

Vayechi 5781

BS"D Parashat Va'ye'chi 5781

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The Many Faces of Kriat Shema

"She'ma Yisrael" is the most quoted verse in the Torah, having been recited hundreds of million times since its revelation at Mount Sinai. There are many ways to understand these six words:

שמע ישראל - יהוה אחד

Listen (hearken, be attentive) Yisrael, the Lord our God the Lord is one.

I would like to deal with two meanings: one of which has to do with our parasha – Vayechi.

One:

The basic formula (nusach) of a bracha (blessing), as formulated by the Anshei Knesset Hagedola (120 rabbis who led the Jewish people during the Babylonian exile and in the initial years of our return to rebuild the Second Temple) is comprised of three phrases:

... יהוה אחד - יהוה אחד - 'יהוה אחד

BLESSED ARE YOU ADO... – OUR LORD – KING OF THE UNIVERSE...

"BLESSED ARE YOU ADO..." – expresses one's acknowledgment of the existence of an Infinite Being who created all that exists.

"OUR LORD" – expresses our realization that this infinite entity has a unique relationship with the Jewish nation, not to be found with any other group of humanity.

"KING OF THE UNIVERSE" – notwithstanding our singular, intimate connection with HaShem, He is creator and master of all that exists.

However, the phrase "KING OF THE UNIVERSE" which appears in every bracha is omitted in She'ma Yisrael! So instead of "Listen (hearken, be attentive) Yisrael / the Lord / our God / King of the universe / the Lord is one", we say "Listen (hearken, be attentive) Yisrael / the Lord / Our God / the Lord is one", without the phrase KING OF THE UNIVERSE.

The reason for this intended omission is that a bracha which introduces a mitzva act, the phrase "king of the universe" relates to the fact that the act has implications not only for the doer and for Am Yisrael, but also for the universe at large. Whereas the statement She'ma Yisrael is the affirmation that the purpose of Creation is to bring into reality the Jewish nation which will bind the spiritual heaven and material earth by our mitzvot and the intimate bond with HaShem.

One could legitimately ask, how can the Almighty God have such a close relationship with the Jewish nation, who after all are mere mortals? However, this itself is proof that HaShem instilled in our bodies an eminently sanctified soul worthy of HaShem's love, as projected in the one pasuk of "She'ma Yisrael".

That this pasuk is the affirmation of HaShem's love for His nation Yisrael is evident from the two introductory blessings of "She'ma". Before the morning She'ma we say:

ברוך ה' אלהינו ה' אחד ברוך ה' אלהינו ה' אחד

Blessed is HaShem who chooses His nation Yisrael in love

And before the evening She'ma we say:

ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד

Blessed is HaShem who loves His Nation Yisrael

Two:

Rashi, in our parasha, alludes to the Gemara (Pesachim 56a) which describes the final hours of Yaakov's physical existence in this world, when he gathered his 12 sons to reveal to them what lay ahead in store for the Jewish nation at the "end of days".

However, at the precise moment when their hearts and minds were at their peak attentiveness, HaShem withdrew His Shechina (Divine spirit) from Yaakov and the revelations became obscured. The Gemara continues to relate that Yaakov feared that HaShem's withdrawal might be due to one or more of his sons being heretics. For just as his grandfather Avraham had begot the sinful Yishmael and his own father Yitzchak begot the evil Esav, he too might be cursed with a wayward son.

The brothers then turned to their father and without prior concurrence recited in unison:

שמע ישראל יהוה אחד יהוה אחד יהוה אחד

"Hearken Yisrael (our father), the Lord is our God, the Lord is One"

Yaakov then replied:

ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד

"Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever"

Question: How could the single statement voiced by the sons, “Shema Yisrael” diffuse Yaakov’s deep-seated suspicion of heresy? Why did Yaakov not consider the possibility that the “heretical sons” (if there were) were lying?

I suggest:

The brothers waited impatiently to hear of the future geula. When Yaakov realized that HaShem did not want the details to be disclosed, he turned to his sons with suspicion that they might be the cause. At that moment, HaShem placed His holy Shechina on the brothers and they announced in unison:

אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יְהוָה אֶחָד

Yaakov was stunned, because this statement was the essence of the prophecy that he had intended to reveal to his sons. Instead, it was taken from him and given to them, proving that they were tzadikim.

And what is the prophecy for the future Am Yisrael?

The prophecy states that just as the “Shema” consists of three phrases:

- 1) *Shema Yisrael* – Hearken Yisrael
- 2) *HaShem Elokeinu* – the Lord is our God
- 3) *HaShem Echad* – the Lord is One

So too will the future redemption of the Jewish people evolve in three stages:

- 1) In the initial phrase of “*Shema Yisrael*”, the name of Am Yisrael is mentioned without HaShem’s name. This refers to the initial stage of redemption with the ingathering of Bnei Yisrael from the far corners of the globe to Eretz Yisrael. They would return for a variety of reasons, not necessarily

religious ones. Most will come to escape anti-Semitism, or totalitarian regimes, or to build a state based on secular socialist Zionist values.

2) Phase two *“HaShem Elokeinu”* includes two names of HaShem: the ineffable (unutterable) YH... representing HaShem’s quality of compassion, and the name *“Elokeinu”* representing HaShem’s quality of harsh justice.

This second stage of redemption would be characterized by a bitter conflict between Torah leaders on how to view the Medina. Religious-Zionist rabbanim will see the Medina as the expression of HaShem’s quality of compassion for His people Yisrael. The Medina is HaShem’s declaration that the Shoah was the last major test in the 2000-year period of anger and galut (exile), and the beginning of a new period of our renaissance leading to the fulfillment of all our prophets’ visions. Millions of Jews have returned, our sovereignty over Yerushalayim and the Temple Mount and the extraordinary military victories are undeniable signs that the geula is at hand.

In contrast, other Torah scholars will claim that the period of *“Elokeinu”* – harsh judgment – is still in effect, with the Medina merely a stage in the natural development of political societies.

3) Phase three *“HaShem Echad”*, is when HaShem’s quality of compassion will reign alone and all rabbinic leaders will unite in the reality that the Medina is HaShem’s avenue for the advent of Mashiach and our final redemption.

Yaakov, upon hearing the revelations voiced by his sons, added a fourth stage: *“Baruch shem kevod malchuto le’olam va’ed”* – blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for the entire world – signaling the universal acceptance of HaShem’s total mastery as Creator and Preserver of all things.

Today, with a near majority of the world’s halachic Jews in

the holy land, we are in the midst of the second stage of *HaShem Elokeinu* where most of the Chareidi rabbinic leadership do not hear the footsteps of the Mashiach in Medinat Yisrael.

The third stage of total unity will come about when we witness the miraculous demise of our enemies, as stated at the end of the first chapter of Tractate Berachot, that we will witness miracles far surpassing those of the exodus from Egypt.

We are not far from a religious awakening among the people in the Medina, unparalleled since the time of Ezra Ha'Sofer. HaShem will "shine His countenance" upon all those who are here to receive it.

May HaShem grant our gallant soldiers victory over the forces of evil, for the final redemption of our people will come about in the merit of the mesirut nefesh (self-sacrifice) of His loyal children residing in Eretz Yisrael.

Remember the three Bs B careful B healthy B here

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Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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