

Vaeschanan

In Parshas VaEschanan we read the Jewish creed "*Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad.*"

Shema in simple Hebrew means hear or listen. In a deeper sense the word *Shema* means a gathering of one's senses and thoughts (as in "*Vayshama Shaul es Hoam,*"¹ and Saul summoned the people). It is incumbent upon us to summon all our senses and thoughts to testify that "*Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echod.*"

If we ponder this for a moment we can understand the essential nature of the recital of the *Shema* and its centrality in Jewish life.

The Baal Shem Tov says that one's essence is where his thoughts are. This is why, he explains, we say in our *Tefillos*, "Draw near our dispersed from among the nations, and gather our "spread out" from the corners of the earth." This is not merely a poetic duplication of the same thought, rather, the second phase "gather our spread out" is an integral part of the original thought.

First we pray for an ingathering of all our exiled—exiled in the physical sense, and then we refer to a spiritual gathering together. We ask that each and every Jew return with his fullest measure of spiritual attributes, his full faculties and deepest thoughts, all attuned to the call of "ingathering..."

We may say "*Shema Yisroel*", Hear O Israel, but the object of our cry is not attuned. We recite words which have little meaning to our distracted inner self. Therefore, we begin by saying *Shema*—gather your senses, thoughts and innermost feelings to understand that "*Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad.*"

Hashem is "*Haya, Hove VeYihey KeEchod,*" He is past, present and future at the same time.² We speak of G-dliness

that transcends human understanding; we speak of the infinity of G-d. *Elokim* in Hebrew has the same numerical value as *HaTeva*—"The Nature."³ *Elokim* refers to G-d the Creator, say Chazal, G-dliness as it relates to man and his world.

A Jew declares in the Shema "*Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*," the unity of G-dliness and his subjugation to the Divine Will.

The *Midrash* comments: from where did the Jewish people merit the creed of Shema? From the experience of "*Matan Torah*," the Revelation at Mt. Sinai, of which it is written "the L-rd spoke to you face to face."

The Jewish people were able to receive the *Panim*—essence of revealed G-dliness at Sinai, and it did so with its own *Panim*—spiritual essence—the *Neshama*. The Jewish people were given the spiritual inspiration that set it apart for all times from all the nations. From *Matan Torah*, we, the Jewish people, became a *Goy Echad*, a singular nation with a unique spiritual sensitivity and Divinely ordained role. Thus, says the *Midrash*, we merited the *Shema*.⁴

We are able as Jews to harness our innermost self in *Kabolas Ol Malchus Shamayim*, assuming the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom twice daily through the experience of *Krias Shema*, the recital of the Shema.

FOOTNOTES

1. Samuel I; 15:4
2. Zohar III:257b
3. Shaloh, Shaar Haotiyot 89a
4. Devorim Rabba 2:22