

And All Believe

A Weekly Leaflet from the House of "Bnei Emunim"



Parshas Shoftim

In the Pathways of Emunim:

Amen and Prayer in this Parsha

The Secret of Reciting Kriyas Shema

"Ashreinu - **How fortunate are we, how goodly our portion and how pleasant is our lot and how beautiful our heritage. How fortunate are we, to arise and go, morning and evening, to the shuls and batei medrash and unify Your Name every day always, and recite twice with love:** Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad..."

It appears that by reciting this prayer every morning, we are expressing above all our tribute to that marvelous affirmation early and late, the very prayer which has long since become the outstanding symbol for the sacrifice and martyrdom of the Jewish people for the sake of their G-d: the declaration of 'Shema Yisrael'.

In this parsha, the Torah mentions the tremendous power of Kriyas Shema in the pasuk which describes the call of the kohen to the Jewish people before they go forth in battle (Devarim 20:3): "Shema Yisrael - Hear, O Israel, you are about to go to war against your enemies. Let your hearts not be weak; do not be afraid or impetuous and do not be terrified by them."

Chazal were puzzled by this pasuk (Sotah 42a) and asked why the Torah wrote 'Shema Yisrael' in the singular when the rest of the parsha is in the plural form. They explained: "R' Yochanan said in the name of R' Shimon bar Yochai: Hakadosh Baruch Hu said to Yisrael: even if all you have observed is reciting Kriyas Shema morning and evening, you will not be delivered into their hands" (Maharsha's commentary on the gemara).

This seems puzzling as well. Is this recital actually enough of an effort to protect Jewry from their enemy at battle? And yet further, the gemara states that even a slight sin like speaking between putting on the tefillin shel yad and the tefillin shel rosh is enough to prevent a victory over the enemy!

The Kotzker Rebbe commented thus: The Torah chose here to establish the fact that the power and impact of a mitzvah is measured according to our regard towards it. Since the kohen attributed to the reciting of Shema such importance and weight, and trusted and believed in its power to protect the Jewish people, he declared that it has the capacity of saving us from every enemy. However, "one who is afraid and weak of heart" and does not believe in the power of Shema was advised to turn back from the battlefield, for since he is not convinced of his power, it will not protect him ("Daf Al Daf" Sotah ibid).

In What Merit Did Jewry Succeed in Battle?

From the words of Chazal we are able to understand that aside from the unique value of the mitzvah of Kriyas Shema, there is an additional segulah-power of its protection and rescue, especially in wars engaged in by Jews. We find an indication of this in Sefer Gematriyos by R' Yehudah Hechassid (Os 65): "Asher cherev geius... (according to Devarim 33:29) which has the same numerical value as "Kriyas Shema", to teach us that the kohen would urge them that during battle, they should recite the Shema aloud and by doing so, they would win, as is written, "Shema Yisrael - Hear O Israel, you are going forth today in battle."

In Bircas Avraham (Ki Savo) we find an additional hint to this from the pasuk (ibid 20:1), "Ki seitzei - when you go forth in battle... veshavisa shivyo -- and you shall take into captivity..." The two words form the acrostic of "Umeyachadim Shimcha Bechol Yom Tamid V'omrim B'hava Shema Yisrael."

The ancient work, Eldad HaDani, describes the wars of the four Tribes which settled in the Kingdom of Chavilla: Reuvein, Naftali, Gad and Asher: "They had a great viceroy, Elitzafan, a descendant of Oholiav the Danite, upon whose white banner was written in black: 'Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu...' They are as numerous as the sand on the seashore... and they engage only in war, and when they are in battle... they recite and shout frequently and in unison: 'Shema Yisrael Hashem... Echad.'"

A Special Segulah Aid for Safekeeping and Salvation

The mitzvah of reciting Shema was a special aid for the Jews in Egypt in sparing them suffering from the ten plagues. The Ben Ish Chai writes (Shana Alef, Introduction to Va'eyra) on the pasuk (Shmos 8:19), "And I shall make a separation between My people and yours; l'machar, tomorrow will this sign be." The word l'MaChaR hints at the numerical value of 248, corresponding to the 248 letters in the Shema (including 'Hashem Elokeichem Emes'). In the merit of their saying Shema, Hashem made a separation between the Jews and the Egyptians and spared them from the plague of the Firstborn. An additional hint was derived by R' Yosef Yisrael Deitsch in his work "Ben Garni" from the verse (Shmos 14:8): "And Bnei Yisrael left b'yad ramah" - in the merit of ramah, the 248 letters which constitute the Shema.

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 61:3) writes that one should add three words to the Shema to complete the count of 248, corresponding to the organs in the body. This is why the chazzan ends with "Hashem Elokeichem emes", and even one who recites Shema alone, prefaces it with the three words of "Kel Melech Ne'eman" to complete the count of 248 (Rema ibid).

R' Yehuda ben R' Yakar writes in his commentary on the siddur by Ahavas Olam that one must be very meticulous in pronouncing every single word of Shema since this will protect each of his 248 bodily organs, as is written in Mishlei (7:2): "Guard My commandments and live." Guard My 248 letters and I will protect your 248 organs. Rabbenu Yonah expressed this thought in his Sefer Hayirah, "And when bedtime comes, one should recite the entire Shema since it contains 248 words, which keep away every evil-seeker from [harming] his 248 organs."

These are the selfsame words of Chazal in Pirkei d'R' Eliezer (end of chap. 4): "Yisrael, which is one nation in the land, unify His great Name every day and say Shema Yisrael. And Hakadosh Bruch Hu answers His people and says: 'I am Hashem Your G-d Who saves you from every tribulation.'"

David and Goliath

After having dwelled upon the potency of reciting the Shema for protection and salvation, we shall not wonder why Chazal said that when the Philistines fought against Israel, Goliath their leader would launch the battles precisely in the morning and evening hours, as is written (Shmuel I 17:16): "And the Philistine would approach early [in the morning] and in the evening." He did this to distract the Jews from reciting Shema for even he was aware of the power of this mitzvah as protection for the Jewish people, and did everything in his power to sidetrack them from it in the hope of overcoming them and defeating them in the war (Maharsha I ibid).

In the light of this we are now able to find substantiation to the inscrutable words of the Zohar (Tikunei Zohar, Tikuna 21) on the pasuk which describes the clash between David and Goliath (Shmuel I 17:40), "And he [David] selected five smooth pebbles from the stream and put them in his shepherd's satchel... and he drew near the Philistine." The five stones represent five words, the first four being: "Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu." When these were laid side by side, they become 'one - Echad'. He was thus able to kill the Philistine who blasphemed against Hashem.

Torah Megina Umatzla -- Torah Protects and Preserves

The Chofetz Chaim used to advise the various Jewish soldiers who came to him to employ the special segulah which he had heard from his master, R' Nachumke of Horodna: At any time of danger, one should shout out the pasuk 'Shema Yisrael' which testifies to the Oneness of Hashem. This would draw Hashem close to protect and save them. The Chofetz Chaim used to add the words of the gemara previously quoted, that even if Jews were to only keep the mitzvah of Kriyas Shema, Hashem would save them from the hands of their gentile enemies.

Upon another occasion, the Chofetz Chaim would add an instruction on how to activate the Torah's power of salvation.

The actual text of the Shema consists of Torah which people can understand and as such, we can surely realize that it has the power to save and to protect us from all evil (Chofetz Chaim Chayav U'fo'olo, Vol. III p. 870; Vol. I p. 391.

The Maharitz Chayos expanded on Rashbi's saying that "even if you only recited the Shema morning and evening, you will not be delivered into the hands of the enemy (Sotah 42a)." This corresponds to what he says in Menachos (99b): 'R' Yochanan says in the name of R' Shimon ben Yochai: Even if a person merely recites Shema morning and evening, he has fulfilled the obligation of 'This sefer Torah shall not budge from your mouth and you shall study it by day and by night.' And since 'Torah protects and preserves', we can now understand how reciting the Shema can protect Jewry during war.

The work Yafeh Lalev (Vol. I) quotes the marvelous work, Shomer Emunim on the Torah by R' Moshe of Lancburg: The words 'Shema Yisrael' (together with the combination of letters) add up to 'Torah tziva lanu Moshe', from which we can infer that whoever recites the Shema in its proper time is credited as if he studied the entire Torah. The pasuk of 'Shema Yisrael' (together with the sum of words and letters) adds up to 613, indicating that when one recites the Shema, it is as if he fulfilled all of the mitzvos.

Kriyas Shema and Korbonos

The Medrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Voes'chanan 8835) teaches us more about the importance of reciting Shema at the proper time, morning and evening. "This can be compared to a sage who had a son who served his father a meal twice a day, morning and evening. There came a time when the father realized that his son could no longer afford to do this as before and said to him: 'I know that you can no longer do this for me. All I ask of you now is to come and hear me expound on Torah in the beis knesses twice daily. This will please me as if you provided me with the two meals of the past.'"

The Medrash continues and says that this can be compared to Hashem and Israel. In the past, the Jews used to bring sacrifices twice a day, as is written, "...the one sheep you shall make in the morning and the second sheep you should make by evening time." Hashem says: "I know that the Beis Hamikdash is destined to be destroyed and you will no longer be able to bring sacrifices. Therefore I ask for a substitute - that you recite Shema in the morning and Shema in the evening, and I will receive it more favorably than all of the korbonos."

In Yafeh Lalev (Vol. I, 61) he coupled this teaching of Chazal with another teaching in Midrash Shir Hashirim (5:2): 'I am asleep but my heart is awake' - says Knesses Yisrael before Hakadosh Baruch Hu: 'Ribono shel Olam, I am asleep from the korbonos, but my heart is awake for Kriyas Shema...'

We can find an allusion to this in the pasuk with which we opened this essay: "Shema Yisrael, atem kreivim - Hear O Yisrael, you are today approaching war." The word 'kreivim' can be said to be derived from the same root as 'makrivim', or sacrificing. Thus we can infer that reciting the Shema is comparable to bringing a sacrifice (Dvash Lefi, maareches 100:9).

Amen in the Parsha

In this parsha we are commanded: "You shall surely pursue tzedek so that you may live and inherit the land which Hashem your G-d is giving you" (16:20). The author of Vaye'etar Yitzchak (Maareches Alef) hints at the words of Chazal that the word 'TZeDeK' hints at tzadi - ninety 'Amen's, four Kedushos and one hundred 'amen's which a person is required to say daily. We learn from this pasuk that if a person pursues this practice daily, he will merit the fulfillment of the promise '...so that you may live and inherit the land...' that is, you will merit a long life in this world and will gain eternal life in Olam Haba.

Tales of Emunim:

A story about Amen and Prayer

The Kriyas Shema Which Saved from Shmad

In the beginning of the horrendous Holocaust, when sword consumed on the outside and fear from within, one uppermost concern by most Jews was the fate of their tender children. The situation deteriorated with time. Many corpses filled deserted streets which had once teemed with vibrant life. Hunger and suffering were rampant, but insignificant compared to the unbearable idea of what would be the fate of innocent children.

This difficult situation sent many parents in search for innovative solutions to the salvation of their children. One recourse was to send them to the many convents and monasteries which dotted the entire European continent and served as sanctuaries for refugee children. There, under the protection of priests or nuns, parents hoped their children would survive until the war's end.

It was a default answer because of the spiritual danger of these impure places but the parents had no choice. Before actually handing over the children, the helpless parents would drill into their young minds the fact that they were Jewish and fill their young minds with as much Jewish content as they could absorb, hoping and praying that the war would not last long enough for them to forget...

Hundreds and thousands of children were transferred to Christian hands. The separation was deeply painful for children, but especially for parents who feared they would never see their children again.

But the war stretched on and on. The majority of parents met their end in the death camps with only very few surviving. The children in the monasteries were kept safe but as time went by, they became brainwashed by the Christian staff and forgot all about their past.

When the war was over, the Jewish relief activists were faced with a dilemma. Parents or surviving relatives came to the monasteries to claim the children. The priests, for the main, agreed to release their charges but demanded proof of the children's Jewishness [since Christian orphans were also kept there]. Who had any such legal documentation? Family names were not accepted by them and the children themselves had been very young when they parted from their parents. The well meaning askanim were at a loss to reclaim these Jewish souls and dreaded the thought that they would remain lost to their people.

We see a scene of two distinguished looking rabbis standing on the threshold of a major Christian orphanage housing hundreds of Jewish orphans. One of the rabbis was the famous

Ponevizher Rav, R' Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman. They presented the head priest with a long list of names of Jewish children who had been entrusted to this place, but these proofs were not substantial enough, especially for the priest who wished to keep the children in the Church's custody.

The arguments went back and forth, with no progress. Growing impatient, the head priest turned to the rabbis and said, "My time is precious. I am giving you three minutes in which to prove who are the Jewish children here. This is your last chance. If you fail, all the children remain here!"

"We will return in the evening," said R' Kahaneman, "to claim our three minutes." The priest agreed. They left and spent the time praying to Hashem for enlightenment. When they returned, the children were lying in bed in a large room. In five minutes the lights would be extinguished according to the strict rules of this orphanage. The rabbanim entered the large hall, followed by the suspicious head priest. Suddenly, the Ponevizher Rav dragged a chair to the center of the room and stood up on it. His voice rang out loud and clear: "Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!"

The clarion call resonated throughout the room and instinctively, a mother image arose in the memories of hundreds of children, standing by their bedside and reciting the Shema together with them. And suddenly, these children cried out, "Mama! Mama!"

The priest bowed his head in defeat. He led the rabbis to his office and prepared the necessary papers of release for hundreds of Jewish children being held in

his care.

What a beautiful, resounding testimony to the love and care of Jewish mothers who had done the little they could to assure that their tender young children would abide by their heritage. How? By reciting the Shema with them night and morning, with emotion and warmth -- a small practice that in the end, saved their children from shmad and preserved them as Jews.

(Pachad David Vayigash)