



**Partners In Torah**

**San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura**

**Take home Dvar Torah**

**תשפ"ה Vayechi**

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***Hello, Welcome!***

**Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.**

***Partners in Torah  
has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.***

***Thank you for joining us!***

**Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.**

Yaakov Avinu, the last of the Patriarchs, is at the end of his life. Yet before he leaves this world, he must charge the next generation with their mission to carry forward their illustrious family's legacy, that of, Avraham, Yitzchak, and himself. His twelve sons comprise the complete spectrum of qualities necessary to found the nation that will accomplish this formidable task. Just as the Forefathers were Hashem's ambassadors, projecting Hashem and His gracious ways to all mankind, so, too, the Jewish nation is charged with that same mission. By keeping Hashem's Torah and Mitzvot, the Jews will be living role models of virtue and morality for all of the world to follow. Through them, the world will recognize and serve the one and only Hashem.

To this end, and so that they would not lose heart over the long upcoming exile, Yaakov sought to reveal the future redemption to his sons; but Hashem concealed it from him.

The verse states (49:1):

(א) וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל בְּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר, "הָאֶסְפוּ וְאֶגִּידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא אֶתְכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים"

*1) And Yaakov called for his sons and said, "Assemble yourselves and I will tell you **what will befall you in the End of Days.**"*

The Talmud (Pesachim 56a) tells us the rest of the story:

דאמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש: ויקרא יעקב אל בניו ויאמר האספו ואגידה לכם ביקש יעקב לגלות לבניו קץ הימין ונסתלקה ממנו שכינה אמר שמא חס ושלום יש במטתי פסול כאברהם שיצא ממנו ישמעאל ואבי יצחק שיצא ממנו עשו אמרו לו בניו שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד אמרו כשם שאין בלבך אלא אחד כך אין בלבנו אלא אחד באותה שעה פתח יעקב אבינו ואמר ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד

*Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said that Yaakov wanted to reveal the end of the exile to his sons, but Hashem's divine presence left him. Yaakov said "Perhaps it is because one of my sons is not righteous (and not*

worthy of the disclosure), just as Avraham had Yishmael and Yitzchak had Esav. His sons responded, **Hear, [our father] Yisroel, Hashem, our G-d, Hashem is one**, (Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad) and just as in your heart there is only one G-d, so, too, in our hearts there is only one G-d. (שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד)

His sons' response reassured Yaakov that his children would always be able to endure the exile's hardships even without knowing its conclusion. This verse expresses our ultimate belief in Hashem even in the worst times without understanding its reason or benefit. How is that?

Hashem has multiple names, each corresponding to different modes in which He operates. Of Hashem's ten holy names, the two names seen most frequently in our prayers and the Torah are י-ה-ו-ה (pronounced "Hashem" when not recited in a blessing or in prayer ) and אלקים - *Elokim*. The first is Hashem's name of lovingkindness; the second represents His strict judgment. We can know what to expect from Hashem based on the name via which He presents Himself. In the Shema, we have Hashem's name of strict judgment surrounded by two names of lovingkindness. According to one understanding of the Shema, this is what we are saying:

י-ה-ו-ה, Hashem, the G-d of lovingkindness, and אלקינו -Elokeinu, the G-d of strict judgment, are really the same, one and only, Hashem י-ה-ו-ה.

With the Shema we proclaim that even though Hashem may be tough with us and mete out hardships and difficult situations, it is all out of love and compassion for our ultimate benefit. Hashem is One and all that He does is unified and, so to speak, single minded. It is all for our good, and nothing but good.

Yaakov's sons' response comforted him to know that his children understood that whatever comes forth from Hashem, no matter how bitter and difficult, comes from His love and mercy on His children.

This perspective has always guided and aided the Jewish people through tragedy and hardship over the ages. Our long history has been difficult to endure, but we understand that ה' אחד - *Hashem is one*, a loving and strict judge, all in one. We have absolute אמונה - trust in Hashem, and have no questions about His judgments.

The Twelve Tribes affirmed to their father Yaakov that, *just as in your heart there is only one G-d, so, too, in our hearts there is only one G-d*. It is no wonder that all twelve sons spontaneously responded with the Shema in unison. This one verse embodies the fundamental belief in Hashem that every Jew must have. There is only one G-d in the world, and Hashem is it. He alone is the source of everything that was, is, and will be.

Maimonides phrased it thus:

א - אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאֱמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה. שֶׁהַבּוֹרֵא יִתְבָּרַךְ שָׂמוּ הוּא בּוֹרֵא וּמְנַהֵיג לְכָל הַבְּרוּיָאִים. וְהוּא לְבִדּוֹ עָשָׂה וְעוֹשֶׂה וַיַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל הַמַּעֲשִׂים

*I believe with complete faith that Hashem creates and guides all creatures, and that He alone, made, makes, and will make everything.*

This is why there is a mitzvah (no. 420 of the 613 commandments) to recite this verse, the *Shema*, twice daily, morning and night: to imbue this feeling in our hearts - Hashem is One to the exclusion of any other, and He alone is the source of everything that transpires in the world on every level.

This is why it says in the Shulchan Aruch – The Code of Jewish Law (Orach Chaim 60:5),

הקורא את שמע ולא כוון לבו בפסוק ראשון שהוא שמע ישראל, לא יצא ידי חובתו

5) *One who reads the verse of Shema without concentration does not fulfill the mitzvah.*

This is because if he does not concentrate on the meaning of what he is saying, he cannot absorb the message of the words.

Once one has absorbed this message to his core, nothing can shake his faith and trust in Hashem. No matter what happens to him, he will be able to accept it, knowing that it is the will of the one and only merciful Hashem, and that it is for his good.

We learn this lesson from Rabbi Akiva (Talmud Berachot 61b).

בשעה שהוציאו את רבי עקיבא להריגה זמן קריאת שמע היה והיו סורקים את בשרו במסרקות של ברזל והיה מקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים אמרו לו תלמידיו רבינו עד כאן אמר להם כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה בכל נפשך אפילו נוטל את נשמתך אמרתי מתי יבא לידי ואקיימנו ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו היה מאריך באחד עד שיצתה נשמתו באחד יצתה בת קול ואמרה אשריך רבי עקיבא שיצאה נשמתך באחד

The Romans sentenced Rabbi Akiva to death for teaching Torah.

*The moment that they took Rabbi Akiva out to kill him, it was time to read the Shema. They were combing his flesh with combs of steel, and Rabbi Akiva was accepting upon himself the yoke of Heaven (saying the Shema). His students said to him, "Our Master! It goes this far?" {Even in such pain, you can still focus and concentrate on the words of the Shema?} Rabbi Akiva answered, "My whole life I aspired for, **'When will I have the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of giving up my life for Hashem'** and now that it has come, I shouldn't fulfill it?" Rabbi Akiva continued saying the last word "echad" until his soul left him. A heavenly*

*voice came from heaven and said, "Rabbi Akiva, you are praiseworthy, for your soul left you as you said the word "echad".*

This story teaches many lessons.

Maimonides writes (Yesodei Hatorah 5:1,2)

(א) כל בית ישראל מצווין על קדוש השם הגדול הזה שנאמר ונקדשתי בתוך בני ישראל... (ב) במה דברים אמורים בשאר מצות חוץ מעבודת כוכבים וגלוי עריות ושפיכת דמים אבל שלש עבירות אלו אם יאמר לו עבור על אחת מהן או תהרג יהרג ואל יעבור

*Every Jew is obligated to give up his life to sanctify Hashem's name, as it says (Leviticus 22:32), **And I will be sanctified among the Jewish people** ... therefore, in the matter of idol worship, forbidden relations, and murder, if one is presented with the ultimatum of either committing one of these three sins or be killed, he must forfeit his life and not transgress.*

This is the mitzvah that Rabbi Akiva was referring to when he said, "My whole life I aspired to fulfill this mitzvah." Whenever Rabbi Akiva recited the Shema, he mentally prepared himself for the time when he may be put to the test by thinking, "I am prepared to give my life for Hashem should I ever be put to the test." Hence, when his students asked him, "how are you able to do it?" he responded by explaining that he had indeed prepared his whole life for this eventuality.

Indeed, our Sages teach us, that we also should think these thoughts as we say the Shema verse twice daily. With this, we will also prepare ourselves as Rabbi Akiva did in case we are put to the test.

There is more, much more. The *Ramchal* (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto) writes:

ספר דרך ה' - חלק ד פרק ד - בק"ש ותפלה וברכותיה

ה. והנה מתנאי המצוה הזאת, להיות האדם גומר בדעתו למסור נפשו על יחודו ית', ולקבל עליו כל יסורין ומיני מיתה על קידוש שמו ית', ונחשב לו כאלו עשה הדבר בפועל ונהרג על קידוש השם

*Included in this mitzvah (saying the Shema) is that a person should decide in his mind to tender his soul for the sake of Hashem's unity and to accept upon himself any suffering or death penalty for the sake of Hashem's holy Name. And when he thinks these thoughts, **it is considered as if he as actually given up his life for the sake of Hashem's name.***

This is neither a mistake nor an exaggeration. Because we have decided that we are prepared to give our lives for Hashem, He considers it as if we have. The *Ramchal* continues to say how these powerful thoughts create a great stir in Heaven and have a tremendous beneficial effect on the world.

וגם מענין זה יוצאות תולדות גדולות לתועלת הבריאה ולתיקון הכללי

*Also, from this come out great ramifications for the benefit of the creation and the rectification of the world in general.*

This is why this verse is on the lips of holy Jews at a time when they see their lives are about to end. Throughout history, when a Jew was tortured and put to the test of "Your G-d or your life!" the Jew always gave his life with the words of the Shema on his lips. At the last moment of his life, he accepted Hashem's judgment and surrendered his life to Him. There can be no holier way to leave this world, just as did Rabbi Akiva.

In the late 1970's and early 80's, it was customary for the Argentine Jewish Community to send promising young men to Yeshivat Porat Yosef in Jerusalem, the leading Sephardic yeshiva, to train as rabbis. They



would spend a few years studying Torah and then return to Argentina to serve as rabbis to their community.

On April 2, 1982, Argentina invaded and occupied the Falkland Islands, two islands that belong to the United Kingdom. On April 5<sup>th</sup>, the British government dispatched a naval task force to engage the Argentine army to retrieve the islands. The conflict lasted 74 days, ending with an Argentine surrender.

One Argentine student in the yeshiva had to return to Argentina to serve in the army during the conflict and returned to the yeshiva after the war. Upon his arrival, he made a סעודת הודאה - a "Thanksgiving meal." When one is saved from a life-threatening situation, such as an illness or accident, it is appropriate to make a festive meal with friends and family to publicly thank Hashem for having saved his life.

At that event he related this story as the reason for the celebration.

At a certain point in a battle between his battalion and the British enemy it became clear to him that his battalion overpowered. He had run out of ammunition and had no way to defend himself; his end was near. He tried to escape by running into a house and hiding, but shortly after entering the house a British soldier broke open the door and discovered him. As the British soldier raised his rifle and was about to kill him, he put his hand over his eyes and recited the Shema. To his surprise, no shot followed. He uncovered his eyes, and the British soldier said to him, "You are Jewish? So am I! I can't kill you! Wait here, I will save you!" The British soldier brought him a British uniform and he was able to escape. Saying the Shema saved his life!

R' Nochum Dovid Herman entered a suit store in Yerushalayim to purchase a suit. He was browsing through the suits when he noticed an army colonel enter the store.

“Hey, what happened to you?” R’ Nochum Dovid heard the store owner say. Startled, he turned to see the owner of the store addressing the army officer. It was then that R’ Nochum Dovid noticed the colonel wearing a kippah.

“Did you fall on your head or something? Since when do you wear a kippah?”

The colonel gave the store owner a dignified look and said, “I have become a *baal teshuva*.”

“Really? But you were so anti-religious! What could have made you change your mind?”

“I’ll tell you my story,” related the colonel.

“A few months ago, I was sent to lead a fleet of fifteen tanks in the Sinai into Egyptian territory. My men were seasoned soldiers and fully trained. We knew how to travel through the desert, and our mission was proceeding exactly as planned. And then, out of nowhere, I spotted 60 Egyptian tanks. We were outnumbered! Not just that, but each of their tanks was faster and more powerful than any of ours. I could see no way out for us. This was it! It would only be a matter of minutes until they spotted us and attacked. I called the men together.

‘I’m afraid this is the end for us. Everyone is on his own now. I’m sorry to let you down, but there is nothing I can do to help us.’”

“Are you giving up?” a voice called out.

“Startled, I turned to see who was speaking. A chassid with payot and tzitzit had stood up in the middle of the group.”

“Listen, if you’re giving up, then permit me to take charge,” he said.

“I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I also couldn’t understand his confident attitude. What did he see that I didn’t? There was no way out of our situation. Still, I was impressed by his confidence, and after all,

what did we have to lose? So I put it to the others. Should we let him take charge?"

"Sure, why not?" They agreed.

"Here are your instructions then," the chassid told us. "We will go full force ahead. When I give the signal, everyone will scream with all his might and concentration, '*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad!*' Then shoot your first round of ammunition. With the help of Hashem we will survive."

Everyone got into position, and the tanks started moving. The Chassid gave the signal, and everyone screamed '*Shema Yisrael*' following it with a round of fire.

When the smoke cleared, we saw an amazing sight. All 60 Egyptian tanks stopped where they were, and the leader had raised the white flag. I couldn't figure out what happened, but I didn't want to lose the opportunity. I quickly took back command of the unit and announced in Arabic that all Egyptians should leave their tanks with their hands up. The men all walked out of their tanks and began to come towards us. Their commander was leading, still holding the white flag.

"You see?" I said, triumphantly to the Egyptian commander when he came close enough. "We are more powerful than you!"

"Don't be ridiculous," he snapped. "How could you be more powerful? We have 60 tanks, and you have only 15. We caught sight of you in the distance, and we were coming over to finish you off."

"So, why didn't you?" I asked. "The Egyptian commander glanced up at the sky. 'We saw those 20 planes flying above us. There was no way we could have withstood them. They would have destroyed us completely! So we gave up.'"

The colonel looked straight at the store owner.

I looked up in the sky, and I didn't see any airplanes. Later on, I checked with the army. There hadn't been any planes in the area at that time. Hashem had showed them those planes to save our lives. Now that I have seen Hashem with my own eyes, how could I not believe in Him and not follow in His ways?"

Here again we see the power of acknowledging Hashem as the One in charge of our fate, and the results of putting our trust in Him. He doesn't let us down.

Until now, we have discussed only one explanation of the Shema. Rashi on this verse in the Torah explains it as follows.

ד) ה' אלהינו ה' אחד - ה' שהוא אלקינו עתה ולא אלקי האומות, הוא עתיד להיות ה' אחד, שנאמר (צפניה ג, ט) כי אז אהפוך אל עמים שפה ברורה לקרוא כולם בשם ה' ונאמר (זכריה יד, ט) ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד

*Hashem who is our G-d now but not the G-d of the other nations, will in the future be the one G-d for all mankind... as it says in Zacharia (14:9) On that day Hashem will be One and His name will be One.*

This will take place when the Mashiach comes. The verse in Zechariah (14:9) says:

ט) וְהָיָה יְדוּד לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִיָּה יְדוּד אֶחָד וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶחָד

*9) And Hashem will be the king over the entire world, **on that day**, Hashem will be One and His name will be one.*

The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) asks the obvious question.

אטו האידינא לאו אחד הוא? אמר רבי אחא בר חנינא, לא בעולם הזה העולם הבא העולם הזה על בשורות טובות אומר ברוך הטוב והמטיב ועל בשורות רעות אומר ברוך דיין האמת לעולם הבא כולו הטוב והמטיב

***On that day** Hashem will be one? Hashem isn't one today? Rav Acha bar Chanina answered. This world is not like the world to come (when Mashiach comes). In this world when something good happens we*

*recite the blessing, "Blessed are you Hashem who is good and bestows good onto others." When something bad happens we recite the blessing, "Blessed are You Hashem, the True Judge." In the world to come, the only blessing we will ever make is the blessing of "who is good and bestows good onto others," because then, we will see how everything is really good. There is no such thing as bad.*

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato explains that it is not just that we will see why the bad was necessary. Rather, we will see how the bad was not bad at all: it was actually good! The attribute of judgment flows forth from the Hashem's kindness.

It could be compared to surgery to remove a cancerous growth. The surgery is not "bad" with a "good" outcome; it is good through and through. How sad it is when a doctor must tell his patient that a tumor is inoperable. *That* is bad news. But when the doctor says, "We can operate to remove it, and with Hashem's help, you'll soon be as good as new!" that is the best news to the patient. After the surgery, he will thank the doctor profusely for a job well done and pay him (or the insurance company will) a lot of money.

Is it comfortable to be in a hospital for two weeks? No. Is there pain after the surgery? Yes. Is a person back to normal two weeks after surgery? Not quite. Nevertheless, these are all *good* things, considering the alternative.

Similarly, in the future, we will see how all the difficult and trying times were actually good. Hashem is one, and only good comes forth from Him.

When this concept is a reality, there is no difficulty one cannot deal with. Hashem loves us and that's a fact. We are incapable of understanding Hashem's ways, but one day we will thank Hashem for it,

just like the patient thanked the doctor. May we all merit this level of trust in Hashem.