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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**PARASHAT VA’ETCHANAN**

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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman**

**August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012**

**לע"נ**

**יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

**ת.נ.צ.ב.ה**

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**“Hear O Israel”**

**Rav Shimon Klein**

This *shiur* will focus on “*parashat* *Shema*.” What is the subject of this unit? And what spiritual process does it facilitate?

Hear, O Israel – the Lord 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… (*Devarim* 6:4-5)

The unit consists of two parts. The first, “Hear, O Israel,” is a call or appeal to the nation, the collective.[[1]](#footnote-1) The second – “you (in the singular) shall love…,” is addressed to the individual. The first is an affirmation and acknowledgment of the Lord as Israel’s God: “The Lord our God, the Lord is One.” The second requires man to love God and to internalize that love in his heart and his soul, having it fill his life all the way to the doorposts of his home and his gates.

“Hear” – the first step, invites a listening. In contrast to seeing, which perceives a physical object, reality, or form to which the seer is exposed, hearing addresses a sound and the meaning embodied in it. The introductory call to “hear” is an invitation to an inner, intimate experience.

Next comes the address of the appeal – “Israel.” This appellation, in the singular, serves to recognize and empower “Israel” as an autonomous entity, with an identity and an independent will.[[2]](#footnote-2) Following this empowerment of “Israel,” the text directs them to recognize God and His relevance in their lives: “The Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

This structure has man as its point of departure – man’s orientation, man who is addressed by God. This is a fundamental structural characteristic of *Sefer Devarim* and a profound reflection of the story of this *sefer*. In *Sefer Devarim*, Moshe prepares the people in different ways for entry into the land. Upon entering the land, the focus will be on their activity and their perception of their new reality. The nation will act, produce, establish life systems. If they are worthy, God will come and cause His Presence to dwell in their midst.[[3]](#footnote-3)

“**The Lord our God, the Lord is One**”

Now, in the wake of this focusing and orientation, *Bnei Yisrael* is exposed to the formula, “The Lord our God, the Lord is One.” “The Lord” – Y-H-V-H, the Name reserved for the God of Israel.[[4]](#footnote-4) “*Our* God” – not “*Elohim*,” but rather “*Elo-heinu*” (the possessive form), the God Who is uniquely associated with *Am Yisrael*. This association takes different forms and expresses the fact that every individual and every society, in every generation, perceives God in a different way, and He also operates and reveals Himself in a different way for each, in accordance with human vessels.[[5]](#footnote-5) In our context, we might have expected the verse to read, “Hear O Israel, the Lord *your* God [in the singular], the Lord is One,” where “your God” means the One God Who is associated with this one nation. The form in which it is actually written, “*our* God,” brings into focus the individuals who comprise the nation and associates God with these individuals. This multiplicity hints to the possibility that the differences between one person and another might create, heaven forefend, “many gods.” The immediate answer to this is “the Lord is One.” Indeed, there is multiplicity, but at its foundation there is unity. What creates and assures this unity? The answer to this would appear to be embedded in the language of the verse: the point of departure is an empowering of “Israel” as an autonomous entity, through its attribute of “hearing,” which empowers its existence. As a second stage, the nation is broken down into its constituent individuals, and, at the same time, attributed to God. In other words, each individual connects with God from his own place, in his own way. A single, unified nation of Israel also means that God is One.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Thus far, the proclamation has addressed the public sphere. Now, the continuation speaks of the individual and his love for God.

**You shall love the Lord your God**

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these things that I command you this day shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you dwell in your home, and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your home, and at your gates.

Before examining the precise exhortation, let us try to identify the “movement” indicated in this unit. The point of departure is the love of God that is generated in the depths of a person’s heart and psyche. It expands outwardly, step by step, to other areas of his life, towards the world around him. First there is a very strong love within the heart; this is conveyed to one’s children and is contemplated in one’s own mind; it is bound to his hand and between his eyes and is written on the doorposts of his home and on the gates of his courtyard or of the city. A great love is described in these verses, one that fills the chambers of the heart and expands to inform all of one’s life.

Let us now examine the unit verse by verse.

The entire unit is a command in the second person singular; it addresses each and every individual. “You shall love the Lord” – the Divine Name embodies an unmediated, face-to-face encounter. “Your God” – the word “*elohim*” is also used to refer to a mortal judge, who maintains the world’s firm footing in judgment.[[7]](#footnote-7) This appellation indicates authority within a system of justice that serves as a basis for human behavior, by setting yardsticks for good and bad, for what is permitted and what is forbidden. The Name “*Elo*-*him*” in reference to the Creator is thus interpreted as a reference to His setting down of the laws of Creation, justice, and all the concepts that form the basis for the existence of the world.[[8]](#footnote-8) What is the meaning of the concept of “your *Elo-him*” within this framework of personal connection – as though He were the personal God of the individual? The formulation suggests that every individual has a unique perspective, connection, and understanding of God that is different from that of every other person in the world. The invitation to love “the Lord *your* God,” with the personal association, is understood as an invitation to one’s inner world, to a love that is impossible when it involves God from the perspective of someone else.

“With all your heart” – at the very juncture of life, in the innermost place – the heart. Not “*bekhol libekha*” (“with all your *lev*”), but rather “*bekhol levavekha*” (with all your *levav*). Whereas “*lev*” refers to the physical organ or the elementary emotional aspect, the concept of “*levav*” points to more profound dimensions, “chambers of the heart,” that are part of the experience. To use *Chazal*’s terminology, “*levav*” encompasses both inclinations – the “good inclination” that seeks to serve God and the “evil inclination” that lurks with the recesses of the psyche. Thus, the call addresses even the darker side of the personality, inviting even the lower traits to be part of this love story.[[9]](#footnote-9)

“And with all your soul” – after the heart comes the soul, the psyche, with all its areas and dimensions. Following this comes “and with all your might (*me’odekha*).” The “*me’od*” suggests an amplification, where all the powers of the heart and soul are harnessed together in the love of God.

The next stage is, “These things which I command you this day shall be upon your heart.” Which “things” are referred to here? On the simplest level, the reference would seem to be to the command to love God, from the previous verse.[[10]](#footnote-10) Following the command to love with all one’s heart, one’s soul, and one’s might, a person is to take this entirety and place it “*upon* (or “over”) his heart.” This would seem to be speaking of a spiritual “place” that is “higher than” or “above” the heart, that transcends the juncture of life. Its higher plan gives it a position of supervision and influence over the workings of the heart.[[11]](#footnote-11)

“And you shall teach them diligently to your children” – what does this command mean? On the simplest level, the word “*shinun*” means repeating. We posit that the word had a different meaning in biblical times, and also as used by *Chazal*. We think of repetition as being meant to engrave something in a person’s memory; we think of it as entailing devoted adherence to something over and over again, without any change or innovation, until the matter is fixed in one’s mind.

However, the picture arising from the verses here is a very different one. The subject of the unit is love of God – man as he stands before the Lord his God. Prior to mention of the “*shinun*,” there is mention of placing of the consciousness of God upon the heart, and afterwards there is a depiction of man contemplating the love of God and speaking of it within himself in all life situations: when he dwells at home, and when he walks on the way, when he lies down and when he wakes. The father’s repetition to his son is yet another expression of his love of God, this time in the interpersonal sphere. The father, occupied at all times with his love of God, shares it with his son, thereby creating a sort of triangle in which the love of God is reflected in the space between the father and his son.

We may say further that the connection between father and son is one that is played out on the field of life, and this playing field determines the quality of the “repetition” that takes place in it. The parent-child bond contains within it a dimension of newness and change. Each day brings new facts and new insights, and this addition creates a perspective that brings the viewer to a new place in which reality is painted in new colors and imbued with new meaning.

We may now understand the nature of the repetition in a similar way. The repetition is an expression of man’s love of God with all his heart and all his soul. This love is a life movement, and as such it is not fixed. While the formula that is repeated is old and familiar, the repetition itself is not one of fixed, unchanging knowledge. The encounter is a living, internal one, and as such each repetition of it brings the person to vistas that he has not yet known, both in terms of the reality of the world and within himself, and thus facilitates a process of constant and endless newness and revelation.

We may summarize thus far and say that this unit commands the father to “repeat” the love of God to his son, and we now understand that the subject here is not commitment to the son, nor even commitment to any specific study content. The essence of this learning, this repetition, is the fact that it takes place. Its existence is a reflection of where the person stands vis-à-vis God. The commitment here is of the person towards his own inner essence, in a space that gives expression to three loves: the love of God, the love of the father, and the love of the son.

**“And you shall speak of them**”

“And you shall speak of them when you dwell in your home, and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down, and when you arise.” Continuing on from repetition with the son, which embodies an inner state of constant contemplation of the love of God, the person then goes on to speak of the love of God in different life situations: when he dwells at home – i.e., in his own personal space; when he walks on the way – i.e., in movement from one place to another;[[12]](#footnote-12) when he lies down – a time of turning inward, and when he rises up – a movement towards life and action.[[13]](#footnote-13) Each of these pairs describes a movement from the inside outward.

“And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes” – The love of God will henceforth be bound as a sign upon the person’s hand. The hand embodies the power to act, and it will henceforth be adorned with a sign, binding the love of God to it. “And as frontlets between your eyes” – not only a sign in the world of action, but also a sign “between your eyes.” A person looks at reality, and his gaze is accompanied by a sign that functions as a lens enabling him to perceive an additional, spiritual dimension.

“And you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your home, and at your gates” – the final location that the text notes as an expression of the love of God is the doorposts of the home and of the gate. The doorposts are part of the home, but also represent the point of contact between the inside and the outside. The gate, similarly, is the outermost limit of the “inside.” A person writes his love of God on that outermost boundary, too, thereby once again renewing and illuminating in a new light his inner love of God, which is projected outwards.

**Epilogue**

We began by asking what the subject of this unit is and what sort of spiritual process it facilitates in man. The unit basically has two subjects. The first verse is a call to hear and become aware and conscious of One God; the second verse is a command to love Him. Now we must ask, what is the relationship between these two parts? Let us first address the latter – the love of God. The place where this love happens is in a person’s heart. In addition, the expression “*your* God” indicates a subjective, uniquely personal dimension. A person can love his God, but he cannot love the God of someone else.[[14]](#footnote-14) The structure of the unit similarly testifies to something that takes place in a person’s individual consciousness, in the subjective dimension. It starts with the innermost position (“with all your heart”), and then moves outward, eventually reaching the doorposts of the home and the gates.

Now, let us imagine what the unit would look like if it started with the command, “You shall love,” without the first verse – “Hear, O Israel.” What effect would this have in the interpersonal sphere? How would it affect relations between the individual and the society in which he lives? The command would give a tremendous boost to an individualist existence in which the love of God burns within a person’s heart, but he pays no attention and attaches no importance to others and to the collective. The obvious outcome would be a world at whose center is the individual who loves God and serves Him – but he stands alone. This would open an abyss between one person and another; no one would understand anyone else.

In this sense, the first verse comes to lay a foundation. “Hear, O Israel” – the nation as a whole is invited to hear, with its inner attentiveness. This is followed by the declaration of all of Israel – “the Lord [is] our God” – and then a clarification: this Lord, to Whom the many individuals turn and refer, is One. These words represent the point of departure for the second part of the unit. They represent a broad, great anchor that speaks of a nation and of its God before speaking of the individual and his God. Only after the initial declaration is there license to move on to the additional sphere, with its profound and precious qualities.

The declaration of *Shema* is the story of *Am Yisrael*. It appeals to “Israel,” who are called upon to recognize the Lord their God, and this recognition sets down a reality in the world according to which the Lord is the God of Israel, and He is One. From here it moves on to the story of the individual, who recognizes and appreciates the significance of the love of God and the bond with Him, and accordingly makes this the foundation of his life.

The Sages of the Oral Law attach the concept of “acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven” to this unit, viewing it in terms of commitment and obligation, a yoke.[[15]](#footnote-15) They also deduce from it the obligation to give up one’s life for the love of God, and the ultimate model in this regard is R. Akiva, who uttered this declaration as his flesh was being torn by iron combs. All of this is not exegesis of the text. It is the Sages’ reading of the verses. Their message to us is that this life is necessary; this is what gives life its stature and meaning. This is the call to the nation and to the individual, and whoever abandons it, abandons his life.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The appeal “Hear, O Israel,” appears in three other places in *Sefer* *Devarim*, and in each case it is clearly addressed to the nation as a whole: “And Moshe called all of Israel and he said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that you may learn them, and keep them, to observe them” (*Devarim* 5:1); “Hear, O Israel: you are to pass over the Jordan this day, to go in to possess nations greater and mightier than yourself, cities great and fortified up to heaven...” (*Devarim* 9:1); “Hear, O Israel: you draw near today to do battle against your enemies; let your hearts not faint, do not fear and do not tremble, nor be terrified because of them…” (*Devarim* 20:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is as opposed to a different possible formulation: “O Israel, hear….” This would be a very different appeal. “Israel, hear…” would proceed from an assumption of identity, as is, and only afterwards would there be a call to an inner listening. By starting with “Hear,” the text proceeds from an invitation to introspection, inner contemplation, in the wake of which the person becomes aware of his identity. In the first instance, the content of the “listening” would be identity-related; in the second instance, the content relates to an encounter with one’s inner world. As an example of the first formulation, we find: “Now therefore, O Israel, hear the statutes and the judgments which I teach you, to do them, in order that you may live and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers gives you” (*Devarim* 4:1). In this unit, the focus is on the statutes and judgments (first the “*chok*” – Divine decree devoid of any humanly intelligible logic, followed by the “*mishpat*”), serving as foundations that must be adhered to. Further on we find, “You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor shall you diminish from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.” There must be no adding to or subtracting from what I command. As an example, “Your eyes have seen what the Lord did because of Ba’al Pe’or, for all the men that followed Ba’al Pe’or – the Lord your God destroyed them from among you.” The principle that the Torah is teaching is illustrated by reference to worship of Ba’al Pe’or, which embodies a corruption of the most elementary foundations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is in contrast to the basic structure in *Sefer Vayikra*, which is the opposite, as expressed in the opening verse of the *sefer*: “And [the Lord] called to Moshe, and the Lord spoke to him out of the Tent of Meeting, saying” (*Vayikra* 1:1). Here, God invites Moshe to the “higher domain,” from which He will speak to him. From where Moshe dwells, within the camp, he will not hear God’s word. In order to be exposed to God’s word, he must leave his place and direct and adapt his gaze to the perspective of God Who dwells in the Tent of Meeting. Throughout *Sefer Vayikra*, God speaks to man, from the Tent of Meeting to *Bnei* *Yisrael*. In contrast, a recurring expression in *Sefer Devarim* is, “the place which the Lord will choose” – meaning, God’s choice to come and dwell in a place prepared for Him by man. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As opposed to "*elohim*,” which is used also to refer to other gods. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An example: “The God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov.” Each understood God in a different way, and God was revealed to each accordingly. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Who is it that proclaims “Hear, O Israel”? On the simple level, the caller is unidentified; he remains anonymous. In the context of *Sefer Devarim*, the caller would seem to be Moshe, who speaks in God’s Name throughout the *Sefer*. In a surprising move, at the stage where this proclamation is uttered, he joins himself with his listeners: “the Lord *our* God” – the God of all of us, I and you, the proclaimer and the listeners, the active voice and the passive voice. What does this signify? Seemingly, the narrator does not wish to exclude himself. This in itself is an expression of the power of this auspicious moment, in which anyone exposed to it becomes part of it. This may be further expression of the fact that “the Lord is One,” with everyone joining in declaring “the Lord *our God*, the Lord is One.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “You shall not revile judges (*elohim*), nor curse the ruler of your people” (*Shemot* 22:27). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The appellation “*elo-ha*,” in the singular, signifies the authority of justice in relation to one particular power. “*Elo-him*,” in the plural, signifies a multiplicity of conceptual systems and the entire range of powers. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The idea of binding of the deepest recesses of the soul to love of God, instead of what might have been a more predictable exhortation – to suppress them – serves as a lead hinting to a type of spiritual service that does not entail suppression and control of inner forces. R. Kook refers to such work of “elevation” as a “broadening” and “expanding” (*Orot ha-Kodesh* III, “*chokhmat haala’at ha-middot*”). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The same idea is suggested by the following *midrash*: “‘And these things which I command you this day shall be upon your heart’ – Rabbi said, Why does the Torah say this? Because it previously said, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart’ – but how are we to know how to love God? Therefore the next verse continues, ‘And these things which I command you this day shall be upon your heart’ – meaning, place these things upon your heart, for that way you will recognize Him Who spoke and the world came into being, and you will cleave to His ways” (Sifri, *Devarim* 33). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This analysis is brought in the name of the Rebbe of Kotzk. There are times when a person’s heart is closed, and at such times, words and ideas that should enter and dwell within the heart are unable to access it. The advice here is to place them “upon” the heart, such that when the heart opens, they will “fall” inside. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. From here the *gemara* deduces the exemption from the requirement to recite *Shema* for a person who is engaged in a *mitzva* (*Berakhot* 11a). In other words, “when you dwell in your home” is understood as a description of the realm of activity that is freely chosen and not mandated, or activity that is within the realm of leisure and personal discretion (as opposed to a groom, who is exempt from reciting *Shema*). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. There is a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel as to whether “when you lie down and when you rise up” is a description of the subjective position or a description of time: “Beit Shammai say: In the evening everyone should recline and recite [*Shema*], and in the morning they should stand, since it is written (*Devarim* 6:7), ‘And when you lie down and when you arise.’ But Beit Hillel say: Each person may recite it in his usual way [posture], since it says (ibid.), ‘And when you walk on the road.’ But if so, why does it say ‘and when you lie down and when you arise’? [It means:] At the time when people lie down and at the time when people arise” (*Mishna* *Berakhot* 1:3) Beit Shammai apply the command formally, as a description of the person’s own posture, while Beit Hillel translate it into universal times of lying and arising. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A somewhat similar situation is one’s love for one’s parents, which cannot be matched by the love for someone else’s parents. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For example: “R. Yehoshua ben Karcha said, Why do we recite ‘Hear, O Israel’ before ‘And it shall be…’ [the second paragraph of *Shema*]? So that a person first accepts upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and afterwards accepts upon himself the yoke of the commandments” (Mishna *Berakhot* chapter 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)