

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Va'etchanan
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פרשת ואתחנן
ט"ז במנחם אב תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 3:23-7:11

In this *parasha*, Moshe stresses to the Bnei Yisrael the importance of keeping Hashem's commandments when they enter the land of Israel; Moshe repeats the *Aseret HaDibrot*, the Ten Commandments, and utters the *Shema* and *V'ahavta*, the ultimate statement of belief in and fealty to the One God.

The Oral Law tells us that there are four ways to interpret the Torah. These are given the acronym פֶּרְדֵּס – *pardes*, which stands for *p'shat*, *remez*, *drash*, and *sod* (simple meaning, hint, explanatory meaning, and secret). When learning *trope*, the cantillation used when reading from a Torah, we discover that there are many “secrets” contained in the way the Torah text is written that can often be seen only when looking into the actual Torah scroll itself. This *parasha* contains a number of those secrets.

When we look into a Torah scroll, this is what we see in the *Shema*, chapter 6, verse 4 (of course without the dashes in the name of God and without the vowels):

שְׁמַע, יִשְׂרָאֵל: ה' אֶחָד.

If you look carefully, you will see that two letters are significantly larger than the rest of the text: the ע (*ayin*), the last letter of the first word, *Shema*, and the ד (*dalet*), the last letter of the last word, *echad*. Indeed, if the text does not appear in this way, a Torah scroll is not considered kosher.

There are a number of messages hidden in this verse, which is considered by many to be the seminal verse in the entire Torah.

The ד is written large so that we do not confuse it with a ו (אחד meaning “one” and אחר meaning “another”); if that happened, the person reciting the *Shema* would be

stating, “Hear, Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is a different god.” Similarly, in *Shmot* [Exodus] 34:14, the ך in אחר is written large to make sure we are not saying “you shall not bow down to the One God.”

According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the ך in the word *Shema* is large in order to make sure it is differentiated from an א (*aleph*), which would spell the word שמא – *sheh'mah*, meaning “perhaps;” in that case, the person reciting the *Shema* would be stating, “Perhaps, Israel, Hashem is our God...”

Another reason to emphasize these two letters is that if we take an ך and a ט and create a single word out of them, we can create three different words. טך – *ed* – means “witness,” and we are giving testimony to the entire world that we believe in Hashem and we are loyal to Hashem. טך – *ahd* – means “until,” and is short for עד עולם, which means “forever.” We are stating our eternal belief and faith in God. Finally, דע – *dah* – means “know,” and we are saying that our faith in God is so strong that it borders on knowledge rather than belief.

It is remarkable that there are so many messages about Jewish faith contained in the secrets of two seemingly simple letters of the Torah.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What is the difference between “belief” and “knowledge”? What do you “know” for sure, and what do you “believe”?
- Why does it matter what we say? What difference would it make if we said the *Shema* incorrectly, even with the untrue meanings mentioned above?
- The text of the *V'ahavta* (chapter 6, verses 5-9) tells us that you should, “speak of them [the teachings contained in the *Shema*]...when you lie down, and when you get up.” This is interpreted in the Talmud to mean that Jews should say the *Shema* twice a day. Why do you think the Rabbis considered it important to recite the *Shema* twice every single day?