

'The Shema Yisroel' — To Recite or Incite

Parshas Voeschanan

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One of the basic principles of Judaism mentioned in the chapter of Shema Yisroel is the obligation to teach Torah to children. This attests to the centrality of "Veshinantom" in Judaism, of teaching Jewish children Torah. The very eternalness of Torah hinges, naturally, upon the instruction to children. Thus the SHEMA, so central in Judaism, is the proper context for the Mitzvah of Torah education of Jewish children.

Yet, the perspicacious student would search for a more particular connection between Jewish education and Shema Yisroel. Also is it intriguing that this Mitzva of teaching Torah to the children is mentioned in the Shema before the Mitzva of learning oneself: "Teach them to your children, and study them..." (Devorim 6:7).

One may gain insight into the above upon examining what is considered according to the Talmud (Psachim 56A) a historic background of the Mitzva of reading the Shema. When Yaakov bestowed his blessings upon his children before his death, he intended to include his prophetic visions about the end of days and redemption, Acharith Hayomim (Beraishis 49:1). However he digressed from that subject, as the Shechina departed from him (Rashi Ibid). Said Yaakov to his sons: "Perhaps it is because you are not worthy of these revelations. Is it possible that there are among you some whose faith in the Al-mighty is not wholehearted?" They all responded in one voice: "Shema Yisroel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem the One and Only." "Just as your faith in Him is intact, so is ours!"

It is clear that "Yisroel" refers to Yaakov. The Rambam adds (Krias Shema 1:4): They said to their father "Hear O our father Yisroel". This presents a difficulty. For it is forbidden to call a father by his name (Rambam, Mamrim 6:3). How is it that they called their father by his name?

One realizes, however, upon analysis of the name Yisroel, that it is not a mere name, but rather a title, used here most significantly and appropriately. The name was given to Yaakov at the time when he led his family back to Eretz Yisroel, and he crossed the river Yabok. There he remained alone, as his family had crossed the river, and "someone" wrestled with him a whole night (Beraishis 32:23-25). The rabbis say (Br. Raba 77:3) the wrangler was the spiritual representative of Esau. Cognizant that Esau must remain subordinate to Yaakov only as long as Yaakov fulfills his spiritual responsibilities (see Beraishis 27:40), this representative of Esau endeavored to weaken Yaakov spiritually. "And when he saw that he could not prevail against him, he struck against the hollow of his thigh" (Ibid 32:26). The thigh is symbolic of descendants (see Ramban and Yefai Toar Midrash Ibid). The spiritual representative of Esau sought to debilitate Yaakov's future generations. Not being able to shake the tenacity of Yaakov himself, he tried to affect a feebleness in his descendants. When Yaakov emerged victorious he was given the name Yisroel, "for you have striven with an angel and with men, and have prevailed" (32:29). The name Yisroel, thus, represents victory over that particular enemy who seeks to wrest children from their parents' influence. The name is therefore testimony that the future belongs to Torah, that Yiddishkeit is eternal.

Remarkably, when this name is later confirmed by the Al-mighty, "Yisroel shall be your name" (35:10), it is followed by the blessing "be fruitful and multiply" (35:11). It is a blending of the blessing of having many descendants, and generations who will proudly bear the name Yisroel, which represents Torah and the continuous struggle for spiritual values.

Yisroel is thus a title which represents the promise of eternal upkeep of Torah and bridging the gap of generations.

No wonder that when Yaakov and Joseph meet for the first time after twenty-two years of heart-rending craving and longing for each other, and Joseph runs over to his father and embraces him and kisses him, just then Yaakov is preoccupied with the reading of Shema (Rashi 46:29). Yaakov's heart-overwhelming emotion at that precious moment was best expressed through the recital of Shema Yisroel, which is the most eloquent testimony of triumph in the struggle to keep children and future generations religiously unscathed and spiritually unmarred. When Yaakov saw his beloved Joseph in his flawless righteousness in spite of the devastating influence of Mitzrayim, he saw the realization of the divine promise and blessing of his name Yisroel.

When Yaakov later speaks his final words to his children, and needs the reassurance of their total and unqualified faith in the Al-mighty, they remind him: "Shema Yisroel". "Remember revered father the title 'Yisroel' which the Al-mighty bestowed upon you, a divine assurance of triumph in the battle against the representative of Esau who seeks to enervate your children spiritually. Hashem is our G-d. Our faith is unshaken. Hashem Echod. He is the One G-d, yours and ours. And our children's. Forever. Upon hearing this zealous declaration, Yaakov responds: "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever".

The reassurance, then, offered to Yaakov by his children, in the above mentioned phrase "Just as your faith in Him is intact, so is ours", is not a mere addition to the historic statement, transmitted from generation to generation and conveyed in the Talmud. It is a vitally inherent component of the Shema Yisroel declaration, a main emphasis in this testimony of everlasting faith. It is to this that Yaakov felicitously responds: "Blessed be the name... for ever and ever".

When the Torah was given, and the reading of Shema became one of the 613 Mitzvoths, that concept of transmittance was retained. Shema Yisroel is a form of communication. One exclaims, the other hears. Even when a Jew recites the Shema when he is by himself, and seeks to convey the message to every fibre of his being, that too is communication. Mainly, however, the aim is communication that assures continuity.

The historic recital of Shema by the family of Yaakov, thus, serves as the basis for the fundamental Mitzvoths in connection with that portion. True to its historic initiation, the Al-mighty enjoins the Klal Yisroel to teach Torah to the children, so that they continue to triumph over those who would seek to weaken their spirit. For this is the pivotal meaning of the title Yisroel. And it is mentioned before studying oneself, because this is the main thrust in the Shema context. Following that, in perfect sequence, the Torah enjoins to study Torah oneself, which too is a form of transmission, and without which the principle of eternity thru instruction cannot materialize.

Upon deeper contemplation one realizes that the concept of teaching Torah goes beyond the obligation to one's own children. "Teach your children" is a reference to your disciples" (Sifri). Shema Yisroel aiming at the assurance of eternity of Judaism, it includes all children, all potential recipients of instruction. The passage following the Shema, "and you should love Hashem...", according to Sifri, means not only to love Hashem, but also "to cause" to love Hashem. Cause Hashem to be loved by people, as did Abraham, who used his talents and energies to influence people to love and worship Hashem (Sifri, Devorim 6:5).

