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Take home Dvar Torah**

5785 Vaetchanan
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**focusing on understanding Jewish
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most interesting to each participant.**

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תשפ"ה Vaetchanan

The Talmud (Makot 23b) teaches us that Hashem gave the Jewish people 613 מצוות - *Mitzvot* (commandments).

דרש רבי שמלאי: שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצוות נאמרו לו למשה... אמר רב המנונא מאי קרא תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה תורה בגימטריא שית מאה וחד סרי הוי אנכי ולא יהיה לך מפי הגבורה שמענום

Rabbi Simlai taught: 613 commandments were told to Moshe on Sinai. Rav Hamnuna said, "Which verse in scripture teaches us this lesson? [Deuteronomy 33:4] תורה מורשה - Moshe commanded us to keep תורה - Torah. The numeric value of the letters that spell תורה is 611 (400=ת 5=ה 200=ר 6=ו), and the Jewish people heard the first two commandments, 'I am the Lord your G-d who took you out of Egypt', and 'Do not have any other gods,' directly from Hashem," bringing the total to 613.

Maimonides's book ספר המצוות – *Sefer HaMitzvot* (The Book of Commandments) lists and explains each of the Torah's 613 mitzvot. Mitzvot numbers one and two correspond to the first two commandments that we heard directly from Hashem and find themselves in a familiar verse in this week's Torah portion, *Vaetchanan* (Deuteronomy 6:4):

(ד) שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֶחָד

Hear, O Israel: Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the One and Only

Maimonides writes (*Sefer Hamitzvot*):

מצוה א - היא הצווי אשר צונו בהאמנת האלהות והוא שנאמין שיש שם עלה וסבה הוא פועל לכל הנמצאים, והוא אמרו - אנכי ה' אלהיך

Mitzvah #1: This commandment is to believe in Hashem, that is, to believe that there is a first cause that made all that exists. The

source for this in Scripture is the first of the ten commandments, "I am the Lord your G-d."

מצוה ב - היא הצווי שצונו באמונת היחוד והוא שנאמין שפועל המציאות וסבתו הראשונה אחד והוא אמרו יתעלה שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד

Mitzvah #2: *This commandment is, to believe in Hashem's Oneness, which means that we should believe that the first cause and source of all that exists is One and Only. The source for this in Scripture is: "Hear, O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the One and Only."*

When we say in the Shema, "Hashem is **our** G-d," we are echoing the first commandment. which commands us to believe in Hashem as the source of all that exists and as the Master over the world. When we say, "Hashem is the One and Only," we are saying there are no other gods- the second commandment.

Because the Shema contains within it the first two commandments, it is also referred to as "קבלת עול מלכות שמים" *the formal acceptance of the yoke of heaven upon oneself*. In this one verse, we declare that we are prepared to subjugate our personal wills and desires to Hashem's will. He is our G-d and we are His subjects, hence, we must fulfill all of His commandments.

מצוה י - היא שצונו לקרוא קריאת שמע בכל יום ערבית ושחרית

Mitzvah #10: *This commandment is to read the Shema twice daily, in the evening and in the morning.*

This is why the Sages have incorporated the Shema into the morning service, שחרית – *Shacharit*, and into the evening service, ערבית – *Maariv* (or *Arvit*). In the course of our daily prayers, we fulfill mitzvah #10 to read the Shema evening and morning.

It is interesting to note the Torah's words used to convey to us that we should read the Shema evening and morning. We learn this commandment from the verse (Deuteronomy 6:7):

(ז) וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָם ... וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ

7) And you shall speak them (say the Shema) when you retire and when you arise.

One retires to sleep in the evening and arises in the morning, so we know what it means, but why such a peculiar way of saying it? Why not just say, evening and morning?

The *Sefer Hachinuch* (Mitzvah 420) provides us with a beautiful explanatory insight.

משרשי המצוה, שרצה השם לזכות עמו שיקבלו עליהם מלכותו ויחודו בכל יום ולילה כל הימים שהם חיים, כי בהיות האדם בעל חומר נפתה אחר הבלי העולם ונמשך לתאוותיו צריך על כל פנים זכרון תמידי במלכות שמים לשמרו מן החטא, על כן היה מחסדו לזכותנו, וצונו לזכרו שני העתים האלה בקבע ובכוונה גמורה, אחת ביום להועיל לכל מעשינו שביום, כי בהיות האדם זוכר בבקר אחדות השם ומלכותו וכי השגחתו ויכלתו על הכל, ויתן אל לבו כי עיניו פקוחות על כל דרכיו וכל צעדין יספור לא יתעלם ממנו דבר מכל דבריו, ולא יוכל ממנו להחביא אחת מכל מחשבותיו, הלא יהיה לו למשמר מחשבתו זאת והודאת פיו בדבר הזה כל היום ההוא, ויהיה לו הודאת הלילה בזה גם כן למשמר כל הלילה

Hashem wanted to give merit to His nation by having them accept His Kingdom and His Oneness, every day and night of their lives. Since a person is materialistic, he is easily persuaded to follow the wiles of the world, and he is drawn to its pleasures. Therefore, he needs a constant reminder of Hashem's Kingdom to guard him from sinning. Hence, out of His kindness, Hashem commanded us to remember Him at these crucial times, consistently, and with complete concentration. [If a person doesn't focus and understand the words of the Shema taking them to heart as

he says them, since he has not accepted the yoke of Heaven upon himself, he has not fulfilled the mitzvah.] *Once in the daytime, to help with all the events that will occur during the day, because when a person remembers Hashem's Oneness and Kingdom in the morning, he realizes that Hashem supervises and controls everything. He should also take to heart that Hashem's eyes are following all of his ways, and that Hashem is counting his every step, and that none of his matters can escape Hashem's scrutiny; he cannot hide even one of his thoughts from Him! These thoughts (Hashem's yoke) and His proclamation of them (saying the Shema) will protect him the whole day. The same goes for the night.*

Therefore, the verse says, "when you arise" to teach us that at the beginning of our day we must fortify ourselves with the message of the Shema – I am Hashem's servant - and "when we retire" at the end of our day, we once again ponder the lesson of the Shema, of how Hashem orchestrated and supervised our entire day.

From the beautiful ideas expressed in the *Sefer HaChinuch*, it is easy to see how, if we properly understood the Shema's message the way that the author did, the day's struggles and challenges would be so much easier to negotiate. There is nothing but Hashem. He is behind everything that happens. Hashem follows my every step! Hashem listens to my every thought! Hashem understands what I am going through. This is all meant to be. Hashem is behind it all, and He has a plan and a reason for everything that He does.

There is yet a deeper meaning to this.

One of the great challenges in life to those who believe in Hashem is the issue of "Why bad things happen to good people?" and the reverse, "Why bad people seem to have it so good." Were we not to have to say that "Hashem is One and Only," we could easily resolve the matter by saying that there are opposing forces of good and evil that vie for control;

sometimes the good wins and sometimes the bad wins. Since the different forces come from different places, there is no conflict. This is how religions with multiple gods deal with the issue of good and bad. There is a good god and a bad god. Serve the good god making sure he likes you, and you will be rewarded with goodness for your efforts. At the same time, be sure not to anger the bad god, or he may get you!

Hashem, on the other hand, is One, and He is the source of *all* of the world's forces! There is only Hashem, and Hashem is only good. So where does the evil come from? Can't He control the bad and prevent it from attacking the good people? How could bad things happen to good people in Hashem's world?

The *Shema* addresses this question.

Although "One," Hashem has ten different holy names, each name portraying Hashem in a specific mode of operation. For example, the name אֱלֹהִים (Elokim) always denotes Hashem acting with strict judgment without mercy. The name יְיָ – Hashem (for reasons of its sanctity, the name is written with י instead of ה), portrays Hashem in the mode of kindness and mercy. We use both of these names in the Shema. Isn't that contradictory?

The answer is that this is exactly the point of invoking Hashem's Oneness in the Shema. We are saying that although sometimes we experience the strict judgment of Elokim, which hurts and seems bad, nevertheless "Hashem is One." Elokim and Hashem are the same entity - and He is only good! What we perceive to be bad is really a blessing in disguise. Because Hashem is One, no evil can possibly come from Him. Everything that He does is only good. This is a fact and a corollary of Hashem's Oneness.

This provides great comfort to a person. Indeed, when looked at from this perspective, difficulties in life should become easier to bear. When a person realizes that there is a reason for the suffering, although it may not take away his pain, at least he knows that it has been carefully thought about, and that Hashem is doing it for a reason. Moreover, that reason, as difficult as it may be to understand, is only to help him. Perhaps, if he figures out and learns the lesson Hashem wants to teach him, he can avoid the entire thing. After all, the suffering has accomplished its goal.

Rabbi Aharon Kotler ל"צ (1892-1962) Rosh Yeshiva of Beth Medrash Gavoha in Lakewood, NJ, once came down with hepatitis, a very contagious condition. The doctor visited him and told him that he would have to be quarantined for a few weeks. This happened just before the High Holidays and this would have meant that the rabbi would not be able to attend services.

Shortly after the doctor left, Rabbi Kotler asked a certain student to come into his room. The boy was just an average student, and everyone was surprised that the Rabbi had asked for him of all people, so they asked him what the Rabbi wanted. He responded, "Nothing special."

The next day Rabbi Kotler was as good as new without any symptoms of hepatitis. Now the boys really wanted to know what transpired in the room with the Rabbi, since the results were so dramatic. They did what they needed to do to get the story out of the boy.

He told them that Rabbi Kotler asked him forgiveness for not visiting him when he was sick with hepatitis, and he did. A few months earlier this boy had contracted hepatitis and Rabbi Kotler thought he should visit him, but he never did. Upon thinking about his own

condition, Rabbi Kotler concluded that perhaps the boy was disappointed that his Rosh Yeshiva did not come to visit him, and perhaps that sin was the cause of his hepatitis. The Rabbi rectified the matter by asking the boy to forgive him for not visiting him, and the sickness went away.

The Talmud says (Berachot 60b):

אמר רב הונא אמר רב משום רבי מאיר, וכן תנא משמיה דרבי עקיבא, לעולם יהא אדם רגיל לומר כל דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד

*Rav Huna said in the name of Rav, who quoted Rabbi Meir, and Rabbi Akiva said the same, "A person should be in the habit of saying, '**Everything** that the Merciful One does, He does for the best!'"*

With this idea, we can add another layer of depth to the words of the *Sefer HaChinuch* about saying the Shema in the morning and the evening.

King David said in Psalms (92:3):

ג) לְהַגִּיד בַּבֶּקֶר חֶסֶדְךָ וְאַמוּנָתְךָ בַּלַּיְלוֹת

3) To relate Your kindness in the morning and Your faith in the nights.

The morning represents the good times. With the sun's light shining brightly, its rays warming us, everything is clear; we understand where we stand, and we are happy with our lot. In the good times, we must recognize that **all** the goodness comes from Hashem and that we must praise and thank Him for it.

Nighttime represents the times when the plan is obscured and hidden from us, like something in a dark room that we cannot see. We don't understand what is happening. Everything seems to be going wrong. The situation is very difficult. Where is Hashem? Why is this happening to me? In the dark times, we must blindly place our trust in

Hashem and keep in mind that He only has our best interest in mind. We cannot see it; it is obscured by the darkness, but it is a blessing in disguise, and it is good for us.

This is why we must say the Shema morning and night. In the morning when we awaken and are alive for another day, we must acknowledge Hashem for the great gift of another day of life. When saying the Shema, we acknowledge that each day of life is a gift from Hashem, and that we were given it to use to serve Him. We accept Him as our King and wish to fulfill His commandments. During the good times when everything is going swimmingly well, when saying the Shema, we recognize Hashem as the source of our blessing, and accept upon ourselves to reciprocate by fulfilling His wishes.

We must also say the Shema at night, when things are bleak and dark. When we don't understand what is going on with us, and why things are happening as they are. *Especially in those times*, we must always remember, "Hashem is One!" It is all from the One good and loving Hashem who only does good, and never bad. This is also good; I don't understand how, but I know it is true because I have made it my reality. How? By saying the Shema twice daily for so many years and imbuing and reinforcing within myself over and over that Hashem is One, there is nothing but Hashem, and Hashem is only good. I have complete trust in Him.

Our Sages teach us that before returning one's soul to its Maker, one should recite the Shema. Moreover, when a person is in danger of losing his life, the best thing for him to do is to recite the Shema. With this he declares that despite his very difficult situation he is still Hashem's faithful servant, accepting His judgement. Reciting the Shema at that critical moment is so powerful, that it may even give Hashem cause to save him - since he has remained loyal even in this most grim situation.

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 5th, 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 was 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!

A soldier in the IDF returned from the front and was called to the Torah. There, with a heart full of thanks and eyes flowing with tears, he recited the special blessing of thanks to Hashem for saving his life. When asked what the story was, he related the following.

Our tank sustained a direct hit from an Egyptian shell and caught fire. We tried to exit the tank but the door was damaged by the impact of the shell and couldn't be opened. We were trapped inside the burning tank and realized that this was the end. With all our hearts we said the Shema, and resigned ourselves to our inevitable end. Suddenly, another Egyptian shell hit the tank door and made a hole big enough for us to escape. We climbed out of the tank and ran for our lives.

The Torah's most important verse for a Jew is "***Shema Yisroel ...***" **Hear O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One.** With these words we proclaim Hashem as the one and only G-d in the world, and our G-d.

The *Rashba* (Rabbi **Shlomo Ben Aderet** 1235-1310) was once asked. "What should a person be thinking when he says the word שמע - *shema* - Listen , when reciting the *Shema Yisroel* prayer?"

The Rashba answers that the word "*shema*" has three different meanings in scripture.

1. To listen carefully to the words being spoken so you know the message being conveyed.

2. King Solomon asked Hashem for a לב שומע - translated as "*a listening heart.*" What King Solomon was requesting was an *understanding heart*, one that would be sensitive to his subjects' needs. Hence, the word שמע (*shema*) also means to understand. This is the second meaning of שמע - *understand*.

3. In Proverbs (1:8) King Solomon says: שמע בני מוסר אביך - *Listen my son to the discipline of your father.* The word שמע - *listen*- here,

means to obey or accept to do. This is the third meaning of the word שמע - obey.

שו"ת הרשב"א חלק ה סימן נה

באומרו שמע ישראל, כולל ג' ענינים שנצטוינו לשמוע וללמוד כי לולי שנשמע ונלמוד לא נתבונן אליו. ואחרי השמיעה והלימוד וחקור היטב אם יש ראייה סותרת ח"ו ואחר שנבא מתוך השמיעה אל החקירה באמת תביאנו החקירה ותכריחנו הכרח אמתי לקבל ולהאמין כי הוא ית' נמצא וכן הוא משגיח על פרטי מעשנו

Hence, the Rashba answers.

Therefore, saying the word Shema includes three ideas. 1. To listen and learn about Hashem, because if we don't learn, we can't know Him. 2. Then, we have to make Hashem a reality to ourselves through proofs and critical thinking. 3. This will bring us to live our lives with the realization that Hashem exists and that He is in control of everything in our lives.

This is what we are saying when we say the Shema and proclaim our belief in the one and only Hashem, Creator and Master of the universe. שמע - 1, 2 & 3 above, Israel! Hashem Elokeinu is the Master of all that transpires in the world and He is One.

The Code of Jewish Law states (Laws of Shema 61:6):

(ו) צריך להאריך בחי"ת של אחד, כדי שימליך הקב"ה בשמים ובארץ, שלזה רומז החטוטרת שבאמצע הגג החי"ת. ויאריך בדלי"ת של אחד שיעור שיחשוב שהקב"ה יחיד בעולמו ומושל בד' רוחות העולם

*6) When reciting the verse Shema, one must elongate the sound of the **n** in the last word אחד long enough to think that Hashem is the King of the heavens and the earth ... and he should elongate the sound of the **ט** of אחד long enough to think that Hashem is the Master of the world, and rules over all four corners of the earth.*

After thinking that Hashem is the Master of the heavens and the earth and all four corners of the earth, a person has coronated Hashem as King of the entire universe. The Chofetz Chaim would regularly quote Rabbi Yisroel Salanter who said, “We are careful to coronate Hashem over the entire universe, but sometimes we forget to coronate Him over ourselves.” Doing so misses the mark because the main goal of the Shema is to accept upon **ourselves** the yoke of heaven.

To our “American” ears, the idea of accepting the yoke of another upon ourselves smacks of the idea of slavery. Our society doesn’t look favorably upon one who has completely subjugated another to his will, so how can we be expected to become “slaves” to Hashem?

The answer is that there is no greater honor or privilege than to be a servant to Hashem, the King of Kings. Do we in fact do anything for Him? Is there anything that we *can* do for Him? He is perfect and He has everything, so there is really nothing that we can actually do for Him. What kind of servant is that? The reality is that when we serve Hashem, we are really serving ourselves. The whole idea of us doing Hashem’s mitzvot is just to give Hashem an excuse to give us reward. Moreover, when a person makes himself the king and serves himself instead of Hashem, no matter how great he is, what is he in comparison to Hashem? Looking down at the world from the space shuttle, will anybody see him? But when a person is Hashem’s servant, he is connected to the infinite love of Hashem, and, as His servant, is worthy of great reward.

No one can create a greater kingdom than the kingdom of Hashem. When a person seeks to create his own kingdom, no matter how much wealth he has accumulated, and no matter how much fame he has achieved, what is it in comparison to the Kingdom of Hashem, who controls the entire universe? More importantly, he cannot take it with him when he leaves this world. He must leave everything behind for

others to take. When he is part of Hashem's kingdom throughout his life, he continues in his position of glory in the world to come. Having been one of Hashem's loyal servants in this world, Hashem will take very good care of him in the World to Come.

Who are we talking to when we say, "Hear, O Israel?"

There is a very important lesson here. When we wake up in the morning and recite the Shema to accept the yoke of Hashem upon ourselves, we must realize that the Torah was not given to me alone. It was given to the *entire* Jewish nation, and it is my obligation to try to connect every other Jew to Hashem! I must be one who calls out to others, "Listen, I want to tell you something. Hashem is real! Hashem is our G-d!!! We need to get with the program and start paying Him some attention!" Each of us can do this in our own way and help others to see the light.

מצוה ג - היא שצונו לאהבו יתעלה

Mitzvah #3: *This is the commandment to love Hashem.*

This comes from the very next verse that we say after saying the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5),

(ה) וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ

5) And you shall love Hashem your G-d with all your heart, and all your soul and with all that you possess.

After fulfilling Mitzva #1 to know and believe in Hashem, and #2 that there is no other god than Hashem, comes mitzvah #3 to love Hashem. If we have fulfilled numbers 1 and 2 properly, and deeply appreciate Hashem, #3, to love Hashem, should be the natural outcome. My heart should fill with love for Hashem for having given me the privilege of serving Him. Moreover, my heart should fill with joy that I

even know Hashem is real, that I may serve Him! How many billions of people walk the earth without a clue, yet I have been selected by Hashem to be His servant! Baruch Hashem!!!! It's time to make a party and celebrate!

May our daily recitation of the Shema not be rushed or mechanical, but filled with meaning, mindfulness, and joy. And may that simple verse—six words long—anchor us in a world that so often pulls us in every direction.

“Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad.” In the light and in the dark. In the joy and in the struggle. In the morning and at night.