YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

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Please daven for a refua sheleima for YHE alumnus   
Rav Daniel ben Miriam Chaya Rut

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**Shiur #07:**

***Keriat Shema* (VII): The Structure of *Keriat Shema* and the *Mitzva* of Recognizing the Oneness of God**

**Introduction**

In the previous *shiurim*, we learned that the first passage of *keriat Shema* – which we are instructed to recite “when you lie down and when you get up” – begins and ends with two verses that define and shape it as a *mitzva*, while its center deals with accepting the yoke of God’s kingship. The two verses express two different aspects of the concept of the oneness of God, and together they form the foundations of this belief: creation and providence.

In this *shiur*, we will focus on these two verses at the beginning and end of *keriat Shema*.

**The Opening Verse: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is your God”**

The opening verse of the *Shema* – “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is your God (*Elokim*), the Lord alone” (*Devarim* 6:4) – expresses our belief in God as the Creator of the world. In this vein, Rambam writes:

It is the command that He commanded us to believe in the oneness [of God], meaning that we should believe that the Source of all existence and its Original Cause are one. And thus He – may His name be exalted – stated: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 2)

In the opening verse of the Torah, “When God (*Elokim*) began to create…” (*Bereishit* 1:1), the creation is associated with the divine name *Elokim*. Based on this, the opening verse in the *Shema* can be viewed as a declaration that God is the Creator of the world. We declare that God, to whom we refer using the Tetragrammaton, is also *Elokim*, the Creator and Source of all existence.

In order to examine the relationship between the various names of God on a deeper level, we must first present the words of the *midrash* in *Shemot Rabba*. The *midrash* describes God’s reaction to Moshe’s question/request: “When they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” (*Shemot* 3:13):

“And God said to Moshe” – R. Abba bar Mamal said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: Is it My name that you want to know? **I am called by My deeds**. There are times when I am called *Kel Shakkai*, *Tzevakot*, *Elokim* and *Hashem* [i.e., the Tetragrammaton]. When I judge humanity, I am called *Elokim*; when I wage war, I am called *Tzevakot*; when I suspend punishment, I am called *Kel Shakkai*; and when I take pity upon My world, I am called *Hashem*, since *Hashem* solely refers to the attribute of compassion, as it says, “*Hashem*! *Hashem*! A God compassionate and gracious” (*Shemot* 34:6). Thus, I am called “I Will Be That I Will Be (*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*)” – **I am called by My deeds**. (*Shemot Rabba* 3:6)

God’s response to Moshe, according to the *midrash*, is that the names of God are merely different forms of the manifestation of God in the world; the name that He is given reflects his deeds and the manner in which He is revealed. The Tetragrammaton expresses, to a certain degree, God’s essence, in the sense of His eternal existence. This notion is imbedded in the way the name is written in Hebrew (*Y-H-V-H* is a variation on the root *H-V-H*, meaning “exist”). The name embodies God’s simultaneous atemporal and supertemporal nature; He was, He is, and He will be.

However, the *midrash* itself uses the Tetragrammaton to refer to a specific expression of God, connected to the way in which He appears in the world: When He takes pity upon His world, He is called *Hashem*. The various ways in which God appears in the world reveal some small part of His essence to us, based solely on what we are capable of comprehending from examining His deeds. Of course, a person cannot comprehend the pure essence of God whatsoever.

Thus, in the verse, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God,” we connect the creation (performed by *Elokim*) to the Tetragrammaton, which expresses, in this context, the absolute existence of God. God – “who reigned before the birth of any thing… And when all things shall cease to be, He alone will reign in awe” (*Siddur*) – is the Creator, *Elokim*, who “began to create” His world.

The prophet Yeshayahu states: “Lift high your eyes and see: **Who created these?** He who sends out their host by count, who calls them each by name; because of His great might and vast power, not one fails to appear” (*Yeshayahu* 40:26). The *Zohar* comments on the words “Who created these?”:

Eliyahu came and asked me: Rabbi, do you know the meaning of ‘Who created these?’”… He said to me: Rabbi, the word was concealed with the Holy One, blessed be He, and He revealed it in the Academy on High. Here it is:

“When Concealed of all Concealed verged on being revealed, it produced at first a single point, which ascended to become thought. Within, it drew all drawings, graved all engravings, carving within the concealed holy lamp a graving of one hidden design, holy of holies, a deep structure emerging from thought, called ‘Who (*Mi*),’ origin of structure. Existent and non-existent, deep and hidden, called by no name but ‘Who.’

“Seeking to be revealed, to be named, it garbed itself in a splendid, radiant garment and created ‘These (*Eleh*).’ ‘These’ attained the name: These letters joined with those, culminating in the name *Elokim*. Until it created *Eleh*, it did not attain the name *Elokim*.” (*Zohar* 2a)

Even without attempting to understand this interpretation on a deeper level, we can appreciate the essence of what the *Zohar* is expressing here. When God first desired to reveal Himself, He created the first element of thought, called *Mi*. This initial revelation garbed itself in Creation itself, called *Eleh*. When the two elements combined, they formed the name *Elokim*, God of creation and all existence. This is also what is alluded to in the statement noting that the numerical value of the word *Elokim* is equal to that of *ha-teva* (“nature”).

**The Closing Verse: “I, the Lord your God”**

“I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I, the Lord your God” (*Bamidbar* 15:41). The Exodus from Egypt was the most revealing and most significant instance of divine intervention in history. This intervention was conducted in an intentional manner, one that was designed to announce God’s name to the world from within the midst of its people.

Thus, in the first meeting between Pharaoh and Moshe, acting as God’s representative, Pharaoh responds clearly and categorically: “Who is the Lord that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go” (*Shemot* 5:2). Following this, God begins a lengthy process of announcing His name to the world. This process has a dual purpose. While it was certainly meant for Pharaoh and the Egyptians – and through them, for the other nations of the world – it was also directed inward, at Israel. These tendencies and points of emphasis can be found in numerous verses throughout the plagues narrative.

At the beginning of *Parashat Va’era*, God – through Moshe – says to the people of Israel:

Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. **And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians**.[[1]](#footnote-1) I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and I will give it to you for a possession, I the Lord. (*Shemot* 6:6-8)

The same is expressed at the beginning of the people of Israel’s conflict with Egypt: “**And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord**, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst” (*Shemot* 7:5).

Similarly, before the plague of blood, in God’s message to Pharaoh, we read: “**By this you shall know that I am the Lord**. See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood” (*Shemot* 7:17).

Prior to the plague of wild animals, the verse takes an additional step forward in advancing the knowledge of God: “But on that day I will set apart the region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarms of creatures shall be there, **that you may know that I the Lord am in the midst of the land**” (*Shemot* 8:18). The distinction here between Israel and the Egyptians does not merely demonstrate the very existence of God, but also His active involvement in the events occurring in the land, in that He decides to implement the plague in question and directs it to its specific target.

Once this message has been received, we advance to the third stage of the knowledge of God, on the day before the plague of hail: “For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers and your people, **in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world**” (*Shemot* 9:14). God does not merely involve Himself in the events occurring in the land, but is actually the sole entity controlling these events. “There is none like me” who controls the entire land as I do, or as we read later on, “so that **you may know that the earth is the Lord’s**” (*Shemot* 9:28).

In that same chapter, two verses later, the underlying goal that Pharaoh should gain knowledge of God is expanded to address the entire land, i.e., all of humanity: “Nevertheless I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power, **and in order that My fame may resound throughout the world**” (*Shemot* 9:16).

After the Exodus, when the people of Israel stand before the Sea, the end goal is reinforced: “Then I will stiffen Pharaoh’s heart and he will pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and all his host; **and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord**. And they did so” (*Shemot* 14:4).

Similarly, we read in the Song of the Sea:

The peoples hear, they tremble; agony grips the dwellers in Philistia. Now are the clans of Edom dismayed; the tribes of Mo’av – trembling grips them; all the dwellers in Canaan are aghast. Terror and dread descend upon them; through the might of Your arm they are still as stone – till Your people cross over, O Lord, till Your people cross whom You have ransomed… the Lord will reign forever and ever! (*Shemot* 15:14-18)

The entire world knows God’s name, recognizes the fact that He is the Master of the Universe. His kingship is now revealed throughout the world.

**Accepting the Yoke of God’s Kingship, Creation, and Providence**

The integration of these two fundamental principles – creation and providence, nature and history, thecreation of the world and the Exodus from Egypt – is the bedrock of our beliefin the oneness of God. He is at once the God of nature and the God of history, both the Creator and the world’s caretaker and Master.

However, even though each of the two verses emphasizes its own unique aspect of God’s essence, in reality they both express both of the two principles. In relation to providence, the matter is abundantly clear: Divine providence forms the basis for God’s very existence. This is expressed very distinctly in the first of the Ten Commandments: “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (*Shemot* 20:2). In practice, the principle of divine providence derives from the basic belief in a single Creator who rules the world.

This may be suggested as an addendum to R. Yehuda Ha-Levi’s response to the question of why God did not say “I the Lord am your God who **created heaven and earth**.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The answer is that the Exodus from Egypt – representing providence – attests to God’s creation of the world, as well as His continuing control and mastery over it.

On the other hand, the name *Elokim*, which is the crux of the creation, is the element that serves to sustain the world’s existence constantly. Only the integration of God’s desire to create (known in the *Zohar* as *Mi*) – which is the constant divine will – is what gives all of creation the power to remain in existence (in the *Zohar*, *Eleh*).

These two principles of faith are what lie at the foundations of Chana’s prayer and her success in attaining divine salvation, when God remembered her and rewarded her with her son Shmuel. At Chana’s most joyous moment, when her heart was truly buoyed by gladness, she declared publicly her firm belief that God is the Creator and Master of the Universe:

And Chana prayed… There is no holy one like the Lord, truly, there is none beside You; there is no rock[[3]](#footnote-3) like our God. Talk no more with lofty pride, let no arrogance cross your lips! For the Lord is an all-knowing God; By Him actions are measured… While the barren woman bears seven, the mother of many is forlorn… For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s; He has set the world upon them. (*Shmuel I* 2:1-8)

These two principles lie at the heart of the *Musaf* service of Rosh Hashana. When we stand before the King of the Word to be judged, we declare that we accept upon ourselves the yoke of His kingship. In the *Malkhuyot* (kingships) blessing, we crown God as King over us and emphasize our belief in Him:

Who extends the heavens and establishes the earth… He is our God; there is no other… You shall know and take heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth below. There is no other. (*Musaf* service of Rosh Hashana)

Consequently, in the *Zikhronot* (remembrances) blessing we express our belief that God remembers us: “For those who seek You will never stumble, and those who trust in You will not be shamed forever” (*Musaf* service of Rosh Hashana). Through acceptance of the yoke of God’s kingship – the kingship of the Creator, who chose us to be His nation – and since we desire that He be our God, we stand at the foot of the mountain and accept upon ourselves the yoke of Torah and *mitzvot* in the blessing of *Shofarot*:

You revealed Yourself in a cloud of glory to Your holy people to speak unto them… When You revealed Yourself, our King, upon Mount Sinai to instruct Your people in Torah and *mitzvot*… You let them hear the glory of Your voice and Your holy pronouncements from flames of fire. In thunder and lightning You were revealed unto them and appeared to them with the sound of the *shofar*. (*Musaf* service of Rosh Hashana)

Thus, through the power of our knowledge of the One Who extends the heavens and establishes the earth, and through our deep recognition that by Him actions are measured, we await the time when God’s kingship will suddenly reveal itself before the eyes of every living creature. Then the great *shofar* will sound, calling the strayed and the expelled to return to their homeland, so that they too will recognize the yoke of God’s kingship. Only then can the truth of the Torah become public knowledge for all to see, and all will give honor to Your glorious name.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Creation and Providence: The Oneness of God in the World**

If we delve a bit deeper into these ideas, we can reach an understanding that creation and providence are not actually separate principles. Rather, they constitute a single essential element in understanding the oneness of God in the world. The creation of the world was not a one-time event, like an object that a craftsman creates and then leaves to exist on its own. God created His world, and in His goodness, continually renews the work of creation, day after day.

It is only by the power of God’s utterances that created the world that the world continues to exist: “The Lord exists forever; Your word stands firm in heaven” (*Tehillim* 119:89). Thus explained R. Shneur Zalman of Liady in the *Tanya*:

It is written: “The Lord exists forever; Your word stands firm in heaven.” The Ba’al Shem Tov, of blessed memory, has explained that “Your word” which you uttered, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters…” (*Bereishit* 1:6), these very words and letters stand firmly forever within the expanse of heaven and are forever clothed within all the heavens to give them life, as it is written, “The word of God is always fulfilled” (*Yeshayahu* 40:8) and “His words live and persist for ever and all time...” (*Emet Ve-Yatziv* prayer). For if the letters were to depart [even] for an instant, God forbid, and return to their source, all the heavens would become naught and absolute nothingness, and it would be as though they had never existed at all, exactly as before the utterance, “Let there be an expanse.” And so it is with all created things, in all the upper and lower worlds, and even this physical earth, which is the “kingdom of the silent” [i.e., inanimate]. If the letters of the Ten Utterances by which the earth was created during the Six Days of Creation were to depart from it [but] for an instant, God forbid, it would revert to naught and absolute nothingness, exactly as before the Six Days of Creation. (*Tanya*, *Sha’ar Ha-Yichud Ve-Ha’emuna* 1)[[5]](#footnote-5)

Thus, the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*, which entails reciting the text that lies between these two verses, constitutes the epicenter of the acceptance of the yoke of God’s kingship. All the rest of the content that is found within the *Shema* between these two verses is merely an expression or realization of the main fundamental principle: We accept upon ourselves the divine yoke.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This *mitzva* is of paramount importance since it helps us focus on our fundamental obligation in the world. All other areas and details in this regard derive from this foundation. Therefore, we are commanded in the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*, which illustrates one’s acceptance of the yoke in the framework that best expresses this action, one that is parallel to the times of the day when a person is generally active – between the time one gets up in the morning and the time one lies down at night.

This explanation fits primarily with Rambam’s position, which views the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* as one *mitzva* requiring one to recite the *Shema* in the morning and in the evening.[[7]](#footnote-7) Rambam’s position implies that the purpose of the requirement to perform this *mitzva* twice daily – each time in an identical manner – is to create a framework of a life under the divine yoke that one has accepted.

According to Rambam, the fulfillment of each of the two required daily recitations has independent value, contributing to one’s acceptance of the yoke of God’s kingship, and when one fulfills both recitations this helps create the intended framework. If we were to understand that both recitations were necessary in order to fulfill the *mitzva*, we would explain that the main part of the *mitzva* is creating that framework. But because that is not the case – omitting the morning recitation does not preclude fulfillment of the *mitzva* at night, and vice versa – it seems that creating this framework is merely an additional value.

It seems that if the purpose of the *mitzva* is to create a life that is bounded by the acceptance of the yoke of God’s kingship, it would be fitting for the *mitzva* to apply literally “when you get up and when you lie down” – the reverse of the order mandated by the Torah – in order to create this framework between when one gets up and when one lies down. However, since the main part of the *mitzva* is not creating this framework, but rather each *mitzva* has independent value, the *mitzva* does not apply based on a person’s normal daily routine. The order of each day, based on the creation of the world as outlined in the Torah, is “And there was evening and there was morning.” Thus, the first *mitzva* to apply is the evening *keriat Shema* (see *Berakhot* 1:1). Only afterward do we create the framework of a life of accepting the yoke; the primary time characteristic of the *mitzva* is the objective order of the day.

In addition, it may be suggested that the Torah emphasizes the expression “when you lie down and when you get up” in order to reinforce the order of the world: “And there was evening and there was morning” – the day follows the night. This does not contradict the claim that the framework that the Torah intends to create through this *mitzva* is the framework of a person’s life, from the time he wakes up in the morning until the time he goes to sleep at night.

**Afterword**

With the expansion of the framework of our prayer over the course of time, the morning *keriat Shema* does not actually mark the beginning of the day, and the evening *keriat Shema* does not actually mark its end. In practice, even as early as in the time of *Chazal*, the evening *keriat Shema* was recited before the evening meal (based on *Berakhot* 4b), and certainly today, when we traditionally recite the Shema as part of the *Ma’ariv* service, we no longer fulfill the *mitzva* of the evening *keri’at Shema* “when you lie down.”

Therefore, the Sages instituted the bedtime *keriat Shema*, in order to ensure that we recite the *Shema* at the actual time “when you lie down.” Similarly, the Sages instituted an additional *keriat Shema* that is recited in the framework of the early stages of the *Shacharit* service, in order to ensure that the *Shema* is recited at a time that is as close as possible to “when you get up.”

In this way, the framework of daily life bounded by the morning *keriat Shema* and the evening *keriat Shema* – life in the framework of accepting the yoke of God’s kingship – is preserved.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. As the process moves forward, this goal is emphasized once more before the people of Israel: “**And that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons’ sons** how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them – **in order that you may know that I am the Lord**” (*Shemot* 10:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Kuzari* 1:25, as well as Ibn Ezra’s commentary on *Shemot* 20:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The *gemara* states:

   He said to him: What is the meaning of the verse, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, all my being, His holy name” (*Tehillim* 103:1)? He replied: Come and observe how the capacity of human beings falls short of the capacity of the Holy One, blessed be He. It is in the capacity of a human being to draw a figure on a wall, but he cannot invest it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. But the Holy One, blessed be He, is not so; He shapes one form in the midst of another, and invests it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. And that is what Chana said: “There is no holy one like the Lord, truly, there is none beside You; there is no rock like our God.” (*Berakhot* 10a) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim* 1:4, which discusses the principles of faith and their foundations, connecting them to the *Musaf* service of Rosh Hashana. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See also *Tanya*, *Sha’ar Ha-Yichud Ve-Ha’emuna* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This perspective undoubtedly reflects the position of R. Yehoshua ben Korcha, and, according to our understanding outlined in the previous *shiurim*, the position of the *Bavli* as well, which views *keriat Shema* as the acceptance of the yoke of God’s kingship and the *mitzva* of Torah study as an expression of this yoke.

   However, according to the position of R. Shimon bar Yochai as well, which places the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* within the *mitzva* of Torah study – a position that arises as well from various passages in the *Yerushalmi* – we have already explained that this refers to a unique form of the *mitzva* of Torah study that involves studying parts of the Torah that relate to God’s kingship. Thus, this perspective on the framework of *keriat Shema* as the acceptance of the yoke of God’s kingship, in which its internal contents serve to expand and fortify the contents and parameters of this yoke, is acceptable and correct according to this position as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ramban disputes Rambam’s position here in his glosses on the *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*. Ramban maintains that in every case of a group of *mitzvot* in which the individual *mitzvot* do not preclude the fulfillment of the others and in which each *mitzva* has its own set time, each *mitzva* is considered an independent commandment. It seems that Rambam maintains that the question whether each *mitzva* precludes the fulfillment of the other does not necessarily determine whether the two parts constitute one *mitzva* or two. This claim is especially convincing in our case, where the *mitzva* in question is an action that is performed twice daily in the exact same manner – morning and evening. See also *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, *Shoresh* 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In a more general sense, this concept can be accurately applied to the framework of a person’s entire life as well. A person comes into the world accompanied by *keriat Shema* – recited at the bedside of a newborn child – and leaves the world accompanied by *keriat Shema* – which he or those around him recite when that hour arrives. Thus, a person’s life as a whole is bounded by the acceptance of the yoke of God’s kingship. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)