

Rabbi David Etengoff

Understanding the Essence of “Shema Yisrael”

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Hear, O Israel: The L-rd is our G-d; the L-rd is one. And you shall love the L-rd, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them to your sons and speak of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up. (*Sefer Devarim* 6:4-7, this, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The commandment of *Kriat Shema* (the recitation of *Shema Yisrael*), as found in our *parasha*, is probably the best-known *mitzvah* of the Torah. After all, nearly everyone is familiar with the reading of its text, whether it is said privately or in the synagogue. Then, too, many people are taught these words shortly after they begin to speak. *Kriat Shema* has the potential, therefore, to help define our Jewish identity and to serve as a “spiritual GPS” in guiding us toward forging a vital and authentic relationship with Hashem.

Unfortunately, however, it is precisely our familiarity with this commandment that often leads to rote and robotic recitations of its words. This tendency obscures the significance and purpose of this *mitzvah*, and desensitizes us to its stature and meaning. Regrettably, we are not alone in our failures. Long ago, in the eighth century BCE, Yeshiyahu (Isaiah) proclaimed our errors in this regard: “And the L-rd said: ‘Because this people has come near; with their mouth and with their lips they honor Me, but their heart they draw far away from Me, and their fear of Me has become a command of people, which has been taught (*mitzvat anashim m’lumdah*).’” (29:13) Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel

(1809-1879), known as “the Malbim,” explained Yeshiyahu’s words in the following fashion:

There are those who perform the *mitzvot* solely because this is what they have become accustomed to do since their youth and they are used to performing them. They perform them without any cognitive gesture (*kavanah*) and without thought – even though they may know that they are commandments from G-d. They, however, do not perform them in any way, shape, or form because Hashem commanded them to do so. Instead, they perform them because this is what they were dictated to do by their teachers and parents. They [the *mitzvot*] are performed without any understanding and are mere mechanical actions reinforced by past rote behaviors... (Commentary to *Sefer Yeshiyahu* 29:13, translation and brackets my own).

Allow me to briefly explicate Rav Meir Leibush’s deeply insightful words:

- 1) There is a significant group of people who perform the commandments simply because they have been doing so since their youth and they feel comfortable in doing so.
- 2) These individuals may know that the *mitzvot* are from G-d, yet, this is not why they perform them. “Instead, they perform them because this is what they were dictated to do by their teachers and parents.”
- 3) Such individuals often perform the commandments without *kavanah* and in a thoughtless manner. As a result, “[the *mitzvot*] are performed without any understanding and are mere mechanical actions reinforced by past rote behaviors...”

Given the Malbim’s trenchant analysis of the behavior of a identifiable part of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people), and the singular import of *Kriat Shema*, it seems to me that we need to reexamine the essential concepts that are inherent in this *mitzvah*. Time and space constraints, however, will only allow us to analyze the famous first *pasuk* (verse): “*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad.*” (“Hear, O Israel: The L-rd is our G-d; the L-rd is one.”)

I believe that the first thing we need to ask ourselves before we recite the *Shema* is, “What are we trying to accomplish by its recitation?” On those rare occasions when we actually think about this question, our immediate reaction is most likely, “I am trying to fulfill a commandment.” This is all well and good, and it is certainly a necessary part of what we should be thinking and feeling when we say *Shema*, since in a small way it is an antidote to what Isaiah called *mitzvat anashim m'lumdah*. It is, however, insufficient in that it does not differentiate the *Shema* from the other *mitzvot*. In addition, this answer does not explain why hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Jews throughout history, have died with the words, “*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad*” upon their lips while sanctifying G-d’s name (*al kiddush Hashem*). Clearly, there is something unique about this most famous of all *pasukim* (verses).

As always, we must turn to *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed memory) to guide us on our journey of understanding and discovery. They labeled the recitation of our verse (i.e. *Shema Yisrael...*) *kabbalat ol malchut Shamayim* (the volitional acceptance of the kingship of Heaven). This phrase appears 29 times in classic Rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash). In nearly every instance, it refers to the recognition and acknowledgment of G-d’s existence, and His role as the Commander (*Metzaveh*) of the *mitzvot*. Now that we have briefly defined this term and noted its referent, it is time to try to grasp its conceptual meaning

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, subjected the term “*kabbalat ol malchut Shamayim*” to a penetrating and systematic analysis in his posthumously published work entitled,

“Worship of the Heart: *Essays on Jewish Prayer*.” Therein, he suggests that both the *Shema* and *tefillah* (prayer) fall under the category of “subjective halakhic norm”:

A subjective halakhic norm, in contradistinction to the objective [i.e. donning Tefillin, sitting in the Succah etc.], signifies mitzvot realized through an inner experience, in a state of mind, in a spiritual act, in a thought, a feeling, or a volition. Although the Halakhah, being very distrustful of human subjective life because of its vagueness, transience and volatility, has introduced, even in the realm of subjective norms, concrete media through which an inward religious experience manifests itself, the real essence of the subjective *mitzvah* is confined to the spiritual component. (Page 88, brackets and underlining my own)

Since the quintessence of *Kriat Shema* is the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* “through an inner experience,” it stands to reason that the kind of *kavanah* that is necessary to achieve this goal is quite different than that which is found in reference to other, objective, *mitzvot*.

Hence the Rav suggests:

Kavvanah, while reading *Shema* or praying, is not to be equated with ordinary intention. It is rather identical with meditation, spiritual surrender, or the turning and directing of the heart unto the L-rd. For it is the heart, and not the lips, which is called upon to turn toward G-d in the morning and in the evening. Most halakhic authorities concur.. that the technical reading of the *Shema* is not enough. The inward turning to G-d is of utmost significance. Thus, the Halakhah teaches that if one fails to direct his heart unto the L-rd while reading the *Shema* – his obligation remains unfulfilled. (Page 89, underlining my own)

In sum, *Kriat Shema* is a subjective halachic norm whose fulfillment is achieved through an inward turning to G-d in a deeply personal manner that results in a uniquely spiritual gesture. Therefore, “lip-service” is insufficient to achieve *kabbalat ol malchut Shamayim* and prevents an individual from fulfilling his *mitzvah*:

...the *kavvanah* in regard to *Shema* and *tefillah* forms the core of the accomplishment, the central idea and the intrinsic content of the *mitzvah*. It is not a mere modality, expressing only the “how” of the *mitzvah*-fulfillment (as it does in other *mitzvot*), but rather is identical with the very substance and essence of the commandment. It implies, instead of imperativistic intentionality, a full-fledged, all-embracing and all-penetrating experience of G-d. (Ibid. , underlining my own)

In addition, the Rav notes that *kabbalat ol malchut Shamayim* is both an “intellectual as

well as a volitional gesture.” (p. 97) What is the content of this “intellectual gesture?”

It asserts itself in an act of comprehension and asserts knowledge of G-d in the form of creed. Free assent to this creed comprises the inner essence of accepting the yoke of Heaven. (Ibid.)

One should not think, however, that the kind of knowledge necessary to properly fulfill *Kriat Shema* is beyond the reach of the average Jew. A person does not need philosophical and theological training to fulfill his/her mitzvah of *Shema*:

The term “knowledge,” in this connection, should not be confused with formal, dogmatic, soulless and “cold” speculation, with abstract deductions devoid of life and warmth, or with assent as a hollow meaningless acceptance. Neither is knowledge in our case just an opinion (however cogent and valid) nor is assent a mere nod of the head...Both knowledge and assent must be realized as an immediate awareness, a glowing and vivid experience, something real and dynamic, an ideal effort toward a Divinely organized and morally inspired existence, the adventure of a heroic life. (Ibid.)

We are now prepared to ask the most essential question of all, “Given the above, what is the content of the phrase ‘*kabbalat ol malchut Shamayim?*’” Here, too, Rabbi Soloveitchik serves as a ready guide:

“Accepting the yoke of Heaven” is not tantamount to entering the Divine presence. The state of reading *Shema* is not identical with that single mood in which man is driven into the company of G-d [i.e. *tefillah*]. It is rather a sedate, placid experience. No encounter takes place. The element of the dialogue is lacking in this ritual. It expresses itself more in the form of declaration, confession, profession of faith...Of course, G-d is also experienced when one reads *Shema*, but not in a sense of fellowship or communion via the grammatical thou [as found in *tefillah*]. G-d, in the experience of reading *Shema*, is “He,” the third person, the remote transcendent Being Whose yoke we do accept, Whose will we must abide, Whose might we respect and fear, Whose authority we acknowledge, yet into Whose presence we must not venture, Whose Being is hidden from us. The emphasis in *Shema* [in contrast to *tefillah*] is found in the phrase *malkhut Shamayim* (the kingdom of Heaven), the majesty of G-d, *majestas Dei*, whose main attribute is inaccessibility and remoteness on the one hand, and absolute might and power on the other. (Pages 96-97, brackets my own)

We are now in a position of understanding the constitutive elements of *Kriat Shema*, and by extension, *kabbalat ol malchut Shamayim*. As we have seen, this *mitzvah* is a “subjective halakhic norm” that demands a unique level of *kavanah* that differs in kind and degree from the *kavanah* of *mitzvot* that comprise the category of “objective halakhic

norms.” Moreover, this commandment is a statement of belief based upon knowledge that is universally accessible to all – including those lacking sophisticated philosophical and theological training. Perhaps most all, *kabbalat ol malchut Shamayim* is expressed in our recognition of G-d’s majesty and the knowledge that, in His transcendence and power, He forever remains *l’aylah u’l’aylah mikol birchata v’shirata* (beyond all blessing and songs of praise).

This, then, is the *mitzvah* of *Kriat Shema* and a path for understanding the nature of *kabbalat ol malchut Shamayim*. May Hashem give us the wisdom to incorporate these principles of understanding in our daily prayers, so that our *tefillah* can be invested with new meaning and purpose. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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