
THE SHEMA – PART I

The Jewish National Anthem

The Shema is undoubtedly the most well known prayer in all of Judaism. You might call the Shema our “national anthem,” since it so fully encapsulates essential principles of Judaism. It is the first Jewish concept a child learns and the last words a person expresses on his deathbed. When we recite the Shema, we declare our acceptance of God as our Creator and King and our recognition that He directly rules over the world and watches over us.

Two Morasha shiurim address the Shema. In this first class we will explain the basic components of the text of the Shema. We refer here not only to the first and most famous line of the Shema, but to all three paragraphs that are recited as a unit in the mitzvah of *Kriat Shema* – reciting the Shema. The second class explores when and how to say Shema, with particular emphasis on the importance of concentrating on the meaning of the words. The class also addresses why the mitzvot of mezuzah and tefillin contain the Shema written on parchments.

- ☞ Why is the Shema so important?
- ☞ What is the real meaning of the Shema?
- ☞ Why are the three paragraphs of the Shema in a different order than they appear in the Torah?
- ☞ The Shema contains the command to love God. How can we be demanded feelings that we may not actually have?
- ☞ Why do we recite the Shema? What are we trying to affect within ourselves when we recite it?

CLASS OUTLINE:

- Section I: **Introduction – The Importance of the Shema**
- Section II: **Text of the Shema**
Part A. The Three Paragraphs
Part B. The Order of the Paragraphs
- Section III: **Explaining the Shema**
Part A. The First Verse – Hear O Israel
Part B. Pre- and Post-Shema – *Kel Melech Ne’eman & Baruch Shem*
Part C. The First Paragraph – Loving God
Part D. The Second Paragraph – Reward for Mitzvot
Part E. The Third Paragraph – Remembering the Exodus
- Section IV. **The Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven**
Part A. What is the “Yoke” of God’s Kingship?
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Part C. Working on Accepting the Yoke

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SHEMA

One cannot overstate the significance of the Shema in Judaism. The most profound and forceful proclamation of belief in God and the Torah that a Jew makes is found in the words of the Shema.

1. **Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, Shema Yisrael, Introduction, ArtScroll Mesorah – The Shema infuses our life with purpose.**

Morning and night, the Jew shuts his eyes and proclaims the Shema - God is ours and He is One. Life's most meaningful moments are punctuated with the Shema: when he dedicates his new day and surrenders to helpless sleep in the unknown night, when the Jew prepares to read the Torah on Sabbaths and festivals, at the climax of Yom Kippur, and at the culmination of life when his soul leaves its earthly host. In the mezuzah, the Shema sanctifies his home and in his tefillin it sanctifies his intellect and strength. And God Himself thanks Israel, as it were, for declaring His uniqueness by means of the Shema, as though He becomes fulfilled through us.

The Shema expresses some of the most mystical aspects of Judaism. At the same time it is so fundamental to our world view that children learn to recite it as soon as they can speak. The following story is a dramatic illustration of this.

During World War II many young Jewish children were harbored by a myriad of monasteries throughout Europe. At the end of the war, the Vaad Hatzalah sent representatives to the monasteries to try and reclaim the orphaned children to their heritage. Many of the children who found refuge did so at a young age and they had but a few recollections of their birthright.

When Rabbi Eliezer Silver, who was the Rabbi of Cincinnati, Ohio and a very influential member of the Vaad, came to a particular hermitage in the Alsace-Lorraine region of France, he was met with hostility. "You can be sure, Rabbi, if we had Jews here we would surely hand them back to you immediately!" exclaimed the monk in charge. "However, unfortunately for you, we have no Jewish children here."

Rabbi Silver was given a list of refugees and was told that they were all Germans. The monk continued, "The Schwartzes are German Schwartzes, the Schindlers are German Schindlers and the Schwimmers are German Schwimmers." Rabbi Silver had been told that there were definitely close to ten Jewish children in that hermitage and was not convinced. He asked if he could say a few words to the children as they went to sleep. The monk agreed. Rabbi Silver returned later that evening with two aides, and as the children were lying in their beds about to go to sleep, they entered the large dorm room.

He walked into the room and in the sing-song that is so familiar to hundreds of thousands of Jewish children across the globe he began to sing, "Shema Yisrael Ado..."

Unexpectedly – in mid sentence – he stopped. Suddenly from six beds in the room the ending to that most powerful verse resounded almost in unison. “Hashem Echad!”

He turned to the priest. “These are our children. We will take them now!” The children were redeemed, placed in Jewish homes, and raised as leaders of our community. (Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky, Parshat Terumah, www.torah.org)

The Shema is among the first words an observant Jewish child is taught, and they should be the last words he utters before death.

2. Talmud Bavli, Succah 42a – As soon as a child is able to speak, he is taught the first verse of Shema.

It was taught, a child...who knows how to speak, his father teaches him the phrase, “The Torah [that Moshe (Moses) commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov (Jacob)]” [Devarim/Deuteronomy 33:4] and the first verse of the Shema.

ת"ר קטן... יודע לדבר אביו לומדו תורה [צוה לנו
משה מורשה קהלת יעקב] וק"ש.

3. Rabbi Avraham Danzig, Chochmat Adam 151:12 –The last words recited before taking leave of this world.

The order of confession on the deathbed is... he should say “Shema Yisrael...” and “Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity.”

סדר וידוי שכיב מרע... ויאמר שמע ישראל וגו'
ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד.

4. Rabbi Boruch Leff, Forever His Students – We start life and end life with the Shema.

We begin life with the Shema. From our earliest days, our parents said it with us as they put us to sleep in our cribs. We were trained to say the Shema as soon as we were able to speak (as per the law in Rambam [Maimonides], Talmud Torah 1:6). We say it (at least) twice daily in our prayers. And in the end, we die with the Shema on our lips.

The Shema is also the first mitzvah that a Jew performs when he reaches the age of Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

5. Rabbi Tzadok Hacoen Rabinowitz, Tzidkat HaTzadik 4 – The Shema is recited moments after reaching the age of being commanded to perform the mitzvot.

The first mitzvah that a person is obligated in when he becomes Bar Mitzvah is reading

מצוה ראשונה שנתחייב האדם כשנעשה בן י"ג
שנה הוא קריאת שמע של ערבית ... דברישא

the Shema in the evening [when it is dark] ... [This teaches that] at first, when one is in a state of darkness a person must accept God's kingship, even in the darkness and childishness and without [seeing God's] actions. Then eventually he will come to fulfill it from a wealth of clear understanding, which is like the light of day.

חשוכא צריך קבלת עול מלכות שמים אף מתוך החושך והסכלות והעדר המעשים. ואז סופו לקיימה בעושר ונהורא דיממא השגה הברורה.

The darkness of night represents a time when God's presence is not apparent. It is at this time that the young Jew is bidden to accept God's kingship when he recites the Shema for the first time in his adult life. He is assured that the morning, the time when he will perceive God in this world, will come. The new Bar Mitzvah boy, who has many years of study before him, must commence his service of God with the belief that darkness will in the future turn to day. At that time, when he will have a greater grounding in Torah, he will sense the presence of God wherever he turns.

6. **Dr. Lisa Aiken, The Hidden Beauty of the Shema, Introduction – The Shema surrounds our day and focuses us on the purpose of life.**

Jews say two especially important prayers every day: the Shema and the Amidah. We fulfill the biblical commandment (mitzvah) to say the Shema every morning and evening when we say its first verse, "Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." The rabbis, however, required us to add three additional paragraphs, drawn from the books of Deuteronomy and Numbers. Besides our reciting the Shema daily, we also say it before going to sleep, over a baby boy the night before his ritual circumcision (*brit milah*), and before we die.

The commandments to which the Shema refers - *tefillin* (leather boxes containing parchments that are put on a man's head and arm), *mezuzah* (a parchment with Torah verses that we put on our doorposts), *tzitzit* (fringes that are put on a four-cornered garment), and remembering the Exodus from Egypt - are also part of our daily lives.

Thus, the Shema literally accompanies us from cradle to grave. The Minchat Chinuch explains why the Shema and its mitzvot (commandments) "surround" us: People tend to be drawn to materialism and give in to their lusts by following foolish, worldly pleasures. We need constant reminders that we are part of God's Cabinet and have responsibilities to Him. Without these reminders, we can't keep focused on what God put us here to do. His loving-kindness determined that we should say the Shema twice a day to help us stay on track spiritually.

The general purpose of any mitzvah is to preserve and heighten our spiritual wholesomeness and to attach us to God. Saying the Shema reminds us that our thoughts, speech, and actions affect the entire universe. That, in turn, encourages us to live with ongoing devotion and fervor in our service to the Almighty.

The Shema also refocuses us at least twice a day so that we are not derailed by constant exposure to forces that negate our spirituality. The Shema can help us regain our spiritual bearings and infuse us with tremendous spiritual energy only if we appreciate and concentrate on what we are saying.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I

- ∞ Shema is like a national anthem of the Jewish people, a statement that is central to Jewish life.
- ∞ The Shema is the first thing a child is taught and the last words uttered before death.
- ∞ Additionally, it is the first mitzvah a Jew performs upon reaching adulthood with its accompanying obligation to perform the mitzvot.

SECTION II. TEXT OF THE SHEMA

We shall begin by familiarizing ourselves with the text of the three paragraphs of the Shema and their order. The significance of each paragraph will be addressed in the next section.

PART A. THE THREE PARAGRAPHS

The Shema consists of the famous first verse and the remainder of the paragraph in which it appears in the Torah, followed by two additional paragraphs taken from elsewhere in the Torah.

i. First Paragraph

1. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:4-9 – Acceptance of God as the single source to all of existence, as well as the mitzvot to love God, study and teach Torah, wear tefillin and attach mezuzot to doorposts.**

Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

(Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity.)

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. These words which I am

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד:

(בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלֻכּוֹתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד):

וְאֶהְיֶה אִתְּךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכֹל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכֹל מְאֹדֶךָ: וְהָיִיתָ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לְבָבְךָ: וְשָׁנַנְתָּם לְבְנֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ

commanding you today must remain in your heart. And you shall teach them to your children and speak of them when you are at home, when traveling on the way, when you lie down and when you get up. And you shall bind [these words] as a sign on your hand, and let them be an emblem between your eyes. And you shall write them on [parchments affixed to] the doorposts of your houses and gates.

בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִקְתֶּךָ בְּדַרְךָ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:
וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ:
וּכְתַבְתֶּם עַל מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

In Section III we will explain the insertion of the line in parentheses above.

ii. Second Paragraph

1. Devarim 11:13-21 – Acceptance of God’s commandments, communal reward and punishment.

And if you will be careful to listen to My commandments, which I am prescribing to you today, and if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, [then God has made this promise]: I will grant the fall and spring rains in your land at their proper time, so that you will have an ample harvest of grain, wine, and oil. I will grant fodder in your fields for your animals, and you will eat and be satisfied. Be careful lest your heart be tempted and you go astray and worship other gods, bowing down to them. Then God’s anger will be directed against you, and He will lock up the skies so that there will not be any rain; and the land will not give forth its crops, and you will rapidly vanish from the good land that God is giving you. And you shall place these words of Mine on your heart and soul. And you shall bind them as a sign on your arm, and let them be an emblem between your eyes. And you shall teach your children to speak of them, when you are at home, when traveling on the way, when you lie down and when you get up. And you shall write them on [parchments affixed to] the

וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמַעַתְּם תִּשְׁמָעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי
מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
וּלְעֲבֹדוֹ בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשׁוֹכֶם: וְנָתַתִּי מִטֶּר
אֲרָצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ יוֹרֵה וּמַלְקוֹשׁ וְאִסְפַּת דְּגָנָה
וְתִירֹשָׁה וְיִצְהָרָה: וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב בְּשֹׁדֶךָ לְבְהֵמְתְּךָ
וְאֶכְלֹת וּשְׂבַעְתָּ: הַשְּׁמֵרוּ לָכֶם פֶּן יִפְתָּה לְבַבְכֶם
וְסָרְתֶם וְעַבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם
לָהֶם: וְחָרָה אַף ה' בְּכֶם וְעָצַר אֶת הַשְּׁמַיִם
וְלֹא יִהְיֶה מִטֶּר וְהִאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת יְבוּלָהּ
וְאֲבַדְתֶּם מִהָרָה מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן לָכֶם:
וְשָׁמַתֶּם אֶת דְּבָרֵי אֱלֹהֵי עַל לְבַבְכֶם וְעַל נַפְשׁוֹכֶם
וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם אֹתָם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְכֶם וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפוֹת
בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם: וְלִמְדַתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם
בְּשֵׁבִיתְךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ בְּלִקְתֶּךָ בְּדַרְךָ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:
וּכְתַבְתֶּם עַל מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ
מִיָּמֶיכֶם וַיְמִי בְנֵיכֶם עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָשַׁבַע ה'
לְאַבְתְּיָכֶם לֵאמֹר לְהֵם כִּי־מִי הַשְּׁמַיִם עַל הָאָרֶץ:

the doorposts of your houses and gates. In order that you and your children will live long on the land that God swore to your ancestors, [promising that] He would give it to them like the days of the heavens over the earth.

iii. Third Paragraph

1. **Bamidbar (Numbers) 15:37-41 – The mitzvah to wear tzitzit (fringes) as reminders of our task in the world, the prohibition against straying after our hearts and eyes, and gratitude for taking us out of Egypt.**

And God spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the Israelites and tell them to make tzitzit on the corners of their garments for all generations. They shall include a thread of sky-blue wool in the tzitzit of each corner. These shall be your tzitzit, and when you see them, you shall remember all of God’s commandments so as to keep them. And you shall not explore after your heart and eyes, after which you stray. You will thus remember and keep all My commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God.”

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל כַּנְּפֵי בְגָדֵיהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם וְנִתְּנוּ עַל צִיצִית הַכֶּנֶף פֶּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת: וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִית וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹת ה' וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא תִתְּוּרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם: לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי וְהִיִּיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם: אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵהִיוֹת לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

PART B. THE ORDER OF THE PARAGRAPHS

The mitzvah of Shema calls for us to recite the paragraphs in a different order than they appear in the Torah. The following sources explain the reason for this.

1. **Talmud Bavli, Berachot 13a – The Shema begins with the most important concepts.**

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha says: Why is the first paragraph of the Shema before [the second paragraph which begins] “It shall be if you listen...”? In order that a person will first accept the yoke of God’s kingship and then the yoke of mitzvot.

Why is the second paragraph before [the

אמר ר' יהושע בן קרחה למה קדמה פרשת שמע לוהיה אם שמוע כדי שיקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים תחלה ואחר כך מקבל עליו עול מצות.

והיה אם שמוע לויאמר שוהיה אם שמוע נוהג

third paragraph which begins] “And God said”? Because the third paragraph only has mitzvot that apply during the day [the mitzvah of tzitzit] while the second paragraph applies both at day and at night.

בין ביום ובין בלילה ויאמר אינו נוהג אלא ביום בלבד:

In the next source, we see another explanation for the order of the paragraphs.

2. **Rambam, Hilchot Kriat Shema 1:2 – The three paragraphs proceed from the key mitzvot to all of the mitzvot of the Torah.**

One first reads the paragraph “Shema,” because it contains the commandment of the unity of God, love of God, and learning, which is the great principle upon which everything else depends. Afterwards comes “It shall be if you listen...” [the second paragraph], which commands regarding all the rest of the commandments. Finally is the paragraph of “tzitzit” [the third paragraph], which also commands to remember all of the commandments.

ומקדימין לקרות פרשת “שמע”, מפני שיש בה יחוד השם, ואהבתו ותלמודו שהוא העיקר הגדול, שהכול תלוי בו. ואחריה “והיה אם שמוע”, שיש בה ציווי על (זכירת) שאר כל המצוות. ואחר כך פרשת “ציצית” (במדבר טו, לח), שגם היא יש בה ציווי על זכירת כל המצוות.

The principal mitzvot of belief in the unity of God, love of God, and the study of His Torah are mentioned first. After this we accept all the mitzvot of the Torah, and we conclude with the mitzvah of tzitzit that hints at all the mitzvot – “and you will see them and you will be reminded of all the mitzvot of God” (Bamidbar 15:39).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II

- ☞ The text of the Shema is comprised of three paragraphs taken from the Torah.
- ☞ The major themes in the first paragraph are: God is the single source of all of existence, the love of God, study of Torah, the mitzvot of tefillin and mezuzah.
- ☞ The second paragraph begins with the mitzvah to listen to all of God’s commandments, the principle of reward and punishment, and a review of the mitzvot mentioned in the first paragraph.
- ☞ The final paragraph teaches the mitzvah of tzitzit (which serve as a reminder to perform the mitzvot), the prohibitions of heresy and gazing at immodesty, and the mitzvah to remember the Exodus from Egypt.
- ☞ The three paragraphs of the Shema are said in a logical order. The first paragraph consists of accepting God’s kingship over existence. After we have accepted Him, we are ready to accept His commandments, as stated in the second paragraph. In the third paragraph we mention the mitzvah of tzitzit, which requires us to remember the mitzvot at all times.

SECTION III. EXPLAINING THE SHEMA

Aside from the famous first verse of Shema, the mitzvah of reciting the Shema includes the three paragraphs cited above. Additional words are also added in at several key points during the recital of Shema. In this section we will clarify the content of each of the elements of the Shema, including the additions.

PART A. THE FIRST VERSE – HEAR O ISRAEL

The first line of the Shema and the source of its name is the verse cited above from Devarim 6:4 – Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad (Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One). This statement of faith in God encapsulates many of the fundamentals of Jewish belief. It is recited in the morning and evening with great concentration and devotion, with one hand covering the eyes. (We will look more closely at the deeper messages contained in the entire Shema in the next class in this series. For now we will briefly cover the basic meaning of this section of the Shema.)

1. **Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, Teshuvot Ha-Rashba 5:55 – The Shema alludes to the foundations of our faith.**

It is incumbent on every intelligent person to know that [Shema] is a very special verse to us. It includes the concepts of the unity of God and faith in Him – it alludes to esoteric and fundamental ideas that are the foundations upon which the House of Israel rests.

ובאמת יש לכל בעל דעה, לדעת, כי היא פרשה מיוחדת לנו, כוללת היחוד והאמונה, שהיא באמת רומזת סודות ועיקרים גדולים, שהם יסודות כל הבנין אשר בית ישראל נכון עליהם.

2. **Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Mitzvah 2 – The meaning of belief in the unity of God.**

Reciting the Shema is the commandment that we are obligated to believe in the unity of God. This means that the ongoing Sustainer of existence and the original Cause for the universe are one. This is what is expressed by “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” [Devarim 6:4].

היא הצווי שצונו באמונת היחוד והוא שנאמין כי פועל המציאות וסבתו הראשונה אחד והוא אמרו יתעלה שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד.

3. **Sefer Hachinuch Mitzvah 417 – The entire Torah is predicated on the ideas in the Shema.**

One who transgresses this commandment and does not believe in the unity of the

ועובר על זה ואינו מאמין ביחודו ברוך הוא ביטל עשה זה, וגם כל שאר מצוות התורה, כי כולם

Blessed One, also negates all the other mitzvot in the Torah, for they are all dependent on belief in God and His unity...

תלויות באמונת אלהותו ויחודו...

4. **Rabbi Baruch Yitzchak Lifshitz, Misgeret HaZahav, Berachot 1:1 (Mishnayot Zecher Chanoch, Vol. I, p. 589) – Three principles of faith to focus on when reciting the first verse of the Shema.**

In order to help others, I will explain what the author of Tiferet Yisrael (Rabbi Israel Lipschitz) instructed his children regarding the mitzvah of reading the Shema.

They should concentrate on the three principles of faith:

1. “Hear O Israel” teaches us to have *emunah* (belief) in the existence of God and the revelation of the Torah from God. That the voice of God and His commandments can be heard in the Torah, and that we must listen to Him.

2. To believe in “Lord our God,” which alludes to belief in reward. The name “Lord” [*Hashem*] refers to His mercy and compassion, while the name “God” [*Elokeinu*] refers to accountability, and His attribute of justice.

3. The words “Lord is One” allude to belief in the immortality of the soul. Just as God is One, so too the soul is one, for it is created in the image of God. It has no parts, and any entity which has no parts cannot be broken apart, and therefore is not subject to decay or death.

אודיע לזכות הרבים מה שצוה רבינו הגדול בעל תפארת ישראל בצוואה שלו לבניו בענין מצוה דקריאת שמע.

חדא שיכוננו באמירת פסוק שמע ישראל ג' שרשי אמונה.

א. “שמע ישראל” מורה על האמונה במציאות ה', ובהתגלות התורה מה', שבהתורה נשמע קול ה' וצויו, וצריכים אנחנו לשמוע בקולו.

ב. “ה' אלוהינו”, מרומז האמונה בשכר, ע"י ה' שהוא מדת הרחמים, ובעונש ע"י אלוקים, מדת הדין.

ג. במלות “ה' אחד” נרמז האמונה בהשארות הנפש. שכמו שה' אחד, כן הנשמה שהוא בדמות דיוקנו של הקב"ה אחת. ואין לה חלקים, וכל דבר שאין לו חלקים לא שייך אצלו פירוד החלקים ולא כליון ומות.

5. **ArtScroll Siddur, Commentary on “the One [and only]”, p. 91 – Harmony in all of God’s actions.**

The word (One) has two connotations: (a) There is no other God other than Him (Rashbam); and (b) though we perceive God in many roles – kind, angry, merciful, wise, judging, and so on – these attitudes are not contradictory, even though human

intelligence does not comprehend their harmony. Harav Gedaliah Schorr likened this concept to a ray of light seen through a prism. Though one sees a myriad of different colors, they are all a single ray of light. So, too, God's many manifestations are truly one.

PART B. PRE- AND POST-SHEMA – KEL MELECH NE'EMAN & BARUCH SHEM

We will now examine the deeper meaning of the lines immediately preceding and following the Shema declaration.

i. Kel Melech Ne'eman (God, faithful King)

Our Sages teach that there are both 248 organs in the body and 248 positive mitzvot (Talmud Bavli, Makkot 23b). Since there are 245 words in the Shema, the *chazzan* (cantor) adds the words “the Lord, your God is truth” at the end of reciting Shema in order to make up for the three words missing from the total count. This addition brings the number of words in Shema to 248. When praying alone without a chazzan, one adds the words Kel Melech Ne'eman with the same goal in mind. Let's explore the significance of this statement.

1. Rabbi Avraham Av Beit Din, Sefer HaEshkol 1, Laws of Prayer and Shema 5 – Add the words *Kel Melech Ne'eman* so that there are 248 words in the Shema.

[The Tosafists] in France say [when praying alone] “God, faithful King” [at the beginning of the Shema] to complete [the 248 words since the Shema itself only has 245 words].

ובצרפת אומרים (ביחידות) אל מלך נאמן
להשלים...

2. Chanoch Zundel ben Yosef, Anaf Yosef (Siddur Otzar HaTefilot) p. 273 – What principles of faith are alluded to in these words?

“God” [*El*] – powerful, omnipotent and full of kindness.

“King” [*melech*] – that He watches over everything Himself, like a king with his army.

“Faithful” [*ne'eman*] – He is trustworthy to punish, and trustworthy to amply reward those who follow His ways.

אל: פירוש תקיף ובעל היכולת והחסדים.

מלך: משגיח בעצמו כמלך בצבאיו.

נאמן: פירוש נאמן ליפרע ונאמן לשלם שכר טוב
למהלכים לפניו.

When we hear someone recite a blessing, we utter the word Amen. The word Amen is in fact an acronym of the words Kel Melech Ne'eman.

3. **Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 119b – The word “Amen” is an acronym for *Kel Melech Ne’eman* (“God, faithful King”).**

Reish Lakish said: Anyone who answers “Amen” with all his strength has the gates of Gan Eden opened for him, as the verse says, “Open the gates, so the righteous nation who keeps faithfulness may enter in” [Yeshayahu/Isaiah 26:2]. Don’t read it as “*shomer emunim*” (keeps faithfulness) but as “*she-omer amenim*” (says Amens).

What is “Amen”? Rabbi Chanina said “God, faithful King” [*El melech ne’eman* whose first Hebrew letters spell “Amen”].

אמר ריש לקיש כל העונה אמן בכל כחו פותחין לו שערי ג"ע שנאמר (ישעיהו כו) "פִּתְחוּ שְׁעָרִים וַיָּבֵא גוֹי צְדִיק שְׁמֵר אֱמֻנִים". אל תיקרי "שְׁמֵר אֱמֻנִים" אלא שאומרים אמן.

מאי אמן? א"ר חנינא אל מלך נאמן.

ii. **Baruch Shem**

Why do we interject the phrase “Baruch Shem Kavod Malchuto Le-Olam Va-ed” (Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity) between the first sentence of the Shema and the remainder of the first paragraph? And why is it recited quietly, except for on Yom Kippur?

1. **Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 56a – Yaakov proclaimed the words of praise of Baruch Shem on his deathbed**

Why do we say [the phrase “Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity,” since it is not in the verses in the Torah]?

Like Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish explained: It is written, “Yaakov called to his sons and said, ‘Gather and I may tell you what will happen to you,’” (Bereishit/Genesis 49:1). [Before he was about to die] he wanted to reveal to them what would happen at the End of Days. [When he was about to do so] the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) left him. He said, “Maybe one of my children is unworthy, like Avraham who had Yishmael, or my father Yitzchak, who had Esav [and that is the reason for the Shechinah leaving].”

His sons said to him: “Hear, Yisrael [which was Yaakov’s other name], the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” [In other words] they

אנן מאי טעמא אמרינן ליה?

כדריש ר' שמעון בן לקיש דאמר רשב"ל (בראשית מט) ויקרא יעקב אל בניו ויאמר האספו ואגידה לכם ביקש יעקב לגלות לבניו קץ הימין ונסתלקה ממנו שכינה אמר שמא חס ושלום יש במטתי פסול כאברהם שיצא ממנו ישמעאל ואבי יצחק שיצא ממנו עשו.

אמרו לו בניו שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד אמרו כשם שאין בלבך אלא אחד כך אין בלבנו אלא אחד באותה שעה פתח יעקב אבינו ואמר

said to him: “Just as there is only one God in your heart, so in our hearts there is only one God.” When Yaakov heard this, he opened his mouth and said: “Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity.”

The Sages said, “What should we do? How can we say the phrase, since Moshe didn’t say it? How can we not say it, since Yaakov said it?” They therefore [compromised and] instituted saying it quietly.

ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד.

אמרי רבנן היכי נעביד נאמרוהו לא אמרו משה
רבנינו לא נאמרוהו אמרו יעקב התקינו שיהו
אומרים אותו בחשאי.

2. **Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, Chiddushei Maharsha to Pesachim 56a – We say Baruch Shem out of respect for Yaakov, but we do so quietly in deference to Moshe.**

Since Moshe did not write [Baruch Shem] in the Torah, it would be disrespectful to add words to Moshe’s and to break up the verses with Baruch Shem between Hashem Echad (the Lord is One) and V’Ahavta (You shall love – the beginning of the first paragraph). But since Yaakov said it in accepting the kingship of Heaven, we say it quietly.

משום דלא אמריה משה בתורה היה גנאי להוסיף
על דברי משה ולהפסיק בקול רם בשכמל"ו בין
ה' אחד לואהבת ומשום דאמרו יעקב בקבלת
מלכות שמים נימריה מיהת בחשאי

There is another tradition as to why we say “Baruch Shem,” and why we recite it quietly – except for on Yom Kippur.

3. **Midrash Rabbah, VaEtchanan 2:36 – Moshe heard “Baruch Shem” proclaimed by the angels in Heaven.**

The Rabbis said that when Moshe ascended to Heaven he heard the angels who were saying to God, “Blessed is the Name of the honor of His kingdom forever and ever.” He brought it back down to Israel ...

On Yom Kippur, when we are purified like the angels, we say aloud, “Blessed is the Name of the honor of His kingdom forever and ever”.

רבנן אמרין בשעה שעלה משה למרום שמע
למלאכי השרת שהיו אומרים להקב"ה בשכמל"ו
והוריד אותה לישראל ...

אבל ביום הכפורים שהן נקיים כמלאכי השרת הן
אומרים אותו בפרהסיא בשכמל"ו.

PART C. THE FIRST PARAGRAPH – LOVING GOD

The opening line of the first paragraph is, “And you shall love your God.” The next source shows how we can reach this lofty state of loving God.

1. Talmud Bavli, Yoma 86a – “You shall love God” means that one should act in a way that will make God beloved by other people.

It was taught: “You shall love the Lord your God...” This means that the Name of Heaven should be made beloved by you. You should learn Torah and Mishnah and serve Torah scholars, and do business pleasantly. What will people say about you? “Praiseworthy is his father who taught him Torah. Praiseworthy is his teacher who taught him Torah. Woe to those who don’t learn Torah. This person who learned Torah – look how beautiful his ways are and how perfect his actions are.”

תניא (דברים ו) ואהבת את ה' אלהיך שיהא שם שמים מתאהב על ידך שיהא קורא ושונה ומשמש ת"ח ויהא משאו ומתנו בנחת עם הבריות מה הבריות אומרות עליו אשרי אביו שלמדו תורה אשרי רבו שלמדו תורה אוי להם לבריות שלא למדו תורה פלוני שלמדו תורה ראו כמה נאים דרכיו כמה מתוקנים מעשיו.

2. Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Mitzvah 3 – We can express our love for God by helping others to love Him too.

The Sifrei says that “You shall love God...” means that you should make Him beloved by people, as Avraham your father did...In other words, Avraham loved God, as the verse testifies, “The children of Avraham, the one who loves Me” (Yeshayahu 41:8). Therefore, Avraham called to people to bring them to believe in God because of his great love of God. So too you should love God so much that you call other people to Him.

ולשון ספרי: “ואהבת את ה'” - אהבהו על הבריות כאברהם אביך... רצה לומר: כמו שאברהם, בעבור שהיה אוהב השם- כמו שהעיד הכתוב: “אברהם אהב” (ישעיה מא, ח) - שהיה גם כן לגודל השגתו דרש האנשים אל האמונה מחוזק אהבתו כן אתה אוהב אותו עד שתדרוש האנשים אליו.

Although we cannot be commanded to feel a particular emotion, the mitzvah to love God nevertheless requires us to do those actions which will naturally generate feelings of love, for others as well as ourselves. Even if one does those actions and no feeling is generated, one still fulfills the mitzvah to love God (Rabbi Reuven Leuchter in the name of Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe). In the following sources, we discuss other ways to increase our love for God.

One way to come to love God is by focusing on all that God bestows upon us in order that we come to fully appreciate Him.

3. **Devarim Rabbah, Va'Etchanan, s.v. *ve'chavivim* – One can come to love of God through recognizing one's dependence on Him.**

Does He need your love? If you would hate Him would it hurt Him, or if you love Him does it help Him? Rather it means that you should not deny the goodness that He does for you. He doesn't need you, but you need Him – how could you not love Him?

וכי צריך לאהבתך, ואם תשנאהו מה אתה מזיקו, ואם תאהבהו מה אתה מהנו, אלא שלא תהא כפוי טובה, שהוא אינו צריך לך שאת צריך לו לא תאהבהו.

4. **Rabbi Yitzchak Maltzen, Siach Yitzchak, Siddur Ishei Yisrael, p. 102, s.v. *v'ahavta* – How can a person inspire himself to love God? By realizing God's love for us.**

If, for example, someone commands his son to love something or someone, he certainly does not mean for his son to fulfill his duty by constantly verbalizing or meditating, "I love this thing or that person as my father commanded me." Love is something in the heart and must come from the depths of the heart.

Someone once asked me about this – how is it possible to command about something which is in the heart? This is the answer I gave: Take the example of someone who hates one of his friends or his teachers because he thinks that they are wronging him and forcing him to go against his nature. If another person tells him that if he would think properly about it he would realize that their intentions are only for his welfare, to lead him in the correct path so that he can receive the proper goodness, he will love them, and the more he thinks about it the more he will love them. His love for them is as great as his understanding about their benevolence towards him, since the true and fundamental love for a person or for something is when it is for his good and his benefit.

Similarly, the mitzvah of "you shall love God..." is that we should think about the

הנה אם א' מצוה למשל לבנו שיאהוב איזה דבר או איזה אדם בודאי אין הכונה שיצא ידי חובתו במה שיאמר תמיד בפיו ויחשוב במחשבתו אני אוהב את הדבר ואת האדם כפי שצוני אבי, כי האהבה הוא דבר שבלב וצ"ל מעומקא דליבא.

וכבר שאלוני ע"ז כי איך שייך ציווי על דבר שבלב, וזה אשר השבתי למשל אם אחד שונא לאחד מחבריו או מרבותיו בחושבו עליהם ע"י הנהגותיהם עמו שהם מריעין לו ומכריחים אותו להיפוך טבעו, ואומר לו אחד שאם הייתה מתבונן היטב בהנהגותיהם עמך היית מבין בטוב איך שהם מכונים לטובתך להדריכך בדרך ישרה כדי שגייע לך טובה קימת וכשהיה שומע לו והיה מתבונן בזה אזי כל מה שיוסיף התבוננות היה מוסיף בהם אהבה כפי הכנתו בהבטחתם עמו כי האהבה העקרית והאמתית הוא לאדם או לאיזה דבר שהוא לטובתו והנאתו.

וה"נ מצות ואהבת גו' הוא שנתבונן בהטבתו ית' כל א' כפי מדרגתו ויתוסף בנו אהבתו וסימיני

goodness that God does, each person according to his level. This will create more love. The signs of this love are that we will not hate the will of the Beloved in any way, small or big.

האהבה הוא שלא לשנות רצון האהוב בשום דבר קטן וגדול.

The more we come to know God, the greater our love for Him. Therefore, one of the best ways of drawing close to God is through study of His word.

5. **Yalkut Shimoni, Parshat Va'Etchanan 439 (106) – Studying God's revelation to mankind – the Torah – generates love for God.**

“You shall love...” – from these words alone one wouldn't know how to love God. Therefore it says, “These words will be on your heart...” Place these words in your heart, for in this way you will know the One Who spoke and made the world, and you will attach yourself to His ways [and come to love Him].

ואהבת וגו' איני יודע כיצד לאהוב. ת"ל והיו הדברים האלה תן הדברים האלה על לבך שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם ומדבק בדרכיו.

6. **Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, Commentary on the Siddur, Ner Le'Elef Booklets, p. 107 – Demonstrating love with our wealth, strength and potential.**

The first paragraph demands that we love God not only **בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך** - with all our heart and soul - but also **ובכל מאדך** - with all our **מאד**, which means with all our wealth. It can also mean with all our strength (Ohr Gedalyahu based on the Ramban and HaEven Ezra) - i.e. a situation actualizing more and more of our human potential dedicated to this idea - **מאד** has the same letters as **אדם**/Adam (human being). The word **אדם** comes from the word **אדמה** (land), which means that which has potential to bear fruit. Adam is that being which can be more and more, **מאד מאד**. We are asked to serve God with that potential (Rabbi Moshe Shapiro).

PART D. THE SECOND PARAGRAPH – REWARD FOR MITZVOT

The second paragraph branches out to all of the mitzvot of the Torah. The main idea conveyed is that of accountability for all mitzvot. In this paragraph we are told of the reward for keeping mitzvot and the consequences of not doing so.

1. **Rashi to Devarim 11:14 – When we keep the mitzvot, God promises to meet our physical needs.**

I will give rain for your land – If you do what you have to do, I (God) will do what I have to do.

ונתתי מטר ארצכם. עשיתם מה שעליכם, אף אני אעשה מה שעלי.

The idea of being rewarded for mitzvot seems to contradict a fundamental principle in Judaism, namely that there is no reward *in this world* for the mitzvot. The actual reward is reserved for the World to Come.

2. Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 39b – We are not rewarded here for our mitzvah performance.

The reward for a mitzvah does not exist in this world.

שכר מצוה בהאי עלמא ליכא

How then to explain this paragraph that we recite along with Shema? It appears to be telling us just the opposite! Rambam has an answer for us:

3. Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 8:1 – Is there reward for mitzvot in this world?

It emerges that the explanation of all those blessings and curses [that are found in the Torah] is as follows: it is to say that if you serve God with joy and you keep His ways, He will bestow upon you these blessings and distance the curses. He does this so that you will be free to grow wise in Torah and follow it in order that you merit the World to Come and all its goodness, and that you will have lengthy days in the World that is infinite. You will therefore acquire two worlds, a good life in this world, which will bring to the World to Come. For if one will not acquire wisdom and good deeds here, he lacks a[n alternative] means to acquire them, as it says, “for there are no acts and calculation, nor knowledge and wisdom in the grave” [Kohelet/Ecclesiastes 9:10].

And if you abandon God and you err through food, drink, illicit relations and the like, He will bring all these curses upon you and remove the blessings to the point that all your days will be consumed by trembling and fear and you will not have a calm mind and a healthy body in order to do mitzvot so that you will not gain entry to the World to Come. You will therefore have lost two worlds, for when a person is preoccupied in this world with disease

נמצא פירוש כל אותן הברכות והקללות, על דרך זו: כלומר אם עבדתם את ה' בשמחה, ושמרתם דרכו--משפיע לכם הברכות האלו ומרחיק הקללות מכם, עד שתהיו פנויים להתחכם בתורה ולעסוק בה, כדי שתזכו לחיי העולם הבא, וייתב לך לעולם שכולו טוב ותאריך ימים לעולם שכולו ארוך. ונמצאתם זוכין לשני העולמות, לחיים טובים בעולם הזה המביאים לחיי העולם הבא: שאם לא יקנה פה חכמה ומעשים טובים--אין לו במה יזכה, שנאמר "כי אין מעשה וחשבון, ודעת וחכמה, בשאול . . ." (קוהלת ט,י).

ואם עזבתם את ה' ושגיתם במאכל ומשתה וזנות ודומה להם--מביא עליכם כל הקללות האלו ומסיר כל הברכות, עד שיכלו ימיכם בבהלה ופחד, ולא יהיה לכם לב פנוי ולא גוף שלם לעשות המצוות, כדי שתאבדו מחיי העולם הבא. ונמצא שאבדתם שני עולמות: שבזמן שאדם טרוד בעולם הזה בחולי ובמלחמה ורעבון, אינו מתעסק לא בחכמה ולא במצוה שבהן זוכין לחיי העולם הבא.

and war and hunger, he cannot engage in wisdom and mitzvot with which to acquire the World to Come.

Although the reward for the mitzvot that we do will only be in the World to Come, we are promised Divine assistance to enable us to continue to follow the Torah in this world, and the opposite if we do not abide by God's will.

- i. **Why the Repetition of ככל לבבך ובכל נפשך (With all Your Heart and Soul) in the First Two Paragraphs?**
- 4. **Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, Commentary on the Siddur, Ner Le'Elef Booklets, p. 105, 112 – What does the repetition of the words, “With all your heart and soul” represent?**

The command to serve God with all one's heart and soul already appeared in the first paragraph of the Shema. Rashi explains that it is repeated in the second paragraph because the first paragraph (in the singular tense) is talking to the individual and the second paragraph (plural tense - בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם) is talking to the community as a whole.

[There are other ideas] why the words ככל נפשך (בכל נפשכם) “with all your soul” appear in both paragraphs. One explanation (Midrash Raba, Ve'etchanan 2) is that we have to thank God for each and every breath we take – we are never to take life for granted. Every breath is a new praise for God. But the Sages also tell us that these words mean that we should be prepared to give our lives for God under the circumstance that the Torah demands. (See further the second Morasha shiur on the Shema discussing Kiddush Hashem).

PART E. THE THIRD PARAGRAPH – REMEMBERING THE EXODUS

Although the third paragraph appears to be lacking the broad scope of the first two paragraphs, it nevertheless touches upon several of the fundamental ideas of Judaism.

- 1. **Talmud Bavli, Berachot 12b – There are five mitzvot that are directly referred to in the third paragraph of Shema.**

Why did the Sages include [the third] paragraph of tzitzit [as part of the Shema]? Rabbi Yehudah bar Chaviva said: Because it contains five things: [1] tzitzit; [2] the exodus from Egypt; [3] the yoke of mitzvot; [4][the prohibition of entertaining] thoughts of heresy; [5] [the prohibition of] thinking about immorality and idolatry.

פרשת ציצית מפני מה קבעוה? אמר רבי יהודה בר חביבא: מפני שיש בה חמשה דברים: מצות ציצית, יציאת מצרים, עול מצות, ודעת מינים, הרהור עבירה, והרהור עבודה זרה.

[Which verses are the sources for these?]
The first three are explicit verses:

[3] the yoke of mitzvot: “And when you see them, you shall remember all of God’s commandments so as to keep them” [Bamidbar 15:39].

[1] tzitzit: “Have them make tzitzit” [ibid. 15:37].

[2] The exodus from Egypt: “Who took you out of Egypt” [ibid. 15:41].

But which verses teach [4] [the prohibition of entertaining] thoughts of heresy, and [5] [the prohibition of] thinking about immorality and idolatry? It was taught in a *beraita*: the verse, “[do not stray] after your heart” [ibid. 15:39] refers to heresy. The phrase “[do not stray] after your eyes” [ibid.] refers to thoughts of immorality. The phrase “after which you stray” refers to thoughts of idolatry [ibid.].

בשלמא הני תלת - מפרשן; עול מצות - דכתיב:
וראיתם אתו וזכרתם את כל מצות ה', ציצית -
דכתיב: ועשו להם ציצית וגו', יציאת מצרים -
דכתיב: אשר הוצאתי וגומר,

אלא דעת מינים, הרהור עבירה, והרהור עבודה
זרה מנלן? - דתניא: אחרי לבבכם - זו מינות ...
אחרי עיניכם - זה הרהור עבירה ... אתם זונים -
זה הרהור עבודה זרה...

2. **Rambam, Hilchot Kriat Shema 1:3 – The third paragraph contains the mitzvah to remember the Exodus from Egypt every day and every night.**

Although the mitzvah of tzitzit is not in effect at night, we read it [the third paragraph] at night for it contains a remembrance of the exodus from Egypt. And there is a mitzvah to remember and mention the exodus from Egypt each day and each night, as it says “So that you remember the day of your departure from Egypt all the days of your lives” (Devarim 16:3).

אף על פי שאין מצות ציצית נוהגת בלילה,
קוראין אותה בלילה, מפני שיש בה זכרון יציאת
מצרים; ומצוה להזכיר יציאת מצרים ביום
ובלילה, שנאמר “למען תזכור את יום צאתך
מארץ מצרים, כל ימי חיך”.

The mitzvah to remember the Exodus twice daily is fulfilled by reading the verses which refer to it in the Shema.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III

- ∞ The first verse of Shema alludes to many central beliefs at the core of Judaism.
- ∞ When praying alone, we precede the Shema with the words *Kel Melech Ne'eman*, in order that there be 248 words altogether, corresponding to the 248 limbs of the body and soul. These words also form an acronym of "Amen," thus expressing our belief in God.
- ∞ We interject the words of Baruch Shem as the angels do in Heaven, and as Yaakov did in response to the proclamation of Shema by his sons. We say these words quietly throughout the year. On Yom Kippur when we approach the level of angels we say these words aloud.
- ∞ In the first paragraph of Shema we find the mitzvah to love God. Since we cannot be commanded to feel an emotion, this mitzvah translates into actions that cause love for God, in others as well as ourselves. We can cultivate love of God by learning and teaching Torah, and by appreciating God's love for us.
- ∞ In the second paragraph we learn that the consequences of mitzvah observance will be the means to further keep the mitzvot; the consequence of our failing to do so is being put into a situation in which keeping mitzvot will be more difficult for us.
- ∞ The third paragraph mentions the mitzvah of tzitzit, which hints at all of the mitzvot of the Torah. We are also commanded twice a day to remember the great kindness God bestowed upon the Jewish People by freeing us from the bondage of Egypt.

SECTION IV. THE YOKE OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

We have discussed the message transmitted by the Shema, but we have yet to explain why it is that we make this declaration of faith. What are we supposed to accomplish by telling ourselves that which we already know and believe?

The answer is that in reciting Shema we are performing a unique religious act called “accepting the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven” upon ourselves. In this section we will spell out what that phrase means and how we can apply it to our lives.

PART A. WHAT IS THE “YOKE” OF GOD’S KINGSHIP?

1. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 13a – The Shema is an acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha says: Why is the first paragraph of the Shema before [the second paragraph which begins] “It shall be if you listen...”? In order that a person will first accept the yoke of God’s kingship...

אמר רבי יהושע בן קרחה: למה קדמה פרשת שמע לוהיה אם שמוע - כדי שיקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים תחלה...

What is a yoke? Is it just a burden to be carried or does it serve some purpose?

2. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Derech Hashem 4:4:2 – By saying Shema we recognize God’s kingship and confirm His authority.

We call God the King of the universe. We consider Him as Our Leader, and He is thus honored by us. We are also required to do His bidding and obey Him, no matter what He commands us, just like the subjects of a monarch. As a result of this, we are also required to recognize God every day and confirm the authority of His kingdom, subjecting ourselves to both Him and His decrees, like subjects to their king. This is called the “acceptance of the yoke of the heavenly kingdom.”

This is the significance of the essence of the *Shema*, consisting of the verse (*Devarim* 6:4), “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” We are confessing that God is the ultimate King and Ruler of all creation,

נקראהו מלכו של עולם. והנה בבחינה זו הוא נחשב לנו לראש, ומתכבד בנו, וגם אנחנו חייבים לעבוד עבודתו ולשמוע אליו לכל אשר יצווה, כמלך בעמו. ואולם בבחינה זו גם כן חייבים אנו להכירו בכל יום, ולקיים מלכותו עלינו, ולהשתעבד אליו ולגזירותיו כעבדים אל מלכם, וזה נקרא 'קבלת עול מלכות שמים'.

ונכלל ענינה בפסוק זה של שמע ישראל, דהיינו ההודאה בדבר זה שהוא מלך מלכי המלכים, מולך בכל בריותיו העליונים והתחתונים, ולקבל עול מלכותו והשתעבד אליו

both above and below. We thus accept the yoke of His kingdom, and subjugate ourselves to Him.

The English language has given the word “yoke” a bit of a bad rap. As the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, one of the uses of yoke is for “something that is regarded as oppressive or burdensome: *the yoke of imperialism*.” However, it can also have positive connotations, as in “something that represents a bond between two parties: *the yoke of marriage*.” Both senses are appropriate here: we carry the responsibility of fulfilling God’s mission in the world; doing so represents our bond with Him.

3. **Ibid., 4:6:6 – Mankind’s responsibility for *tikkun olam*, to rectify the world, is called God’s yoke upon us.**

Man was given the task of rectifying all creation, as discussed in the first section (1:4:7). In maintaining all things in the state desired by God, man is serving God and doing His work. This is accomplished through man’s actions, based on the Torah and commandments that he was given.

All of this, however, is based on the fact that man is God’s servant, and was therefore given the task of rectifying all creation. It is for this reason alone that his deeds can have such an effect and he can thus actually accomplish this. ***The fact that man has this responsibility is called God’s yoke***, and it is very much like the yoke that a master places on his slave. Man’s ability to rectify creation is strengthened by certain aspects of this yoke, as determined by God.

והנה ניתן לאדם להיות מתקן את כל הבריאה כמבואר בחלק א', ונמצא שהוא עובד עבודתו של הבורא יתברך ועוסק במלאכתו, שהוא העמיד הבריאה אשר ברא על המצב הנרצה ממנו יתברך. ואולם זה יוצא ממעשה האדם ופעולותיו, שיפעל כפי התורה והמצווה שעליו.

אמנם כלל כל העבודה הזאת עומד על יסוד אחד, שהוא היות האדם עבדו של הבורא יתברך שנמסר לו העניין הזה של תיקון הבריאה והפקד בידו, שעל כן הדבר הזה מצליח בידו, ומעשיו מגיעים להוליד תולדות אלה. ואולם כלל מציאות היות משא זה על האדם, נקרא עולו יתברך שעליו, כעול האדון על עבדו. ודבר זה מתחזק על ידי פרטים ידועים שתלאו בהם האדון, ברוך הוא.

But the simplest understanding of what a yoke means comes when we think about what a yoke actually does when a farmer attaches it to an animal: it guides the animal’s direction. Accepting the “yoke of Heaven” means living according to the will of God in all that we do. It means that our behavior is directed by the recognition that God is our King and that we are obligated to follow His laws and thus affect the rectification of the world.

The first paragraph of the Shema lays out a vision of the ideal acceptance of God’s authority.

4. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter – The first paragraph of Shema portrays the harmony between our will and God’s will.**

Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. This is the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven...It most certainly deals with the acceptance of the authority of another.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. The essential state of “love” is characterized by the following: that my desire and God’s desire are in harmony with each other. Only then is love possible, for if not, “he who seeks lust is separated” (Mishlei/Proverbs 18:1).

This means to say that the first paragraph of Shema refers to someone who has no problems of personal will. So when it says, “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might,” it means to spell out to what extent this harmony must go. There may be other forces attempting to interrupt this resonance, like the evil inclination, the loss of life, or the loss of money. The expectation is that the love will be the deciding factor, even if it means getting killed.

We find the greatest example of the kind of resonance with God’s will and authority in the story of Rabbi Akiva.

5. **Talmud Bavli, Berachot 61b – Rabbi Akiva epitomized the harmony of wills expressed in the Shema.**

When Rabbi Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour to recite the Shema, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingship of Heaven. His disciples said to him: Our teacher, even now? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, “with all thy soul,” [which I interpret,] “even if He takes thy soul.” I said: When shall I have the opportunity to fulfill this? Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it? He prolonged the word *echad* (one) until he expired while saying it. A Heavenly voice went forth and proclaimed: Fortunate are you, Akiva, that your soul has departed with the word *echad*!

בשעה שהוציאו את רבי עקיבא להריגה זמן קריאת שמע היה, והיו סורקים את בשרו במסרקות של ברזל, והיה מקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים. אמרו לו תלמידיו: רבינו, עד כאן? אמר להם: כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה בכל נפשך - אפילו נוטל את נשמתך, אמרתי: מתי יבא לידי ואקיימנו, ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו? היה מאריך באחד עד שיצתה נשמתו באחד. יצתה בת קול ואמרה: אשריך רבי עקיבא שיצאה נשמתך באחד.

Like Rabbi Akiva’s students, we may find it hard to relate to the concept of giving up our lives for God; we prefer to live our lives for God. Nevertheless, the willingness to die as Rabbi Akiva did, for the sake of God, is the ultimate expression of the Shema.

PART B. WITH ALL YOUR HEART – USING THE INTELLECT TO ACCEPT THE YOKE

1. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Morasha – There are two ways by which people come to value something: intellect and imagination.

The acceptance of the yoke must create a sense of obligation. A person needs to relate to and accept the authority of God. Creating a sense of obligation presents us with a significant challenge. We prefer to act freely, to make our decisions completely independently, and many times recoil from being forced to do something. We need to figure out how we can approach this task, to value it so much that we feel impelled to fulfill it.

There are two ways by which we can create within ourselves an appreciation for the value of something. One is imagination and the other is the intellect.

Imagination has its limitations. It tends to focus on one aspect of a thing and blow it out of proportion. In the end, the big picture is lacking.

For instance, everyone would like to be wealthy. We imagine that it would be nice to have all the money we want and be able to spend it on anything. But that is only one aspect of being rich. The imagination fails to take into account all the worry, stress, and responsibility that go along with it.

Another approach, that championed by the Mussar Movement in the figure of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, focuses on using the intellect.

2. Ibid. – The intellect helps us see the connection to a bigger picture and thus increases its value.

In Iggeret HaMussar, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter portrays the war between the intellect and the imagination. That is, the intellect is also able to appreciate the value of a thing and cause us to yearn for it. How does the intellect do this? The intellect draws connections between things. Something is considered important because it is connected to and influences other things, which are themselves connected to other things.

Rav Leuchter's example of this is people's willingness to spend countless hours every day working at a job. Because they see their own productivity as integral to the larger success of the project they are working on or the company at large, they are able to work hard even without seeing immediate results. This type of intellectual clarity that values something for its part in the big picture is preferred to the imagination that tends to view things out of proportion.

These two modes – intellect and imagination – are also ways of approaching the acceptance of God's kingship upon ourselves. We can use our imaginations and think of ourselves as a Rabbi Akiva willing to die for God. But, as we said, imagination has its limitations. The Shema tells us that to harmonize with God we need to use our intellect.

3. **Ibid. – Harmony is achieved by gaining intellectual clarity.**

“These words which I am commanding you today must remain on your heart.”

This is the point where real inner work starts. What it means by “on” your heart is that these matters should be clear in your mind – the brain being the place that is “on the heart.” For that which is clearer in the mind is accepted more easily within the heart.

That clarity then spreads its influence upon the next generation, children and students, as in “you shall teach them to your children.” And so on in all the affairs of one’s life – “speak of them when you are at home, when traveling on the way, when you lie down and when you get up, etc.” until the end of the paragraph.

To illustrate the idea that intellectual clarity engenders acceptance, Rabbi Leuchter uses the following example: Imagine that you are hanging out with a friend when suddenly you start to have a terrible stomach ache. As it gets worse and worse you start to suspect it may be appendicitis. Your good friend, whom you generally trust, says, “Don’t worry,” as he pulls out his pocket knife. “I can handle this. I learned how to do it in the Boy Scouts. Come over here, and I’ll remove your appendix for you.”

You politely decline his offer but ask him rather to take you to the nearest emergency room. There at the hospital you submit yourself to the care of a number of people – nurses, anaesthesiologists, surgeons. You do not trust your good friend in this situation, yet you happily put your life into the hands of people you don’t know and whose moral character you are not familiar with. How can it be?

The reason we trust hospital staff is that it is so clear to us that they would not be in such a position of authority if they were not actually qualified to be so. That idea is so clear to us that we happily submit to their authority without hesitation. Our intellectual clarity makes us naturally accept their authority. The way to accept God’s authority must also come about through this intellectual clarity. It must be so clear to us, that our sense of acceptance spills over to the next generation as well.

PART C. WORKING ON ACCEPTING THE YOKE

The first paragraph of the Shema represents an ideal that is fully realized only by the completely righteous – those who experience no conflict between themselves and God’s will. The acceptance of authority proceeds with complete harmony.

Rabbi Akiva presents us with this lofty ideal. However, most of us are far from being able to synchronize ourselves with God’s will to such an extent. Putting the ideal of accepting God’s authority into practice is easier said (in the Shema) than done (in real life). It is this less than completely harmonious relationship with God that the Shema addresses in its second paragraph, in instructing the upkeep of mitzvot.

1. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shor, Vol. II, pp. 362-363 – Accepting the yoke of Heaven in a practical way may lead to internal conflict.**

Included in what it means [to accept the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven] is to make God king over our actual limbs and senses, over thought, the eyes, the ears, the mouth, the heart, the hands, the feet, etc. to the point of self-sacrifice...

Now it is certain that God's unity should not remain an abstract idea. His unity must be manifested in our lives!...

...So we accept the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven upon ourselves, upon each and every limb, upon the senses and upon all the spiritual and physical faculties. *What are we to do if we feel that a certain limb, sense, or faculty does not want to make this acceptance?* And if you ask, "How would we know this?" the answer is readily perceptible: When we say Shema we should envision that we are accepting the yoke of Heaven upon our eyes – not to look at that which should not be looked at; upon our ears – not to listen to prohibited things (like *lashon hara* - slander); upon our mouths – not to use prohibited speech or say nonsense, and not to eat merely to satisfy our desires, etc. One who knows himself will easily perceive which faculty or sense rebels against this kind of acceptance. It may very well be that most of his faculties and senses do not agree to accept the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven in this practical way.

בתוך כוונה זו עלינו להמליך את הקב"ה גם על כל אברינו וחושינו ממש, על המחשבה, העיניים, האזניים, הפה, הלב, הידיים, ורגליים וכו', וזאת עד מסירת נפש...

וברור הוא: אינו רצוי שתישאר אחדותו ית' ידיעה מופשטת. אחדותו ית' צריכה להתגלות בחיינו!

...הרי אנו מקבלים על עצמנו מלכות שמים על כל אבר ואבר, על כל החושים וכל כחות הנפש והגוף. מה נעשה אם אנחנו מרגישים כי אבר, חוש או כח אינו רוצה בקבלה זו? ואם תאמרו: איך נדע זאת? הרי בשעת הקבלה אנו מציירים לעצמנו: עול מלכות שמים על העינים – שלא נסתכל במה שלא ניתן להסתכל, על האזניים – שלא נאזין לדברים אסורים, על הפה – שלא נדבר דברים אסורים או בטלים, ושלא נאכל לשם תאוה, וכו'. המכיר את עצמו ירגיש היטב איזה כח וחוש מתמרד נגד קבלה כזאת, וייתכן מאד כי רוב כחותיו וחושיו אינם מסכימים לקבל עול מלכות שמים בצורה מעשית זו.

It may be easy to feel inspired by Rabbi Akiva's attachment to God as he uttered his last Shema. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to deceive ourselves into thinking that the Shema ends with that vision of inspiration. Most of us – God willing – will not be called upon to sacrifice our lives for God, but how are we living our lives for God? How is the yoke of Heaven manifest in the way we go about our daily business?

Rabbi Reuven Leuchter illustrates the challenge of accepting a yoke upon ourselves with an example from everyday life: At certain times, everyone has to eat food prepared for them by

someone else. Whether the cook was your mother, your spouse, or the cafeteria chef – in all these situations you are at the mercy of another person’s control of the food supply. What are you to do if upon your next visit home someone prepares a special meal for you, but there is just one problem: you don’t like the way it tastes?

This presents a tough moral circumstance. You cannot change the menu, and you certainly can’t change your taste buds. The only solution is to accept the fact that with all due respect, your personal taste is not the decisive factor in the equation. It is the other person – the cook, your mother or your spouse – who is in control, and the “yoke” of his cooking must be accepted. If this is not achieved you will find yourself perpetually disgruntled by the cook and hungry in the kitchen.

The same is true in our relation to God and His Torah. Although they are surely for our good (like the food a spouse cooks), as human beings we don’t necessarily resonate with the mitzvot of the Torah. Unless we’ve harmonized our will with His, in the sense that Rabbi Akiva did, it is only natural that we’ll feel an inner conflict in trying to accept the yoke of God’s kingship. It is this conflict that the second paragraph of the Shema comes to address.

2. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Morasha – When we lack harmony with God’s will, we need to employ the intellect to remove the obstacles in our way.**

There are people that do not naturally experience this harmony (with God’s will). And for this phenomenon the second paragraph of Shema is written:

And if you will be careful to listen to My commandments, which I am prescribing to you today – The person stands upon his own authority, but he is able to open his mind to hear what God wants of him. And what is requested of him?

...love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul – He needs to try to reach the state of love (the harmony mentioned above). But here the spiritual task has a new aspect, which was not addressed in the first paragraph. Here the task is given to the possibility of failure. We work a field by removing the stones that pose obstructions to growth. So too here: since the person functions within his own authority and lacks harmony with God’s will, he needs to work with all his heart and all his soul, meaning that he needs to remove the internal obstacles that prevent him from relating to the authority of God.

Even though there is spiritual work to be done and the obstacles to service of God need to be removed, failure is still a possibility. *Be careful lest your heart be tempted to go astray and worship other gods, bowing down to them.* The heart can be enticed and may become involved with a completely different authority to the point of becoming nullified, expressed here as bowing.

This is where *teshuva* (repentance) comes in. “And you shall place these words upon your heart,” meaning that we need to take an intellectual approach (as per above) that demands the acceptance of God’s authority.

In the example we gave above about being served unappealing food, there is an intellectual approach to the problem. A person needs to think it through and realize that logically, his desires are not the only factors that matter. The person preparing the food deserves gratitude and respect for the effort whether or not the food appeals to his tastes.

In relating this example back to God, too, we need to employ our intellectual faculties to realize that doing His will is a greater good than following instincts that lead to other directions. Lacking perfect harmony with God's will means that we will make mistakes, but the way back is to use our minds to help us accept God's authority. Then, to whatever degree possible, we will have truly accepted the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven and fulfilled the words of the Shema.

3. **Ibid. – The next level is to work on changing inner drives and desires.**

There is yet another level hinted to in the second paragraph not mentioned in the first, that of placing these words “on your souls.” The soul refers to working to develop the inner drives or desires. Since the first paragraph spoke of someone whose will was already aligned with God's, there was no reason to mention this aspect of character development. But when we focus on the idea of doing teshuva, we find that it is all starts with uprooting the desire to do the wrong thing, as is explained in Mesillat Yesharim. Teshuva works to change the past because “uprooting the desire (to do the act) uproots the act itself.”

And what does it mean *on* your souls? Seemingly, this refers to the change of perspective that comes with realignment of desire. A person comes to realize that his true desire is broader than he originally thought and that it actually suits him to follow God's will.

To go back to our example of food, a person can come to realize that there is more at stake than the taste of his dinner, that the food can be seen in the context of the relationship he has with the person who prepared it for him. Even if he does not like the taste, he can still appreciate the food as a symbol of good will and be happy that someone cares enough about him to prepare food for him.

So too with serving God. It is unrealistic to expect someone's life-long desire for things not in synch with Judaism to vanish in an instant and he immediately observe all the Torah commandments to their fullest. Yet, he can learn to appreciate that our essential goal is to build and strengthen a relationship with God for it is only through His overwhelming goodness and kindness that we exist. Thus, over time he can learn to overcome those desires that interfere with his accepting the yoke of Heaven, so he can come closer and closer to God and actualize his full potential.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV

∞ **Reciting the Shema is not lip service; it is an act of accepting the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven upon ourselves. That means that when we say Shema we are recognizing that God is King and that we have a unique relationship with Him and a duty to perform for Him.**

- ∞ Accepting God's yoke requires us to see ourselves as operating under God's authority and rule. At the highest level, that recognition translates into a harmonious pairing of our deepest will with God's will. No one epitomized that harmony better than Rabbi Akiva, who died for God with the words of Shema on his lips.
- ∞ The way to create resonance with God's will is by clarifying to ourselves who God is and what our relationship to Him should be.
- ∞ If we are honest with ourselves, most of us will realize that acting in accord with God's Torah and its mitzvot runs counter to our natural drives and tendencies. Giving in to our passions will inevitably "lead us astray." Nevertheless, through our intellectual effort to clarify how things should be, we can do teshuva and come to accept the yoke of God's kingship to a greater extent than before.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHY IS THE SHEMA SO IMPORTANT?

The Shema is the first and the last word in Judaism: it is the first word a child is taught and the last word uttered by someone on his deathbed. The reason for this is that the Shema is a proclamation of faith in the most fundamental beliefs of Judaism. Some of these concepts are alluded to in the first verse of the Shema, while others are spelled out more clearly in the paragraphs that follow.

WHAT IS THE REAL MEANING OF THE SHEMA?

The meaning of Shema is to hear, to understand and to accept that God is the only source of all existence. When reciting the Shema, one should concentrate on accepting God's total control and mastery over every detail of creation as our forefather Yaakov did. This process is referred to by the Sages as "accepting the yoke of the Kingship of Heaven."

WHY ARE THE THREE PARAGRAPHS OF THE SHEMA IN A DIFFERENT ORDER THAN THEY APPEAR IN THE TORAH?

The paragraphs progress from the "big picture" to the details. The first paragraph tells us of a loving God, Who is the only Source of all existence; it also speaks about our mitzvot to love Him and study the Torah. After this, the second paragraph instructs us to accept all the mitzvot of the Torah, and describes communal reward and punishment. Finally, the third paragraph relates the mitzvah to wear tzitzit (fringes) as reminders of our task in the world, the prohibition against straying after our hearts and eyes, and gratitude for taking us out of Egypt.

THE SHEMA CONTAINS THE COMMAND TO LOVE GOD. HOW CAN WE BE DEMANDED FEELINGS THAT WE MAY NOT ACTUALLY HAVE?

It is true; the Torah does not dictate our emotions – at least not directly. The mitzvah to love God is fulfilled by *causing* love for Him, within ourselves and within others. This mitzvah becomes a practical one as we actively do those things that will bring about love of God, such as learning Torah, performing mitzvot and focusing on God’s love for us and all that He has done on our behalf.

WHY DO WE RECITE THE SHEMA? WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO AFFECT WITHIN OURSELVES WHEN WE RECITE IT?

Reciting the Shema is an act of “accepting the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven” upon ourselves. We strive for the ideal in which our inner thoughts and desires are harmonized with God’s to such an extent that we’d be willing to die for Him. Of course, we must also commit ourselves to living for God as well. That commitment takes honest self-evaluation and an attempt to clarify how accepting God’s authority should be manifest in our lives.

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Rabbi Yehudah Heimowitz, *The Six Constant Mitzvot* (Artscroll, 2009)

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