



חבורת מהות היהדות

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From the Chabura
By: Adam Friedmann

Have Any of Us Ever Read the Shema?

We continue our study of individuals who are exempt from the obligation to recite the Shema. Last week, we began exploring whether such individuals may nonetheless choose to recite it voluntarily. We noted the debate in the Mishna (*Berachot* 2:8) concerning a groom, who is generally exempt from reciting the Shema for several nights following his wedding. According to the Chachamim, he may choose to recite it regardless. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, however, limits this option to exceptionally pious individuals. In other cases, reciting the Shema may constitute *yuhara*—a display of religious arrogance—by implying that the groom is undistracted and able to concentrate fully, despite being preoccupied with another mitzvah. We considered the definition of *yuhara* in detail last week.

There's a debate among the Rishonim about how to rule in this debate. There are three general approaches (following *Perisha*, *Orach Chaim* 70:):

1. The halacha follows Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel (Tosfot *Berachot* 17b s.v., *Rav Shisha*, Rosh *Berachot* 2:15, possibly also Ra'avad, *Hilchot Keriat Shema* 4:7). According to this view, fundamentally the groom should not read the Shema. However, these Rishonim note that, practically speaking, no one has proper focus when they read the Shema today. As a result the concern for *yuhara* should be reversed. If a groom refrains from reading the Shema, indicating his temporary lack of focus, he is communicating that he usually *does* have proper focus. This is highly unlikely, and therefore itself constitutes *yuhara*. As a result, these Rishonim hold that a groom should read the Shema *despite* ruling like Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel.
2. Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (Maharam) rules that the debate in the Mishna is irrelevant today. The groom's initial exemption from reading the Shema because of distraction was premised on the assumption that people usually read the Shema with proper focus. Now that people no longer do this, there is no exemption in the first place. According to this view, all grooms today are *obligated* to read the Shema.
3. The Rif (*Berachot* 10a) and Rambam (*Hilchot Keriat Shema* 4:7) rule like the Chachamim. According to this view, a groom is exempt from reading the Shema but may do so if he wishes.

The Rambam expands this ruling, but adds a condition. Anyone who is exempt from reading the Shema can choose to read it anyhow, not only the groom. But this is on condition that the person knows they can properly focus. If they are distracted, they shouldn't read.

These positions carry significant halachic and philosophical implications, all hinging on a generally accepted premise: to fulfill the mitzvah of Shema, one must have proper intention, at least for the first verse (*Berachot* 13a; *Orach Chaim* 60:5).

According to the first view, we must accept the fact that at some point we entered a new reality where most people simply aren't fulfilling the mitzvah of reading the Shema most of the time. If so, why bother to read it at all? The Ra'avad (ibid.,) explains that even if a groom cannot concentrate, there is still value in reciting the Shema: "What's the concern? Let him read, and be like one who reads from the Torah. And let him not be like one who casts the name of G-d off of himself." According to this approach, reciting the Shema—even without full focus—has two merits: (1) it qualifies as Torah study and (2) it keeps G-d's name and presence part of one's regular speech. From this perspective, these residual benefits may be the most realistic spiritual gains available to most of us today.

The Maharam seems to differ. According to him, grooms are obligated to read the Shema even though they can't focus. If reading the Shema without proper focus doesn't count, it's unclear what it means to be obligated to do so. Can one be obligated to perform a non-mitzvah action? It would seem then that according to the Maharam there must still be *some* obligation that's fulfilled when we read the Shema without focus. It's not clear what that obligation is.

The Rambam may reject both prior assumptions. He likely maintains both halachically and practically that the Shema must—and can—be recited with proper intention, even today. Philosophically, this aligns with his broader view: the Shema is part of an overarching effort to cultivate *love of God* through constant awareness. In *Moreh Nevuchim* (1:50; 3:51), the Rambam argues that reciting words without understanding or internalizing them is meaningless. This perspective may underlie his reluctance to assign halachic value to distracted recitation or to concede that focus is no longer attainable.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

What is the Mishnah?

This past week, my new article, “What is the Mishnah?: Discovering Judaism’s Philosophy of Harmony” was published at TheLehrhaus.com. Below is a very condensed summary of its major arguments and conclusions.

The Mishnah is typically described as a code of Jewish law. But a careful study of its structure and style raises the possibility that it might be much more. While not offering a formal philosophy in the classical sense, the Mishnah seems to present a coherent worldview—one in which law serves as a vehicle for social and cosmic harmony.

This isn’t an entirely new idea. Drawing on *Shabbat* 31a, Maharal interprets the Mishnah’s six orders as a progression: from the physical (agriculture and festivals), through the social (marriage and civil law), to the spiritual (sacrifices and purity). For Maharal, that structure suggests a kind of metaphysical ladder—a vision of the world as layered and ordered, with human behavior playing a role in maintaining balance across those layers. Passages in the Tosefta, Midrash, and Zohar also suggest that deep philosophical insights undergird even the most procedural Mishnaic laws.

Modern scholars have noted that many tractates in the Mishnah end with moral or theological reflections that seem to recontextualize the legal material that precedes them. *Berachot* concludes by elevating harmony (*shalom*) above even the sanctity of Hashem’s Name. *Uktzin*, the Mishnah’s final tractate, ends with the notion that Hashem found no vessel to contain blessing except *shalom*. These teachings, which bookend the entire Mishnah, seem to point toward an overarching goal: that the legal system is meant to foster not just order, but a particular kind of order—one rooted in wholeness, justice, and harmony.

This interpretive thread may also help explain the Mishnah’s frequent idealism. Many of its laws assume a fully functioning Temple or perfect judicial system—conditions that did not exist when the Mishnah was compiled. Scholars like Moshe Halbertal and Naftali Cohn have identified a utopian thrust in these passages, and it’s possible that this quality reflects not detachment from reality but an aspiration toward it. The Mishnah invites us to imagine a world in which law does not merely regulate, but elevates.

On a more granular level, R’ Avraham Walfish and others have shown that the Mishnah’s organizing principles are often more literary/conceptual than legal/logical. Stylistic repetitions and wordplays not only add an aesthetic quality to the text but also yield concrete insight into the Mishnah’s underlying worldview, as R’ Yakov Nagen has eloquently shown.

Taken together, these patterns—structural, thematic, and literary—make a strong case that R’ Yehudah HaNasi and his students were doing more than collecting rulings. They were proposing, implicitly and carefully, a vision of how law can bring harmony to a fractured world. The Mishnah offers us a philosophy of life, woven from the fabric of law.

Back On Track

In Sforno's comments to our *parsha*, he returns to what he considers to be, one of the primary themes of the *Torah*, one which has featured prominently in his commentary to *Sefer Bereishit*, *Shemot*, and *Vayikra* (see introduction to each *sefer*). After coordinating events and setting the stage to provide opportunities for *Am Yisrael* to achieve physical and spiritual greatness, how does *Hashem* ultimately respond to the insurrections and rebellions of His people? Even in the face of punishment, *Hashem* does not leave them distant from Him, rather He bestows the ability for the broken connection to be repaired. In the post *Chet HaEgel* reality, *Hashem* gave them the *Mishkan*, *Kohanim*, obligatory sacrifices, and several other *mitzvot* in order that the *Shechina* could once again dwell amongst them. Now, in the aftermath of the sin of the spies, a second national tragedy, we are introduced to a series of *mitzvot* geared towards getting *Am Yisrael* back on track.

The first passage following the sin of the *Meraglim* (spies), discusses the flour and wine offerings (*mincha*, *nesachim*) which accompany an animal sacrifice. Why is this section brought here and not in *Sefer Vayikra*, the primary book of the sacrificial rite? Sforno explains (*Bamidbar* 15:3,4) that before *Chet HaEgel* an animal offering was able to achieve the lofty level of "a pleasant aroma before *Hashem*" (*reiach nichoach*), without any additional components. The offerings of *Hevel*, *Noach*, *Avraham*, and those at *Har Sinai* make no mention of a flour and wine element. After the *Egel* these became required for the communal offering of the *korban Tamid*. It is now after the sin of the spies that a flour and wine aspect becomes necessary for the *korbanot* of an individual as well. As a result of sin and the subsequent weakening of spiritual bonds, additional details are now mandated to achieve the devotion to *Hashem* which will produce "a pleasant aroma before Him".

The following passage in the *Torah* introduces the *mitzvah* of *Challah*, giving a first portion of your dough to the *Kohen*. Sforno explains (15:20) that this too is a consequence of the *Meraglim*. The *navi Yechezkel* states (44:30) that a function of this *mitzvah* is "to cause a blessing to rest on your house". Before the sin, *Bnei Yisrael* were fitting receptacles for blessing to befall them. Post sin, more effort on their part is required and *Hashem* provides the means for them to regain that status.

The parsha ends with *Hashem* giving his people the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*. After the *Meraglim*, we must carry a sign that we are servants to *Hashem* and have made a commitment to Him. A symbol, placing the totality of the *Torah* before our eyes, aids us in guiding our intellectual and physical pursuits to both imitate and become holy before *Hashem*.