

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Va’etchanan, August 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Va’etchanan – the Shema

This week’s Parsha of Va’etchanan contains some of the most fundamental portions of the Torah, including the Ten Commandments and the first paragraph of the Shema. Let’s focus on some ideas and halachot surrounding the Shema.

We are commanded to recite the Shema twice each day. There is a well-known, touching story about how the Shema saved many Jewish children after the holocaust.¹ Many young children were placed into Christian orphanages during the war, as a means of protecting them from the Nazis. The priests and nuns who ran the orphanages tried their best to ‘save the souls’ of these poor children and raise them as Christians. After the war, various Rabbis visited the orphanages in an effort to rescue these children. However the priests and nuns denied that any of the children were Jewish. The rabbis would walk up and down the aisles calling out Shema Yisrael. Those children that were Jewish instinctively covered their eyes with their hand and called out “Mama! Mama!” They retained the subconscious memory of their mothers putting them to sleep with the Shema. In this way countless Jewish children were identified and saved.

The Shema should be the last thing that a Jew says before they die. Many martyrs have died al Kiddush Hashem with the Shema on their lips. But perhaps even harder than dying al kiddush Hashem, is to **live** al Kiddush Hashem. In practice this means to live and behave with the message of the Shema. That is, with the knowledge that Hashem is our G-d and Hashem is One. This knowledge must ideally impact every aspect of our lives – how we relate to Hashem and how we relate to each other. Let’s learn some of the halachot relating to the recitation of the Shema in the correct way.

Our intention

The Shulchan Aruch² rules that a person fails to fulfil the obligation of reciting Shema if they do not concentrate when reading the first pasuk. The Mishnah Berurah explains that we need a heightened level of concentration when reciting the Shema, which is greater than the concentration needed for other mitzvot. There are 3 things we need to concentrate on when reciting the Shema: the fact that we are fulfilling the biblical mitzvah of reciting the Shema, that we accept upon ourselves the yoke of Heaven and the unity of Hashem.

There is a memory trick that can help us to focus on these three things as we recite the first verse:

- (a) **Shema Yisrael**: The word ‘**Shema**’ reminds us to focus on the fact that we are fulfilling the biblical mitzvah of reciting the Shema.
- (b) **Hashem Elokainu**: The word ‘Elokainu’ states that Hashem is our **G-d** and reminds us to consciously accept upon ourselves the yoke of Heaven.
- (c) **Hashem Echad**: The word ‘Echad’ reminds us to focus on the fact that Hashem is One.

Our state of mind

The Shulchan Aruch³ rules that one should read the Shema with concentration, fear, awe, trembling and shaking. The Mishnah Berurah⁴ explains that we should read the Shema as though it were a new message received from the king. We should therefore read it carefully and with great focus, considering each

¹ This story has been told about the Ponovicher Rav and the Skulener Rebbe.

² Orach Chaim 60:5.

³ Orach Chaim 61:1.

⁴ 61:4.

commandment and punishment as we utter it. The Mishnah Berurah emphasizes the importance of understanding the words as one reads them.⁵

Such a requirement can present a challenge to those who have difficulty understanding the Hebrew. Thus, it is highly recommended that one spend some time learning the meaning of the words. Additionally, an interlinear translation of the Shema (where the English translation appears below each word) is very useful.

Our pronunciation

The Gemara⁶ teaches that Gehinom⁷ is 'cooled down' for those who are meticulous in enunciating the letters of the Shema. Accordingly, the Shulchan Aruch⁸ describes how to pronounce the Shema correctly. This includes sounding each letter correctly and ensuring that words are pronounced separately. Many siddurim include a vertical line between certain words that end and start with the same letter to remind us to pause and separate these words and not run the words into each other. In order to fulfil this requirement properly we are forced to slow down and concentrate on our speech.

Accenting the correct syllable

It is important to place the accent on the correct syllable of each word. Unlike English, the accent in Hebrew words is often on the last or second last syllable. You can tell which syllable to accent by looking at the position of the trop (musical note) that is printed above or below each word of the Shema in the siddur.

The following anecdote demonstrates the importance of accenting the correct syllable.

Rav Yisroel Reisman is known as being very precise in his pronunciation of Hebrew words. He asks his congregants to be very careful as well, especially when they are acting as chazzan. One of his congregants once asked: "Does it really make such a difference which syllable I emphasise? It doesn't change the meaning of the word!" Rav Reisman didn't answer, but he started to mispronounce the congregant's name by placing the emphasis on the incorrect syllable. At first, the congregant just laughed. However, Rav Reisman kept this up for some time and eventually the congregant got quite annoyed and asked Rav Reisman to stop. Rav Reisman understood that people hate to hear their name being pronounced incorrectly. And the congregant finally understood the significance of correctly emphasising each word.

Furthermore, changing the accent from one syllable to another can sometimes actually change the meaning of the word. We see the same concept in English. A heteronym is a word whose meaning changes with the pronunciation. For example:

- **'Object'**: if the emphasis is on the first syllable it is a noun (e.g. "He was dragging a large object"). If the emphasis is on the last syllable it is a verb meaning to protest (e.g. "I object your Honour").
- **'Sewer'**: depending on how you pronounce the first 'e' this word can either mean a person who sews or an underground pipe for carrying away drainage water and waste.

Just as in English, pronouncing the Hebrew words incorrectly can risk changing the entire meaning of the words, and result in failing to correctly fulfil the mitzvah of saying Shema.

Though putting in the requisite effort to say the Shema slowly and correctly may be quite awkward and challenging at first, if we persevere it will become easier. Though, on the other hand, we can welcome the challenge as it may actually force us to recite the Shema with a heightened concentration.

We recite the Shema at least twice a day, every day. We may as well try to fulfil the mitzvah properly!

Let's try something this week:

1. Actively try to focus on having the correct kavana when reciting the Shema. Perhaps use the memory trick provided above.
2. Slow down and make more of an effort to pronounce each word of the Shema properly.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

⁵ 61:5, quoting the Pri Megadim.

⁶ Brachot 15b.

⁷ The Jewish equivalent of 'Hell'.

⁸ Orach Chaim 61:14-23.

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About Darchai Noam

The pasuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: “Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace”. The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem’s help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of ‘v’ahavta l’re’echa kamocho’ – loving one’s fellow as oneself.

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