

“Hear & Receive”
Studies on the Shema, Pt. 1
by Rob Vanhoff

Certainly all of us relish the story in Mark 12 of the scribe who approaches Yeshua, asking for the “first commandment in the Torah.” The *first* commandment – *ha-mitzvah ha-rishonah*. Matthew 22 reads, “the first and *great* commandment.” There are other differences here as well, but I’m not now going to lay the texts of these two Gospels side by side for comparison, though such a venture would certainly bear fruit and insight for the effort. Rather, I want to make a few simple observations that in my opinion are worthy of our reflection; observations that, as far as I know, have gone unnoticed among the Torah-pursuant talmidim of our Master, the King Messiah Yeshua.

In Mark’s telling, Yeshua’s response to the scribe’s inquiry begins, “*Hear, O Israel...*” Many will right away recognize that this of course is the “*Shema*,” named such after the first Hebrew word of the ancient and famous prayer. “*Shema!*” means, quite simply, “*Hear!*” In grammatical terms, we say this is a “qal” 2nd person singular imperative of the root *shin-mem-ayin*, a verb meaning “to hear.” Now let me repeat something that might have slipped by you just now: it’s an *imperative*. In Hebrew, we say “*z’man tzivui*,” or simply, “command.” Did you catch that? The word “*Shema*” in Deuteronomy 6:4 is a command!

So what? Wouldn’t we all agree that the “greatest commandment in the Torah” is “Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, etc...”? Perhaps. But I believe we can yet go deeper. What I would like to suggest is that the real command here is indicated clearly by Hebrew grammar. That command is “*Shema!*” or, “*Hear!*” or even, “*Listen!*”

Fine. So what does this have to do with the Targumim? Hasn’t all this been a discussion of nuances of Hebrew? Well, an ancient manuscript of Targum Onkelos uses an interesting - and very meaningful - word to translate the command, “*Shema!*” What word? “*Qabbel!*” As a matter of fact, over half of the 80-some occurrences of the root *shin-mem-ayin* in Deuteronomy are translated into Aramaic with the root *qof-bet-lamed*, meaning “to receive, accept.” Most people will recognize this root behind the word *qabbalah* (some transliterate it *kabbalah*), referring to the Jewish mystical tradition. Actually, in the most ancient rabbinic texts the word *qabbalah* simply means “that which has been received,” or “received tradition.” So the Targum is using the root *qof-bet-lamed* to mean “receive”—it is not delving into the much later mystical traditions expressed in a work like the Zohar.

Quite practically, however, that the root *qof-bet-lamed* means “to receive” has a lot of significance. Just think of the use of the verb “to receive” in these passages: “Receive the Holy Spirit (as the Father sent Me, so I send you)...” (John 20); “As you have received the Lord Messiah Yeshua, so walk in Him.” (Colossians 2); “For I delivered unto you that which I also received...” (1 Corinthians 15). The list goes on. The main point here is the foundational truth that *you cannot give what you do not have*. How much more when we are talking about “loving God with all our heart...”? At the end of the powerful story of debt-forgiveness in Luke 7, Yeshua asks his host, “Which of them will love him most?” Shimon answers, “I suppose the one whom he forgave more.” In other words, our capacity to love God is limited by what we have first received from Him. “We love, because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

Back to the first commandment in the Torah: Yes, we are commanded to love God, and this is of utmost importance. But how can we? We must first adopt the understanding of the ancient Targumist, who rendered the Hebrew word “*Shema*” with “*Qabbel!*”: “*Receive, O Israel! The LORD our God the LORD*

is One.” Only after we have received Him in His complete Unity, in His own self-disclosure through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son Yeshua, God-in-the-flesh, can we respond with the second part of that first and great commandment, “and you will love the LORD your God with all your heart...” For you cannot give what you do not have. And, “what do you have that you did not receive?”

(to be continued...)

Copyright © 2010 Rob Vanhoof
All rights reserved

A Tale of Two Proclivities

Studies on the Shema, Pt. 2

Rob Vanhoff

“And you will love the Lord your God with both inclinations of your heart...” Deut 6:5, (Targum Jonathan)

Though there is much to be said about Targum Jonathan’s rendering of the Shema passage as a whole, right now I want to focus on this single line. We can’t say which came first, but the Mishnah (c. 200 AD) understands “with all your heart” in the same manner as this Targum: “with all your heart – this means with your two impulses, the evil impulse as well as the good impulse” (m. *Berachot* 9.5). The tradition is quite old, and the double letter ‘bayt’ in the word *levavekha* (“your heart”) has even been explained midrashically as indicating the *yetzer ra* (evil inclination) and the *yetzer tov* (good inclination).

Ancient as this interpretive tradition may be, thinking in such terms is not helpful for me; nor do I believe it is helpful for anyone in Messiah Yeshua. Why? Because Messiah and the Apostles never taught that we have “two inclinations,” and neither does the Tanakh! Rather, “Every *yetzer* of the thoughts of his heart are only evil continually” (Gen 6:5); “Whoever turns his ear from the Torah, even his prayer is an abomination” (Prov 28:9); “The carnal mind... does not subject itself to the Torah of God, neither is it able to do so” (Rom 8:6–7); “Without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Heb 11:6); “They shall put you out of the synagogues... whosoever kills you will think that he does God service” (John 16:2). Verses like these highlight the twisted condition of the unredeemed heart. Any approach to Torah apart from faith will twist and distort it, misrepresenting both God and His righteousness.

Yeshua calls us to purity of heart. “Make the whole tree good!” (Matt 12:33); “Cleanse the inside of the cup and the outside will also be clean!” (Matt 23:26). Through His Spirit in us, we put to death the deeds of the flesh. He is our life, our fulfilling of the righteousness of the Torah. On my own I can do nothing for God. How we rejoice in the prophet’s promise, “I will give you a new heart... and I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you shall keep my judgments, and do them.” (Ezek 11:19–20, cp. Ezek 36:26–27). Never has a sweeter promise been made.

Time and again, Yeshua underscores that transgressions of Torah originate in the heart: “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies...” (Matt 15:19, cp. James 1:13–15).

How could such “inclinations” be offered to God as an expression of love? They can not. Go and reread the first chapter of Isaiah. Loving God with all your heart does not have anything to do with “good and evil inclinations,” as this tradition suggests. Such a picture of a person’s inner world is demonstrative of the blindness at the core of rabbinic philosophy. It’s no wonder this line of thought spins out of control and crashes by the time we get to the Talmud. Apart from the faith of Messiah, there is no “good inclina-

tion.” Rather, we receive the gift of faith; we die and rise again with Him. He paid our sin debt so that we could be reconciled to the Father in shalom. This is how we are able to bear good fruit unto Him; to love Him with all our heart.

(for additional thoughts on the *yetzer ra* and *yetzer tov*, see Tim Hegg, *Notes & Commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* [TorahResource, 2005], 1.112ff.)

Copyright © 2010 Rob Vanhoff
All rights reserved

The Soul Proprietor
Studies in the Shema – Pt. 3

Rob Vanhoff

“And you shall love the Lord your God ... with all your *nefesh* (soul)...”

Nefesh... Ever wonder about that word? What exactly is a *nefesh*, and where’s mine?

According to rabbinic lore, Rabbi Akiva struggled with this command his whole life. “How will I ever fulfill this mitzvah?” he pondered. Tradition tells us that even as Roman soldiers pulled the flesh from his body with iron combs he was faithful to recite the Shema. “Even if He takes your *nefesh*,” he taught his talmidim. Certainly this story has strengthened Jewish resolve to be willing to die for the sanctification of God's name. In spite of the Roman prohibition, this rabbi would not for a moment refrain from the study or teaching of the holy Torah. Akiva understood “your *nefesh*” in the Shema to be referring to his physical life.

However, the Torah itself teaches us that there’s more to the word *nefesh*, and hence this command. “That *nefesh* shall be cut off from its people” is a recurring phrase in the Torah (Gen 17:14; Ex 12:15; Lev 17:14; Num 19:20; etc.). A *nefesh* can be ‘cut off’? And if ‘cut off,’ what is the thing it is ‘cut off’ from? Its people. If a *nefesh* being cut off from its people is a punishment, how much more does it flourish when living properly among them? Thus the Torah teaches that the rightful place of a *nefesh* is among its community. As a matter of fact, in ancient Semitic languages the root *nun, peh, shin* has the sense of flourishing or fruitfulness. This connotation helps us understand why the verb “cut off” makes sense here. Phrases like “the axe is at the root of the trees” (Matt 3:10; Lk 3:9) start to pack a bigger punch.

Therefore, when I read “with all your *nefesh*,” I am thinking about my life in the context of serving others. My God-given capacities to act are to be channeled for service within the social settings that Hashem has placed me. To live with integrity, I am to be consistent with a servant-hearted attitude in all spheres of life; whether fellowshiping with other believers or conducting a business transaction. Not only is it contrary to our design to “forsake the assembly (Greek: *episynagogue*)” (Heb 10:25), but Paul exhorts us to “walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt...” (Col 4:5-6). My *nefesh* is to be sincerely engaged in the lives of others. Serving others is the essence of loving God with your soul.

As Yeshua said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life (Greek: *psyche*; Hebrew: *nefesh*) a ransom for many.” (Mk 10:45)

God and Mammon

Studies in the Shema, Pt. 4

Rob Vanhoff

“...with all your might.”

Have you ever compared the various translations of this last phrase, *uvkhol me'odekha* (“and with all your might”)? Even the 21st century Jewish Publication Society version follows the 400 year-old King James Version here, rendering the Hebrew *me'od* as “might.” But in the Tanakh, *me'od* is most often used as an adverb, such as “much,” “very,” or “exceedingly.” Where does the English “might” come from? To say “and with all your much” seems nonsensical to our ear.

Once again, the Targum comes in handy. The Aramaic word used to translate *me'od* will sound familiar to almost any literate American: *mammon*. So that gives us, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your mammon.” But is that any better? ArtScroll's Stone Edition translation will diverge from the KJV whenever possible, and in so doing adopts the Targum's *mammon* by using the English “resources.” This move towards understanding *me'od* as finances is a good start.

The famous passage alluded to in the title of this article is found in both Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13. “*You cannot serve God and mammon.*” (The English word “mammon” is a transliteration of the Greek, which in turn is a transliteration of the Aramaic word.) The obvious point, however, is that in both verses, our King is talking about money. Looking at Matthew specifically, you will see that the greater part of chapter 6 contrasts God's way of *tzedekah* (“righteousness”) with that of men. The Father's heart for the poor extends from forgiveness of debt on one hand to fasting so that others may eat on the other. Yeshua's comment on the “evil eye” in 6:23 is about the stingy heart that refuses to give to the needy (Cf. Deuteronomy 15:9; Proverbs 28:22; Matthew 20:15). Finally, notice how the word “righteousness” in both 6:1 (though Textus Receptus has “alms” here) and 6:33 forms nice book-ends for the entire section.

So how are we to understand the phrase “You cannot serve God and mammon” in light of the Shema, which commands us to love God with all our *mammon*? Actually, this statement cuts right to the heart of the Shema. We cannot love God *and* mammon. Rather, we are to love God (by serving Him) *with* our mammon (money). What's more, we are to love Him with *all* our mammon. Money has a purpose in this world, and that is for the worship and love of the Holy One, Blessed is He. Think about this when you spend your money.

Unity in Messiah Yeshua
Studies in the Shema, Part 5

Rob Vanhoff

He who says, “What’s mine is yours, what’s yours is yours” is a Hasid.
Mishnah Avot 5.9

In the last Newsletter we explored the Targumic interpretation of the Hebrew word *me’od* in the *Shema*. To “love God with all your mammon (money/wealth)” may sound funny to some at first, but quite possibly evokes a good question: “How can I love/serve/worship God with all my money?”

Luke in particular underscores that true faith in Yeshua corresponds to a new orientation toward personal possessions. In Messiah’s rebuke of the brothers (12:15), His challenge to the rich young ruler (18:22), and in the salvation of Zaccheus (19:8), we see that finances cannot be compartmentalized and separated from our walk in the Spirit. Those who want to follow Yeshua should consider carefully Luke 14:33, “So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.” (NASB)

To be sure, Yeshua is not asking us all to become homeless beggars. Rather, all our efforts and resources are to be aligned with glorifying Messiah, walking the way He walked, sharing the “good news” of His kingship with the world, and supporting ministries that bring the lost to God’s Torah through Him. It’s an “all or nothing” proposition.

I delight in pointing the reader to yet another passage authored by Luke, keeping in mind all we have said concerning the *Shema*:

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. (Acts 4:32, ESV; Cf. 2:44ff)

In this one verse, we have a wonderful expression of the early *ekklesia*’s unity in heart, soul, and possessions. If Luke was not intentionally embedding the Master’s exposition of the *Shema* here, then certainly the Holy Spirit was! The point is clear: my identity in Messiah is not as much “individual” (me and mine) as it is a member of His body, the community of believers (us and ours). We are united in Him, and His community is where our individual talents, gifting, and purposes are nourished and find their ultimate fulfillment. For what else were we created?

“Do” Diligence

Studies in the Shema, Part 6

Rob Vanhoff

“And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your children.” Deuteronomy 6:6-7

One of the earliest rabbinic commentaries expands upon the word וְשִׁנְנָתָם (veshennantam, “and you shall impress them/teach them diligently”). It reads, “They shall be so well ordered inside your mouth that when a man asks you a matter (literally, דְּבָר, *davar*, “word”) you will not hesitate, but will answer him immediately.” (*Sifre to Deuteronomy*, 34)

What impresses me about this comment is its insightful observation that the commandment’s purpose is to make a teacher out of a parent; to link parenthood with instruction in God’s Word. Unfortunately, I used to hear this command and think, “Yeah, my kids need to learn this, and it’s my job to make sure they do,” assuming that it was solely for their sake. Sticking to the text before us, however, we see that this particular command is for the parent to teach. It is not directed at “children,” as if to say, “Children, listen to your parents and learn the commandments from them” – of course, passages like Proverbs 2:1, 3:1, or even Eph. 6:1 accomplish this end. No, the obligation here is for parents to be teachers.

What are we to teach? We are to teach “these words” that Moshe is commanding. That is, the Torah. And just as with any skill, the more you practice the better you become. We improve only by doing, and in this respect we teach through doing the *mitzvot* as much as by teaching what Scripture says. It is imperative that we constantly guard against the hypocrisy of “saying but not doing.” What’s more, instructors will generally agree that good teaching requires levels of mastery well beyond what is expected of a student. The command for us to teach “these words” presses us to a greater mastery of walking in them.

The comment from the *Sifre* alludes to a benefit beyond the scope of the “home-school” as well, and that is the benefit that an inquirer receives when asking us about a “word” - or should I say, “the Word.” Our hearts and minds, sharpened through regular doing-and-teaching, will be ready to answer when questioned about our faith.

“but sanctify Messiah as Adonai (κύριος, *kurios*) in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account (λόγος, *logos*, “word”) for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15)

Once we understand that life in Messiah Yeshua is the goal of the Torah, we also see that any study, teaching, or doing is in vain if He is not at the center of our activity. Let us hold fast to Messiah our Redeemer, teaching our children, at all times ready to give an answer to those who ask about what we are doing or why we are doing it.