

The Power of the Shema

If you would have asked my son earlier this year (before the Coronavirus pandemic and Zoom classes from home) what his favorite part of school was he would have responded...“Dismissal.”

Seems about right for a second grader. However, I have a strong feeling that in 2 or 3 years' time his response will be that his favorite part of school is the monthly Hiloula which is a special day of festivity, singing, dancing, and learning in honor of great *tzaddikim*.

I was happy to attend a Hiloula with Rabbi Moshe Pinto, a descendant of Rabbi Chaim Pinto (1748 – 1845) who was the leading Rabbi in the seaport city of Essaouira, Morocco, known in his lifetime as Mogador. He was the leader of the Jewish community all over Morocco and was respected as one of the greatest and venerated *chachamim* (wise men) of his generation by Jews and Muslims alike.

Rabbi Moshe shared a coming-of-age story about Rabbi Chaim as a young child of 11 or 12 years old in Morocco. Rabbi Chaim was quite well-respected, and he was approached by the leaders of a neighboring congregation, either a Church or a Mosque, who wanted to disrupt the Jewish community. These leaders said to Rabbi Chaim that they are insisting that he publicly go against his teachings in order to influence other young people and that they will force him to do so if he resists.

Rabbi Chaim Pinto agreed on condition that they gather the entire community and to ensure that all the young children are at the front of the crowd near him.

The leaders were pleasantly surprised that Rabbi Pinto was agreeable and they assembled the community around a stage they constructed for this purpose. They bring Rabbi Pinto to the middle of the stage and then stand off to the side in eager anticipation for Rabbi Pinto to renounce his teachings.

Rabbi Pinto surveys the crowd settling his gaze on the children in front of him. The leaders, a few feet away, are bursting with excitement at their good fortune of hurting the Jewish community through the help of Rabbi Pinto. As they're practically salivating over the damage this spectacle will serve, Rabbi Chaim Pinto raises his right hand for all to see, covers his eyes, and in a loud clear voice for all to hear, recites Shema Yisrael with all his might.

Rabbi Pinto looks at the stunned children in front of him and says that he just taught them what to do in the worst-case scenario if they are ever forced to do something bad.

Rabbi Moshe Pinto said to us that one of the messages we can take away from this story is that when doing something good age is meaningless. It's never too early or too late to start doing good and spreading good.

Our parsha Va'eschanan is chock-full of material to discuss, such as the gathering at Mount Sinai and hearing Hashem's voice, the giving of the Ten Commandments, the setting aside of the Cities of Refuge, remembering *Yetziyat Mitzrayim* (Hashem taking us out of Egypt), but I'd like to focus on the Shema.

The Shema is the very essence of Judaism. It is the anthem we must always have at the ready on the tips of our tongues. It is said in times of imminent danger and often the last words spoken before one passes away. The Rambam comments that its importance is indicated by the fact that the Torah places it immediately after the Ten Commandments.

The pasuk we all have ingrained on our hearts is:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד: (Devarim 6:4) – *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokainu Hashem Echad.*

The *yud-kay-vav-kay* name of Hashem first mentioned is the name representing mercy. The second name of Hashem written is *Elokainu* – the name of *din*, judgment. Then, the first name of *yud-kay-vav-kay* is written right away again teaching that mercy and judgement are both actually mercy, that even Hashem's judgement is mercy, and that Hashem is אֶחָד (*Echad* – One).

We perceive Hashem in many ways – He is kind, angry, merciful, wise, judgmental – and in these apparently contradictory manifestations really exists an inner harmony for all that He does – He is One and Only.

Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr likened this concept to a ray of light seen through a prism. Though the viewer sees a myriad of different colors, it is a single ray of light. So too, Hashem's many manifestations are truly one.

Rabbi Schorr continues that Hashem's name *Elokainu*, the name that describes the source of all the powers of the universe, represents the truth that although there are many physical and metaphysical forces in the world, none of them operates on its own. They all derive their power and receive their marching orders from the One and Only Hashem.

This principle, however, does not give one a full picture of Hashem's Oneness. For even if the powers of this world are not self-sufficient, one can still believe that they have their own existence, separate and distinct from their Creator. To correct that notion, the Shema verse concludes *Hashem Echad*, Hashem is One, using the four letter name of *yud-kay-vav-kay*. The use of this name teaches further that not only did Hashem create the universe and everything in it, but He continues to maintain them in a state of being.

With this in mind, we gain a clearer perspective of Hashem's Oneness, for we realize that the multiplicity we see around us is only superficial. Its root cause and continuity are all one.

The Ramban states that Moshe came to elaborate the commandment of Hashem's Oneness right after the Ten Commandments, i.e. to make *explicit* what was only *implicit* earlier in the Torah when it states *Hashem is One*, that anyone who does not accept it in effect denies the basic principle of faith.

Our Sages taught in the Midrash that Hashem said to B'nai Yisrael that everything He created, He created in pairs. The heaven and earth, the sun and the moon, Adam and Eve, and this world (*Olam Haze*) and the World to Come (*Olam Habah*) are pairs. However, Hashem's Glory is One and Only in the universe – He has no partner.

The Ba'al HaTurim explains that the word שְׁמָע (Shema) may be read as two words – שֵׁם (Shem – name) and ע (Ayin) which has the gematria of 70. This corresponds to the 70 names of Israel, the 70 names of the Torah, which can be learned 70 ways, to distinguish between Israel and the 70 nations of the world.

The Shema ends with Hashem being אֶחָד (Echad – One) with a large letter א (Daled) which indicates that we are to recognize Hashem's Kingship in the heavens and the earth, and in the four directions of the world.

Additionally, the letter א is written larger than usual so that it not be read as the letter ר (Reish) which would then, G-d forbid, say Hashem *Acher*, Alien or Foreign.

The Baal HaTurim goes on that the word שְׁמָע (Shema) has a gematria of 410 which equals the number of years that the First Beis Hamikdash (Temple) stood.

Further, the verse begins with a ש (Shin) and ends with a א (Daled) spelling the word שא (Shayd – destructive spirit). This phenomenon does not occur in any other verse in the Torah. The meaning is that destructive spirits, *Shaydim*, flee from a person who recites the Shema with proper intent. Today there are no *Shaydim*, but they were present in the time of the Gemara.

Rav Zevin cites the Baal Shem Tov who explains that man is where his thoughts are. One can be physically present in one place, but his thoughts – and hence his essence – are far, far away.

When one is distracted, when his thoughts are elsewhere, he is not “here.” The call of Shema, *to Hear*, to focus on the speaker and the situation at hand, is a call to bring one back to where he physically stands.

At times, the call of Shema is a summons. The person summons himself to collect his thoughts, to gather together the scattered fragments of his spirit, to bring them back and concentrate them all to one purpose and one purpose alone. Then there will be someone to listen, someone who is capable of listening.

How does one accomplish this “gathering” of the Shema? The Midrash tells us: Through the Giving of the Torah, B'nai Yisrael merited the Shema. At Har Sinai we were privileged to have Hashem speak to each one of us *Panim b'panin* (Face to face).

Panin also denotes “inside.” We inhabit a world of externalities, and those externalities obscure the inner nature of things where Hashem is apparent. But at Har Sinai, we were raised to a level of comprehension ordinarily denied in this world – we encountered Hashem “*Inside to inside*” – the inner Divine truth met our innermost souls. And that momentary comprehension became embedded in the inner mind and heart of B'nai Yisrael forever.

Imagine if we could call upon that inner awareness, to summon and gather together all the scattered and diffuse powers of our soul to hear loudly and clearly in our innermost minds that *Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One*. How would that feel?

We say the Shema at night and in the daytime. Night represents the difficult times in our lives, when things are dark and bleak. Day represents the easy times in our lives, when things are great, light and have blessing.

By understanding the message of the Shema, we learn that everything comes from Hashem and He treats us with *rachamim* (mercy) at all times, whether we see it or not.

Please let me know about a time you found yourself seeing the *rachamim* (mercry) of Hashem even when things seem difficult. I am interested to hear about it.

What steps can we take to internalize the deeper meaning of the Shema and truly understand and *feel* that everything is from Hashem and that everything is for our absolute best?