YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Structure of and Meaning of the Daily Prayer**

**By Rav Ezra Bick**

This shiur is available in the archives at:

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Dedicated to Liora & Ari Tuchman - In honor of the Bat Mitzvah of Danelle Sophia and in Honor of the Birth of their son, Adin Emanuel

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated in memory of Herschey Hawk z”l   
by Dr Jerry Hawk

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**Shiur #06*: Le-olam Yehei Adam***

In all modern *siddurim*, the prayer that begins with the words “*le-olam yehei adam*” appears between *birkot ha-shachar* and the section known as “*korbanot*.” This prayer appears in the *siddur* of Rav Amram Gaon and today is included in all versions of the *siddur*. The source of the text is the *Tana De-vei Eliyahu* (21). In our versions of that *Midrash* the text of the prayer is truncated, but the full text can be found in the *Shibolei Ha-leket* (6), where the *midrash* is quoted in its entirety.

The Ra’avya (146) cites a different source for the prayer, or at least for the second half. The *Yerushalmi* (*Berakhot* 9:2) writes: “‘He looks at the earth and it shudders’ – when the Holy One, Blessed be He, looks at the theaters and circuses existing in security, peace and quiet, and His temple is in ruin, He wishes to destroy the world.” The *Yerushalmi* ends here in our editions, but the Ra’avya continues the quote:

But when Israel gathers morning and evening in the synagogues and the study halls, and they declare the unity of His name and recite *Shema Yisrael*, all the attending angels gather before God and say to Him: “You are He who was before the world was created and You are He since the world was created. You are in this world and You are in the future world; sanctify Your name over those who sanctify Your name. Blessed are You, God, who sanctifies Your name in public.” Immediately, His mind is put to rest. Of this is written, “And You are holy, who sits on the praises of Israel,” [which means] that His mind is put to rest because of the praises of Israel.

The statement of the angels before God is the conclusion of the prayer, “*ata hu ad she-lo nivra ha-olam*,” with a blessing at the conclusion.

According to the Raavya, this blessing is a response to the fact that the Jews sanctify the name of God in public when they recite the *Shema* in the synagogue, which helps to correct the public desecration of His name that is caused by the peaceful existence of the nations in their depravities. The public recitation of the *Shema* compensates for this desecration of God's name and thus saves the existence of the world. The angels bless God for this phenomenon, and we follow suit. This explains the line before the prayer’s conclusion – “sanctify Your name over those who sanctify Your name.” Those who sanctify His name are those who recite the *Shema* in public, and we ask God to join us and sanctify His name through His actions.

In light of this, *Le-olam Yehei Adam* seems to be a sort of blessing on the recitation of the *Shema* – not on the personal mitzva of *keriat Shema*, but on the *Kiddush Ha-shem* implicit in its recitation*.* More accurately, it is a blessing on the *Kiddush Ha-shem* that is implicit in the existence of the Jewish people, who continue to sanctify the name of God in a world that seems to be dedicated to the opposite – to frivolity and licentiousness. The blessing is engendered by the **public** recitation of the *Shema*, because the importance of this act is that it redeems the world by publicly sanctifying the name of God in an otherwise godless world.

Some *poskim* ruled that this blessing should only be recited during the time that *keriat Shema* can be recited, or alternatively, only before one has recited the *Shema*. However, according to the Ra’avya this is unnecessary, since the blessing refers not to the halakhic *Shema* of personal obligation, but to the declaratory effect of the *Shema*, the *Kiddush Ha-shem* that can only be achieved by its recitation. This is emphasized by the introduction to the blessing (not cited in the Ra’ayia’s source), which delineates the difference between the “vanities” (*ki ha-kol hevel*) of the world and the saving grace of Jewish existence, which has led to our privilege to recite the *Shema* – and thereby sanctify the name of God – twice daily:

*Aval anachnu amekha* – But we are Your people of the covenant, the children of Avraham, Your beloved…. Fortunate are we, how good is our portion, how pleasant our destiny, how beautiful our heritage, fortunate are we that we say, evening and morning, twice each day, ***Shema Yisrael***.

The blessing, then, is not actually about *keriat Shema* itself, but about the sanctification of God's name.

The *Shibolei Ha-leket*, who quotes the entire source of *Le-olam Yehei Adam* as found in the *Tana De-vei Eliyahu*, presents a different picture. After citing the text, including the opening words, “A man should always be in fear of heaven in secret,” he adds:

Rabbeinu Shlomo [Rashi] was accustomed not to recite “A man should always be in fear of heaven in secret,” because the question was asked: Should a man fear heaven only in secret and not in public? [Rather,] one should begin, “Master of the universe….” And one sage wrote that it is right to recite it, as it is established for our way of thinking, as it comes to encourage us to be fearful of heaven **even** in secret, and speak truthfully **even** in his heart…. But my brother R. Binyamin wrote that it is proper to say “in secret,” as it was said by our father Eliyahu concerning the generation of forced apostasy, where it was decreed that one may not recite the *Shema*, and they were not able to be fearful (of heaven) in public; therefore, he enjoined and encouraged them to accept upon themselves the yoke of heaven in secret. Know that this is so, for he says, “and we are obligated to say always before you the *Shema* every day, and we declare the unity of Your name twice with love, and say *Shema Yisrael*.” Therefore, one says, “Blessed is He who sanctifies His name in public,” for at the time of forced apostasy His name is not sanctified in public, but only in secret.

According to the latter explanation cited in the *Shibolei Ha-leket*, the entire prayer is a reaction to religious persecution, representing the underground fulfillment of Judaism in hiding.

This explanation is, in fact, supported by the opening of the section in the *Tana De-vei Eliyahu*, which begins:

“Who are enveloped in hunger in all public places” (*Eikha* 2:19). “Hunger” refers to words of Torah, as is written, “For days are coming, says God, where I shall send forth a hunger in the land; not a hunger for bread and not a thirst for water, but rather to hear the word of God” (*Amos* 8:11).[[1]](#footnote-1) About that generation it is said: “A man should always be in fear of heaven in secret, and confess the truth, and speak truth in his heart, and he should rise early and say: ‘Master of the universe….’”

Accordingly, the prayer refers to *keriat Shema* itself, or at least to a special occurrence of *keriat Shema*, the one recited in secret when it is impossible to recite it in public. The echoes of dark periods in Jewish history are given a permanent place in our prayer, and that special *Shema*, recited in hiding behind shuttered doors, a flickering spark in the nights of oppression, is maintained even when we are free to resume public observance.

In modern *siddurim*, *Le-olam Yehei Adam* generally includes not only the first line of the *Shema*, but the entire first paragraph (*ve-ahavta*). This inclusion derives from a suggestion made by R. Yehuda Ha-chassid, who advised that if one anticipates missing the time for *keriat shema*, one could say it here, at an earlier part of the prayers. The original suggestion was to add “*barukh shem kevod malkhuto*” to the *Shema*, and the Maharshal added that one should recite the entire first paragraph, which according to some opinions is part of the Biblical obligation of *keriat Shema*. On the other hand, the Vilna Gaon objected to the very idea of fulfilling the obligation of *keriat Shema* at this time, since it is unacceptable to recite the *Shema* without its attendant blessings (*yotzer ha-me’orot* and *ahava rabba*). The Vilna Gaon suggested that one should only say the two words “*Shema Yisrael*” and not even finish the entire verse.

According to the Ra’avya, there is no particular reason to recite the entire verse, since this is a blessing on the concept of *keriat Shema*, and not on its actual recitation*.* But according to the *Shibolei Ha-leket*, we are recreating an actual recitation of the *Shema* – in secret – that was once a necessary part of the daily service, so it does make sense that the *Shema* – at least the entire first verse, if not more – be recited now as well.

There is an important distinction between the Ra’avya and the *Shibolei Ha-leket* regarding the meaning of the concluding blessing. According to the Ra’avya, “who sanctifies His name in public” refers to the present, where the Jewish people recite the *Shema* in the synagogue. According to the *Shibolei Ha-leket*, however, the concluding blessing is an implied prayer. The Jews are sanctifying God's name in secret, which is a marvelous exhibition of perseverance and steadfastness – and therefore we pray for the day when this sanctification can be public. The previous line should be understood as follows: Sanctify Your name (in public) over those who sanctify Your name (in private), and sanctify Your name in Your world (for all to see). The secret sanctification is, after all, deficient, and therefore we pray and look forward to the day when God will bring about the public, uninhibited sanctification of His name.

According to both versions of the origin of *Le-olam Yehei Adam*, the prayer expresses the unique role of the Jewish people in the world: They are the basis for the sanctification of God's name. The congregation of those who declare the *Shema* are literally upholding God's name in a world in which it would otherwise be absent. This is a marvelous prayer, and I think it would be a shame if the exigencies of modern life led us to skip it. It is a wonderful way to begin one's prayer, to actually understand the cosmic significance of what it is we are doing when we gather to pray.

1. “Hunger” here refers to deprivation rather than desire, so it refers to a time when there will be a scarcity of Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)