

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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פרשת ואתחנן
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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* (Ten Commandments) and utters the *Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta* passages.

The *Shema* is central to Jewish belief and Jewish prayer. It is recited during *Shacharit* (the morning service) and *Ma'ariv* (the evening service) in addition to being recited upon retiring to bed for the night. The text reads as follows (6:4-9):

ד שְׁמַע, יִשְׂרָאֵל: ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, ה' אֶחָד. ה וְאַהֲבַתְּ, אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ
וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ. ו וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם--
עַל-לִבְבְּךָ. ז וְשִׁנְנֶתָם לְבִנְיֶיךָ, וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָם, בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ,
וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ. ח וְקִשְׂרָתָם לְאוֹת, עַל-יָדְךָ; וְהָיוּ לְטָטְפֹת, בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ. ט
וְכִתְבֹתָם עַל-מְזוֹזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ, וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ.

4 *Shema*, Yisrael, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One. **5** And you shall love Hashem with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your might. **6** And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart. **7** And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way and when you lie down and when you get up. **8** And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. **9** And you shall write them upon the door-posts of your house and upon your gates.

Note that the verse we recite when saying the *Shema* during prayer, “כְּבוֹד בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם”
יְדָד – *Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam va'ed* – Blessed be the

Name of God's glorious kingdom forever and ever," does not appear in the Torah text. The Rabbis added this verse for a number of reasons.

In the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple), when a blessing was uttered, the response was not *Amen*, but was rather, "בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד." Here, reciting a seminal verse from the Torah, we respond in kind, not with *Amen*, but with this phrase.

Another reason is that the *midrash* says that the *Shema* verse was first recited by Yaakov's sons at his deathbed. They were saying, "Listen, [our father], Yisrael (another name for Yaakov), [we all believe that] Hashem is our God, Hashem is One." Yaakov, realizing that all of his sons believed in God, declared "בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד" in response.

A second *midrash* explains why we say the *Baruch Shem* verse quietly when we pray every day, except on Yom Kippur when we say it out loud.

When Moshe ascended to heaven he took [this prayer] from the ministering angels and taught it to Israel.... So Moshe said to Israel, "All of the commandments that I gave you are from what I received from the Torah, but the use of this verse comes from what I heard being employed by the ministering angels. Through its use they praise Hashem. And I took it from them. Therefore, recite it only inaudibly"... But on Yom Kippur why do they recite it publicly? Because they are like the angels; they wear white, they do not eat, they do not drink, and there is in them no sin and no transgression, but God forgives them for all of their misdeeds.

Note also that when I wrote the text from this week's *parasha* above, I did not translate the word *Shema*. The usual translation is "hear." But *shema* means much more than that. It can also mean "listen," as in "הֲאִזְנֵנו הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאִדְבָּרָה; וְתִשְׁמַע – הָאָרֶץ, אֲמַר־יָפִי – Give ear, oh heavens, and I will speak; [*v'tish'ma*] listen, oh earth, to the words of my mouth." (*Devarim* 32:1). The word *Shema* can also mean "understand," as in "שְׁמַע בְּנִי, מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ וְאֵל-תַּטֵּשׁ, תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ – [*Shema*] understand, my child, the tradition of your father, and do not abandon the Torah of your mother." (*Mishlei* [Proverbs] 1:8).

As is so often the case when attempting to understand the Torah in a language other than Hebrew, much is lost in the translation.

The *Shema* is recited not only upon retiring to bed for the night, at which time we place our well-being and our souls in God's hands, but is traditionally the last verse one recites before one's death. We proclaim to ourselves and to the world our belief in יהוה – *Echad* – the Oneness, the Uniqueness, the Unity, and the non-divisibility of Hashem, all of which are wrapped up in the word, "*Echad.*"

We can see that many concepts are contained in these few words. As we recite them, let us try to be conscious of the power of *Shema* – Hear, Listen, and Understand – that Hashem is our God and that Hashem is *Echad*.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What is the difference between "hearing" and "listening"?
- What does it mean that Hashem is unique? What does it mean that Hashem is non-divisible?
- How many *mitzvot* can you find in the paragraph of *Shema*? (See below for answer.)

Answer: 1. belief in one God; 2. loving God; 3. teaching your children Torah; 4. reciting the *Shema* twice a day, in the morning and evening; 5. *tefillin*; 6. *mezuzah*.