus on a different concern, stemming from the fact that they permit the use of an impure table: if the towel remains on the table and becomes impure, it could transfer *tumah* directly to the food. Since food impurity has a basis in Torah law, while hand impurity is only a rabbinic concern, Beit Hillel prefer to minimize the risk to the food, even if it means the hands might occasionally become impure.

This seems to reflect a pragmatic legal philosophy. Beit Hillel prioritize practical outcomes over theoretical concerns, choosing leniency when it preserves the sanctity of what is most critical. Their approach is focused on maintaining halachic observance in real-world settings, even if it tolerates some manageable risks.

The debate highlights an enduring tension in halacha: should we prioritize the ideal, theoretical state of ritual purity, as Beit Shammai suggest, or focus on practical sanctity and minimizing major risks, as Beit Hillel advocate? Beit Shammai's idealism emphasizes stringency and perfection, while Beit Hillel's realism underscores leniency and accessibility.

This tension mirrors broader questions of human life and decision-making: Should we address risks at their source, even if it requires stricter controls, or focus on mitigating consequences, prioritizing practicality and impact? The debate between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel is not necessarily just about where to place a towel. It can also reflect the complex interplay between heaven and earth, between idealism and realism, in the world of halacha and beyond.

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

***Zocher Chasdei Avot***

“Yaakov dwelled in the land of his father’s sojourning, in the land of Canaan” (37:1).

The connection of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov with Eretz Yisrael is an integral part of the *brit* forged between Hashem and our Avot. Each is individually promised that they and their descendants will be given the land (see *Bereishit* 13:15, 26:3, 28:13). Their three generations overlap, creating approximately two hundred and fifteen years of continuous residency. Yaakov’s return and settlement after a prolonged absence maintains this attachment during the waning days of Yitzchak’s life and beyond.

Hashem’s promise mentions “the land **to you** and to your descendants”, but in what way was the land given to our Avot, given that they seemingly never held formal possession and control of it during their lifetimes? Sforno explains (13:15, 26:3, 28:13) that this refers to the fact that they will be regarded as *Nasi Elokim* (prince of G-d) amongst the people. In addition to a respected spiritual stature, Hashem will provide them with monetary blessing and significant material wealth. They will command honor and prestige from the residents of the land. Indeed we find the Hittites describing Avraham with that title (23:6) when they acquiesce to his request to purchase a burial spot for Sarah. This widespread esteem and status adds a crucial dimension to the actions of the Avot. Their dwelling in the land will be viewed on another magnitude by its inhabitants, allowing it to be considered as an act of acquisition which can then be transferred onward as an inheritance to the Avot’s descendants.

A further effect of the Avot on the people of the land is learned from our opening *pasuk* (37:1) quoted above. Why specify “the land of his father’s sojourning” as the land of Canaan, given that we already know where Yitzchak lived? Additionally the *pasuk* at Bereshit 35:27, “Yaakov came to his father Yitzchak, to Mamre, to Kiryat Arba which is Chevron, where Avraham and Yitzchak lived” contains a similar redundancy. Sforno explains (37:1, 35:27) the *pasuk* as meaning that Yaakov chose to settle in the same region where his fathers had been, not just anywhere in the same land. The memory of the kindness performed by Avraham and Yitzchak to the community was still alive in the hearts of the citizens of that area. Yaakov as their offspring would be received with gratitude and affection. As successor to his illustrious fathers, a sterling reputation will precede him, allowing for easier integration and the ability to positively influence the locale (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 84). Sforno also notes that the added holiness of the location due to Avraham and Yitzchak’s previous residence motivated Yaakov’s decision (*Amar HaGaon*; see Netziv, *Ha’amek Davar* 37:1).

The legacy of our Avot was not limited to their lineage. Every society they encountered was impacted in some fashion by the *Nasi Elokim* amongst them.

To receive this newsletter via email visit [www.essenceofjudaism.com/newsletter](http://www.essenceofjudaism.com/newsletter)