YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Before Sinai: Jewish Values and Jewish Law**

**By Rav Dr. Judah Goldberg**

**Shiur #52: Spirituality (7):**

***Shema***

This *shiur* continues the previous discussion of the relevance of *berit Avot* to everyday rituals. The last *shiur* addressed daily prayer; this one will examine the recitation of *Shema*.

**Historical Roots of *Shema***

At first glance, the recitation of *Shema* (at least the first two paragraphs) seems unconnected to our forefathers or to history. Rather, the law commands us to declare our belief in God, His oneness, His Torah, and His *mitzvot*, “when you lie down and when you rise” (*Devarim* 6:7), through the recitation of Biblical passages. Acceptance of the yoke of Heaven is the most timeless and foundational act of religious commitment. In what way could historical events or specific personalities be relevant?

Nevertheless, our Sages suggest that *Shema*, or at least its first line, might indeed have a historical basis. *Devarim Rabba* offers multiple such accounts. First:

From where did the Jewish people merit to recite *Shema*? R. Pinchas ben Chama said: From the giving of the Torah did the Jewish people merit to recite *Shema*. Where do you find [it]? At Sinai, the Holy One, blessed be He, only began with this. He said to [the Jewish people]: “Listen, Israel (*Shema*, *Yisrael*)” (*Devarim* 6:2) – “I am Hashem, your God” (*Shemot* 20:2). They responded all together and said, “Hashem is our God; Hashem is one” (*Devarim* 6:2). (*Devarim Rabba* 2:22)

According to this version, *Shema* originates in the Revelation at Sinai; moreover, it commemorates it. The first verse alludes to a dialogue that unfolded between God and His people: God addressed us and asserted His authority, and we embraced Him enthusiastically. The twice-daily *Shema* begins by recalling this covenantal event, as if the first of the Ten Commandments is hinted at in a latent ellipsis between the opening of the verse – “*Shema*, *Yisrael*” – and its continuation.

Subsequently, however, the *midrash* offers an alternative backstory:

Another interpretation: “*Shema*, *Yisrael*” – from where did the Jewish people merit the recitation of *Shema*? From the time when Yaakov was approaching death. He called all the tribes and said to them, “Perhaps, once I have the left the world, you will bow down to another god?” … They said to him, “Listen, Yisrael, Hashem is our God; Hashem is one.” (Ibid. 2:25)

In this account (which takes note of linguistic similarities between *Devarim* 6:4 and *Bereishit* 49:2), the first line of *Shema* originates not at Sinai, but in Egypt, and not in a dialogue between the Jewish nation and their Father in Heaven, but between the elders of a nascent people and their own father, Yaakov (also known as Yisrael).

The *midrash*, then, offers two divergent conceptions of where the roots of the first verse of *Shema* – or, I might say, Jewish belief in general – lie: at Sinai or with our *Avot*. The verse can be read as a concise reaffirmation of the core beliefs and commitments that were ratified at Sinai, or it can be read as a pledge directed primarily not towards God but towards our forefather Yaakov.

The latter version – which is echoed widely in Rabbinic literature and cited by major codes of law[[1]](#footnote-1) – reinforces the notion that the core beliefs of our ancestors were not just a precursor to the formal doctrines of the subsequent covenant of Sinai. Rather, their faith binds us independently, and we pledge allegiance to it every day. In *Midrash Tanchuma*’s telling, Yaakov specifically implores his children to uphold his religious tradition:

He began to say to his sons, “Please, honor the Holy One, blessed be He, *just as my fathers and I honored Him*,” as it says: “The God before whom my fathers walked” (*Bereishit* 48:15).” (*Tanchuma*, *Vayechi*, 8)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Amazingly, monotheism for the Jewish people is not just a philosophical truth but is also a family heritage, and we unabashedly celebrate it as such.

**Blessed Be the Name of His Glorious Kingdom Forever and Ever**

Anchoring *Shema* in history may have practical implications. The Mishna (*Pesachim* 55b) mentions practices of the people of Jericho that the Sages disapproved of yet did not protest; one example is “bundling *Shema* together.” The Gemara cites the *Tosefta* (3:16), which offers two different explanations of this practice:

The rabbis taught: How did they bundle *Shema* together? They said, “Listen, Yisrael, Hashem is our God, Hashem is one,” and did not pause; this is the opinion of R. Meir.

R. Yehuda says: They would pause, but they did not[[3]](#footnote-3) say, “Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever (*Barukh shem kevod malkhuto le-olam va’ed*).” (*Pesachim* 56a)

The sentence of “Blessed be the name, etc.” is not part of the Biblical text. Rather, it appears in each of the midrashic origin stories for *Shema* as a response to the declaration of “Hashem is our God, Hashem is one.” According to the tradition that “Hashem is our God, etc.” was exclaimed by the Jews at Sinai, “Blessed be the name, etc.” is a praise that was then uttered by Moshe, broker of their covenant with God. According to the tradition that “Hashem is our God, etc.” was said in Egypt, “Blessed be the name, etc.” was Yaakov’s relieved and grateful response to his children’s pronouncement.

*Pesachim* 56a adopts the latter account, citing it to explain why our practice, unlike that of the people of Jericho, is to interrupt the Biblical text of *Shema* with “Blessed be the name, etc.” Similarly, the Rambam, who is generally so restrained when it comes to retelling Rabbinic tales, relates the story of Yaakov and his sons at length and concludes:

Therefore, all of [the nation of] Yisrael is accustomed to reciting the praise that Yisrael, the elder, praised [God] with after this verse [of “*Shema*, *Yisrael*, etc.”]. (*Hilkhot Keriat Shema* 1:4)

How should we classify the recitation of “Blessed be the name, etc.,” and what is its significance? The mitzva of *Shema* is to recite a set of Biblical verses; thus, when it comes to the addition of “Blessed be the name, etc.,” the Rambam can only say that we are “accustomed to” (*nahagu*) recite it. Yet, the Mishna, according to R. Yehuda, calls out the people of Jericho for not including this line!

Perhaps, however, the historical basis for “Blessed be the name, etc.” can explain the Sages’ reaction. Were this sentence simply an embellishment of the preceding profession of faith, perhaps it would not garner quite as much attention. But as a quote from our forefather Yaakov, it adds a whole other dimension to our recitation of *Shema*. By reenacting a scene from *Sefer Bereishit* while reciting a text from *Sefer Devarim*, we are taking a mitzva of Sinai and linking it to the legacy of our *Avot*. The product is a hybrid of *berit Sinai* and *berit Avot* that transforms our simple declaration of faith from an abstract truth into a lived experience, rooted in history and community.

In the context of the law, the Rambam cannot call “Blessed be the name, etc.” anything more than a custom, for obligation is simply not the language of *berit Avot*. Likewise, the Meiri (*Pesachim* 55b) explains, the Sages could not protest its omission, despite their disapproval. But mere “custom” does not quite capture its role, either. Thus, on the one hand, the *Mishna Berura* rules (following *Piskei Riaz*, *Berakhot*, 2:1:4\*) that one who skipped over “Blessed be the name, etc.,” like the people of Jericho, does not have to make it up. On the other hand, one may not interrupt the words of “Blessed be the name, etc.” for anything less than a death threat – for, when uttered, they become conjoined with the declaration of faith of “*Shema*, *Yisrael*, etc.” itself (*Bi’ur Halakha* on 61:13).

**In a Whisper**

Understanding the recitation of “Blessed be the name, etc.” as a fulfillment of *berit Avot* can also shed light on the subsequent discussion in the Gemara in *Pesachim*:

The Sages said: What should we do? Should we say [“Blessed be the name, etc.”]? But our teacher Moshe did not say it! Should we not say it? But Yaakov said it! They established that they would say it quietly. (*Pesachim* 56a)

The Gemara presents a tension between the teachings of Moshe and the tradition from Yaakov; the solution is to say the words of “Blessed be the name, etc.” in a whisper. But what problem does this solve? Can we fool Moshe, or God, by lowering our voices?

Perhaps this is not a compromise between two competing allegiances, but a way of combining the mitzva of Sinai with the message of Yaakov. The mitzva of *Shema* is to recite discrete Biblical passages, with rigid rules that govern every detail of its execution. From that perspective, how can we alter the text by introducing a sentence that Moshe did not record? The legacy of Yaakov, on the other hand, is of raw, direct, total dedication to and embrace of the yoke of Heaven, without concern for form or format. The words of “Blessed be the name, etc.” link us to Yaakov, but it is their spirit more than their formal enunciation that is paramount.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Whispering, I think, is the Rabbinic solution to integrating these two different modes. It captures the truth to which Yaakov submitted, without disrupting (at least symbolically) the integrity of the Mosaic text. It weaves an experience of the heart into an action of the lips, or the approach of *berit Avot* into a formal ritual of *berit Sinai*.

The Gemara then offers a metaphor for its solution, which can perhaps also be understood in this vein:

R. Yitzchak said that they say in the school of R. Ami: A parable to a princess who smelled *tzikei kedeira*. If she speaks up, it is unbecoming; if she is silent, she will suffer. Her servants began to bring [them] to her quietly. (Ibid.)

*Tzikei kedeira* refers to either a meat pudding (see *Bava Metzia* 86b and *Chullin* 77b) or the spices used to prepare it (see *Yoma* 75a). What does it symbolize here? Rabbeinu Yona (*Berakhot* 9a in Alfasi) explains that the princess craves the ingredients “that flavor a dish and improve it. So, too, is this matter: It is fitting to say, ‘Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever’ when one accepts upon oneself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven”. In other words, “Blessed be the name, etc.” enhances the recitation of “*Shema*, *Yisrael*, etc.” like a fragrant spice. But what, then, is the cause for embarrassment?

Perhaps *tzikei kedeira*, according to Rabbeinu Yona, is akin to a condiment. There is no question that it adds taste, but it might seem out of place within the rigid formality of royal cuisine. So, too, “Blessed be the name, etc.” is an exquisite complement to “*Shema*, *Yisrael*, etc.” but out of place within a staid ritual of Biblical quotation. Therefore, we need to sneak it, like ketchup, under the table, so as not to disrupt the formalities of royal affairs.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**The Opinion of R. Meir**

Having analyzed at length R. Yehuda’s explanation of the practice in Jericho, let us now turn to R. Meir, who explains that the people of Jericho “did not pause” at all. What does this mean?

Tosafot suggest that they rushed the first verse of *Shema* and did not pause between individual words, thereby allowing for misinterpretation. In this view, R. Meir’s explanation is unrelated to that of R. Yehuda.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rashi, however, explains that they did not pause between the first and second verses, i.e., between the words “*echad*” and “*ve-ahavta*.” R. Meir’s opinion would therefore be similar to that of R. Yehuda but more extreme: Not only did the people of Jericho not insert “Blessed be the name, etc.,” but they didn’t create any separation at all between the first verse of *Shema* and the rest.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Rashi goes on to explain why this is problematic:

One is supposed to elongate the word “*echad*” and separate between acceptance of the kingdom of Heaven and other matters, for each person accepts upon himself and says “One is our God” in the first verse, and the second verse is in the form of a command.

Rashi explains that the first verse of *Shema* ought to stand apart for both thematic and grammatical reasons.[[8]](#footnote-8) The first verse is written in first person (“our God”) and amounts to a personal declaration by one who recites it. The subsequent verses, however, are written in second person and contain a series of commands: “And you shall love… And you shall teach [these words] to your children and speak them… And you shall bind them… And you shall write them, etc.” (*Devarim* 6:5-9). According to Rashi, our recitation should reflect this distinction by making a clear separation between the first and second verses.

But the first verse of *Shema* is not only different from the verses that follow. As the Ramban notes (*Devarim* 6:4), it stands apart from almost all of *Sefer Devarim*, in which Moshe addresses the nation in second person.

This anomaly, R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv) suggests, is the textual basis for the Rabbinic tradition that the verse of “*Shema, Yisrael*, etc.” originates in history (*Ha’amek Davar, Devarim* 6:4). It does not flow with the rest of the text because it is copied and pasted from elsewhere – according to the most prevalent view, from the mouths of Yaakov’s children!

Following the Netziv’s reading, when we recite the first verse of *Shema*, we are not just affirming our own belief but are stepping into the shoes of Yaakov’s children and declaring our allegiance to his faith. This, in fact, is how the passage in *Devarim Rabba* (2:25) concludes, and even sharper is the parallel formulation in *Bereishit Rabba*:

R. Berekhya and R. Chelbo said in the name of R. Shmuel: This is how the Jewish people start and end each day, saying, “Listen, Yisrael” – our father, from the cave of Machpela; the same thing you commanded us still applies to us – “Hashem is our God, Hashem is one.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 98:4)

In the *Sifrei* (*Devarim* 31), *Shema* is presented as a reward to Yaakov: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Yaakov: You yearned your whole life that your children should start and end each day by reciting *Shema*” – which I assume does not literally mean reciting the text of *Shema*, but refers to maintaining commitment generally. In other words, it is a tribute to Yaakov that our quintessential declaration of faith is addressed to him,[[9]](#footnote-9) and, as the Netziv explains in his commentary on the *Sifrei*, quotes him and his sons. Our daily acceptance of the yoke of Heaven is formulated in a way that both draws upon the faith of our forefathers and continually honors their vision for posterity.

Returning to Rashi’s rendering of R. Meir’s opinion, I would suggest that there are two possible critiques of bundling Shema here. On one level, one ought to take a breath after accepting the yoke of Heaven, as the Meiri explains, “so as not to bundle acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven with acceptance of the yoke of *mitzvot* [through the rest of the first paragraph[” (*Pesachim* 55b); similarly, see *Shulchan Arukh* OC 61:14.[[10]](#footnote-10)

On another level, R. Meir may share the same goal as R. Yehuda: recognition that the declaration of the first verse is rooted in history. If one recites it in continuum with the rest of Shema, then one has uttered a block of text but has not tapped into the heritage of our *Avot*. When one pauses, one allows the first verse to stand alone and echo the voices of our forefathers in Egypt.

Perhaps, then, Rashi’s concern is not so much the merging of two different “acceptances,” but the mixing of two different experiences. (Unlike the Meiri, he does not refer to the “acceptance of *mitzvot*” but to “other matters.”) The first verse of *Shema* is a personal declaration that echoes the voices, and commitment, of earlier generations – and all the better if, following R. Yehuda, we include Yaakov’s response as well. The subsequent verses restate a Jew’s responsibilities towards the words of Torah and the commandments – in other words, *berit Sinai* – but without the same raw energy; and these two modes ought to be differentiated.

**Conclusion**

Up until now, this series has operated with the premise that *berit Avot* lurks mostly in the shadows of Jewish practice, perceptible mainly when there are gaps in the halakhic system. In the last two *shiurim*, however, we discovered that reflections of *berit Avot* have been right under our noses all along, prominently displayed in the Jewish prayer book. Every time a Jew lowers his or her voice to whisper “Blessed be the name, etc.” or opens the *Amida* by calling out to “the God of our forefathers,” he or she is tapping into the ancient power and spirit of *berit Avot*. *Berit Avot* spirituality is not an afterthought or an addendum. Rather, it is front and center in our most familiar rituals, two and three times a day, respectively.

Regarding the recitation of *Shema*, I think, this is particularly fitting. I have noted repeatedly that, astonishingly, allegiance to monotheism does not seem to be as central to Avraham’s legacy as other features of *berit Avot*. When the Jews of the desert bow down to the golden calf, Moshe can still appeal to the merit of the *Avot*, even though he cannot do so when they reject the Land of Israel.[[11]](#footnote-11) Likewise, avowed idol worshippers, while liable for death and equated with non-Jews in many respects, do not have their genealogy questioned, while one who lacks compassion is suspected of not descending from Avraham.[[12]](#footnote-12) Apparently, one can worship idols and still be counted among the children of Avraham! Could it be that monotheism is an afterthought within his legacy?

Our recitation of *Shema* is a crucial counterpoint. Twice daily, we profess faith not only towards God but also towards our forefathers. We affirm our self-identity, simultaneously, both as subscribers to a dogma and as fiercely devoted heirs to a tradition. Moreover, to the extent that the first verse of *Shema* addresses Yaakov, as the *midrash* would have it, faith as a family heritage is not merely a complementary theme of *Shema*; it is the primary narrative. Through the mitzva of *Shema*, *berit Sinai* commands us to frame our own faith experience as a tradition received from our forefathers and as a perpetual response to their ancient calling.

Faith, then, might not be the foundation stone of *berit Avot*, but it is most certainly part of its crowning glory. Avraham’s epiphany, and Yaakov’s determination to transmit it forward, live on in our daily declarations, and through them we seek to link our own devotion to that of the earliest generations. With total earnestness, we call out to our father Yaakov as if we are still surrounding his deathbed – "Listen, Yisrael!” – and we can only hope and imagine that, in some sense, from his resting place in that sacred cave, he hears us.

**For Further Thought:**

1. In addition to the two possible sources for “Blessed be the name, etc.” quoted above, *Devarim Rabba* offers a third version of its origin, as well as of our practice to whisper it:

Another interpretation: “*Shema, Yisrael*” – the Sages said: When Moshe ascended to Heaven, he heard the ministering angels saying to the Holy One, blessed be He, “Blessed be the name of His glorious Kingdom forever and ever”; and he brought it down to the Jewish people. (*Devarim Rabba* 2:25)

In this version, “Blessed be the name, etc.” is not a quote from Yaakov, but from the heavenly angels. Therefore, the *midrash* continues, we do not say it out loud, as it does not really belong in the terrestrial domain. However, “On Yom Kippur, when [the Jews] are as pure as the ministering angels, they say it openly – ‘Blessed be the name of His glorious Kingdom forever and ever.’”

Furthermore, *Devarim Rabba*’s version of the Yaakov narrative asserts that Yaakov himself said “Blessed be the name, etc.” quietly. *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Vayechi*, 8) adds that God confirmed it should stay hidden, as “this attribute does not belong to you.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

These *midrashim* assert a general ambivalence about the recitation of “Blessed be the name, etc.” by humans but make an exception for Yom Kippur. Neither the concern nor the exception, though, appear in *Pesachim*. There, whispering is certainly not an imitation of Yaakov; moreover, the discussion concludes that at one time it became standard to say “Blessed be the name, etc.” out loud so that doubters would not wonder what was being murmured. Are these texts in tension with each other, or can they be reconciled?

The halakhic record does not offer a monolithic answer to this question. While the Rif, Rambam, and Rosh cite the Gemara’s narrative about Yaakov, R. Elazar of Worms only references the story about Moshe and the angels (*Sefer Ha-Roke’ach*, 320). *Shibbolei Ha-Leket* (15) and *Avudraham* (The Laws of *Keriat Shema*), on the other hand, quote both texts.[[14]](#footnote-14) The Tur also cites both (OC 61 and 619), as well as the practice of saying “Blessed be the name, etc.” out loud on Yom Kippur, and is followed by the *Shulchan Arukh* (OC 619:2); see *Magen Avraham* and *Ma’amar Mordechai* there. Also see *Tzelach* (*Pesachim* 56a) and *Chokhmat Shlomo* (on *Shulchan Arukh* OC 619:13), who disagree about whether one may say “Blessed be the name, etc.” out loud all year long when not in the context of *Shema*.

1. For a different analysis of “Blessed be the name, etc.,” see *shiurim* [#9](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/topical-issues-thought/blessed-be-name-his-glorious-kingdom) and [#10](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-10-blessed-be-name-his-glorious-kingdom-ever-and-ever-ii-higher-and-lower-oneness-god) of Rosh Ha-Yeshiva Harav Baruch Gigi’s series on “*Avodat Hashem* – Foundations of Divine Service.”[[15]](#footnote-15)
2. The narrative about Yaakov and his sons also appears in the *Targum Yerushalmi* on *Bereishit* 49:1 and *Devarim* 6:4. There, the Aramaic rendering of “Blessed be the name, etc.” is “*Yehei shemeih rabba mevareikh la-alam*,” the central line of the *Kaddish* prayer. Could *Kaddish*, too, have roots in *berit Avot*?
1. See *Sifrei*, *Devarim* 31; *Pesachim* 56a; *Bereishit Rabba* 98:4; *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Vayechi*, 8; Rif *Berakhot* 8b (in Alfasi); Rambam, *Hilkhot* *Keriat Shema* 1:4; and Rosh, *Berakhot* 2:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also *Bereishit Rabba*, ibid. and *Devarim Rabba*, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rashi quotes a variant text that omits the word “not.” In that case, Rashi explains, the critique is of saying “Blessed be the name, etc.” out loud, rather than quietly (see below). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Maharsha, ad loc. and *Minchat Asher*, *Bereishit*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For other interpretations of the metaphor, see Rabbeinu Bechaye and Malbim on *Devarim* 6:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also Rabbeinu Yona, *Berakhot* 8b in Alfasi. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Pesachim* 4:9), quoted by *Tosafot* on *Menachot* 71a, cites two explanations of R. Meir that parallel those of Rashi and Tosafot, respectively, though with a slight variation. According to R. Acha, R. Meir contends that the people of Jericho “did not pause between one word and another.” According to R. Yosa, they “did not pause between ‘*echad’* and ‘*barukh*.’” That is, according to R. Yosa, R. Meir is raising the bar further than R. Yehuda: Not only should one recite “Blessed be the name, etc.” but one should also pause prior. On this issue, see *Beit Yosef* and *Shulchan Arukh* OC 61:14.

Rashi and *Tosafot* both find fault with “bundling *Shema*” as explained by R. Meir. However, according to a *baraita* quoted later on the same page in *Pesachim* (as well as in *Menachot*), R. Meir actually lists “bundling *Shema*” as a practice that was “to the liking of the Sages.” R. Yehuda argues, and it is his opinion that the Mishna reflects. On this issue, see *Chatam Sofer* (*Pesachim* 56a), as well as *Divrei Yirmeyahu* on Rambam, *Hilkhot* *Keriat Shema* 1:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It seems from Rashi that the separation is accomplished by emphasizing the final letter of “*echad*,” as encouraged in *Berakhot* 13b, rather than by actually pausing. See *Hagahot Ha-Bach*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also the Vilna Gaon’s emendations to the text of the *Sifrei*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the unique requirements of the first verse of *Shema*, see also *Berakhot* 13b. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See *shiur* #3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See *shiur* #41. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. R. Shimon b. Tzemach Duran further explains that Yaakov learned this praise from angels during his prophecy of the ladder (*Bereishit* 28:12; *Sefer Ha-Tashbetz* 2:236). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Also see *Hagahot Maimoniyyot*, *Hilkhot Keriat Shema* 1:1; *Sefer Ha-Tashbetz*, ibid.; and *Mateh Moshe* 868. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See also *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* 3:6, 11, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)