

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yitzchok Eliezer *ben Shmuel Chayim HaLevi a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

The Power of *Shema*

Important Bulletin

The following appeared in the *Pesti Hirlap* (a Hungarian newspaper) in the summer of 1916 (during WWI). It is a (translated) copy of a letter sent by a Hungarian militiaman from the battlefield, to his wife back home, telling of the wondrous events he witnessed firsthand:

“Please be so kind as to seek out our Jewish neighbor ‘Chaim.’ Ask him to interpret for you the following words: ‘*Shema Yisrael.*’ When the deadly bullets whiz around our heads, our soldiers fall like wheat-stalks from the scythe. At that point, the Jewish soldiers begin to cry out (these words) ‘*Shema Yisrael.*’ They are thus spared from death at the same time that their non-Jewish comrades are killed (by the enemy fire). Let me know *as soon as our neighbor ‘Chaim’ translates these words for you*; the next time I am in mortal danger, my life shall be saved.”

Apparently, *Krias* (recital of) *Shema* effects a special measure of protection. This phenomenon is mentioned by Chazal: “Hakadosh Boruch Hu says to Yisrael (as they go out to war): Even if your only merit is that you have fulfilled the mitzvah of *Shema*-recital in the morning and evening, this will be sufficient to save you from the enemy,” (*Sotah 42a*).

As we delve somewhat into the particulars, an interesting question arises. As is well known, the text of *Krias Shema* is comprised of three parts: The first paragraph, beginning with “*Shema Yisrael*” and including the section of “*Ve’ahavta*,” is taken from this week’s *parshah* (*Devarim 6:4-9*). The second paragraph, “*Vehayah im shamo’a*,” is from Eikev (*ibid 11:13-21*), and the third, “*Vayomer*,” comes from Shelach (*Bamidbar 15:37-41*). To fulfill the daily and nightly obligation properly, all three sections must be recited in their entirety. The question is, how much must one say in order to utilize the protective power of *Shema*? Must one recite the entire three paragraphs in order to be saved from a dangerous situation, or is a partial recitation sufficient?

The answer to this query, it would appear, depends on the answer to a broader, more fundamental question. What, exactly, is the secret of these immortal words? How and why do they afford such miraculous, defensive power?

The Shield of Torah

It could very well be that the security benefits garnered from *Krias Shema* are not necessarily unique to this specific passage. Rather, they stem from a much broader source. The study of Torah in general is renowned for the protection it affords: “Torah

shields and saves lives,” (*Sotah 21a*). When one recites the verses of *Shema*, he fulfills the mitzvah of *talmud* Torah (Torah study) at the same time, as they are also a part of the Torah (*Menachos 99b*).

This appears to have been the understanding of the Chofetz Chaim. A group of young Jewish men from his town had been conscripted into the army. Before reporting for duty, they came to take their leave of the venerable sage. The Chofetz Chaim advised them what to do if they should ever find themselves in a dangerous situation. He told them to recite the paragraph of *Shema* repetitively and without interruption, to afford protection. His reasoning was that this is a section of Torah that is familiar and understood by most Jews, no matter what their particular level of erudition. In this way, anyone can tap into the great protective power of Torah.

The Maharsha’s Approach

Others, however, do seem to attribute the potency to the specific *pesukim* and content of the *Shema*. Commenting on the arrangement of the paragraphs of the *Shema*, the Mishnah in *Berachos* (2:2) outlines the main themes:

“R’ Yehoshua ben Korchah says: why do we recite the paragraph of “*Shema Yisrael*” before the paragraph of “*Vehayah im shamo’a*”? The idea is: first, one should accept the yoke of Heaven upon himself and then the yoke of the commandments.”

In explaining the order of the paragraphs, R’ Yehoshua ben Korchah spells out their basic themes. By reciting the first paragraph – “*Shema Yisrael*” – a Jew proclaims his belief in and subservience to the Kingship of Hashem. Having firmly laid this essential groundwork, he proceeds to express what this pledge of loyalty entails: namely, acceptance of fulfilling Hashem’s *mitzvos*, as mentioned in the second paragraph.

The *Maharsha* (*Sotah 42a*) explains that it is these two *kabbalos* (acceptances) that are the essential ingredients for receiving the element of protection. Obviously, it is Hashem Who is providing the salvation, as the Torah testifies (*Devarim 20:4*): “For Hashem... is accompanying you, to battle your enemies on your behalf, (and) to save you.” Hashem accompanies the Jewish people to the battlefield by resting His Shechinah (Divine Presence) amongst them. The people, however, must clear the way for the Shechinah’s descent and demonstrate their willingness for Him to dwell in their company. And so, to accomplish this, they “accept” Him into their midst by accepting upon themselves the yoke of Heaven and the yoke of *mitzvos* – through *Krias Shema*.

Bodily Protection

Yet another aspect of this unique defensive measure is reflected in the number of words that comprise the three paragraphs of *Shema*. Commenting on the Gemara in *Sotah* (regarding the assurance given to the troops that they will be saved in the merit of *Shema*), the Chofetz Chaim (*Machaneh Yisrael, ch. 4*) relates a Medrash. “R’ Mani said: *Krias Shema*... contains 248 words, corresponding to the number of limbs in a person’s

body. (The message is as follows:) Hakadosh Boruch Hu promises: ‘If you keep My Word to recite *Shema* properly, then I will keep and protect you.’”

It would seem, then, that the requisite number of sections to be recited (to merit the special protection) would depend on the reason for its protective powers. According to the Medrash’s observation that the number of words in *Krias Shema* are equivalent to (and thus afford corresponding protection for) the number of limbs in the body, one would have to recite all three paragraphs (to achieve the total of 248). According to the Maharsha’s reasoning, however, one would need to recite the first two paragraphs; these contain the two *kabbalos* that were the principal ingredients for meriting the Divine Intervention. Following the initial approach that it is the merit of Torah study that provides the shielding effect, it would seem that one would only need to recite the first paragraph, as this itself contains the element of learning Torah.