



# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

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פרשת נשא  
י"א סיון תשפ"ה

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From the Chabura (chazara)  
By: Adam Friedmann

### What Does the Shema Mean?

The Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 63:4) we are obligated to have a specific intention when reading the Shema. This applies at least to the first verse. This intention is not just to fulfill the mitzvah. It involves declaring some kind of belief about G-d and the world. What is that intention? What are we supposed to think about when reading the Shema?

Let's consider some approaches:

#### Accepting the yoke of heaven

One possibility is that the meaning of the words of the Shema is less important than the recognition that one is accepting the yoke of heaven (*ol malchut shamayim*). Loosely speaking, this means recognizing that there is a G-d and that G-d rules over all of reality. According to this approach, this recognition is the basic kernel of the Shema. This approach is suggested explicitly by Rabbi Akiva Eiger (see *Halichot Shelomo*, *Tefillah*, chapter 7, note 15). He writes that even though it's ideal to understand the words of the Shema when reading, this may be fundamentally unnecessary.

#### Understanding the words: the traditional approach

A second possibility is that one must focus on and intend for the meanings of words of the Shema (see *Igrot Moshe*, *Orach Chaim* 5:5:2). In this case, we must understand what the words mean, at least for the first verse. Chazal and the Shulchan Aruch map out a traditional approach to these meanings:

- *Shema Yisrael* - One might assume that *Yisrael* here refers to the People of Israel. That's who Moshe Rabenu was speaking to when he said this verse (*Devarim* 6:4). However, many sources in Chazal (see *Pesachim* 56, *Devarim Rabba* 2:35, *Targum Yerushalmi* and *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel* to *Devarim* 6:4) indicate that *Yisrael* refers to Yaakov Avinu. When we recite the Shema, we are declaring to our ancient father that we still hold strong to his beliefs and values.
- *Hashem* - The Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 5) rules that when reading this name of G-d one should have intention for both the way it's written and the way it's pronounced. The pronunciation denotes G-d as the master of the world. The way the name is written denotes Him

as eternal.

- Elokeinu* - The Shulchan Aruch (ibid.,) rules that when saying this name of G-d, one should have intention for the fact that G-d is absolutely powerful and controls all other sources of power.
- Echad* - This word indicates G-d's mastery of all of physical space. The letter *chet* is written in the Torah with an upward-facing point connecting its two sides. This indicates G-d's mastery of what's up and down (heaven and earth). The *daled* at the end of the word has a numerical value of 4, indicating G-d's mastery over the expanse of the universe in all four directions. (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 61:6)

Putting these sources together, the first verse of the Shema is our declaration to Yisrael Avinu of our belief in an eternal and all-powerful G-d who rules absolutely over the entire universe.

### **Understanding the words: building personal meaning**

In an article about the first verse of the Shema (*Yeshurun* volume 1), Rabbi Shlomo Fisher cites several thinkers who argue that it's insufficient to base our understanding of G-d solely on ideas received from tradition. (see *Teshuvot HaRashba* vol. 5:5 and *Panim Me'ivot* 39) Rather, one is obligated to combine these traditions with personal thought and philosophical analysis. This way, a person can arrive at a recognition of G-d that's compelling and form a deeply held belief.

In the Medieval period, this kind of analysis generally followed along the lines of Aristotelian philosophy. Thus the Rambam (*Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah*, 1) understood G-d to be the Prime Mover who created the causal mechanisms of the universe and maintains them. He also understood G-d's oneness to refer to a particular metaphysical state. Unlike Aristotle, today's post-Kantian philosophical mindset is at least skeptical of the possibility of making absolute claims based on metaphysical arguments. As a result, the Rambam's claim of discovering G-d's existence as the Prime Mover based on philosophy is less appealing to many people today than it once was.

One alternative to metaphysics is to recognize G-d in history through the momentous events in our era. This approach fits nicely with Rashi's understanding of the first verse of the Shema. He explains it to mean that even though currently Hashem is only the G-d of the Jewish People, in the future He will be the sole G-d for all of humanity.

## Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life By: Dovid Campbell

### Gittin 9:10 — The Boundaries of Love

Gittin 9:10 brings the tractate to a close with a deceptively simple question: *What constitutes a valid reason for divorce?* But beneath this legal query lies a profound debate over the very nature of marriage itself—and, by extension, the dignity and permanence we assign to human relationships.

Beit Shammai insists that divorce is only legitimate if the husband finds in his wife a *davar ervah*—a matter of sexual impropriety. This view tightly binds the dissolution of marriage to a clear moral or legal violation. Marriage, in their conception, is not merely a contractual arrangement but a covenantal bond, breached only by serious betrayal. Divorce, then, is an act of justice, not of preference.

Beit Hillel, however, reads the same verse differently. The Torah's phrasing—*ki matza bah ervat davar*—can be parsed as highlighting either *ervah* (immodesty) or *davar* (a different kind of fault). Even something as minor as ruining a meal is grounds for divorce, they suggest. While the example seems trivial, its implications are not. Beit Hillel acknowledges that marriage can erode through the cumulative weight of disappointment or incompatibility. They preserve a legal pathway to end a marriage even absent clear moral wrongdoing.

Rabbi Akiva takes the idea further: *Even if he finds another more beautiful than her*, that suffices. Here, the reason for divorce need not lie in the woman's behavior at all—it lies entirely in the husband's subjective shift in affection. Rabbi Akiva reads the Torah's phrase "*if she no longer finds favor in his eyes*" as a standalone clause. His is a radical individualism: if love, desire, or connection fade, that itself is a justification.

These three views together reflect a tension between *marriage as duty* and *marriage as desire*. Is it a covenant that must be maintained unless deeply breached? Or is it a bond continually contingent on emotional connection? The answer has consequences not only for divorce law but for how we view the sanctity and expectations of marriage itself.

Curiously, this mishnah is placed at the very end of tractate *Gittin*. Given its foundational importance—what justifies the very act of divorce—we might have expected it to appear at the beginning. Why the delay?

One possibility is that the Mishnah is dramatizing the weight of the question. Only after navigating all the technicalities—writing, delivering, and verifying a get—do we finally ask: *But when should this document be written at all?* Perhaps the Mishnah is showing us that legal mechanism and personal judgment must be treated separately. Only after learning how to dissolve a marriage with procedural integrity can we confront the deeper, more unsettling question: *Should we?*

In this way, the final mishnah becomes not an afterthought, but the ultimate challenge. It confronts us with the raw core of the halachic enterprise—not just how to act, but when action is truly warranted.

## Sforno on the Parsha

By: Nochum Spiegel

### Relationship Woes

To experience mistrust or lack of confidence in a relationship can be irritating, unsettling, or painful. To undergo a betrayal is absolutely gut-wrenching. Our deepest personal bonds have the potential to unleash the full range of the emotional spectrum from profound love to persistent hate. *Parshat Naso* tells the tale of individuals whose relationship with man, society and G-d lay at a critical juncture.

As part of the process of setting the foundation for *Bnei Yisrael* to enter and possess the land in a quick and conflict-free manner, *Hashem* has commanded them in several areas. Their camping and traveling follows a formation patterned after the heavenly realm revealed in the visions of the prophets. *Kohanim* and *Leviim* must maintain their own internal structure and responsibility to care for and protect the *Mishkan* from outside influence. Those affected by various spiritual impurities should be separated from the rest of the camp (Sforno, *Bamidbar* Introduction). Clear delineation of place and role in relation to others has been emphasized as a prerequisite for a successful journey and connection to *Hashem*.

A passage of law is now introduced, “When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit, so as to trespass (***memayinlamed***) against *Hashem*, and that soul is guilty” (*Bamidbar* 5:6). A similarly worded section appears in *parshat Vayikra* (chapter 5). The tradition of *Chazal* is that our current passage is referring to one who has stolen property from a convert. Sforno explains (*Vayikra* 5:6) that when stealing from others the trespass against *Hashem* occurs when they lie about it, falsely using G-d’s name. With the convert it’s different, the act of theft alone suffices to disgrace *Hashem*. The convert has left a former life to enter *Hashem’s* covenant to be part of the one nation who has made a similar commitment. He has forgone and sacrificed much in the process. To be subjected to theft and damage from one of G-d’s people is a harrowing experience. The robber has profaned the name of *Hashem* in the eyes of the convert in a very personal and painful manner. He must now come to terms with a reality far from the expectations of truth and purity he so deeply desired.

The next *pesukim* discuss the *Sotah*, a woman who’s displays of affection to a man other than her husband have put her under suspicion of adultery. She too is described as committing a trespass (***memayinlamed***) against her husband. This term is normally used regarding one’s actions in relation to *Hashem*, what is their meaning here? Sforno explains (*Vayikra* 5:12) that she has profaned the holiness of *Hashem* which He loves (see *Malachi* 2:11), the commitment of a man and woman to developing their marital relationship. This core principle so cherished by G-d for the advancement of purity and holiness amongst his people has been violated by her actions. Even if innocent of the adultery this dual trespass has occurred and must be repaired (cf. *Rashi* 5:12).

Our interpersonal actions powerfully affect the spiritual standing and relationship to G-d of all parties involved.