

# Parashat Vaetchanan

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## Shema Yisrael

Maybe it is the most famous Jewish line of all: "*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad.*"

It would be no exaggeration to state that this verse is the ultimate Jewish pronouncement of faith. After all, this is the final pronouncement that a Jew will make on his deathbed. Ever since Rabbi Akiva,<sup>1</sup> this *passuk* has become the determined proclamation of the Jewish martyr. And *lehavdil*, this is the text that we recite twice daily in order to (in a wonderful oxymoron) willingly impose God's sovereignty and authority in our lives – to perform the act of "*Kabbalat Ol Mulchut Shamayim.*"<sup>2</sup>

The Shulchan Aruch<sup>3</sup> instructs us to have full focus, absolute concentration, as we recite this verse. But, what exactly should I be focusing upon as I recite it? If I am supposed to be thinking about God's "one-ness," what exactly does that abstract concept imply?

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### Chavruta Study

1. Dedicate a few minutes to examining this phrase. In a chumash it may be found in Devarim 6:4
  - What textual difficulties are apparent in this line? Or, in other words, how might the line have been expressed in simpler language?
2. Study the classic mepharshim on this passuk: Rashbam, Rashi, Seforno. How do their translations differ?
  - An interesting experiment is to pick up a few different translated siddurim/chumashim, and to observe the different translations on offer.

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### Shiur

Before we begin, let us begin by pointing out some of the textual problems in this most famous of pesukim:

1. There is a change in the grammatical form mid-sentence. "Listen Israel" is the "third person" form. The verse then switches to 1<sup>st</sup> person plural as it states "Hashem is OUR GOD." What is the nature of this transition?

- And why do we need the introductory command - "Listen Israel" - at all?

2. The four-letter name of God – YHV"H – is repeated twice: "Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad."

Why not simply write: "Hashem Elokeinu Echad?" What is the meaning behind the double phrase: Hashem Elokeinu/Hashem Echad"?

3. Why not state that Hashem is THE God - "Hashem hu HaElokim"?

### **RASHBAM – Singular Worship.**

**"Hashem Elokeinu:** Hashem alone is our God. We have no other god in conjunction with Him. Similarly in Divrei Hayamim (II 13:10) "And we have Hashem our God and we have not forsaken Him," that is to say that you (Yerovam) have the Golden Calves, but for us, Hashem is our (exclusive) God...

**Hashem Echad:** We will serve Him and we will not adjoin any other deity, even to engage in divination..."

For the Rashbam, The opening line of the Shema contains a theological statement followed by a related instruction. First, we have only one God; that God is a single power with no attachment, no subsidiary. Second God is to be worshipped without any associated mini-gods, physical representations, intermediaries, and the like.

The parallel verse that the Rashbam quotes sheds interesting perspective upon our passuk. He refers to the famous story of Yerovam (see I Melachim ch.12-13.) Yerovam rebelled against the kingdom of Solomon, and established a new kingdom in Northern Israel. His big worry was that with the Beit Mikdash in Jerusalem, his subjects would always be drawn to the kingdom of Yehudah. His solution involved setting up two new religious centres, one in Dan And one in Beit El, and states "These are your Gods, Israel, who brought you up from Egypt." With this reference (clearly echoing Aharon at the Egel) he establishes the fact that the calves will be physical representation of God. The northern kingdom didn't abandon God as their deity, but they introduced

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<sup>1</sup> Talmud, Berachot 61b

<sup>2</sup> Mishna Berachot 2:2

<sup>3</sup> Orach Chayim 60:5.

some "accessories" some physical forms that represented Hashem. And so when Yerovam is criticised for making the calves as "gods (Elohim)" (Divrei Hayamim II 13:8) the counter statement is made: "...we have Hashem our God (HASHEM ELOKEINU) and we have not forsaken Him" (ibid.)

The Rashbam reads the Shema as: Listen O Israel. God is our exclusive deity. God alone (is to be worshipped.)

And actually, his explanation fits comfortably into the entire context of our chapter here in Sefer Devarim, Chapter 6, which discusses the limits and appropriate form of faith in God: "Do not forget God ... do not follow other gods of the people around you ... do not test God ..." (6:12-17) The entire context is one of warnings regarding absolute loyalty to God.

### **RASHI – A Historical Process.**

"Hashem, who is OUR God at the present time, and not the God of the gentile nations, he will at a future time be – Hashem Echad – as it states: "Then I will transform all nations to a single speech that they will all call out in the name of Hashem (YHVH) (Tzephania 3:9) and it states: "On that day God's will be one (Yiheyeh HASHEM ECHAD) and his name will be one." (Zecharia 14:9)"

Rashi reads our verse historically. After all, why repeat the YHVH name of God twice in the passuk? Why do we state that Hashem is OUR God rather than THE God? Rashi answers, (based on the Sifrei) with this reading: Nowadays, ONLY Am Yisrael recognise God, hence he is OUR God. However, in future times in which all Civilisation will recognise Hakadosh Baruch Hu as the supreme God, then "Hashem Echad," God will be one in that everyone will call out his name. The entire world will be as one in that they will recognise his dominion.

Notice how Rashi scans Tanakh for another context in which we can find the enigmatic combination, "Heshem Echad." After all, what does the Torah imply by such a statement? Rashi finds parallels in Tzephania and Zecharia in an eschatological (End of Days) context, a future era of worldwide recognition of God, and this contextual reference forms the base for his commentary to this passuk.

Shema then is not so much a religious instruction as our hope for the world, a belief in the future, a testimony to an era of Redemption and Truth. Shema tells us that the

Jewish people stand apart in this imperfect world. Indeed it is only Am Yisrael who, in this age recognise Hashem. However, there will be a different future. In an era of redemption, God will be evident to everyone.

### **MALBIM – Love and Fear, and the dangers of Dualism.**

We haven't really spoken yet about the difference between the names YHVH and Elokim in the context of Shema. This is one of the key themes for the Malbim.

Traditionally the name Elokim represents the harsh, rule-based, "din" aspect of God, whereas YHVH signifies the worldlier, human, sensitive, "rachamim" features of God. The Malbim bases himself upon this difference.

A second observation by the Malbim is that he takes note of context, focusing our attention on the fact that the Torah prior to the verse of Shema Yisrael (see 6:2) instructs us regarding FEAR of God, whereas immediately after this passuk, we begin to speak (VeAhahavta) of the LOVE of God.

The Malbim comments:

"After he (Moses in Sefer Devarim 6:2) has stated that the objective of the Mitzvot is FEAR of God, - "These are the commandments, statutes and judgements that Hashem your God commanded to teach you ... that you may fear God..." – he now comes to raise them to a higher level of LOVE of God..."

All ancient societies believed in polytheism. A common factor between them all was that they had a god of good acts and a god of bad events. They could not conceive that Good and Bad in the world could emerge from a single source. Hence they feared the "bad" god, and loved the "good" god."

This is a theology that we know as Dualism. It is the fundamental layer of all Polytheism. As presented by the Malbim, pagan theology sees the gods as forces of nature. But forces of nature sometimes clash. Imagine a farmer in the ancient Near East. Maybe it was a good year agriculturally – so the gods are favouring me. But yesterday, my prize cow died – so god is angry with me. How can both be true? Is god happy or angry with me? The pagans explained that there are in fact two gods, two addresses. There is a god of "good" and a god of "evil", and that these two opposing forces govern human existence. (In other systems, the division became more

sophisticated with a fire god, a war god, a rain god etc. but this dual division is always at the basis of the polytheistic mindset.) The force of good gives me the good things in life, and the force of evil punishes and precipitates disaster and misfortune. Naturally one begins to characterise the forces of good and evil, these gods; one of which is worthy of love and the other worthy of fear. And this is the root of all polytheism. One fears the bad god, and loves the force of good.

The Malbim says then, that in the Torah's transition from Fear to Love lies a potential theological minefield; and hence the urgent necessity to restate the unity of God. We affirm that the One God is the source of good AND evil, there is only One.

"...As the Torah comes to teach the unification of Fear and Love to the true God it needs to precede the believe in the unity – that the God of the world is One , that there is none besides him, and that he is the source of all existence in all the worlds...

In addition the Malbim states that:

"...there is no true evil in the world for from the one good God, only good will emerge, and that which appears to us as evil is ... all for a purpose of good. Hence its states:

HASHEM ELOKEINU, HASHEM ECHAD:  
Hashem (YHVH) refers to the attribute of mercy – the force of good – and Elokim refers to the force of Judgement (Din) and punishment – the force of bad – IT IS ALL ONE, all good, and in truth, only goodness and kindness; hence HVH is repeated a second time. And after this statement of the absolute unity of God, we can say: You shall LOVE the Lord your God ..."

SHEMA AS A PRAYER. BACK TO RASHI.

We have seen Rashi and also the Malbim. I wonder if we might simply adjust things a little. In this shiur and on previous occasions we have remarked on the fact that God may be viewed from a variety of vantage points. One perspective of the world sees God as the master of order (as in Bereshit ch.1 - Elokim) in which all events of the world have a planned and organised mechanism and where life follows a correct pattern. This is a world in which we experience a God of Justice, a God of truth and order. Here the world makes sense.

But then sometimes, life doesn't go to plan. Sometimes, we experience hardship in this world. Even then, God has a place; God supports us, he challenges and tests us (God as YHVH – Bereshit ch.2). At these times, the experience of Justice and order are distant and elusive. But God is very much present even in our flawed human existence, as the source of our humanity despite its pitfalls, its pain and injustice.

God can be manifest as master of order, and also the God of disorder? If "Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad," then possibly we can, (in a sort of Rashi way,) perceive Shema as a prayer, a plea. We can read Shema and request that we be allowed to witness and experience Unity of Hashem and Elokim, the caring God, and the God of Truth. That we may behold the God of History in a manner that will be truly evident of His values of truth, caring, peace, justice and holiness.

Shabbat Shalom