

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Va'eschanan

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

A Soldier's Greatest Honor

A well-known feature in this week's *parshah* is the mitzvah of *K'rias Shema* (the recital of the Shema). Its specific arrangement in the order of the morning prayers is outlined in the Mishnah in Berachos (1:4), which states:

בַּשְּׁחֵר מְבָרַךְ שְׁתֵּימָּה לְפָנֶיהָ וְאַחַת לְאַחֲרֶיהָ.

“In the morning, we recite two blessings before the recital of Shema and one blessing afterward.”

What It's All About

The Mishnah refers, of course, to those blessings that are a part of the daily routine familiar to regular worshippers. The responsive *Barchu* service ushers in the recital of the extensive *Yotzer Or* blessing, which contains, among other things, a rendition of *kedushah* (“*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh,*” etc.) in its midst. This is followed by the emotional *Ahavah Rabbah* blessing, focusing on Hashem's love for Yisrael, His selection of them as His people and His granting them the Torah. At the conclusion of this blessing come the three paragraphs that comprise *K'rias Shema*, which are followed, in turn, by the paragraphs of the final blessing (*Emes V'yatziv*, concluding with *Go'al Yisrael*). At this point, the recital of the *Shemoneh Esrei* begins.

A closer look at this arrangement, however, may give rise to some perplexities that might have been overlooked, despite the familiarity of the overall routine. Let us focus on the first two blessings: short of the fact that they precede *K'rias Shema*, there does not seem to be an apparent connection with that prayer contained therein. As they are placed immediately beforehand, they would seem to serve as a type of “introduction” to the Shema; but a glance at their content doesn't seem to provide much support for this notion. The first blessing – *Yotzer Or* – deals mainly with the Works of the Creator and the due praise He receives from His Heavenly hosts and ministering angels. No explicit reference to Shema appears in this lengthiest of all morning blessings. The primary emphasis of the subsequent blessing – *Ahavah Rabbah* – is placed on Hashem's great love for His people, as mentioned above. What exactly is the flow and connection of this whole arrangement?

According to R' Ya'akov Neiman (*Darchei Mussar*), the selection of these prayers is quite orderly and deliberate. He explains with a rather illuminating parable:

At Attention

The military of a certain land was informed that – in a few days hence – the troops would be reviewed by an extremely important visitor: the king himself! With this electrifying news came a great infusion of energy and anticipation, as feverish preparations went into full swing. Top officers issued an abundance of anxious orders, the grounds were swept clean, soldiers ran to and fro making all manner of intense preparations – in short, the army base became a scene of frantic activity.

And then the long-awaited day finally came. The assemblage stood at the ready in precise formation. The rows

were arranged in order of rank, which the king observed as he made his way through the lines standing at attention. He passed the formation of generals and top-ranking officers, continued on through the soldiers of higher rank and eventually made his way to the humblest rank of privates. And it was here that something unusual occurred. Upon reaching the very last soldier – the (seemingly) most insignificant member of the force, as evidenced by his placement – the king came to a halt. All the assembled turned their attention to this most curious scene. And then, to the amazement of all and in full view and earshot of the most vaunted generals and high officers, the king embraced this lowly soldier and proclaimed, “You are most beloved to me, my dear soldier!”

Prior to presenting the conclusion of this narrative, let us return momentarily to the order of the blessings, for they are arranged in a similar fashion. The first blessing reflects how Hashem begins His review of the world that He has created: the light, the heavenly bodies, indeed, the entire *ma’aseh bereishis* (creation). At the beginning of this review, the Melech Meromam (Exalted King) “encounters” first the most high-ranking of His ministers – the heavenly hosts, his holy ones, the *Ofanim*, the *Chayos Hakodesh*, the *Serafim* – who constantly proclaim His Praise, Glory and Holiness. In the midst of this huge symphony of Celestial grandeur, Hashem is hailed and proclaimed as the Ultimate Master: Who alone enacts mighty deeds; He is the Initiator, the Orchestrator of wars, the Sower of righteousness, the Cultivator of salvation, Creator of cures, the Awesome of praise, Lord of Wonders, Who renews the entire creation on a daily basis.

But then something marvelous takes place, as recorded in the second blessing. This Most Exalted King of Ultimate Goodness and Power, Who is constantly recognized and praised by such an august body of celestial agents – to whom does He direct His attention? He turns His focus toward the most seemingly downtrodden and lowly beings, mere denizens of the earth. Bypassing all of the heavenly hosts, and even all the nations of the world, Hashem showers His love on one people, His chosen nation Yisrael, upon whom He has bequeathed His most treasured asset: the gift of Torah.

When that single, “lowly” soldier is singled out and made the object of adoration by the king himself – what should his reaction be? Obviously, to reciprocate and proclaim his loyalty and allegiance with gusto: “Long live my lord, the king!” This, then, is Yisrael’s response as well: “Hear Yisrael, Hashem is our L-rd, Hashem is One!”

Perhaps this clearer understanding of this aspect of the morning prayers will increase our appreciation of the great significance involved. Perhaps it may even help raise to a new level our fulfillment of this mitzvah and our proclamation of allegiance to Hashem.