

Parashah One Hundred Thirty-One

Deuteronomy 6:4–7:26; Zechariah 14:1–9; Mark 12:28–34

notes by Tim Hegg

Loving God

No portion of the Torah is better known than the section we have before us today. Known as the “Shema” from its opening word, this passage is repeated in daily and Sabbath prayers. It is probably the first prayer learned as a child, and the last said before leaving this world. It has formed the confession of Jews throughout the history of our people, and has, in every generation, formulated the central and basic core of our beliefs.

The Shema is actually found twice in the book of Deuteronomy, (6:4ff and 11:13ff) and both versions are included in the daily and Sabbath prayers. Its repetition in chapter 11 is not without a specific purpose, however, for in this rendition the focus is upon the community, while in our text it is upon the individual. How do we know? Because in our passage the commands are addressed to a singular “you” while in chapter 11 they are almost all given to a plural “you.” Granted, in the English one cannot tell the difference, but in the Hebrew it is clear. So the issue which should arrest our attention from this comparison is that in our text HaShem addresses Himself to each individual before He addresses the entire congregation. The community finds its strength in the integrity and faith of each individual. Like a chain whose strength is found in the consistent casting of each link, so the community of faith rises and falls on the growing spiritual strength of each individual. It thus becomes the duty of each one of us to grow in our understanding of HaShem and His will for our lives, and to increase our faith and resolve to live according to His ways. It is the duty of each of us to see that the community will succeed as I draw closer to HaShem, and as I see myself as a vital link in the on-going process of sanctifying the Name in this world. It will not do to simply ride upon the strength of the community—in the Shema God calls to me personally, specifically, because He has a duty and purpose for me as an individual created in His image and called to be part of His family. The Shema, then, requires first and foremost a personal relationship with HaShem, one in which I know the reality of His saving grace and forgiveness and in which I have committed myself to Him as a grateful servant, eager to do His will.

How differently the Shema defines our relationship to HaShem than what one often hears today from well-meaning but misdirected teachers. Common in our day is the basic emphasis that confessing God and receiving His Messiah as Savior will primarily benefit us—bring a solution to our mountain of problems. But the salvation preached by the prophets and the apostles was an escape from the terrible wrath of God which, though deserved, had been taken for us by the suffering Messiah, Yeshua. This “salvation” is so magnificent, so undeserved, that the only proper response is to listen carefully to what the Savior is saying, and then obey fully. Obedience, not necessarily comfort, is thus the expected “end” of the salvation preached by the prophets and apostles. But it is an obedience which flows out of tremendous gratitude for God’s grace—undeserved favor in the place of deserved wrath.

The structure of the Shema is seen to be in three parts: 1) a command [Hear, O Israel], 2) a declaration [Adonai is our God, Adonai is one], and 3) an exhortation [And you shall love. . .]. The order of this is clearly important. HaShem gives a command which He immediately bases upon the eternal reality of His own character, and then expands or explains the command through an exhortation to action.

The Command

The command is given: Hear, O Israel. *Shema* (שמע) is a singular, masculine imperative—a shortened form of the idiomatic שמע בקול, “listen to a voice,” which means “to obey.” In the imperative form it clearly means “listen-up” or “pay attention”—what is about to be said is of importance. It is this idiomatic use of “hear” as fundamental in the Hebrew concept of “obeying” that gives rise to the phrase “he who has ears, let him hear” (cf. Is 6:10; Mt 11:15; 13:9; Rev 2:7ff). What this means is, “he to whom God has directed His word, let him obey it!”

And here is a most important truth of our passage: God directs His word to His chosen people—Hear, *O Israel*. This message is not given to the nations at large, but to His own—to His firstborn. The very giving of His word is an act of grace. God calls to those He has already brought into covenant relationship.

Obedience, then, flows, not from our own efforts, but first and foremost from the covenant into which we have come through God's divine choosing. The prophets make it clear that Israel did not choose HaShem, but that He chose Israel. Out of all the nations upon the earth He chose to "know" Israel (Amos 3:2), that is, to enter into an eternal covenant with her.

"You are My witnesses," declares Adonai, "And My servant whom I have chosen, in order that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me." (Is 43:10)

You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities. (Amos 3:2)

The very fact that HaShem calls us to obey Him is proof that He has chosen us. The expectation of the prophets with regard to the nations is that they are idol worshipers. Israel, on the other hand, is expected to worship and serve God in truth. Thus, all of Israel (which includes all who have been grafted into Israel) are His chosen and are called to heed His voice and to obey.

The Declaration

The first thing to which Israel is called to "listen" (i.e., obey) is the declared fact of 1) God's covenant relationship with Israel, and 2) His unique character. Do you find it interesting that the first thing to which God calls Israel to pay attention is the need *to know the truth*? In a time when one's impressions or feelings often form the basis for what one says he "knows," HaShem calls upon Israel to accept as fact what she could otherwise have never known: that יהוה is her God, and that He is אֶחָד, "one" or "unique." In other words, she is called to believe the revelation of God apart from her empirical ability to "prove" His existence and character. She is called to trust that what He has said about Himself is, in fact, true. What is more, she is called to accept His sovereignty (ownership) as the One Who redeemed her from Egypt and made her His own. (The Name יהוה is given to Israel as a covenant Name at the time of her coming out of Egypt.) In a world in which the pagan mind is deceived into thinking that there are actually other gods, Israel is to confess that יהוה is the one and only God, and that He is uniquely Israel's God through a covenant relationship with Israel which He initiated.

The Tetragrammaton also emphasizes that God, the God of Israel, is the eternal God Who exists without reference to time. Whether the Name is formed on the *hifil* of the verb היה (thus giving the sense "cause to be," "bring into being") or simply on the future *qal* (יהיה, yielding a sense of "I will be," "I will always be") or even upon some other aspect of the verb, is impossible to determine (and therefore impossible to know for certain the correct pronunciation). But apparently the Name is emphasized to Moses (Ex 3:14; 6:1-8) in relationship to the exodus because by the outstretched arm of HaShem in the exodus the people were to understand and appreciate the important fact that HaShem was above all and unaffected by time and that, therefore, He was always able to redeem them and to fulfill His covenant promises to them. Moreover, He could promise that He would always "be with them" because nothing outside of Himself can alter Who He is or what He will do.

Thus, the One Who always has been, Who is, and Who always will be, the Unchangeable One, is Israel's God. This relationship (emphasized by the possessive "our"), is one which was initiated by God, is maintained by God, and will inevitably bring glory to God. He is able to keep His eternal, covenant promises primarily because of Who He is—the unchangeable One. Nothing affects change in Him—He is the unmoved Sovereign of the universe.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

Yet, in spite of His eternal, unchangeable character, He is "moved" by the prayers of His people, grieved by

their sin, joyful in their praise, and forever mindful of their needs.

The declaration of God's character continues with the statement: "Adonai (יהוה) is one (אֶחָד)." Rambam explained to us his interpretation of the word אֶחָד when, in his 13 principles he exchanged the word אֶחָד with יָחִיד, *yachid*, "singular." In reaction to the Christian doctrine of a "tri-unity," (which Rambam misunderstood to mean "three gods"), he emphasized rather the singularity of God's being. But I'm convinced that "singularity" is not the primary issue of the word אֶחָד in our passage. It is true that the word can have the sense of "unity" (cf. Gen 2:24), but again, while this may have some bearing upon our text, I don't think it is the primary meaning here. Rather, the context would emphasize that the meaning of אֶחָד here is "unique," that is, there is no other God, and therefore there is no compulsion to divide one's loyalty—one's service and worship, with any other god. In fact, since the uniqueness of God's being is everywhere affirmed in the Scriptures (e.g., Is 45:5, 14), to confess that another god exists, or to act as though one does, is idolatry and denies the very essence of the one true God. One simply cannot worship God as one of many—such a belief is to deny Him. By His own definition, one of the core aspects of His character is that He exists without rivals—He is alone the God of the universe, all others are the fabrication of man's depraved and wayward mind.

The need to understand the make-up or component parts of the person of God does not enter into the discussion of Him until the time of the Greek Church fathers. For the fact that God declared Himself invisible and thus impossible for man to see, but yet He "shows up" as a man (Gen 18) or as the Angel of the Lord (Gen 38), does not bother the Hebrew mind, and no explanation is forthcoming. That no man can see God and live, yet Moses, Aaron, and the 70 elders not only "see" Him but even eat with Him (Ex 24:10-11) is, in the Hebrew mind, in need of no explanation. These apparent contradictions are part and parcel of the Hebrew way of looking at the world, for when opposites appear, they only pull each against the other to bring the truth into focus.

But the Greek mind could not allow such "contradictions" to stand in its sequential logic—an explanation must be given. Thus, the "trinity" doctrine was formulated with terms like "essence" and "substance" to attempt to give an explanation of what all agree (and, if we're fair, all agreed) is/was a mystery and beyond human comprehension. Yet for the Greek mind to leave something as important as the nature of God's character to the realm of unexplained mystery was to "waffle" in one's faith and simply could not be allowed. Interesting, isn't it, that for centuries, yea, millennia, the Hebrew people never considered this "problem" of God's character as requiring some explanation. He revealed Himself, not in ontology (the essential reality of things) but in deeds—in His salvific activity toward Israel.

Thus, the use of אֶחָד here, while it could express the sense of "unity," cannot be understood primarily by this definition for the simple reason that such a meaning was entirely out of the sphere of necessity for the Hebrew mind. One could speculate that "unity" enters into the meaning here on the basis of the pagan nations who manufactured a god for differing emotions (anger, wrath, love, kindness, etc.), and that HaShem was One in the sense of expressing all of these toward mankind. But even this is removed from the words of the Tanach. Rather, it seems the best explanation for אֶחָד here is to understand its meaning to be numerical in the sense of "the only one," i.e., that God is the only God and that therefore it is futile to divide one's loyalty or covenant faithfulness between the true God and false gods that don't even exist.

Thus, the following paragraph, "and you shall love..." begins with the conjunction "and," showing the connection to the declaration just made. Therefore, we should understand the Shema to be saying: Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai alone, and thus you shall love Adonai with *all* your heart, *all* your soul, and *all* your might, etc. The emphasis upon "all" is that of God's unique position as the only God in the universe. As such, He is entirely and singularly worthy of one's love and allegiance.

In the Torah scroll (and in some printed texts), the ׀ of עֵד and the ׀ of אֶחָד are enlarged to form the word עֵד, "witness." It is through the living out of the Shema that we will be a witness to the world of Who God is, and of what He has done for us in making a way of atonement for our sins, and bringing us into His covenant of shalom.

Explanation

The rest of the immediate paragraph of the *Shema*, as well as the remainder of the *parashah*, goes on to explain what it means to “love” Adonai with one’s entire being and abilities. In so doing, the *parashah* reminds us that loving God is not confined to one’s inner feelings or thoughts, but is equally manifest in the outward actions of one’s life. Note the general description: 1) to put the commandments (“these words”) upon one’s heart, 2) to teach them to one’s children, and thus to enable them to put them upon their hearts, 3) to make the commandments of God one’s regular conversation, i.e., to be the central core and substance of life itself, which is encouraged by 4) binding the commandments upon one’s arm and between one’s eyes, and 5) writing the commandments upon the doorpost of one’s house and upon the gates.

The first duty of God’s covenant people is to see to it that His commandments find their regular and constant place of residence to be upon the heart. To have the commandments upon one’s heart means that they govern the thoughts and intents of one’s volition, and that they therefore direct one’s actions. “As a person thinks within himself, so is he” (Prov 23:7). Our contemporary technological age has coined a phrase with regard to computers: “garbage in, garbage out,” meaning that if one inputs false data into a computer program, one can be assured that the computer will generate errors. It is a fitting illustration of our own thinking processes. To the extent that we allow the ways of the world to dominate our hearts, to that extent our actions will conform to the world. Conversely, when the commandments of God govern our hearts, our actions will follow. It is psychologically demonstrable that one becomes like that upon which one constantly meditates. When the Psalter was organized in the canonical process, by the superintending work of the Ruach HaKodesh, the Psalm chosen to head the five books of the ancient hymnal was a Psalm extolling the place of Torah in the life of a true covenant member:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the Torah of Adonai, And in His Torah he meditates day and night. (Ps 1:1–2)

To have one’s delight (חֵפֶזְתְּ, *cheifetz*) in the Torah of Adonai means to have His commandments upon one’s heart. And the parallel line of the poetry explains to us how this is possible: “And in His Torah he meditates (הִגִּדָה, *hagah*) day and night.” To meditate means to mull over and over, to consider deeply, to seek to understand by repeating and contemplating what is repeated. If our delight is to be in the Torah of Adonai, then we must have it constantly in our thoughts and upon our lips (the verb הִגִּדָה can also mean to speak softly, as though to oneself). Even in our everyday work, the words of the Almighty are like a melody that remains constantly in our minds, and often sung, whether softly or in full voice.

We are also to teach these words to our children. The word for teach (שָׁנַן, *shanan*) is not the common word (which would be the *piel* form of לָמַד). The use of שָׁנַן here most likely is derived from the primary sense of the verb, which is “to sharpen.” In the same way that a knife or sword is sharpened by drawing it time and again over the sharpening stone, so the commandments of God are to be taught repeatedly to our children. And even as the edge of the knife is sharpened by the repeated action against the whetstone, so are the lives of our children sharpened to know and love God through their constantly being taught, in word and deed, the truth of God’s word. Here we find the Torah’s basis for the responsibility of parents to teach their children, a responsibility that cannot be shifted to others. While surely our children are taught by others (and the plural form of the *Shema* in Deut 11 emphasizes that the whole community has an obligation to be engaged in instructing all of the children of the community), the responsibility for their training in righteousness cannot be delegated to others. As parents, it is our happy and God-given responsibility to mold the lives of our children in accordance with His ways and words. We neglect this responsibility when we presume that other teachers are in charge of their learning. Other teachers may supplement what we are doing, but the responsibility remains with us.

Yet in all of our desires and efforts to train our children, we must recognize that success ultimately lies in the hands of God. He must do that heart work that we cannot do. He must give to our children the faith that transforms. The metalsmith knows that hardened steel cannot be bent, for it will break. He therefore softens it before he can shape it into the desired form. So it is with our children. God’s mercy must be showered

upon them if they are finally to submit to Him and love Him as their own King and Savior.

This commandment to teach God's commandments diligently to our children (i.e., over and over again) is given substance in the Shema in terms of how we are to accomplish this task. First, we are to "speak of them when we sit in the house and when we walk by the way." This is simply the Hebrew way of saying "speak of them at all times in all situations." One of the grave mistakes embedded in the educational model of Western society is that education occurs only at certain, scheduled times. But this is not God's perspective on education. Teaching our children is a matter of life, not something that occupies certain hours of the day. Homeschooling our children allows for the biblical model, in which we understand our entire life, whether at home or outside of the home, to be the active "school room." Moreover, the goal of education from God's standpoint is that our children should live righteously. It is not so that they can pass the standardized tests. Of course, passing academic tests is important, but it is not of prime importance. Knowledge apart from righteousness has a bitter end. The reality is that when we teach our children the way of God, and they accept this teaching, they are all the more ready to excel in academic ways. Or to put it simply: we are not educating our children for the primary purpose that they might acquire good paying occupations. We are educating our children to know and love God. And when, by God's grace, they receive Him as their Master, and accept from Him the life of righteousness which He gives through the power of His forgiveness, they become people who do excel at their chosen occupation. This is the message of Psalm 1. The person that takes God's Torah into his heart as the standard of life lived out before his gracious and sovereign King, is he who "will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers." (Ps 1:3).

The Shema of our text goes on to give us two examples of how the words of God's Torah are to be the central focus of our lives: "bind them for a sign upon your hand and they shall be for frontals between your eyes." This has been traditionally followed by binding *tefillin* on the arm and forehead. This is a physical activity which is to remind us of an internal reality. For the Hebrew, the head constituted the source from which the rest of the body derived its life. The head was not primarily viewed as the place of cognition and intellect, which was rather thought of in terms of the heart. Moreover, our text instructs us that one of the *tefillin* is to be bound "between the eyes." The eyes are the physical gate of the soul. Thus, metaphorically, those who know the truth "see it," and those who are "blind" have not seen it. This is the point of Yeshua's teaching, that when a blind man guides a blind man, they both fall into the pit (Matt 15:14). By this He means that one without the truth cannot guide another person to find the truth. Thus, "to see" and "to be blind" are used as contrasting metaphors in regard to knowing and living out the truth. When we bind the *tefillin* (symbolic of God's commandments) between the eyes, we are reminding ourselves that true knowledge comes from God. If our "eyes" are to be opened, it will only be when we see the wonderful things God has revealed in His Torah, that is, in the whole of the inspired Scriptures He has graciously given to us.

Likewise, when we bind the *tefillin* upon the arm, we are acknowledging that our strength, our abilities, our endeavors, will only have success when they are conformed to the ways of God. From a Hebrew perspective, one's arm is the symbol of one's strength and abilities, one's actions in life. The instructions in righteousness given to us by God are to govern what we do and how we do it.

Additionally, the means by which we will educate both our children and ourselves to the ways of God, and speak of them when we are in our homes and when we travel on the road, is by having constant reminders. Writing the commandments upon the doorpost of our house and upon our gates is one practical way to establish such a reminder. Our homes are the domain of our private lives. Family privacy is a Torah principle. The family is the first and all important foundation in the building of community. Any community will only be as strong as the families that form it. As we come into our homes, and touch the *mezuzah*, we are acknowledging that God is the King of our private domain. His is the invisible Lord of the house, always in attendance at every meal, at every activity, in all the family relationships. All that is done is to be in honor of Him, and with Him in mind and heart. Likewise, when we leave the home, we touch the *mezuzah*, remembering that our actions, now to be seen in the public domain, are also to honor our King. We are to apply His commandments in the closest of relationships (family) as well as in the world where we interact with others. His commandments are to govern our buying and selling, our work and our entertainment, and the relationships that these activities may engender.

The fact that the commandments are also to be written upon our gates most likely refers to the city gates

of the ancient times. Even when we leave the known environment of our own city, we are to remember that God's commandments are to go with us (for they are upon our hearts). In short, all that we do, all that we think, all that we believe, is to be moulded and patterned after the commandments of God. It is by this life of full conformity to His will that we express our love to Him.