

Parashat Vayechi 5772, 2012:

*Baruch Shame Kavode Malchuto L'olam Vo 'ed*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shelaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Our *parasha* includes many dramatic moments and powerful images. Perhaps one of the most captivating of these episodes is that of “*Birkat Yaakov*,” Yaakov’s blessing to his beloved children. It comprises the first 28 verses of the penultimate chapter of *Sefer Bereishit*. Herein, *Yaakov Avinu* (our Father Yaakov) addressed each of his children in the manner he saw fit to prepare them, and their descendants, for the challenges of the future.

The first two *pasukim* (verses) of *Birkat Yaakov* are written in the plural, and serve at one and the same time as a call for attention and an introduction to everything that will follow: “Jacob called for his sons and said, ‘Gather and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days. Gather and listen, sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel, your father.’”

(*Sefer Bereishit* 49:1-2, this and all Torah translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) A careful reading of these verses indicates that Yaakov was about to foretell the future of the 12 Tribes, the Jewish people, and, by extension, the time of the *Mashiach* (Messiah). This is precisely the way in which the great third-century Palestinian Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, interpreted these *pasukim*: “R. Simeon b. Lakish said: ‘And Jacob called unto his sons, and said: Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you.’ Jacob wished to reveal to his sons the ‘end of the days,’ whereupon the

*Schechinah* [the Divine Presence] departed from him.” (*Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 56a, translation, with my emendations, *The Soncino Talmud*) Yaakov was so shocked by the departure of the Divine Presence that he postulated it abandoned him due to some critical theological-philosophical flaw in one of his children. As Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish so beautifully explained:

Said he, “Perhaps, Heaven forefend! there is one unfit among my children, like Abraham, from whom there issued Ishmael, or like my father Isaac, from whom there issued Esau.” [But] his sons answered him, “Hear O Israel, the L-rd our G-d the L-rd is One.” Just as there is only One in your heart, so is there only One in our hearts. (*Ibid.*)

Yaakov was so reassured by this outpouring of depth-level faith and fealty to Hashem that he joyously declared: “*Baruch shame kavode malchuto l’olam vo’ed*” (“Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever,” *ibid.*), a halachically-sanctioned practice that we emulate until our own historical moment whenever we recite the *Shema*.

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) does not address the Talmud’s insistence upon Yaakov’s desire to reveal to his sons the “end of the days.” He is in consonance, however, with our Talmudic passage when he asserts that the answer of the 12 *Shivtei Kah* (Tribes of Hashem) focused primarily upon their acceptance of the concept of the absolute Unity of G-d, and secondarily upon their heartfelt dedication to *Torat ha’Avot* (the halachic positions and procedures of the Patriarchs):

When reciting the *Shema*, after completing the first verse, one says quietly “Blessed be the name of the glory of His Kingdom forever.” ... Why do we read it in this fashion? It is our tradition that when the patriarch, Jacob, gathered all his sons together in Egypt close to his death, he commanded and urged them regarding the Unity of G-d and the path of G-d upon which Abraham and Isaac, his father, had tread. He asked them: “My sons, perhaps there are dregs among you, one who does not stand with me in the Unity of G-d?” ... They all answered and said: “Listen, Israel, G-d is our L-rd, G-d is One,” i.e., listen to us, Israel, our father, G-d is our L-rd, G-d is One. The wise elder responded: “Blessed be the Name of the Glory of His Kingdom forever.” Therefore, the Jews are

accustomed to utter the praise that Israel, the wise elder, uttered after this verse. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Kriat Shema* 1:4, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Rav Yosef Karo (1488-1575), the author of the *Kesef Mishneh* on the *Mishneh Torah*, the *Beit Yosef* on the *Tur*, and the *Shulchan Aruch*, notes in his glosses on the above-quoted passage from the *Mishneh Torah* that Maimonides' emphasis therein was to provide a rationale as to why we recite “*Baruch shame kavode malchuto l’olam vo’ed*” after the first verse of the *Kriat Shema* (Recitation of the *Shema*), as it is not found in the Torah. Rav Karo, therefore, opines that Maimonides refrained from analyzing why we recite this extra-Torah phrase in a whisper. Rav Karo, however, quotes our Gemara and explains that we state our phrase in this all-but-silent manner since *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe) did not say it aloud – and, therefore, how can we differ from his practice?

There is one day a year, during the recitation of *Kriat Shema* however, when it is the universal practice to declaim “*Baruch shame kavode malchuto l’olam vo’ed*” aloud, namely, Yom Kippur. As in all significant halachic subjects, there are numerous interpretations as to why our people have adopted this tradition. I believe, however, that the above-cited sources and interpretations provide us with a clear roadmap for understanding our need to declare this phrase aloud. The *Shema*, itself, is our ultimate and most direct statement of faith. Its six words are a direct assertion of our belief in the one and only G-d who is an absolute and unparalleled unity. Yet, on an existential level, the statement of *Shema* alone – even with all of its theological-philosophical import – is simply not enough. Instead, our souls feel a depth-level need to trumpet our historical connection to the Jewish people and all that this entails. As we know, proclamations are almost never performed in silence – instead, they are done aloud, for all to hear. What

better day, then, is there to perform the action of declaring “*Baruch shame kavode malchuto l’olam vo’ed*” aloud than on Yom Kippur – the day when we are most like angels and most connected to *Yaakov Avinu* and the trans-historical consciousness of *Knesset Yisrael*, the eternal and mystical entity of our people? Therefore, on this day of all days, we resoundingly proclaim our deepest connection to the past, present, and future of our people by invoking our phrase.

May the Almighty help all Jews throughout the world come under the protective wings of His *Schechinah* and recognize their connection and relationship with Him. Moreover, may each of us be *zocher* (merit) to declare the stirring words of the *Shivtei Kah*, next Yom Kippur, aloud and from the depths of our being: “*Baruch shame kavode malchuto l’olam vo’ed!*” *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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