



## RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

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# The Soul of the *Shema*

The *Shema* is one of the most familiar obligatory prayers. The body of the text is recited two times a day, to the point of flowing from memory. More elusive is the soul of the prayer, that is, its essence and core principles. Thankfully, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, following in the footsteps of his forbears, illuminated the spirit behind the words for us.

Rabbi Chaim ha-Levi Soloveitchik, the Rav's grandfather, deemed the *birchot kerī'at Shema*, the blessings that are the introduction and afterward to the *Shema*, integral to fulfilling the mitzvah. For this reason, he held that it is preferable to pray without a minyan and recite the *Shema* with its blessings at the proper time, rather than pray with a minyan and miss the proper time for the blessings.<sup>1</sup> *Birchot kerī'at Shema* are inseparable from the *Shema* itself; they lend it its religio-philosophical meaning. Let us examine them more closely through the Rav's eyes to see what they can reveal about the *Shema*.

### A DECLARATION OF FAITH

The Rav noted that the most complex *berachah* (blessing) in our prayers is the first of the *birchot kerī'at Shema*, from two

perspectives: its structure and central theme. The formula of the *berachah* is: "Blessed are You, Lord... who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates everything." This blessing is recited in the morning, so why mention darkness? Furthermore, what is the relevance of peace and overall creation here?

The Talmud points us to the source material from which this *berachah* was crafted. The verse says, "who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates evil" (Isaiah 45:7).<sup>2</sup> The Sages emended the last word from "evil" (רע) to "everything" (הכל) to teach that from the divine perspective, which encompasses everything, evil has no true reality. When viewed within the context of all creation, it simply ceases to exist. This opening blessing conveys that we bless God not only for the "light" but also for the "darkness," because we have faith that "everything" emanates from God, without divisions. There is only *yichud Hashem*, God's absolute unity, from which all existence springs.<sup>3</sup>

This has direct bearing on the character of the *Shema* and the appropriate *kavanah* (intention) for it, because the *Shema* is a "form of a declaration, a profession of faith." The Rav contrasted this with prayer, such as the Amidah, which demands a certain state of awareness of encountering God. In the language of the Sages, the

2. *Berachot* 11a.

3. Grodner, *Al ha-Tefilah*, 77–78.

1. Schachter, *Nefesh ha-Rav*, 114.

first verse of the Shema focuses on *yichud Hashem*, the first passage on the acceptance of *ol malchut shamayim* (the yoke of Heaven), and the second passage on accepting the mitzvot. In our daily recitation of the *Shema*, we affirm and reaffirm the core principles of Judaism.<sup>4</sup>

### TESTIMONY IN THE DETAILS

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, a close student of the Rav who wrote an entire volume on the *Shema*, pointed out that this motif of religious commitment is graphically represented in the very text we recite. Scribal tradition dictates that the *ayin* in the first word *shema* (שְׁמָע) and the *dalet* in the last word *echad* (אֶחָד) be enlarged. The two complementary reasons offered for this graphic highlighting reinforce the notion that the *Shema* is a pledge or testimony.

Rabbi David Abudraham explained that the two enlarged letters (ט-ע) spell the Hebrew word for witness (עֵד): the recitation of the *Shema* testifies to our faith before God, our fellow man, and ourselves. Furthermore, one can say that these letters are maximized so as to eliminate any room for error. In other words, the *ayin* is given prominence to distinguish it from *alef*; otherwise, one might read the first word of the *Shema* as “perhaps” (אֲפָשׁ). The *dalet* is likewise oversized so that it not be mistaken for a *resh* in the last word and read as “other” (אֲחֵר). Although roteness would prevent us from actually making



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these mistakes, the theological point is clear. We do not waver, nor admit the possibility of other powers, in crowning God. The *ayin* and *dalet* that jump out at us from the text serve as reminders to jettison any doubts or hesitations.<sup>5</sup>

### A CRUCIAL INTERRUPTION

The *Shema* consists of three biblical passages, yet we interpolate one non-scriptural line into our recitation: “Blessed be the name of His glorious Kingdom forever and ever.” The Talmud explains the significance of this phrase which follows the initial verse of the *Shema*. It goes back to a conversation between Yaakov and his sons that occurred before his passing.

Yaakov wished to reveal to his sons the end of days, but the holy spirit withdrew from him. He said, “Perhaps, God forbid, there is a defect in my bed, like Avraham who had Yishmael and my father Yitzchak who had Esav.”

His sons said to him: “Hear, Yisrael, the

4. Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur, 108 and 111. Accepting a yoke indicates discomfort and sacrifice for the sake of a higher goal (*Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 5:180–181).

5. Lamm, *The Shema*, 16-17. The Talmud compares someone reciting the *Shema* without tefillin to someone giving false testimony, implying that the recitation is a kind of testimony (*Berachot* 14b).

Lord our God, the Lord is one. Just as there is only one in your heart, so there is only one in our hearts.”

At that moment our forefather Yaakov said, “Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever.”<sup>6</sup>

The Rav pondered why the Rambam decided to include this story in his *Mishneh Torah*, since the legal code usually does not feature Midrash. He suggested that the Rambam wanted to underscore that unlike the Amidah, the *Shema* is not interested in communing with God. Its recitation—or rather declaration—is an act of “self-identification with the history and destiny of our people.”<sup>7</sup> The *Shema* is a kind of intergenerational attestation of faith.

The *Zohar* notes that in the Midrash above “Yisrael” is Yaakov. Two times a day we address Yaakov, as it were, declaring that we still hold true to his faith.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this explains why the *Levush* made *kavanah* for this line absolutely necessary for fulfilling the mitzvah of *keri’at Shema*. Without it, the declaration that is the *Shema* remains incomplete.<sup>9</sup>

### FAITH IN ACTION

The faith attested in the *Shema* is not some abstract credo that we simply carry on from generation to generation. It plays a pivotal role in our lives. The third paragraph commands us to wear tzitzit, to teach us how to stand firm when our willpower is tested on a daily basis. Affirming our faith multiple times a day strengthens our resolve. To this end, the Rav cited an unforgettable story

recorded in the Talmud:

There was once a man who was meticulous about the mitzvah of tzitzit. He heard there was a prostitute in a city overseas who took four hundred gold coins as her payment. He sent her four hundred gold coins and made an appointment. When his time arrived, he came and sat at the entrance.

Her maidservant told her, “The man who sent you four hundred gold coins has come and is sitting at the entrance.”

She said, “Let him enter.”

He entered. She arranged seven beds for him, six of silver and one of gold. Between each was a silver ladder, and at the top was a golden one.

She went up and sat naked on the top bed, and he too ascended to sit naked facing her. His four tzitzit then came and slapped him on his face. He dropped down and sat himself on the ground, and she also dropped down and sat on the ground.

She said to him, “By the *gappa* of Rome, I will not let you go until you tell me what defect you saw in me.”

He said to her, “By the Temple service, I have never seen a woman as beautiful as you. But there is one mitzvah that the Lord our God commanded us called tzitzit, about which it is written twice: “I am the Lord your God” (Numbers 15:41). I am the one who will punish [transgressors], and I am the one who will reward [the faithful]. Now [the tzitzit] seem to have appeared to me like four witnesses [to testify against me].”<sup>10</sup>

A person encounters innumerable stumbling blocks. Affirming faith in God twice daily strengthens one’s spiritual resolve.

6. *Pesachim* 56a.

7. *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, xxviii.

8. *Zohar Chadash*, 93b (*Midrash Ruth*).

9. *Levush ha-Techelet*, *Orach Chayim*, 63:5.

10. *Menachot* 44a, cited in Grodner, *Al ha-Tefilah*, 76–77.

## A MITZVAH IN TWO ACTS

The Rambam begins his laws of *keri'at Shema* as follows: "We recite the *Shema* twice daily...."<sup>11</sup> The Rav concluded from this that the *Shema* is a single mitzvah divided into two parts, rather than two independent obligations. It follows that reciting only the morning or evening *Shema* does not discharge one's obligation.<sup>12</sup> Why should this be the case?

To answer this, the Rav drew on two episodes in Jewish history when the *Shema* was recited by a seminal figure. First, Yaakov descended to Egypt to finally reunite with his long-lost son, Yosef. When they embraced, Yaakov affirmed the yoke of Heaven with unbridled joy, as he could see that everything that had happened was part of God's plan. It was a bright time. The words of *Shema* were an expression of love. By contrast, when Rabbi Akiva recited the *Shema*, accepting his fate as a divine decree, he was suffering extreme torment at the hands of the Romans. His death dealt a blow to budding hopes of overcoming the oppressors. It was a dark time.<sup>13</sup>

The morning *Shema* is when one sees God's hand at work in the light of day, when the declaration of faith comes easily. The evening *Shema* is when God's hand is hidden in the waning or absent light, when it is excruciatingly difficult to believe because everything indicates otherwise.<sup>14</sup> The mitzvah

of the *Shema* lies in two acts, so that the unshakable faith of the Jew is fully voiced.

The Rav thought that this is reflected by the halachic requirement to say *Emet ve-Yatziv* after the morning *Shema* and *Emet ve-Emunah* after the evening *Shema*.<sup>15</sup> The word *yatziv* denotes stability and abiding presence; one can lean on God. *Emunah*, on the other hand, requires drawing the strength and courage to reach out for God in the darkness, even when His presence is not visible.

The intrinsic connection between the two recitations of the *Shema* also emerges from the total number of *birchot keriat Shema* said daily. In the morning the *Shema* is enveloped by three blessings, and at night the *Shema* is accompanied by four.<sup>16</sup> Rashi there sourced this number to the verse, "Seven times a day do I praise You" (Psalms 119:164). This seven may allude to the seven blessings that mark a marriage, a relationship of total devotion. Through thick and thin we remain with God, knowing that He reciprocates.<sup>17</sup> ■

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Grodner, *Al ha-Tefilah*, 177–179.

15. *Berachot* 12b.

16. *Berachot* 11a.

17. Grodner, *Al ha-Tefilah*, 72.



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11. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Keri'at Shema*, 1:1.

12. *Genack, Shi'urei ha-Rav*, 33. The Ramban noted an inconsistency in the Rambam's conceptualizations, since he counted the hand and head tefillin as separate mitzvot. Clearly, there is something deeper at work here with the *Shema*, as explicated in the continuation below.

13. *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 1:343.

14. For the Rav's take on finding God in the darkness and bewilderment of life, see