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בס"ד

Parashat Va'ethanan Part II On the *Shema' Yisrael* Passage

1. The *Shema' Yisrael* Verse

The *misvot* section of the *misvot huqim* and *mishpatim* code of law expounded in Deuteronomy constitutes an array of regulations that is designed to foster total devotion to G-d on the part of each Israelite. It begins with a six-verse passage (Deut. 6:4-9), the first verse of which is שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד (NJPS: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone"). This verse serves as a heading for the section that extends through 11:25.

The name that G-d assumed for His identity, by which He referred to Himself in His revelation to Israel and is referred to throughout Scripture, is Y-H-V-H, the Tetragrammaton. (It is an ancient traditional practice to refrain from verbally referring to Him by this name outside special services in the temple. In Bible reading and prayer, *A-do-nai* – my Master – is substituted for the Tetragrammaton, and care is taken not to utter even this term needlessly. In study, speech and other contexts He is traditionally referred to as *Hashem* or "the Name.") Analysis of the meaning of the Tetragrammaton's root letters provides a degree of discernment of the essential characteristics Hashem chose to be known by. (For a discussion of its meaning see our study *Parashat Va'era Part I*.) In general, and particularly in the polytheistic world of biblical times, it was of great value to identify G-d by His special name for the monumental verities it connotes.

The opening two words, "Hear, O Israel!" which call upon the nation to be especially attentive, signal that an important statement is forthcoming. The first word of the sentence – *shema'* – also translates as a call to "understand."

The next phrase – *Hashem Elokenu* – throughout the Torah and especially in its many Deuteronomic

attestations is usually employed as an expression wherein the two words constitute a single appellation that comprises subject and adjective. The phrase generally means, "Hashem our G-d," and some commentators do render it so here. In this case, however, as Ibn Ezra points out, that does not appear to be the correct translation. Had that been the intention, the immediately following repetition of *Hashem* would not fit the context well; however *ehad* (generally meaning "one") is to be construed, the verse should then have been formulated *Hashem Elokenu ehad*, the second Hashem being superfluous.*

Thus, *Hashem Elokenu* appears to be a self-contained declarative statement meaning "Hashem is our G-d," an expression proclaiming relationship. The Rashbam, who also takes it as such, points to 2 Chronicles 13:10 to illustrate an unambiguous use of this phrase with that meaning: וְאֵלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְלֹא עֲזַבְנוּהוּ ("But as for us, Hashem is our G-d, and we have not forsaken Him.")

The next phrase ה' אֶחָד, a follow-up mini-sentence, has several possible translations. Some have understood it to mean "Hashem is one," that He is a true unity, indivisible and not composed of multiple elements. Such an interpretation, however, appears to reflect a later philosophical concern not relevant to the time of Moses. As a supplement to the preceding "Hashem is our G-d," Rashbam and Ibn Ezra consider *Hashem ehad* to mean, "Hashem exclusively" is our G-d, a further comment on the relationship between the Israelites and their G-d. He is our G-d, our one and only G-d, there is no other that we may look to as our G-d. Others take *ehad* as meaning *מְיֻחָד*, in the sense of His being special and unique, a notion that the word "one" sometimes represents, such as in the verse, וּמִי כַעֲמֻךָ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל גּוֹי אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ, ("And who is like your people Israel, a unique nation on earth" [2 Sam. 7:23]).

Many other commentators, however, have taken *ehad* in a fuller sense, understanding it to be stating that Hashem

is the one G-d in existence, expressing the monotheistic principle. Support to the latter view may be adduced from the climactic phrases of Moses' motivational discourse that had shortly preceded this passage. In Deuteronomy 4:35 he proclaimed a related concept: ה' הוא האֱלֹהִים אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ ("Hashem is the G-d, there is none other besides Him"). In 4:39, he stated: ה' הוא האֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת אֵין עוֹד ("Hashem is the G-d in the heavens above and on the earth below, there is no other"). Although in Moses' day the primary concern for the masses may have been to ensure their commitment to Hashem alone (monolatry) as a necessary step toward the goal, it appears appropriate to assume that the *Shema'* verse addressed even the most enlightened as well and was formulated in accordance with those monotheistic pronouncements of chapter four.

Regarding the future, Zechariah prophesies, "Hashem shall be king over all the earth, on that day Hashem will be one and His name will be one" (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִי־ה' אֶחָד וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶחָד [Zech. 14:9]). Since Hashem will be king over all the earth, the following *Hashem ehad* should be understood in its full monotheistic sense.

*In any event, it appears likely that the two declarations of the Shema' verse allude directly to the Decalogue's first two pronouncements: Hashem Elokenu recalls the opening proclamation, "I am Hashem your G-d," denoting the covenantal relationship, while Hashem ehad refers to "you shall have no other gods." True, the second commandment appears to mandate monolatry and does not explicitly touch on the matter of monotheism. But the Decalogue formulation reflects the period of the Exodus when Israel had just been redeemed from bondage and was not yet at the stage of appreciating a full monotheism. The Shema' Yisrael verse, however, as well as the whole of Moses' Deuteronomic discourse (except for what he quotes from the past) is a fortieth-year formulation, after the Israelites had greatly matured, having come of age under Moses' guidance. (There are variations between the two articulations of the Decalogue but as we point out in our study *On Decalogue Variants* there are a number of indications that the Deuteronomy text reflects the first version. In any event, the opening statements of*

the Decalogue undoubtedly became well known in the nation precluding a significant modification.)

2. *Ve'ahabta Forward*

The second verse of the *Shema' Yisrael* passage, which begins with *ve'ahabta*, summons Israel to fully love Hashem. Use of the term "love" in ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal covenantal contexts has been found to denote the notion of loyalty, which very likely is the intention here. It may also be the intention in *וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ* ("Love your fellow as yourself" [Lev. 19:18]), and, as regards the stranger, in *וְאָהַבְתָּ לוֹ כְּמוֹךָ* ("Love him as yourself" [v. 34]). Both latter precepts are part of a covenantal context in Leviticus 19, as we explain in our discussion on that chapter. Such an understanding obviates the need for the many strained interpretations proffered to explain how the law could require the emotion of love to the extreme degree mandated. This especially applies to cases that refer to loving a person whom one does not even know "as yourself," considered by many to be beyond the reach of average human beings.

The *ve'ahabta* verse calls for three applications of love for or loyalty to Hashem. *Bekhol lebabekha*, with all one's heart, means with an undivided heart, that is, without contradictory motivations and without reservations. *Ubkhol nafshekha* with all one's being, in the sense of one's life, requires the Israelite to be prepared to give his life when necessary. The third application, *ubkhol me'odekha* is a difficult clause to translate.

Technically, it means "with all your *me'od*." But in Tanakh, *me'od* (very) is never used as an item of possession except in this verse (and in the citing of this verse in describing King Josiah after his death [2 Kings 23:25]). This unique coinage appears to mean with all one's "very," with the utmost of all one's resources, whether wisdom, ability, wealth, strength or whatever. Ibn Ezra explains it to mean to love G-d "in every way you can." The popular translation of *me'odekha* as specifically referring to one's wealth appears to be based on later usage, although such an application was surely included in the original intention.

The third verse of the *Shema'* passage prescribes that "these words that I am commanding you this day should be upon your hearts," meaning that one should take them seriously, focus on and internalize them. In

discussing the daily responsibility of reciting the *Shema'*, the Tannaitic sages derive from the clause “should be upon your hearts” the requirement to consciously focus on the meaning of the words (*kavana*). Some apply this requirement to the two prior verses but the halakhic conclusion was that only the first verse of *Shema'* absolutely requires *kavana*. In a somewhat parallel discussion, some understand “these words” as referring to all the laws while others maintain that “these” particularly refers to the two preceding verses, the foundation of the covenant.

Another school of thought is of the opinion that in *peshat*, “these words” refers to the Decalogue. They point out that the Decalogue almost immediately precedes *Shema'* and that the fifteen verses between them do not digress to another subject. They narrate matters that concern the awesome event, the people’s reaction to it, G-d’s message for them, the divinity of the laws and an exhortation to fulfill them. As pointed out earlier, the *Shema' Yisrael* verse seems to refer to the Decalogue’s primary pronouncements concerning the Israelites’ relationship with G-d. In addition, the Decalogue was also called “these words” (Deut. 5:19) in the previous occurrence of this term not many verses before.

Interestingly, the Mishnah states that in the temple the Decalogue was recited daily together with *Shema'* (*m. Tamid* 5:1). The Talmud asserts that this practice was not maintained outside the temple. This is explained by some commentators as stemming from fear that heretics or the ignorant might claim that only the Decalogue is truly Torah, undermining the people’s commitment to the other laws. As “these words” of the third verse of the *Shema'* passage carry through to the following verses, the Qumran sect included the Decalogue, specifically the Deuteronomy version thereof, in their *tefillimot* (phylacteries). This very likely is the explanation why some ancient Samaritan *mezuzot* had the Decalogue inscribed upon them.

Verse 4a of our passage – *veshinantam lebanekha* – calls upon parents to repeatedly teach “these words” to their children. The two possible roots of *shinan* – sh-n-h or sh-n-n – denote “repeat” or “sharpen” respectively (see Deut. 32:41), either enjoining to

teach them repeatedly or to teach in such a way that the children have a well-honed knowledge of them.

Verse 4b – *Vedibarta bam* – requires discussing these words “when sitting at home, walking on the road, lying down to sleep and arising,” meaning at all times, at every opportunity. In the book of Exodus there is a corresponding passage (see our study on *Parashat Bo Part II*) that speaks of relating the Exodus experience to one’s children “in order that *Torat Hashem* should be in your mouth” (Exod. 13:9), meaning to constantly speak about the Teaching. All this discussion and instruction points to a larger tradition, the *Torah Sheba'al Peh* (the Oral Law), which supplements Scripture.

The fifth verse – *Uqshartam* – prescribes “binding these words” on one’s arm as a sign and on one’s forehead as an ornament (*tefillin*). The Rashbam (on Exod. 13:9, which speaks in similar terms) comments: “In the depth of *peshat* [the sign on your arm] means that these [matters] should be for an ongoing remembrance as if they were written on your arm, similar in meaning to ‘place me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm’ (Song of Songs 8:6) ... ‘between your eyes’ means that they should be as an ornament or gold chain that was customarily worn on the forehead.” The Rashbam maintains that there is a dimension of scriptural *peshat* even in cases where there is an intended halakha attached to the verse. However, this command does not appear to intend a metaphorical meaning. Since the next verse speaks of writing these words on doorposts, which does not lend itself to a metaphorical interpretation, especially since writing on doorposts was a well-known practice in the ancient Near East, it is more logical to also take the binding of these words literally.

Recent discoveries have revealed that in some ancient Near Eastern societies, subjects wore inscribed objects on their arms and foreheads that announced their affiliation to their chief and protector. Some have speculated that these were likely pledges of allegiance to their sovereign. *Tefillin* would then be the Israelite’s concrete pledge of allegiance to Hashem. Halakha prescribes that the four biblical passages that make reference to the concept of *tefillin* – the two linked to the Decalogue, namely our passage and *Vehayah Im Shamo'a* (Deut. 11), plus the two embedded in the Exodus context, namely, *Qadesh Li* and *Vehayah Ki Yebi'a'kha* (both in Exod. 13) – be inscribed on parchments and inserted in leather boxes for placement on arm and forehead.

Verse 6 of the *Shema* passage – *Ukhtabtam* – refers to writing these words on the doorposts of home and gates. “Gates” undoubtedly includes city gates (private homes rarely had gates), an important hub of business activity, communal affairs and social life, where a reminder to remain conscious of the covenant was especially fitting. The *peshat* of the verse may have mandated affixing the written document on the doorpost so that it could easily be read periodically. This would be in accordance with the practice from pre-Torah days of displaying important notices at city entranceways where people would read them to become informed of relevant regulations that pertain to that locale and review them as necessary. This may have required that if the document was placed in a protective container it should be of a type from which it could easily be removed for reading and returned. The halakha is to write the two passages that refer to the performance of this *misvah*, namely, *Shema Yisra’el* and *Vehayah Im Shamo’a*, on a parchment that is rolled up and affixed to the doorpost.

The passage’s flow of verses – instructions to be loyal to Hashem, that “these words” be upon one’s heart, taught to the children, spoken about, bound upon forehead and arm and placed on the doorposts – indicates that the idea of *mezuzah* is to make “these words” available as reminders to everyone all over at all times. Thus, the public would maintain a high level of awareness of the foundational principles of the covenant. *Mezuzah* was not commanded as a charm to ward off evil.

The correspondence to the one-time ritual of placing the blood of the Passover sacrifice on the two doorposts and the lintel of the homes in which the Israelites resided on the night of the Exodus (Exod. 12:7) is relevant. That blood was a sign that the people who resided in that home were committed to Hashem so that the “destroyer” not enter that home. (Of course, that “destroyer” was a metaphorical term that referred to G-d’s retributive action.) This has led some to interpret *mezuzah* as a prophylactic device. However, the aspect of being a sign and a reminder to maintain awareness is what

links that passage with our *mezuzah*. The context of our *mezuzah* passage as well as the spirit of the Torah supports the Rambam’s formulation regarding the purpose of this regulation:

Whenever one enters and exits he should come upon [written expression] of the unity of Hashem, the name of The Holy One blessed be He and recall the love of Him and awaken from his slumber and his folly in [engaging in] the vanities of the time ... and he returns to his senses and goes in the way of the righteous. The early sages stated regarding whomever has *tefillin* on his head and arm, *šišit* on his garment and a *mezuzah* on his doorway, that it is taken for granted that he will not sin for he has many reminders. And it is they [these items] who are the angels that save him from sinning, as it states, “The angel of the Lord camps around those who fear Him and rescues them” (Ps. 34:8, NJPS). Blessed is the Merciful One who has helped us.

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Tefillin and Mezuzah 6:13

We will return to the *Shema* paragraph when explicating the *Vehayah Im Shamo’a Tishme’u* passage (Deut. 11:13-21).

Endnote

* It surely is unlikely that the verse is stating, “Hashem our G-d is *Hashem ehad*.” By repeating and stressing “Hashem” in a continuing thought while He already is the subject of the sentence, what follows might be thought to specifically refer to “Hashem” and not to “our G-d.” It would sound like it is negating a false notion we find no mention of elsewhere in Scripture and have no reason to think would have been of concern here, namely, that aside from the issue of many gods there is the matter of there being more than one Hashem – the specific deity that Israel recognizes as G-d – and this verse would be saying there is only one Hashem. Such an interpretation is in sharp contrast to the very likely possibilities of the verse’s meaning when *Hashem ehad* is understood as beginning a new statement, as in the next interpretation we proffer.