**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

Prayer 7: *Keri'at Shema*

what is the Mitzva of keri'at shema? What should women recite?

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# Keri'at Shema

What is the mitzva of *Keri'at Shema*? The first portion of *Shema* itself gives us some indication:

*Devarim* 6:4-7

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your heart. And you shall repeat them to your children and you shall speak of them when you sit in your home and when you walk on the way and when you lie down and when you arise.

The Torah commands us to keep "these matters" upon our hearts and to speak of them "*u-veshochbecha uv-kumecha*," when we lie down and upon arising, meaning both at night and in the morning.

Halachically, the final verse of this portion teaches us the timeframe for *Keri’at Shema*. We should ideally recite the morning *Shema* by the latest time for arising, which is considered to be the end of the third halachic hour. If need be, we are permitted to recite the verses even later.[[1]](#footnote-1) The evening *Shema* should ideally be recited by halachic midnight, and, if necessary, can be said until dawn.

What are "these matters"? Halachic authorities are divided about how to understand this phrase. One opinion in the Talmud suggests that it refers to the general mitzva of learning Torah, and that the mitzva of reciting *Shema* is rabbinic.[[2]](#footnote-2) Ultimately, however, halachic authorities agree that *Keri'at Shema* is a Torah-level obligation. They disagree whether "these matters" means just the first verse, all three sections of *Shema*,[[3]](#footnote-3) or something in between, with the other sections of *Shema* rabbinically obligatory.

The Talmud and Shulchan Aruch[[4]](#footnote-4) seem to support the view that only the first verse is a Torah-level obligation:

*Berachot 13b*

Our rabbis taught: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." To this point one requires intention of the heart, according to Rabbi Meir. Rava said: The halacha follows Rabbi Me'ir.

If only the first verse requires full intentionality, we can deduce that the rest of *Keri'at Shema* is not obligatory on the same level.

**A Sequence** All agree on the order of the paragraphs of *Keri'at Shema*: We begin with *Shema Yisrael* and *Ve-ahavta* (*Devarim* 6:4-9); continue with *Ve-haya im shamo'a* (*Devarim* 11:13-21); and conclude with the paragraph of *Va-yomer* (*Bemidbar* 15:37-41).

The line *"Baruch shem kevod malchuto le-olam va-ed,"* "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever,"is an interpolation—inserted before *Ve-ahavta* because of a tradition that Ya'akov Avinu said it on his deathbed, after hearing his sons recite *Shema*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Why is this sequence so important? A mishna explains that it reflects a conceptual progression:

Mishna *Berachot* 2:2

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha said: Why did [the Torah] put *Shema* before *Ve-haya im shamo'a?* In order that one first accept upon oneself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, and afterwards accept upon oneself the yoke of *mitzvot.* [Why] *Ve-haya im shamo'a* [before] *Va-yomer?* Because *Ve-haya im shamo'a* is said in the day and at night, *Va'yomer* is only said in the day.

This mishna calls the first portion of *Shema* (*Shema Yisrael* and *Ve-ahavta)* an acceptance of "*ol malchut shamayim*," the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, which must precede acceptance of "the yoke of *mitzvot*."

To understand the sequence, let's first clarify what acceptance of (*kabbalat)* "*ol malchut shamayim"* means:

Rambam, Sefer Ha-mitzvot, Positive Commandment 2

He commanded us to believe His oneness. That we should believe that He is the Mover of what exists and its only first cause. That is what He said [in] "*Shema Yisra'el"…*They [the sages] also called this mitzva *malchut*, for they said "In order to accept upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven." That is to say, to accept His oneness and to believe it.

According to Rambam, reciting the first verse of *Shema* accomplishes *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*. Saying "the Lord is our God" establishes God's sovereignty over us; adding that "the Lord is One" tells us that God is the singular prime mover who initiates all existence, and thus has a unique claim to rule.

Importantly, Rambam lists the mitzva of *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* separately from the positive mitzva of *Keri'at Shema* itself.[[6]](#footnote-6) We can act to fulfill it through *Keri'at Shema,* but *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* is a constant belief, obligatory for women and men, not limited to morning and evening.

Once we recite *Shema* to accept God as Ruler, we can progress to expressing acceptance of His rules, "the yoke of *mitzvot*." *Ve-haya im shamo'a* focuses on *mitzvot* and their rewards and punishment.

**Va-yomer** Finally, we move on to *Va-yomer*, also known as the portion of *tzitzit*. Since the mitzva of *tzitzit* applies only during the day, this portion is less all-encompassing than *Ve-haya*, and should come after it. The Talmud explains that *Va-yomer* also makes four broader points: [[7]](#footnote-7)

*Berachot* 12b

The portion of *tzitzit* [*Va-yomer*], why did they establish it [as part of *Shema*]? Rabbi Yehuda son of Chaviva said: Because it contains five things: [1] the mitzva of *tzitzit*, [2] *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* (the exodus from Egypt)*,* [3] the yoke of *mitzvot* [vs.] the views of heretics, [and warnings about 4] thoughts of transgression, and [5] thoughts of idolatry.

Although *Va-yomer* discusses *tzitzit,* someone not wearing themcan still relate to its other themes.

We begin *Keri'at Shema* with a focus on love of God, and end with caution about how important it is not to stray from our Beloved God's path.

# Exemption

The mishna teaches us directly that women are exemptfrom *Keri'at Shema*:[[8]](#footnote-8)

Mishna *Berachot* 3:3

Women…are exempt from reciting *Shema.*

*Keri'at Shema*, recited morning and evening, is a positive time-bound mitzva, and women are typically exempt from those. But if that is the mishna's rationale, it should be obvious that women are exempt. Why does the mishna need to state the exemption explicitly? The Talmud takes up this question:

*Berachot* 20b

[Women are exempt from] *Keriat Shema*, that is obvious! It is a positive time-bound mitzva and women are exempt from all positive time-bound *mitzvot*. What might you have thought? Since it has [an element of accepting] the kingdom of heaven, [women should nevertheless be obligated]. It [the mishna] comes to teach us [otherwise].

Without the mishna's teaching that women are exempt, we might have thought the opposite, because *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*, achieved through *Shema,* is essential.[[9]](#footnote-9)

If accepting the yoke of heaven **is** a fundamental part of being Jewish, though, how can women be exempt from *Keri'at Shema*?

Talmud Yerushalmi raises a similar question, without resolving it:

Yerushalmi *Berachot* 3:3

[Women] are obligated in *tefilla* in order that each and every person should request mercy for himself… Rabbi Yosei and Rav Yuda ben Pazi would ask the question, saying: Does it not make sense in *Keri'at Shema* that each and every person should recite it with his [or her] own mouth?

In the case of prayer, we have seen that the importance of seeking mercy *does* override exemption. Why doesn't the importance of each woman reciting *Shema,* and thus personally taking action to accept *ol malchut shamayim,* work the same way?

Perhaps, in a limited sense, it does. Rav Shemuel Bar Meshullam (Catalonia, 14th century) argues that women are indeed obligated to recite the first *pasuk* of *Shema* as an act of *kabbalat ol malchut shmayim*:

*Sefer Ohel Mo'ed*, *Keri'at Shema* 2

It seems that a bondsman and a woman are obligated in accepting the oneness [of God], which is in the first verse, but are exempt from the other verses.

Unfortunately, Rav Shemuel does not explain how his ruling aligns with the Talmud.Perhaps for this reason, although Rav Yosef Karo cites this position in his *Beit Yosef,[[10]](#footnote-10)* he softens it in *Shulchan Aruch:*

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 70:1

Women and bondsmen are exempt from Keri'at Shema because it is a positive time-bound mitzva. It is correct to teach them to accept upon themselves the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. Rema: They should recite at least the first verse (Beit Yosef in the name of Ohel Mo'ed).

On this view, "it is correct" for women to accept *ol malchut shamayim*. "Correct" falls short of obligatory, and its precise meaning is unclear.[[11]](#footnote-11) It's also not clear how much of *Keri'at Shema* Shulchan Aruch expects women to recite. While Rema specifies that it should be "at least the first pasuk," Shulchan Aruch might have more in mind.[[12]](#footnote-12)

A generation later, Bach concludes, like Rav Shemuel, that reciting the first verse of *Shema* daily is obligatory for women, and not just correct practice. He also explains how to reconcile this view with the Talmud's presentation of the exemption:

Bach OC 70

The explanation [of the Talmud] is that since, in any case, women and bondsmen are obligated to accept upon themselves the oneness of the kingdom of heaven that is written in the first verse, they should also be obligated to recite all three portions. [The mishna] teaches us [otherwise]. We learn that even though they are exempt from reciting all three portions, they are still obligated to accept upon themselves the oneness of God and to recite the first verse. So wrote *Beit Yosef* in the name of *Ohel Mo'ed*. He learned this from this Talmudic passage. This we take [as Halacha], and so must one rule for women.

On Bach’s reading, the Talmud assumes that women are obligated to recite the first *pasuk* of *Shema* in acceptance of *ol malchut shamayim.* The mishna needs to teach us that women are exempt from the **rest** of *Shema* (because it is time-bound). However, women remain obligated to recite *Shema Yisrael*, in order to accept God's unity and Kingship.

In practice, a woman should act in accordance with Shulchan Aruchand Rema, and make an effort to recite the first verse of *Shema* and *Baruch shem kevod malchuto* every day, to be sure that she formally accepts *ol malchut shamayim*.[[13]](#footnote-13) Many women recite all three portions of *Shema* and accept the yoke of *mitzvot* as well.

## ● How can we understand women's exemption from a mitzva as fundamental as *Shema*? (See Appendix.)

# *Keri'at Shema She-al Ha-mita*

In addition to *Keri'at Shema* morning and evening, the sages enacted recitation of the first portion of *Shema* and the *Ha-mapil* blessing at bedtime:[[14]](#footnote-14)

*Berachot* 60b

One who goes in to his bed to sleep says from Shema Yisrael to Ve-haya Im Shamo'a, and says "Baruch ha-Mapil" [Blessed is He who brings down the bounds of sleep on my eyes].

This *Shema* is usually not recited in fulfillment of the mitzva of *Keri'at Shema*, ideally fulfilled at *Ma'ariv,* but to invoke Divine protection from the dangers of the night.

*Berachot* 4b-5a

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Even though a person recited *Shema* in synagogue, it is a mitzva to recite it in his bed…Rabbi Yitzchak said: Whoever recites *Shema* in his bed, [will have] damaging forces stay away from him.

If that is the case, then both women and men should recite it. Rav Eliya Shapira, known as Eliya Rabba, makes this case, rejecting along the way the position that it might be considered time-bound, so that women would be exempt:

Eliya Rabba 239:4

The works of *mussar* wrote that women, too, must be careful with *Keri'at Shema al ha-mita* with intentionality and precision of the words. Magen Avraham writes [239:2] that women do not say it because it is a time-bound mitzva at night. This is not correct, for could it be that men require guarding [from damaging forces] and women not? For I wrote that the reason for this *Shema* is for protection.

Going beyond invoking protection, a woman who does not recite *ma'ariv* can also use her recitation of *Keri'at Shema al ha-mita* as an additional opportunity for a formal act of *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim.* If she chooses, she can add the third portion of *Va-yomer,* for *zecher yetzi'at Mitzrayim* (which we discuss in our next *shiur).*

What of the *beracha? Ha-mapil* praises God for a good sleep. It is the companion to the last of *birchot ha-shachar,* "*Ha-ma'avir sheina me-einay"* "who moves away sleep from my eyes." Indeed, many authorities maintain that *Ha-mapil* is considered a blessing of praise like *birchot ha-shachar:*

Eliya Rabba 239:3

I found in Birkat Avraham…*Ha-mapil* is recited over the conduct of the world, like "Who gave the rooster discernment."

If it is a *beracha* of praise, then, just as a woman recites *birchot ha-shachar* in the morning*,* she should recite *Ha-mapil* at night*.*

Reciting the rest of the service of *Keri'at Shema al ha-mita* is praiseworthy, not obligatory, for both men and women.

In a blogpost, educator (and Deracheha editor-at-large) Sarah Rudolph writes about how meaningful it is for her to recite *Keri'at* *Shema Al-hamita* with her children:[[15]](#footnote-15)

Sarah Rudolph, "This Jewish Bedtime Ritual Was a Parenting Win"

No matter what we do or how fervently we pray, we don’t actually know that everything will be all right. *Shema* or no *Shema*, there are no guarantees. There is little that we can be sure of in this world. But what I can do — and what our bedtime *Shema* ritual can do — is help my children prepare to face a world of uncertainty. I can help provide them with the security to have their eyes covered — to welcome it, even — to find assurance from the embrace of their parents, and of God, to confidently embark on a long, dark night without knowing how things will be in the morning. As a mom, I hope and pray that the rituals and habits I teach my children will provide them with a framework from which to confidently explore the world, with all of its uncertainties.

**What are the *berachot* of *Keri'at Shema?* When and how do women say them?** We'll address these questions next week.

## ● APPENDIX: How can we understand women's exemption from a mitzva as fundamental as *Shema*?

It can be hard to fathom how women can be exempt from *Keri'at Shema.* Although it is a time-bound commandment, it is also an absolutely fundamental expression of our faith in God.

Bach's explanation of the Talmudic passage is attractive for precisely this reason—it leaves women obligated in reciting *Shema Yisrael* in order to accept the kingdom of heaven, while exempting women from the time-bound extended mitzva of *Keri'at Shema* as it is commonly understood*.* But not everyone follows Bach here.

Perhaps Rambam's position best explains the reasoning for those who uphold exemption despite the importance of accepting *ol malchut shamayim*. We saw that in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* he counts *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* as a separate mitzva from *Keri'at Shema.* On this logic, women are fully obligated in the mitzva of accepting *ol malchut shamayim.* Women are only exempted from the distinct mitzva to recite *Shema,* which begins with a formal act of acceptance.

There is no question that women must live lives animated by belief in God's Kingship. Formal verbal repetition of that acceptance day and night is not the only way to accomplish this.

1. At worst a recitation at the incorrect time will be considered an independent act of learning Torah. At best, it might still satisfy the obligation of *Shema.*

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 58:6

Even though its time continues until the end of the third [halachic] hour, if the third [halachic] hour has passed and one did not recite it [*Shema]*, one may recite it without its *berachot* all day long*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Berachot* 21a

*Keri'at Shema* is rabbinic. Rav Yosef challenged: "*uv-shochbecha uv-kumecha*!" Abaye said to him: That is written about [studying] words of Torah [not reciting *Shema*].

Note that Rav Yosef here maintains that it is a Torah-level obligation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mishneh Torah,* Laws of *Keri'at Shema* 1:3

Reciting these three portions in order, this is what is called *Keri’at Shema.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Shulchan Aruch* 60:5

One who recites *Shema* and did not have intentionality for the first verse, which is *Shema Yisrael,* has not discharged his obligation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Pesachim* 56a

His sons said to him: *Shema Yisrael*…At that moment, Yaakov declared: *Baruch shem kevod malchuto le-olam va-ed.* Our sages said, what should we do? Should we say it? Moshe Rabbeinu didn't say it. Should we not say it? Ya'akov said it. They enacted to say it softly. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Talmud seems to enumerate six topics rather than five. *Maharsha* explains that the yoke of mitzvot and heresy are counted together.

*Maharsha*, *Chidushei Halachot, Berachot* 12b

One can explain our text of the Talmud that *ol mitzvot* and heresy are considered one [matter]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Masechet Soferim* records the reverse opinion, but it is not clear to what this refers, nor is it accepted as authoritative over the view of the mishna.

 *Masechet Soferim* 18:5

So they [women] are obligated in *Keri'at Shema.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Talmud Yerushalmi presents a different reason to exempt women:

*Yerushalmi Berachot* 3:3

From where [do we learn that] women [are exempt]? And you shall teach them to your children [*beneichem*]. Your sons [*beneichem*] and not your daughters [*benoteichem*].

*Shema* contains the command to learn Torah, from which women are exempt (see more [here](https://www.deracheha.org/learning-torah)), and we can even view reciting *Shema* as a form of learning Torah, one that includes accepting *ol malchut shamayim*. If so, perhaps the exemption from the mitzva to learn Torah extends to *Shema*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Beit Yosef, OC 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Peri Megadim Eshel Avraham* OC 70:1

That which *Shulchan Aruch* wrote "and it is correct" means [it is obligatory] rabbinically.

 *Bei'ur Ha-Gera* OC 70:1

"And it is correct"- As a mere stringency, not like *Ohel Mo'ed* who wrote that they are obligated, for the Talmud does not indicate thus… [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Magen Giborim*, *Elef Ha-magen* 70:3

As it would seem, *Beit Yosef* added on his own that they [women] should recite all of *Keri'at Shema.*

Available here:

<http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=9312&st=&pgnum=30&hilite>= [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Levush* OC 70:1

In any case it is correct to teach them [women] to recite the first verse [of *Shema*]with *Baruch shem kevod malchuto le-olam va-ed,* so that they accept upon themselves the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Some authorities rule that one should recite *Ve-haya* as well:

### Rosh *Berachot* 9:23

Rabbeinu Chananael wrote also [to recite] the second portion. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sarah Rudolph, "This Jewish Bedtime Ritual Was a Parenting Win." The Times of Israel, 2.2.2018.

Available here: https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/this-jewish-bedtime-ritual-was-a-parenting-win/ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)