

The Centrality of Instruction in the 'Shema'

Parshas Vayechi

by Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

One of the basic principles of Judaism mentioned in the chapter of Shema Yisroel is the obligation to teach Torah to children. Torah and the Jewish people are eternal; it is, of course, the duty of the present generation to assure the next. "One generation shall laud Thy works to another..." (Tehilim 145:4). Continuance of Torah, perpetuity of its ideals, can be assured only through parental guidance and instruction. It is intriguing, however, that this Mitzvah of teaching Torah to children is mentioned in the Shema before the Mitzvah of learning oneself: "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and Thou shalt speak of them..." (Devorim 6:7). It would have been more logical to mention first the obligation of self-study, without which one cannot possibly teach his children.

The Talmud (Psachim 56a) gives a historic background to the mitzvah of reciting the Shema. When Yaakov bestowed his blessings upon his children, before his death, he intended to include his prophetic visions about redemption and the end of days, Acharith Hayomim (Braishis 49:1). However he digressed from that subject, as the Shechina departed from him. (Rashi ibid.) Only indirect indications can be found in his utterances about days of redemption. 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, the one G-d. Just as your faith in Him is intact, so is ours!" It is clear that "Yisroel" refers to Yaakov.

The RaMBaM adds (Kriash Shema 1:4) "Hear 'O our father' Yisroel". This presents a great difficulty. It is forbidden to call a father by his name (RaMBaM: Mamrim 6:3, Yoreh Deah 240:2). How is it that they called their father by his name?

One realizes, upon analysis of the name Yisroel, that 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 (Braishis 32:23-25). The rabbis say (Medrosh Rabba 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, this spiritual representative of Esau endeavored to weaken Yaakov spiritually. "And when he saw that he could not prevail against him (Yaakov), he struck against the hollow of his thigh" (ibid, 32:26). The thigh is symbolic of descendants, (see Yefai Toar Medrosh ibid, and RaMBaN). The spiritual representative of Esau sought to debilitate Yaakov's future generation. 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 thou hast striven with an angel and with men, and hast 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 a 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 thy name" (35:10), it is followed by the blessing "be fruitful and multiply" (35:11). It is a blend 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 heartrending craving and longing for each other, and Joseph runs over to his father and embraces 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 has 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 responded: "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever." (It is this reassurance that Jews feel on Yom Kippur, with their children at their sides at the Synagogues in devout repentance, which prompts them to exclaim out loud the "Baruch Shaim... blessed is the name... forever and ever"), as a response to their children's shema).

The historic recital of Shema by the family of Yaakov serves as the basis for the fundamental Mitzvohs in connection with the Shema. 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. Following that, in perfect sequence, the Torah enjoins to study Torah oneself, which is, of course, of equal importance.