

The Secret of the Shema

Translated from Sefer Nefesh HaChayyim

Joel David Bakst ©
All rights reserved 1980 - 2003

Rabbi Chayyim of Volozhin (1749-1821) was the outstanding disciple of the Torah luminary, Rabbi Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna. He was a recognized leader of Jewry in his time. In 1802, he founded the Yeshiva of Volozhin (later named Etz Chayyim, in his honor), which became the prototype and inspiration for Yeshivot in Lithuania and Europe during the 19th century. Even up to this day, in America and in Israel, the centers of Torah scholarship are patterned after his approach. Among his writings, his most famous work is *Sefer Nefesh HaChayyim (Book of the Living Soul)*. One of the book's purposes was to rectify a number of misconceptions and improper relationships relating to the performance of mitzvot and to the study of the Torah. In his book, Rabbi Chayyim reveals certain esoteric principles of the kabbalistic Oral Tradition -- principles that were previously only hinted at. He writes:

"And in truth I would have prevented myself from speaking about this subject altogether, since the Early Authorities (*Rishonim*), may their remembrance be for a blessing, hid the matter very well...and only spoke about it through suggestion (*remez*). Their spirit was faithful to G-d and was good for them according to their generation, but now it has been many days without a [Torah] leader. To each man, every path appears correct to walk in after the tendency of his mind. All the desired thoughts of men are soaring according to their inclination...and it is this that has brought me to begin to speak about the subject...and to elucidate all that our Sages, may their remembrance be for a blessing, hinted at to us here."

Although Nefesh Hachayyim is neither a study in the Kabbalah proper, nor a systemized introduction to it, it does expound on many of the principles and it has since become required reading in those circles. As a guide to developing correct ethical relationships to the mitzvot and to Torah study, it is also a classic among the adherents of the Mussar Movement (character development).

The goal of this work is to present the intentions one should have during the reading of the Shema, as these intentions are explained primarily in the third gate of Nefesh HaChayyim. In so doing, an outline of the basic kabbalistic concept of G-d's existence and Unity will be defined. Consequently, a spiritual and metaphysical basis for the existence of the Torah and the Mitzvot will also, with the help of G-d, be presented. Because the material is found throughout 14 chapters, and due to its difficult syntactical structure, an adaptation, and not a literal translation, has been produced.

Rabbi Chayyim of Volozhin concludes his preface by stating:

"(Now), for the truth of the matter incline your ear and pay heed in your heart and you will walk securely."

Two perceptions of reality exist, ours and G-d's. The two, however, are not comparable. Our existence is totally dependent upon His. This is so true that if G-d were to remove His will, for even one brief moment, not would our entire reality cease to exist, it would never have existed.

The existence of G-d, however, is completely independent of His creation. Further, His Being is absolute Oneness without parts, structure, relationships, or borders. In absolute terms, it

follows that there cannot exist anything other than His Being. His pure, indivisible and unlimited Oneness (*achdut pashut*) fills up every dimension, level and point of all possible realities with perfect and absolute equality, without any change or distinction whatsoever. Thus, G-d and G-d alone can only truly be said to exist. He is everywhere, not allowing room for even a pinpoint of anything other than Himself. Even where life appears now to exist, from His perspective, it is as if it were before it was created. There is still no existence of interposition or distinction whatsoever in His Essence, which is everywhere and at all times. This is to be understood literally.

Exactly how these two realities exist simultaneously -- that we are yet here, in one sense, yet not really here, as only G-d exists -- cannot be grasped completely by any consciousness. Furthermore, we are forbidden to even attempt to understand the details of this paradox. But, on the other hand, it is an obligation and responsibility for every Jew who truly desires to come close to G-d and to serve Him, to understand and to have personal knowledge of the overall principles involved. It is the principles of these two realities that are expressed in the first two verses of the Shema.

The first verse of formula is SHEMA YISRAEL, A-DONAI E-LOHAYNU, A-DONAI ECHAD (ONE). G-D is one. His unity does not allow anything to co-exist with Him. There is no other, other thing, or "otherness" -- categorically, without exception. There never was, there never will be, there is not now. It is as if the world, when proclaiming this truth, has momentarily ceased to exist. This cannot be intellectually fathomed, but rather it must be understood and experienced in the heart. A word of caution: One does not and cannot unite with this Oneness in the normal sense of the word, because from the inferred perspective of that Oneness, he, as he knows and experiences "himself (or herself)" to be, is no longer in existence to be able to unite with anything.

The two names of attributes of G-d contained in this formula, A-donai and E-lohim, further explain this concept. E-lohim literally means "powers," the controlling factor behind every force, general and specific. This is the quality of G-d as the Master of All Forces. This is the chain of active forces behind every force. Each preceding link or cause can be seen as the "master" of the effect which it produces below it. Each becomes in turn the power source for the level beneath it. Creation is thus seen to be an infinitely intricate matrix of transmitting stations from the most spiritual level to all of the details of our physical existence. This is G-d as E-lohim.

The second name or attribute G-d is the four Hebrew letters Y-H-V-H, known as the Tetragrammaton and is pronounced only as A-donai, meaning literally "bringing into being." Y-H-V-H is the quality of G-d as the origin of existence and the source of never-ending life. Even though there is an elaborate evolution and interrelationship of individual energies and processes called E-lohim, all these life forces have their absolute source in the four letters Y-H-V-H. This is the meaning of the verse (Deut. 4-39), "And know now and understand deeply in your heart that Y-H-V-H (He) is the E-lohim above and below." He alone is the root of all roots, the soul of all souls and the life of all life, "SHEMA YISRAEL"...! Listen Israel! Know and understand that Y-H-V-H is our E-lohim. There are no "other gods," no independent powers and no chance occurrences. Everything, large and small, good and evil, is under the providence of Y-H-V-H. There is G-d as Y-H-V-H.

The name Y-H-V-H, the root of being, has another unique property. The actual essence of G-d is known only to Himself, as explained, and is beyond any conceptualization. Therefore, there is no form, name or even thought that can be applied to It. Nevertheless, it is in relationship to this name of G-d, Y-H-V-H, that as if it were, all existence is nullified. This is, then, the closest aspect to His unknowable essence that He chose to reveal to us. It is for this reason Y-H-V-H is called the *Essential Name (Shem HaEtzem)*...the one that brings all existence into being, and at the same time is called the "United Name" or *Name of Oneness (Shem HaMeyuchad)*, because it is here that existence ceases and we begin to *infer* the true concept of G-d's perspective of reality, the indefinable Oneness that is.

The structure of the Shema may thus be viewed as a syllogism. All our independent forces (E-lohim) are rooted in the source that brings them into being. (Y-H-V-H). The source of all being (Y-H-V-H) is rooted in pure, absolute Unity (ECHAD - ONE). Therefore, all our independent forces are, in truth, rooted in pure, absolute Unity. Thus, the Shema reads, "Yisrael!" Understand clearly in your deepest being that the very same Y-H-V-H that is our E-lohim is the same Y-H-V-H that is "ONE." We have just proclaimed that from G-d's side, G-d is literally everywhere and everything; there is not any independent consciousness or thought at all, general or personal. This includes the reader himself: this very moment is an actual "experience" of his thought process attempting to grasp this very point and the next point of consciousness and the next, and so on.

Shifting now to the second verse of formula: BARUCH SHEM KAVOD MALCHUTO LEOLAM VAED--"Let it be revealed and recognized the all-encompassing splendor of His Kingdom for Eternity," we encounter the initial experience of "this world," the Kingdom of G-d. Here then is the decree of our own separate awareness and perspective, the vision of the creation before us, constantly being recreated through His Divine Will. All One from His side, though from our side, He *concealed* His true state of being to allow for this relative reality to exist. However -- and this is the essential point here -- it is relative only in relationship to Him. In relationship to us, G-d created it as an absolute reality unto itself, with all of its intricacies, limited to distinct right and wrong times (i.e. reading of the Shema, morning and evening, eating on Shabbat, not eating on Yom Kippur, etc.), and right and wrong locations (i.e. learning Torah in the Beis Midrash, not learning Torah in the bathroom, or in unclean streets, etc.) -- all in accordance with His Divine Will. This is the basis of all the principles and laws of the Torah. If it were not for this aspect, all the positive and negative commandments would have no reality. This is His Malchut -- the Kingdom of G-d. He, as King, rules over His Kingdom and He as King, saw fit that there should constantly be appearing to us an absolute reality, requiring His constant blessings of the life experience as we know it. This is incorporated in the word BARUCH (meaning "increase")...that the royal cup of His Kingdom should overflow with the world's much-needed blessing of life through our actions, prayer and the learning of His Torah.

Even though we have neither the permission nor the means to understand fully the awesome matter of the co-existence of a Kingdom antithetic to His Unity, we can accept it and resolve ourselves to fear Him and to serve Him. Upon this a covenant is sealed, to which every Jew must know and adhere to in his heart with an undeniable and irrefutable faith, that from our side, there is a reality which necessitates a distinction between good and evil, of things permitted and of things forbidden, of spiritually clean places, and spiritually unclean places. This is a cornerstone of our belief and the essential root of the Torah and the Mitzvot. It is this reality, based on the underlying principle of Torah and Mitzvot, to which we resolve upon ourselves willingly, and accept humbly. This is the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. "Let it be recognized and increased (BARUCH)...the all encompassing splendor (SHEM KAVOD) of His Kingdom (MALCHUT) for eternity (LEOLAM VAED)." That yes, our reality is real, there are 613 Mitzvot, there is good and evil, right and wrong, and the consequences of one's acts are indeed forever. And G-d, as King, is recognized and revealed through the hierarchy of these commandments of His Kingdom throughout all of creation.

We have just unified G-d in the first formula, "SHEMA YISRAEL..." as explained above, that He is pure, absolute, undefined Oneness, and there is no "otherness" whatsoever besides Him, and that all physical and spiritual existence is, as we perceive it, is not existing at all. Knowing this, how can we now praise Him with the recognition that His perfection is increased and glorified through the existence of our reality? As if our world has an independence of its own? As if He needs to rule over us? This cannot be praise in the light of the unspeakable Unity of the first verse. But, in spite of this, His Will decreed that we should praise Him specifically with this recognition, since this is in fact our reality. All our perception, which is made possible and defined by the blueprint of the Torah, is built precisely upon this point. Still, because it is only our reality and not His, we are required to say the second verse, in contradistinction to the first, only in a whisper.

We can now begin to understand why the Sages have called the first formula the "Upper Unity" and the second formula the "Lower Unity." In the Upper Unity of the first verse, before and during the experience, one should intend to perform the mitzvah of the unification of G-d. It is the obligation and mission of every Jew to clearly understand and experience, that true G-d Reality, personal providence, and the cause of every effect (G-d--E-lohim), is rooted in the Source of Existence (G-d-Y-H-V-H); further, the Source of Existence is "non-existence" (G-D-Oneness), as there is only His unknowable Being, which is completely beyond the concept of existence.

In the Lower Unity of the second verse, before and during the whisper, one should intend to perform the mitzvah of accepting the yoke of G-d's Kingdom. This means: 1) accepting the decree that we cannot fully comprehend the why and how of G-d's Kingdom in relationship to His true Essence, and 2) accepting that once there is a reality --- a kingdom with specific times and places affecting good and evil, and that one's actions have eternal consequences, it the most wonderful gift possible and it is His Will that it should continue. It is also His Will that we should be completely dependent upon Him for it's continued existence.

To the extent that one continues to understand and to deepen the performance of the Unification G-d, one will gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Kingdom of G-d, His commandments, and the learning of His Torah, the definition and map of this reality. Likewise, to the extent that one continues to deepen his/he praise of the absolute wonder of the Kingdom, and to receive it's yoke, one will be merited to understand and to actually experience the true Unity of G-d and to be counted among those of the True Faith.