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### **Why Is the Jewish People So Small?** by Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Covenant and Conversation - Va'etchanan 5766 Va'etchanan

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is one." These words are the supreme testimony of Jewish faith. Each word is worthy of careful study, but it is the first – the verb Shema – that deserves special attention.

There was a profound difference between the two civilizations of antiquity that between them shaped the culture of the West: ancient Greece and ancient Israel. The Greeks were the supreme masters of the visual arts: art, sculpture, architecture and the theatre.

Jews, as a matter of profound religious principle, were not. G-d, the sole object of worship, is invisible. He transcends nature. He created the universe and is therefore beyond the universe. He cannot be seen. He reveals Himself only in speech. Therefore the supreme religious act in Judaism is to listen. Ancient Greece was a culture of the eye; ancient Israel a culture of the ear. The Greeks worshipped what they saw; Israel worshipped what they heard.

This is how Hans Kohn put it in his *The Idea of Nationalism*. The ancient Greeks were "the people of sight, of the spatial and plastic sense . . . as if they thought to transpose the flowing, fleeting, ever related elements of life into rest, space, limitation . . . The Jew did not see so much as he heard . . . His organ was the ear . . . When Elijah perceived G-d, he heard only a still, small voice. For that reason the Jew never made an image of his G-d."

That is why the keyword of Judaism is Shema. G-d is not something we see, but a voice we hear. This is how Moses put it elsewhere in this

week's sedra, describing the supreme revelation at Mount Sinai:

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. (Deut. 4: 12)

This has systemic implications for the whole of Judaism. Its way of understanding the world, and of relating to it, is fundamentally different from that of the Greeks, and of the philosophical tradition (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others) of which they were the founders. A listening culture is not the same as a seeing culture. In this week's study I want to explore one of the many aspects of this difference.

The Mosaic books are, among other things, a set of commandments, 613 of them. That is the primary meaning of the word Torah – namely law. It would seem to follow that a book of commands must have a verb that means "to obey", for that is the whole purpose of an imperative. Obedience stands in relation to command as truth does to statement. Yet there is no verb in biblical Hebrew that means to obey. This is an utterly astonishing fact.

So glaring is the lacuna that when Hebrew was revived in modern times a verb had to be found that meant "to obey". This was an obvious necessity – especially in the case of Israel's defence forces. An army depends on obedience to the command of a superior officer. The word chosen was *letsayet*, an Aramaic term that does not appear in this sense anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. The word the Torah uses is quite different, namely *lishmo'a*, Shema, "hear".

The verb *lishmo'a* is a key term of the book of Deuteronomy, where it appears in one or other forms some 92 times (by way of comparison, it appears only 6 times in the whole of Leviticus). It conveys a wide range of meanings, clustered around five primary senses:

[1] to listen, to pay focused attention, as in "Be silent, O Israel, and listen [u-shema]" (Deut. 27: 9) [2] to hear, as in "I heard [shamati] Your voice in the garden and I was afraid" (Gen. 3: 10) [3] to understand, as in "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand [yishme'u] each other" (Gen. 11: 7) [4] to internalize, register, take to heart, as in "And as for Ishmael I have heard you" (Gen. 17: 20), meaning, "I have taken into account what you have said; I will bear it in mind; it is a consideration that weighs with Me". [5] to respond in action, as in "Abraham did [vayishma] what Sarah said" (Gen. 16: 2). This last sense is the closest *shema* comes to meaning "to obey".

It has yet other meanings in rabbinic Hebrew, such as "to infer", "to accept", "to take into account as evidence" and "to receive as part of the Oral tradition". No English word has this range of meanings. Perhaps the closest are "to hearken" and "to heed" – neither of them terms in common use today. Psychotherapists nowadays sometimes speak of "active listening", and this is part of what is meant by Shema.

The best way to discover what is unique about a civilization is to search for words it contains that are untranslatable into other languages. It is said that the Bedouin have many words for sand and the Inuit many terms for snow. The Greek word *megalopsuchos* – literally the "great-souled" person, one blessed with wealth, status and effortless superiority – has no equivalent in either Judaism or Christianity, two cultures that valued, as Greece did not, humility. Shema is untranslatable – understandably so since it belongs to biblical Hebrew, the world's supreme example of a culture of the ear.

This is a fact of great consequence and should affect our entire understanding of Judaism. The existence of the verb *lishmo'a* and the absence of the verb *letsayet* tells us that biblical Israel, despite its intense focus on Divine commandments, is not a faith that values blind, unthinking, unquestioning obedience.

There is a reason for the commands. In some cases they are rooted in the fact that G-d created the universe and the laws that govern it: therefore we must respect the integrity of nature. In other cases they are grounded in history. Our ancestors were slaves in Egypt; they knew from indelible personal experience what it is to live in an unjust, tyrannical

society. Therefore a society based on Torah will be just, compassionate, generous. Slaves must rest one day in seven. One year in seven, debts should be cancelled. The landless poor should not go without food at harvest time – and so on.

The G-d of revelation is also the G-d of creation and redemption. Therefore when G-d commands us to do certain things and refrain from others, it is not because His will is arbitrary but because He cares for the integrity of the world as His work, and for the dignity of the human person as His image. There is a profound congruence between the commandments and the laws that govern nature and history. An arbitrary ruler demands blind obedience. G-d is not an arbitrary ruler; therefore He does not demand blind obedience. Instead, He wishes us as far as possible to understand why He has commanded what He has commanded.

Hence the emphasis, in Exodus and Deuteronomy, on children asking questions. In an authoritarian culture, questions are discouraged: “Ours not to reason why, ours but to do and die” as Tennyson put it. Had this been the case in Judaism, the Torah would have had a verb that meant the same as *letsayet*, not one with the meanings of *lishmoa*.

On Pesach the least mature child, not the most, is “one who does not know how to ask”. Indeed we are commanded to teach him or her to ask. Even the verb three lines after “Hear O Israel” – usually translated as “You shall teach these things diligently to your children”, means according to Rashi, “you shall sharpen your children” -- meaning, teach them the full depth of their meaning, rather than superficially (see Rashi to Kiddushin 30a).

To be sure – this should go without saying – obedience to the commandments should never be conditional on understanding them. It is a contradiction in terms to say that one who does not understand or agree with a law is free to break it. Anyone who thinks this has not understood what a law is. But it does mean that ours is a searching, questioning, rational, intellectual faith, one that calls for the full exercise of the mind.

Shema Yisrael does not mean “Hear, O Israel”. It means something like: “Listen. Concentrate. Give the word of G-d your most focused attention. Strive to understand. Engage all your faculties, intellectual and emotional. Make His will your own. For what He commands you to do is not irrational or arbitrary but for your welfare, the welfare of your people, and ultimately for the benefit of all humanity.”

In Judaism faith is a form of listening: to the song creation sings to its Creator, and to the message history delivers to those who strive to understand it. That is what Moses says, time and again in Deuteronomy. Stop looking: listen. Stop speaking: listen. Create a silence in the soul. Still the clamour of instinct, desire, fear, anger. Strive to listen to the still, small voice beneath the noise. Then you will know that the universe is the work of the One beyond the furthest star yet closer to you than you are to yourself – and then you will love the Lord your G-d with all your heart, all your soul and all your might. In G-d’s unity you will find unity – within yourself and between yourself and the world – and you will no longer fear the unknown.

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#### VAESCHANAN AND EIKEV - THE SH'MA

**Chaim Ozer Shulman** cshulman@gmail.com

The first chapter of the Sh'ma, which is in the Parsha of Vaeschanan (6:4), as well as the second chapter of Sh'ma which is in the Parsha of Eikev (11:13) both enumerate three Mitzvos (commandments): Talmud Torah (Torah study), Tefilin and Mezuzah.

Interestingly, the order of these Mitzvos differs in the two chapters of Sh'ma. The first chapter lists first the Mitzvah of Talmud Torah (ViShinantam LiVanechah - Teach your children (6:7)), second the Mitzvah of Tefilin (U'Keshartam Le'os Al Yadechah - A sign on your arm ... and between your eyes (6:8)), and third the Mitzvah of Mezuzah (U'Kesavtam Al Mezuzos Beisecha U'Visharechah - On your door posts

(6:9)). The second chapter of Sh'ma, however, lists first the Mitzvah of Tefilin (U'Keshartem Osam Le'os Al Yedchem - A sign upon your arm (11:18)), second the Mitzvah of Talmud Torah (ViLimaditem Osam Es Beneichem - Teach your children (11:19)) and third the Mitzvah of Mezuzah (U'Kesavtam Al Mezuzos Beisecha U'Visharechah - On your door posts (11:20)). Why is the order of these three Mitzvos different in the two chapters of Sh'ma?

Also, why is the first chapter of Sh'ma written in singular form (ViAhavta, ViShinantam LiVanecha, U'Keshartam Le'os Al Yadechah, U'Kesavtam Al Mezuzos Beisecha) while the second chapter of Sh'ma is written in plural form (ViHaya Im Shamoah Tishmiu, ViSamtem Es Devorai Eileh, U'Keshartem Osam, ViLimaditem Osam)?

Perhaps the answer to these two questions lies in the fact that the first chapter of Sh'ma discusses accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven (Sh'ma Yisroel), while the second chapter of Sh'ma discusses accepting the yoke of the Mitzvos (ViHaya Im Shamoah Tishmiu El Mitzvosai). We see this in the Mishnah in the second chapter of Berachos (Daf 13.): Amar Reb Yehoshua Ben Karchah, Lamah Kadmah Sh'ma LiVihaya Im Shamoah? Elah Kidei Sheyikabel Alav Oll Malchus Shamayim ViAchar Chach Yekabel Alav Oll Mitzvos. - Why is Sh'ma read before ViHaya Im Shmoah? So that a person should accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Hashem and afterwards accept the yoke of Mitzvos.

This explains why the first chapter of Sh'ma is written in singular form and the second chapter of Sh'ma is written in plural form. With respect to accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, each person has to work on himself individually and privately to come to believe and have faith in Hashem. But with respect to accepting the yoke of Mitzvos, a person can fulfill this publicly, and in fact fulfilling Mitzvos in public is often preferable (Birov Am Hadras Melech). Therefore the first chapter of Sh'ma which deals with accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven is in singular form, and the second chapter of Sh'ma which deals with accepting the yoke of the Mitzvos is in plural form.

This also helps us understand why in the first chapter of Sh'ma the Mitzvah of Talmud Torah is mentioned before the Mitzvah of Tefilin and in the second chapter of Sh'ma the Mitzvah of Tefilin is mentioned before the Mitzvah of Talmud Torah. With regard to accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven a person must first understand with his mind through Talmud Torah that there is a G-d, and only afterwards can he fulfill with his body things that symbolize the oneness of Hashem. Therefore in the first chapter of Sh'ma Talmud Torah is mentioned first. With respect to accepting the yoke of the Mitzvos, however, one can certainly keep the Mitzvos even without understanding the reasons or knowing all the underlying details. That is the concept of Na'aseh ViNishma, that one can accept the Mitzvos even before understanding the reasons. Therefore in the second chapter of Sh'ma the Mitzvah of Tefilin is mentioned first, since Tefilin symbolizes all the Mitzvos that a person fulfills with his body, while Talmud Torah is mentioned afterwards as that deals with the reasons and the ideology.

A similar explanation was given by both my grandfathers, Rabbi Yechiel Michal Kossowsky ZTL and Rabbi Moshe Yitzchok Shulman ZTL, as to why one first puts on the Tefilin Shel Yad (of the hand) and afterwards the Tefilin Shel Rosh (of the head), but one takes off the Tefilin Shel Rosh first, because even before understanding the reasons with our head, we must do the Mitzvos with our hands, and even if the reasons escape us we must continue to do the Mitzvos.

What remains to be understood is why the Mitzvah of Mezuzah is mentioned last in both chapters of Sh'ma. Mezuzah being last in the first chapter of Sh'ma is very logical, because with regard to accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven one first must believe in Hashem with one's head through Talmud Torah, then one can put a sign on one's body to show this belief (through Tefilin), and finally one can put a sign on one's home that this home houses a family that believes in Hashem. In the second chapter of Sh'ma, however, the Mitzvah of Mezuzah should

logically belong before the Mitzvah of Talmud Torah, because one should do Mitzvos in one's house even before one understands the reasons for them. So why is Mitzvah of Mezuzah placed last even in the second chapter of Sh'ma?

I would suggest that a Mezuzah on a house shows not only that parents keep the Mitzvos, but also that children who grow up in the house will keep the Mitzvos as well. If parents do not learn Torah and do not understand the reasons and the philosophy behind what they do, they will not be able to instill in their children a devotion for the Torah and the Mitzvos. Therefore, even with respect to accepting the yoke of the Mitzvos, Talmud Torah is a necessary prerequisite to building a house of Mitzvos. And that is why even in the second chapter of Sh'ma the Mitzvah of Mezuzah is placed last after the Mitzvah of Talmud Torah.

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Rabbi Wein - Parshas Vaeschanan genesis@torah.org  
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**Rabbi Berel Wein**

Parshas Vaeschanan The Formula to Achieve

Contentment This Shabat is Shabat Nachamu, the Shabat that begins for us a cycle of comfort and consolation after the weeks of sadness and mourning over the past tragedies of the Jewish people. These next seven weeks of healing comfort will lead us into the bright, new year that awaits us. In this week's parsha there is to be found, so to speak, the short course and synopsis of all of Judaism – the Ten Commandments, the Shema and the explanation of the Exodus from Egypt to be given to the wise son.

In a general sense, the entire structure of Torah and Jewish life is encapsulated for us in the parsha of the week. Since this Shabat is invariably also Shabat Nachamu, it is not difficult to see that the Torah is teaching us that comfort and consolation are spiritual values and attainments and not necessarily dependent upon material wealth or worldly success.

Our society, so rich in material goods and advanced technology, suffers greatly from all sorts of mental and social dysfunction. Depression is the "black dog" (Churchill's words for his recurring bouts of depression) that affects over a third of the citizens of the Western world! True comfort and serenity within human beings are difficult to achieve and most precarious to maintain.

The Torah in this week's parsha, in order to help and guide us, gives us a formula to achieve this elusive goal of contentment. And, it lies within the parameters of those three principles of Jewish faith outlined in the parsha of the week.

The Ten Commandments create for us a structure of belief and morality that every individual can aspire and ascribe to, no matter how decadent the society in which one finds oneself enmeshed in. The moral strictures that protect life, property and person are the basic rules of Jewish faith and life. The dysfunction between parents and children, a 24/7 commercial world, accepted robbery and corruption as a social norm, daily murders and a completely sexually dissolute society – how can one avoid being depressed in such a milieu?

All of civilization teeters on the fulcrum of those Ten Commandments. They point the way out of the social morass that sucks us down to destruction. The Shema is the vehicle of connection of our soul with the Creator Who fashioned us and gave us life. The belief in the one and universal God Who rules and is omniscient and omnipotent is the greatest gift of the Jews to the human race. It gives us discipline and security, purity and nobility, the whiff of immortality and the security in knowing that life is never in vain.

And finally, the understanding of the uniqueness of Israel in God's scheme of things, as represented in the story of the Exodus from Egypt, gives structure and perspective to our national and personal lives. But it takes wisdom and knowledge – a wise son – to appreciate and treasure

this memory of the distant past. Memory alone can also give us a sense of comfort and well-being and contribute towards the consolation and contentment we so ardently seek.

Shabat shalom

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Shabbat Shalom: **Rabbi Shlomo Riskin's Parsha List**

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Printer graphic [CLICK HERE FOR COMPLETE ARTICLE](#) (Printer-Friendly) Efrat, Israel - "Comfort you, comfort you, My People" (Isaiah 40:1) The Shabbat after Tisha B'Av is known as the Shabbat of Comfort, a phrase taken from the first verse of the prophetic reading from Isaiah. Additionally, a most fascinating festival day-one which is unfortunately not very well known-falls just about one week after the bleak fast for the destruction of both of our Holy Temples. An analysis of this festival, known as Tu B'Av, "the 15th day of Av," will reveal a striking similarity between it and the Shabbat of Comfort. The conclusion of the last Mishna of tractate Ta'anit (26b) teaches as follows: "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, 'There were no greater festive days in Israel than the fifteenth day of Av and Yom Kippur, when the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white dresses so as not to embarrass those who didn't have their own. They would go out and dance in the vineyards. What would they say? 'Young man, lift up your eyes and see whom you wish to choose for yourselves. Do not cast forth your eyes after beauty, but cast forth your eyes after family. 'False is grace and vanity is beauty; a woman who fears the Lord is the one to be praised'; and the scriptures further state, 'Give her of the fruit of her hands and let her deeds praise her in the gates.'" The Talmud then cites the Tosefta, which provides a more descriptive picture: "The beautiful ones among them, what would they say? Cast forth your eyes after beauty, for woman was only created for beauty. The ones with good pedigree, what would they say? Cast forth your eyes after family, because woman was only created for children. The plain ones, what would they say? Take your wares for the sake of heaven, as long as your adorn us with gold (and then even the plain-looking women will appear

to be beautiful)." Apparently, the 15th day of Av was a kind of Sadie Hawkins day, when the women would entice the men to marry them; and each woman would emphasize her particular quality: beauty, family or "for the sake of heaven." And, as the Mishna concludes, it is chiefly the attributes of fear of God and performance of good deeds which truly count in assessing the proper wife. The Talmud adds, "It is clear why Yom Kippur is a Festival, since it brings forgiveness and absolution, since it is the day when God gave the second tablets [as a sign of His forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf]; but what is the reason for the joy of the 15th Av?" The Talmud then gives seven possible reasons, from the suggestion that on that day members of the tribes were permitted to marry one another, to the opinion that on 15 Av, the desert generation stopped dying, to the astronomical fact that from that day on, the sun begins to lose its strength and the days begin to be shorter. Permit me to add another possible reason, one which would also explain the unique manner in which we are to celebrate the 15th of Av. Josephus records that on the afternoon of the ninth day of Av 70 CE, the Holy Temple was set aflame; this was the day of heaviest fighting. It would be logical to assume that as Jews witnessed Jewish sovereignty and God's very throne smoldering, they tore their garments and sat on the ground, sitting shiva not only for the lost lives, but also for the disappearing dream of at-hand redemption. If the seven-day mourning period began on 9 Av, it must have concluded on 15 Av, the seventh day, about which our sages rule that "partial mourning on that day is accounted as if one had mourned the complete day." Hence, they rose from their shiva on 15 Av, Tu B'Av.

It was precisely on the day that their shiva concluded that our Sages ordained the merriment of Tu B'Av. This parallels the joy when the High Priest emerged unscathed from the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur; a sign that Israel had indeed been forgiven! The Holy Temple may be burning to the ground, but the Jewish nation remains alive and God's commitment to His eternal covenant remains intact (as is clear from this week's reading, which we also read on Tisha B'Av (Deut. 4:25-32). As the Midrash teaches, God exacted punishment from the wood and stones of a physical edifice, albeit a holy one, but He demonstrated His ultimate forgiveness by keeping His nation alive and His covenant operational. This is why and how 9 Av will one day be a day of great celebration. God ordains Tu B'Av as a day of weddings; Judaism sees every wedding ritual as a ringing confirmation of the future of the Jewish people, as a personal commitment to continue the nation and the faith because "there will yet be heard on the streets of Judea and in the great plazas of Jerusalem, sounds of gladness and sounds of rejoicing, sounds of grooms and sounds of brides." (Jeremiah 33: 11) Judaism bids us never to despair. Certainly our generation has not been disappointed! Like us on Facebook Follow us on Twitter View our videos on YouTube Shabbat Shalom Enjoying Rabbi Riskin's weekly e-mails?

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Shabbos Nachamu and Tu B'Av follow soon after Tisha B'Av. The restrictions of the Three Weeks, increasingly intensifying through the Nine Days, the week of Tisha B'Av, and even continuing to some extent after Tisha B'Av until mid-day of the Tenth of Av, all come to a halt. We seemingly turn to a more joyous state of mind.

As a child, I remember how summer camps I attended would have a

countdown until midday on the tenth of Av at which time music would blare from the loudspeakers. Another memory I have is of a very somber mural representing the churban which was displayed prominently during the Three Weeks. After Tisha B'Av, the mural was flipped to the other side, revealing a cheerful mural of Yerushalayim. I remember thinking, "Good, now the sad period is over. Now we can be happy!"

Is the mourning over? We still have no Beis HaMikdash, no revealed Divine Presence, no Korbanos, and many mitzvos are still lacking. The Jewish people are not united, rampant secularism, materialism and even hatred of Torah are pervasive, and our enemies surround us and threaten the destruction of Israel. Why do we move so suddenly from Tisha B'Av to Nachamu? Has anything changed?

"Kila Hashem chamaso ... vayatzes eish b'tzion - Hashem expended His fury ... and He kindled a fire in Tzion" (Eicha 4:11). The Midrash (Eicha Rabba 4:14) comments: kila chamaso 'al eitzim va'avanim - instead of destroying the Jewish people, Hashem poured out his wrath on sticks and stones. This teaching is difficult. A human being who is angry can "let off steam" by smashing objects and then calm down. The Ribono shel 'Olam clearly does not "get angry" and need to "let off steam". Rav Yosef Binyamin Pincus shlita explained[1] with an analogy of a husband who loves his wife but knows they must separate for a while in order to heal the strained relationship and demands that his wife leave for some time. The Beis HaMikdash was the house representing Hashem's love of the Jewish people. The intertwined keruvim symbolized this great love. When Hashem destroyed this house and sent the Jewish people into exile, he was expressing his love for them as well. The "marital home" had to be destroyed. K'nesses Yisrael, the beloved of HKB"H, had to wander in exile before being able to return to her Beloved. Thus, Hashem's destroying the Beis HaMikdash allowed for Klal Yisrael to survive.

The Gemara in Kiddushin (31b) records that Avimi once served a cup of water to his father, R. Avahu. Finding his father sleeping, Avimi stood there waiting for him to awaken. In the meantime, he was inspired to interpret the Psalm (79), "Mizmor L'Asaf ba'u goyim nachalasecha, samu es Y'rushalayim l'iyim - A song to Assaf: the nations have entered Your inheritance, they have turned Jerusalem into ruins!" Rashi explains that Avimi found the usage of the word, "mizmor", a song, difficult. When speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem, the word, "kina", a dirge, would have been more appropriate! He answered similarly to the aforementioned teaching that the song refers to the fact that Hashem took out his wrath on wood and stones and preserved the Jewish people.

Why did Avimi expound on this particular verse at this precise time? Rav Pincus explained that standing over his father, refusing to just place the cup on the table, Avimi realized how much love existed between father and son. He used this as a tool to understand the relationship between our Father in Heaven and B'nei Yisrael. Because of this great love, Avimi realized that clearly the destruction of the Mikdash was not an act of Divine punishment intending to banish the Jewish people forever. A father always loves his child. The destruction must be interpreted as a necessary separation to preserve, rather than destroy, the Jewish people.

Rav Pincus further explained that this love being implicit even at the very moment of churban is demonstrated by Klal Yisrael by lifting some of the customary restrictions of mourning after noon.[2] Then we may sit on regular seats and the paroches is returned. Women then have a custom to sweep the house and start preparing the post Tisha B'Av meal. The Beis HaMikdash was set aflame toward evening of the ninth of Av (Ta'anis 29a). At that very moment, we begin to lift some of the restrictions of mourning since this very destruction also demonstrated Divine love.

The same analysis can explain the timing of Shabbos Nachamu and the other six haftoros of consolation. We have experienced destruction, exile, misery, and distance. But we take comfort in the fact that G-d has

not abandoned His beloved nation. Even the destruction itself implicitly demonstrated His great love for us.

## II

We live in a unique era. Hashem, in his kindness, has orchestrated the physical rebuilding of Eretz Yisrael. He has caused Torah study to blossom in the Land of Israel so intensely such that "ki mitzion teitzei Torah ud'var Hashem MiY'rushalayim" has become a reality.[3] The Jewish population of Eretz Yisrael has skyrocketed from just a few thousand in the early part of the nineteenth century to over six million (!), kein yirbu. There have been Rabbinic figures, based on this new reality, never imagined to occur before the Redemption, who suggested changes in various prayers of Tisha B'Av. Rav Soloveitchik, together with all Gedolei Yisrael, vehemently opposed these proposed changes, for as long as there is no Mikdash, Yerushalayim is still in a state of Churban.[4] How can we comprehend this seemingly paradoxical state, one in which Klal Yisrael has once again become a sovereign nation in its land, has rebuilt the land spiritually and physically, but is still so far from the geula?

Perhaps the end of the Shemone Esrei provides a perspective on this problem. After the b'racha of Modim, we recite Sim Shalom. After thanking Hashem, we pray again for peace and a whole litany of additional requests. Klal Yisrael are in an eternal state of modeh 'al he'avar v'tzo'eik 'al he'asid (54a), thanking Hashem for the past and praying for the future.[5] We are in a constant state of receiving from our Heavenly Father. Hashem, in His wisdom, has bestowed upon us in the recent era unprecedented kindness that we have not received since the Churban Beis HaMikdash. For this, we must constantly thank HKB"H.

But we have not been granted the geula sheleima. So much is still lacking. The overwhelming majority of the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael andchutz la'aretz are not shomrei Torah umitzvos. Many never even heard of many mitzvos. A frightening intermarriage rate prevails outside of Israel. The current pending legislation compelling a draft for Yeshiva students threatens to divide even further an already divided nation, pitting not only religious against secular Jews, but religious Jew against religious Jew with different viewpoints as to their role in the modern day State of Israel. The civil wars in Syria and Egypt, the nuclear threat from Iran, the missile threat from Lebanon, and the constant terror threat in Israel proper all serve to remind us how tenuous Klal Yisrael's survival is. Mah zeh 'asah Hashem lanu? He has shown us so much kindness, but so much is still so wrong! Perhaps we can humbly suggest that precisely in an era such as ours, when we have received so much Divine blessing including the return of so many millions to Eretz Yisrael, Hashem has to remind us that we have not reached geula yet. Being able to pray at the Kotel HaMa'aravi for the last 46 years sometimes makes us forget the enormity of this privilege, and, even more importantly, that we do not have the Mikdash that this wall was meant to surround![6] I have heard many speakers suggest that the current situation hovering over Yeshiva students is meant to awaken us not to take the gift of Torah study for granted and to increase its study ever more diligently. He sends us constant reminders to tell us: awaken, pray for the redemption!Titz'aku 'al he'asid! Do not think you already have been redeemed. There is still so much lacking!

But we take comfort, nachamu, nachamu ami. Hashem, even in periods of utter destruction, still loves us. He will redeem us totally and unqualifiedly. All these threats and troubles will disappear. In the meantime, though, we must redouble our efforts, in Torah study, in prayer, and in hasbara demonstrating to our not yet observant brethren the beauty of our Torah. In this merit, may we see the geula sheleima bim'heira.

[1] Heard in a shiur given on Tisha B'Av. Any errors in this presentation are my own.

[2] Only the ones practiced as customs not as halachos are lifted.

[3] This miraculous transplantation of Torah was expressed beautifully

by the Chazon Ish to the Rosh Yeshiva of the Slonimer Yeshiva in Ramat Gan, with the following words: "For hundreds of years, the Babylonian Yeshivot wandered from place to place and tried to pave their way to the Holy Land from where they were exiled... Their names have changed but not their souls... This is the Torah which was exiled ten exiles... This is the Torah which now returns from desolate plains back to the coveted Land... [the original name of the Yeshiva] reminds us of our great efforts and courage in preserving the Covenant of the Torah in exile after which we have brought it back to its final rest and heritage. Its glory and shining beauty have not been dulled even in the gloom of exile." (quoted in Chazon Ish, a Biography of Rabbi Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, by Aharon Sorsasky).

[4] See B'ikvei HaTzon (18:10) and Piskei Teshuvos (561:1) concerning the obligation of k'ri'a on Yerushalayim nowadays.

[5] I heard this idea from Rav Hershel Welcher shlita.

[6] Rav Menachem Nissel shlita suggested that perhaps this is one Divine message of the recent morning when Orthodox Jews were prevented from praying at the Kotel to allow the non-Orthodox Women of the Wall to hold their "services" there. We should never take the privilege of praying there for granted.

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from: Rabbi Ozer Alport <oalport@optonline.net>

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subject: Parsha Potpourri - Parshas Va'eschanan

**Parsha Potpourri**

**Parshas Va'eschanan – Vol. 8, Issue 41**

**Compiled by Rabbi Ozer Alport**

**כי תוליד בנים ובני בנים ונושנתם בארץ והשחתם ... ועשיתם הרע בעיני ד' אלקיך להכעיסו**

**העידתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ כי אבד תאבדון מהר (26-4:25)**  
רמז להם שיגלו ממנה לסוף ח' מאות וי"ב שנה כמנין ונושנתם והוא הקדים והגלם לסוף שמונה מאות וחמשים והקדים ב' שנים לנושנתם כדי שלא יתקיים בהם כי אבד תאבדון (רשי"י)

The Torah threatens that after the Jewish people become accustomed to living in the land of Israel, if they begin to take it for granted and perform evil acts in Hashem's eyes, He will have no choice but to promptly destroy them. Rashi writes that the numerical value of the word ונושנתם – and you grow old in the land – is 852. This hints that they will be exiled after 852 years of living in Israel. However, if Hashem allowed them to remain for the full period, He would be forced to carry out the threat of the next verse: to utterly annihilate them. In order to allow them to remain intact, Hashem mercifully exiled them prematurely after only 850 years.

While Hashem's compassionate act was certainly beneficial, it remains difficult to understand why He sent them into exile two years early. Wouldn't it have sufficed to allow them to remain in the land for one more year, during which time they would have an opportunity to repent their sins, and to expel them at the end of 851 years if they hadn't corrected their ways?

The Leket Yosher writes in his introduction that the Terumas HaDeshen suggested that this difficulty is the source for the widespread belief that when comparing the numerical values of two words or phrases, they are permitted to differ by one and still be considered equivalent. Had Hashem permitted the Jews to remain in Israel for 851 years, He would no longer have been able to lighten their sentence by merely exiling them. Since 851 is only one year less than the numerical value of ונושנתם (852), it would have been considered a fulfillment of the Torah's frightening threat, and He would have to destroy the Jewish nation. To avoid that catastrophic scenario, He had no choice but to send them out two years early.

**וקשרתם לאות על ירך והיו לטטפת בין עיניך (6:8)**

In listing the people who are permitted to return home from the battle front, the Torah includes (20:8) one who is afraid and weak-hearted. Rashi explains that this refers to a person who is fearful that the sins *which are in his hand* will cause him to die in the battle. It is difficult to understand the use of this peculiar expression. In what way is it possible for sins to be in a person's hand more than they are in his heart or soul? Further, one of the examples given (Menachos 36a) of such a sin is a person who speaks between putting the tefillin on his arm and placing the tefillin on his head, mitzvos which are presented in Parshas Vaeschanan (6:8). Since this isn't from the more severe sins which require Yom Kippur to effect forgiveness, why doesn't he merely confess and repent his sin, which will effect immediate forgiveness and allow him to remain and fight?

Rav Shalom Schwadron suggests that Chazal specifically referred to the sin as being "in his hand" to hint to the fact that he has yet to relinquish his improper actions and is still figuratively holding on to them. The reason that he is unable to simply repent his actions is that he doesn't want to. Nevertheless, although he is unwilling to admit the error of his ways and correct them, he is still intellectually cognizant of their impropriety and therefore fears the consequences of placing himself in the danger of war. Although he recognizes that his actions are inappropriate and could lead to his death, he is still unable to release them from his hand and properly correct his ways due to the tremendous force of habit.

Rav Yisroel Salanter is quoted as saying that the greatest distance between two places in the world is the gap between a person's mind and his heart, which we see illustrated here. The soldier believes in something in his mind, but unless he can find a way to internalize it in his heart and know it with every fiber of his being, it won't affect his actions. This is why the Torah commands us (4:39) **וידעת היום והשבות אל לבבך** - it's not enough just to know something in your head, but you have to also find a way to implant it into your heart.

For this reason, Hashem told Moshe in Parshas Tetzaveh that the unique garments that were worn by the Kohanim during the time that they served in the Beis HaMikdash were so special and holy, they couldn't simply be made by anybody who possessed the necessary skills and craftsmanship. Rather, Hashem instructed Moshe (Shemos 28:3) to command the *wise of heart* to make these special garments for Aharon and his sons.

The Torah recognizes that the primary criterion for evaluating wisdom lies in the ability to connect one's mind, and the information stored therein, with his heart, which guides and determines his decisions and actions. It is for this reason that Hashem stressed the importance of selecting the truly wise – the wise of heart – to make the special garments worn by the Kohanim.

Now that we have a heightened appreciation of the importance of ensuring that our intellectual learning and development influences and guides our actions and decisions, the more difficult question is how a person can do so. The Baalei Mussar tell us that the secret to getting knowledge and information to travel all the way from the brain to the inner depths of one's heart is through emotion. When something makes a strong and powerful impression on a person, it impacts him to the core and becomes a part of him.

I would like to suggest an additional technique based on the topic of tefillin with which we began. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 25:5) writes that the tefillin shel yad corresponds to the heart, and the tefillin shel rosh corresponds to the head. In light of this piece of information, we can understand that wearing tefillin properly can help us connect and unite our heads and our hearts.

Rashi maintains that the sin involved in speaking between putting the tefillin on his arm and placing the tefillin on his head is not the hefsek (interruption) constituted by speaking, but rather doing so obligates a person to make an additional blessing before placing the

tefillin on his head, and the Gemora is speaking about a case of somebody who neglected to do so. According to this explanation, the sin is not unique to the mitzvah of tefillin, and the Gemora could have seemingly selected any number of cases of a person performing a mitzvah without reciting the appropriate blessing beforehand. If so, why did the Gemora specifically choose to give this example as opposed to any other?

B'derech drush, I would suggest that the Gemora was bothered by this phenomenon. How is it possible that somebody is afraid of his sin, but yet is unable to do teshuvah and move on with the battle? It must be that there is a cognitive dissonance between what he knows in his mind and what his heart causes him to do. How did such a situation come about? Why didn't his tefillin help him unite his mind and his heart and overcome the disconnect between them? The Gemora understood that his sin must have been that he talked in between them and severed the connection between them, which is why his mind lost its control over his heart.

Although the society in which we live holds wisdom and its pursuers in high esteem, we must recognize that our study of Torah cannot become just another source of intellectual stimulation and knowledge. The Torah is described as a "Toras Chaim," for it is intended to provide us not just with intellectual stimulation, but to shape our actions and to guide us in every decision that we make in life.

Therefore, as we pursue our studies, it is important to be cognizant of the Torah's message about the true definition of wisdom. As we begin the difficult work of honestly evaluating ourselves and attempting to improve and grow throughout the month of Elul, the first step is to understand that whatever we study must penetrate our hearts and become part of us so that it influences and guides our future actions and makes us truly wise, a recognition which will allow us to loosen our grips on our sins and completely release them from our hands.

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Subject: in honor of parshas Va'eschanan From: Rabbi Kaganoff <ymkaganoff@gmail.com> To: kaganoff-a@googlegroups.com

#### **Using Hashem's Name**

#### **By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff**

Question #1: Nasty Neighbor Mrs. Goodhearted asks: "I have a neighbor who seems a bit disturbed and often spews out abusive invective against me. I am concerned that her cursing may bring evil things upon me. What should I do?"

Question #2: A Friend in Vain Mr. Closefriend inquires: "A close friend of mine often makes comments like 'for G-d's sake,' which I know are things that we may not say. I wanted my friend to be one of the witnesses at my wedding, but an acquaintance mentioned that my friend may not be a kosher witness, because he uses G-d's Name in vain. Is this really true?"

Answer: This week's parshah, Va'eschanan, mentions several mitzvos that involve respecting the sanctity of Hashem's name, including not swearing falsely and not cursing people. This provides an opportunity to study many of the laws about oaths, curses, and the proscription against taking Hashem's name in vain. (For clarification: although both "swear" and "curse" are often used to mean "speaking vulgar language," for this entire article I will not be using these words in this sense, but will use "swear" in the sense of "taking an oath," and "curse" to mean "expressing desire that misfortune befall someone.") The Rambam counts a total of thirteen different mitzvos, ten mitzvos Lo Saaseh and three mitzvos Aseh, that involved oaths and curses. The ten Lo Saaseh prohibitions are:

1. Not to break an oath or commitment that one has made. (The Torah's commandment concerning this law is located at the beginning of

Parshas Matos. It is counted and discussed in the Rambam's Sefer Hamitzvos as Lo Saaseh #157 and in the Sefer Hachinuch as Mitzvah #407.) 2. Not to swear falsely (Sefer Hamitzvos, Lo Saaseh #61; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #227). This is derived from the words, lo sishav'u bishmi lashaker, "you shall not swear falsely in My name," which appear in this week's parshah. 3. Not to deny falsely, with an oath, that one owes money. This mitzvah is also located in this week's parshah and is derived from the words lo seshakru ish ba'amiso, "do not lie to your fellowman," which Chazal interpret as a prohibition against swearing a false oath denying that one owes money (Bava Kama 105b; Sefer Hamitzvos, Lo Saaseh #249; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #226). 4. Not to swear an oath that has no purpose (Sefer Hamitzvos, Lo Saaseh #62; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #30). This mitzvah is derived from the words of the Aseres Hadibros, you shall not take the Name of Hashem, your G-d, in vain. 5. Not to cause someone to swear in the name of an idol (Sefer Hamitzvos, Lo Saaseh #14; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #86). This mitzvah is derived from the words vesheim elohim acherim... lo yishalu al picha, "You should not cause the names of other gods to be used in an oath," in Parshas Mishpatim (23:13; see Sanhedrin 63b). 6. Not to curse Hashem (Sefer Hamitzvos, Lo Saaseh #60; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #70). 7. Not to curse one's parents (Sefer Hamitzvos, Lo Saaseh #318). 8. Not to curse the king of the Jewish people or the head of the Sanhedrin, who is called the Nasi (Rambam, Hilchos Sanhedrin 26:1; Sefer Hamitzvos 316; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #71). This mitzvah is derived from the words venasi be'amecha lo sa'or in Parshas Mishpatim. 9. Not to curse a dayan, a judge presiding over a beis din proceeding (Sefer Hamitzvos, Lo Saaseh #315; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #69; Rambam, Hilchos Sanhedrin 26:1). This mitzvah is derived from the words Elohim lo sekaleil in Parshas Mishpatim. 10. Not to curse any Jew (Rambam, Hilchos Sanhedrin 26:1; Sefer Hamitzvos 317; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #231). This mitzvah is derived from a verse in Parshas Kedoshim, since it is included under the Torah prohibition do not curse a deaf person. As the Sefer Hachinuch explains the mitzvah, "do not curse any Jewish man or woman, even one who cannot hear the curse."

**Four in one** We should note that the above-mentioned mitzvos are not mutually exclusive, and one could violate several of them at the same time. For example, the son of the Nasi of the Sanhedrin who curses his father violates four different Lo Saaseh prohibitions: for cursing: (1) a Jew, (2) his father, (3) a dayan, (4) the head of the Sanhedrin (Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah #231). As we will see shortly, violating most of these prohibitions is punishable by 39 malkus, lashes (Temurah 3b). This is highly surprising, since violating a Torah mitzvah through speech does not usually lead to a sentence of malkus (Temurah 3a). However, the laws of swearing and cursing are exceptions to the usual rule, which demonstrates the severity of these prohibitions.

**Three positive mitzvos** In addition to the ten Lo Saaseh mitzvos that this topic covers, there are also three positive mitzvos involved: 1. A mitzvah to fulfill something that one has accepted to do (located at the beginning of Parshas Matos; Sefer Hamitzvos, Mitzvas Aseh #94; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah # 406). 2. Fearing Hashem, which includes treating His Name with respect (see Temurah 4a). 3. The Rambam counts a positive mitzvah of swearing, which we will soon explain (Sefer Hamitzvos #7).

**What does a curse accomplish?** At this point, I would like to explain a very important and often misunderstood concept. When someone curses an innocent person, the curse causes no harm. To quote Rav Moshe Feinstein, "When someone curses his fellowman, the prohibition is not because it causes harm to the other person. First of all, Heaven will ignore a curse that was performed in violation of the Torah. Second of all, a curse without basis does not bring harm." Rav Moshe refers to the verse in Mishlei (26:2): an unjustified curse affects only the one who uttered it. Rav Moshe continues "a curse of this nature causes no harm"

(Shu't Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 3:78). Furthermore, even the curses and evil intended by sorcerers (kishuf) do not affect Jews, since we are directly connected to Hashem, and therefore not affected by kishuf (Ramban, Bamidbar 24:23). Rav Moshe concludes that one who cursed a fellow Jew is punished because he embarrassed someone, and because he acted with disdain for Hashem's Holy Name. However, Rav Moshe explains that there is a difference in halachah between cursing someone else and cursing oneself. Someone who curses himself indeed will bring upon himself punishment and harm (Shu't Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 3:78). Based on Rav Moshe's analysis of the mitzvah, we can now understand several other halachos of cursing. Cursing a child old enough to understand what was said is liable to the same level of punishment as cursing an adult. This is because it is prohibited to hurt a child's feelings, just as it is forbidden to insult an adult. However, cursing a dead person is exempt from the punishment of malkus (Toras Kohanim on Parshas Kedoshim; Rambam, Hilchos Sanhedrin 26:1-2). This is because the dead feel no pain when someone curses them. (There is one situation in which cursing a dead person is indeed punished -- cursing one's parents after their demise is a fully culpable crime [Sanhedrin 85b, quoted by Kesef Mishneh, Hilchos Sanhedrin 26:2].)

**Cursing without using Hashem's Name** Cursing a person without using G-d's Name does not incur the punishment of malkus. However, the beis din has the halachic right and responsibility to punish the offender in a way that they feel is appropriate (Rambam, Hilchos Sanhedrin 26:5). Having heard Rav Moshe's explanation of the mitzvah, we can now explain why someone who curses without using Hashem's Name is not liable. The most severe violation, which incurs the punishment of malkus, is violated only if one committed both aspects of the sin – he demonstrated total disregard both for G-d and for man, by desecrating G-d's Name and by offending someone. However, one who cursed without offending anyone living, or who cursed without desecrating Hashem's Name is spared from receiving corporeal chastisement, because his infringement was not of the highest level. At this point, we can address our first question above. Mrs. Goodhearted asked: "I have a neighbor who seems a bit disturbed and often spews out abusive invective against me. I am concerned that her cursing may bring evil things upon me. What should I do?" I would advise her to avoid her neighbor when she can, but for a different reason. Mrs. Goodhearted is concerned that she will be damaged by the neighbor's curses – but according to Rav Moshe, there is no cause for concern. However, if her neighbor is sane enough to be responsible for her actions, the neighbor will be punished for cursing and for hurting people's feelings, and Mrs. Goodhearted should try to avoid giving her neighbor an opportunity to sin.

**Cursing in English** Does cursing using G-d's Name in a language other than Hebrew violate this prohibition? The Rambam rules that cursing someone using a vernacular Name of G-d is also prohibited min haTorah and chayov malkus (Hilchos Sanhedrin 26:3; see also Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 27:1).

**What type of oath?** Having discussed the prohibitions against cursing one's fellow Jew, let us now discuss the prohibitions against swearing in vain. What type of oath did the Torah prohibit taking? In general, the Torah prohibits taking any type of oath, even when the oath is true, because it is an oath that has no purpose (Temurah 3b). For example, someone who swears truthfully that he did not eat anything today violates the Lo Saaseh, you shall not take Hashem's Name in vain, since this oath accomplishes nothing. Someone who swears an oath that is false, such as one who falsely swears that he did not eat breakfast that day, violates both the proscription for swearing a false oath and also for swearing a vain oath, since it serves no purpose.

**Two exceptions** There are two instances when the Torah permits someone to swear a truthful oath (Temurah 3b). This is derived from the fact that the Torah says in two different places (Devarim 6:13; 10:20),

uveshmo tishavei'a, "in His Name, you may swear." We will see shortly that the halachic authorities dispute whether the words uveshmo tishavei'a should be translated as "in His Name, you shall swear" or as "in His Name you may swear."

**Encouraging mitzvah observance** What are the two exceptional instances in which the Torah permits someone to swear an oath? (1) The first is when someone swears an oath as an incentive to support his efforts at growth and self-improvement. One may take an oath to encourage himself to perform a mitzvah that he might otherwise not perform (Temurah 3b). For example, one may swear to donate to tzedakah or to say a chapter of Tehillim every day. Bear in mind that, in general, although permitted, it is not a good idea to create oaths or vows upon oneself (see Nedarim 22a). Someone who takes an oath or a vow is now bound to observe it, and failure to do so is a grievous sin. Therefore, although reciting such an oath (that has a purpose) does not violate the Torah's prohibition against taking Hashem's Name in vain, it is usually recommended not to do so. A better approach is to accept the new practice bli neder, which means that one is hoping and planning to observe the new practice, but without the obligation and inherent problem of making it an obligation on the level of a shavua or a neder, a vow.

**When required in litigation** (2) The second situation in which the Torah permitted swearing an oath is within the framework of halachic litigation. There are instances in which the psak halachah, the final ruling of a beis din, requires a litigant to take an oath in order to avoid paying or to receive payment. When the beis din rules that one is required to take an oath, the Gemara (Temurah 3b) concludes that the person swearing does not violate the Torah's prohibition against swearing unnecessarily.

**Permitted or a mitzvah?** It is important to note that in this last situation, the authorities dispute whether the halachah is that one may take an oath, but there is no mitzvah to do so, and we would discourage the oath, or whether in this situation it is a mitzvah to swear an oath. The Rambam (Hilchos Shavuos 11:1 and Sefer Hamitzvos, Positive Mitzvah #7) contends that someone who swears because of a din Torah fulfills a positive mitzvah of the Torah, uveshmo tishavei'a, "in His Name, you shall swear." Others contend that this verse means simply "in His Name you may swear," but that there is never a mitzvah of taking an oath (Ramban, Sefer Hamitzvos, Positive Mitzvah #7). Still others contend that even though the verse says, "in His Name you may swear," this does not mean it is permitted to swear, but that one who swears is not punished for taking an oath (Shu't Chasam Sofer, Choshen Mishpat #90). Thus, this last authority contends that one should avoid taking an oath even under these circumstances, and thereby explains why the custom is to pay large fees or fines rather than swear an oath that is fully truthful.

**Testimony without oaths** It is worthwhile to note that testimony in halachah does not require one to swear an oath. This can be juxtaposed to the secular legal system, in which one must take an oath or pledge for one's testimony to be considered binding. A Jew's word is sacrosanct, and any time he testifies or makes a claim in court, whether as a litigant, as a witness or as an attorney, he is halachically bound to tell only the truth. It is therefore a serious infraction of the Torah for someone to file a legal brief including statements that are not true. In addition, filing these statements may involve many other violations including loshon hora, rechilus, motzi shem ra, machlokes and arka'os.

**Oath without G-d** Does swearing an oath without mentioning Hashem's Name qualify as an oath? This question is discussed extensively by the Rishonim, who conclude that someone who commits himself to doing (or refraining from doing) something, using terminology that implies an oath, is now bound to observe the pledge, whether or not he mentioned Hashem's Name (Rambam, Hilchos Shavuos 2:4; Rashba, Shavuos 36a; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah

137:1). Nevertheless, according to most authorities, swearing an oath that mentions Hashem's Name is a more serious violation of the Torah (Rambam, Hilchos Shavuos 2:4).

**Taking Hashem's Name in vain** It is also prohibited min haTorah to use Hashem's Name unnecessarily, even when one is not taking an oath. This is prohibited as a mitzvas Aseh, since it violates the words of the Torah, es Hashem Elokecha tira, "You shall fear Hashem your G-d" (Devarim 6:13). Thus, it is prohibited min haTorah for someone to say as an expletive, "For G-d's sake," "Oh, my G-d in Heaven" or similar exclamations. In this context, the following halachic question is raised: "Is there anything wrong with what the common folk say: 'Just as G-d is True, so this is true!' Does halachah consider this to be an oath?" This question, which may sound very contemporary, is discussed almost five hundred years ago by the Radbaz (Shu't #17), who writes that these types of declarations are very serious infractions of the Torah and are considered blasphemous. Anyone who makes such statements should be severely reprimanded and punished, so that he realizes how sinful this is and will take it upon himself to do teshuvah for his crime. The Radbaz states that it is very wrong to compare the existence and truth of anything else to Hashem's existence and truth. Furthermore, someone who makes such a declaration about a falsehood denies the Creator and forfeits his share in the World to Come.

**A Friend in Vain** At this point, we have enough introductory information that we can examine Mr. Closefriend's question posed above: "A close friend of mine often makes comments like 'for G-d's sake,' which I know are things that we should not say. I wanted my friend to be one of the witnesses at my wedding, but an acquaintance mentioned that my friend may not be a kosher witness, because he uses G-d's name in vain. Is this really true?" Although Mr. Closefriend should convince his close friend that this callous referring to Hashem and His Holy name is prohibited, it does not qualify as making an oath in vain, but as a violation of the Mitzvas Aseh of fearing Hashem (Temurah 4a). As such, there is a difference in halachah. The halachah is that there are two categories of people who are disqualified as witnesses because they are sinners. One is someone who has demonstrated that he will compromise halachah for monetary benefit (Rambam, Hilchos Edus 10:4). The other category is someone who violates a sin so severe that, during the time of the Sanhedrin, he could be punished with malkus (Rambam, Hilchos Edus 10:1-3; Sefer Hamitzvos, Lo Saaseh 286; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah 75). Such individuals may not serve as a witness to a wedding ceremony. Similarly, someone who curses people using G-d's Name or one who swears is not a valid witness at a wedding ceremony. However, although it is highly sinful to violate mitzvos Aseh, one who violates them is not invalidated as a witness.

**Conclusion** In addition to the above-mentioned reasons why one should be careful how and when one uses Hashem's Name, the Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzvah 231) mentions the following reasons not to curse people. Cursing creates conflict, something we certainly want to avoid. Furthermore, we want to train ourselves not to be vengeful, and to learn to develop our self-control.

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[Rav Kook List] Va'Etchanan: **With All Your Soul** Chanan Morrison <ravkooklist@gmail.com> Jul 17 (1 day ago)  
Va'Etchanan: With All Your Soul Rabbi Akiva's Martyrdom

When the Romans decreed that teaching Torah is a crime punishable by death, Rabbi Akiva's reaction was not surprising. The great scholar, who had supported Bar Kochba in his revolt against Rome, gathered people together and gave public Torah lectures.

It was not long before Rabbi Akiva was charged and convicted. When the rabbi was brought out for public execution, it was the hour to recite the Shema. As the executioners flayed his skin with iron combs, Rabbi



Akiva recited the Shema, concentrating on fulfilling its words: to love God "with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might."

The Talmud records Rabbi Akiva's final words before his death. His students asked him: "Our master! Even to this extent?"

The great scholar responded:

"All my life I have been troubled by this verse, "You shall love God... with all your soul." As I have explained its meaning: "all your soul" - even if they take your life. I have always wondered: will I ever have the privilege of fulfilling this mitzvah? And now that the opportunity has finally arrived - shall I not seize it?" This exchange between Rabbi Akiva and his students requires clarification. What is the meaning of their question, "Even to this extent?"

The Purpose of Shema

One might think that the daily recitation of Shema is a preparatory act. Each day we accept upon ourselves the yoke of Heaven, and prepare ourselves to love God, even at the cost of our lives. This daily declaration ensures that we will have the necessary reserves of courage and commitment should there arise a need for the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom.

This is why his students were surprised. Their teacher had already withstood the test. He had accepted martyrdom with noble determination. Even the cruelest instruments of torture had failed to deter him. What need, then, was there for Rabbi Akiva to recite this final Shema? Why prepare for that which he was now fulfilling?

Rabbi Akiva, however, understood the intrinsic value of the Shema. This declaration of love for God and acceptance of His rule is not just a tool to train the spirit. Each recitation of the Shema is in itself a wonderful act. Each time we declare God's unity, our souls acquire greater holiness and closeness to God. The Shema is not just a means to prepare oneself; its very recitation refines and elevates the soul.

Until his final declaration of the Shema, Rabbi Akiva had recited the Shema with the thought that he was willing to sacrifice his life - "with all your soul" - for love of God. His entire life, he had wondered whether he would be able to fulfill the mitzvah of the Shema in its most extreme, most demanding, form. "Will I ever have the privilege of fulfilling this mitzvah to its utmost?" At the hands of the Romans, he accepted the reign of Heaven while sacrificing his life - not just as a mental vision, but in real life.

His Soul Departed With Echad

The Talmud relates that as Rabbi Akiva concentrated on the final word of Shema, his soul departed.

Rabbi Akiva breathed his last with the word Echad - "God is one." A master of Jewish law, the scholar was able to infer legal rulings from the smallest markings in the Torah's text (Menachot 29b). In the final analysis, however, all of the detailed laws and myriad interpretations that he had propounded during his lifetime were all part of a single harmonious system. Everything Rabbi Akiva had taught shared the same underlying theme: how to live life according to the supreme principle of God's oneness. It was thus fitting that his final word should be Echad.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, pp. 344-345) RavKookTorah.org This Dvar Torah: VAET62.htm To subscribe/unsubscribe/comments: Rav Kook List