

The Power of Shema

Category: Devarim, V'eschanan

From Moses until October 7th, the prayer from our Parsha has played an outsized role.

The Message of the War

When the attack on the Nova festival began on October 7th, there was a young couple who managed to get into their car. Miraculously, they escaped the festival, but they weren't yet out of danger. They had gone to Kibbutz Be'eri, which itself was under attack. In Be'eri. Outside of the kibbutz, they hid in a small bathroom for six hours, and at some points, heard terrorists shooting everywhere right outside the door.

Throughout the entire ordeal, his only weapon had been exactly six words: "Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad."

Eventually, they escaped somehow and reached Kibbutz Alumim; the site that welcomed them was a soldier lying dead, with many dead terrorists around him. This kibbutz was filled with soldiers, but the danger wasn't over.

Then, as the man was ducking behind a concrete wall, he looked down and saw something shiny. It was a ring, and on the ring was inscribed "Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad."

Since October 7th, that ring has been hanging on his necklace—to remind him that G-d is always with him.

Indeed, "Shema Yisrael" has become the verse most associated with the recent war. Many of you have seen the dog tag with the inscription (in Hebrew) "Our heart is captive in Gaza." Well, another tag is widespread among soldiers; it says "Shema Yisrael."

Yoni, from Kibbutz Nir Oz, had his wife and two young daughters kidnapped on October 7th. For 49 agonizing days, he had no word on their fate—his daughters were just four and two years old. Like the other families of the hostages, he did

everything he could to bring them back. He even led a delegation of hostage families to Europe, where he delivered an emotional speech at the European Union Parliament. At the end of his speech, he did something unexpected: he stood up, covered his eyes with his right hand, and placed his left hand over his head as if wearing a kippah. With his eyes closed and head raised, he cried out, “Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad.”

The emotion in the room was palpable.

Not long after, he was reunited with his family.

The Shema

Shema first appears in our Torah portion, at the end of the forty years, just weeks before Moses’ death, when he says it to the Jewish people. Shema is the call to the Jewish people of Israel to recognize G-d’s presence and accept His sovereignty.

There are a few core messages that are included in Shema.

First of all, says the Rebbe, it is about faith in G-d, faith in the oneness of G-d.

Then there is the message of love. In the next verse, we say: “You shall love G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” — the mitzvah of loving G-d.

How does one learn to love G-d? The Rebbe explains that it can be attained through prayer. Prayer is the framework within which we contemplate G-d’s greatness. The prayer is designed to help us dwell on G-d’s kindness, and that will help us develop this love for Him.

In the morning blessings, we reflect on how G-d opens the eyes of the blind and frees the bound, how every step we take is thanks to Him. From there, we continue to read and contemplate the beauty and grandeur of G-d’s creation. Later, we speak of the heavenly hosts and angels. Then, we arrive at the blessings of the Shema, where we read that G-d sets aside all His affairs and chooses to focus specifically on the Jewish people. This gives us the ability to develop a love for G-d.

The next mitzvah that appears in Shema is the mitzvah of Torah study: “And you shall teach them diligently to your children and speak of them.” Teaching Torah to our children is even more important than studying on our own—because the children are the future of the Jewish people. Afterwards, comes the commandment, “And you shall speak of them,” to study Torah yourself, “when you lie down and when you rise up,” day and night. There is a minimum of at least one verse, the verse of Shema itself. We say it each morning and night, and in this way, one fulfills the mitzvah of Torah study.

Finally, the Shema concluded with practical mitzvot: It tells us to wear tefillin on our bodies, and to hang a mezuzah on our homes.

The Order

This order within Shema is actually very precise.

First comes faith in G-d; that’s the first verse. Then comes “Ve’ahavta,” to love G-d, which represents the aspect of prayer. Then comes Torah study, and then comes mitzvos. Well, it is this exact order we proceed by every day: When we wake up, we declare our faith by saying Modeh Ani. Then we proceed to pray, and then we study some Torah, and then we proceed to the “practical” mitzvos of the day.

This is also true in the life of every Jew: when he is born, he already has faith; faith is part of his DNA. The Talmud says that the Jewish people are “believers, the children of believers.” Then, as children, we begin studying Torah, and then we learn how to observe mitzvot.

This exact order is evident with Abraham, the first Jew. He was the first to have faith. Then, the Torah tells us that he “commanded his children and his household after him,” which itself represents Torah study. What did he command them? “To do righteousness and justice,” which represents mitzvot.

Finally, the Rebbe said, the same approach should be taken when meeting another Jew. First, one must awaken the Jewish spark within him, which is expressed through the cry of “Shema Yisrael.” Then, he can be connected to his source through prayer, and then we can teach him Torah—which will ultimately lead to the observance of mitzvot (Sichot Kodosh 5738, Vol. 3, p. 229).

After Liberation

Here's one final Shema story:

On May 5, 1945, in the Gusen concentration camp in Austria, Eliyahu Herman lay exhausted in his barracks, surrounded by the dying and the dead, whom no one even bothered to collect. He was a yeshiva student from Veitzen, Hungary, who was deported like many others to labor and extermination camps. Suddenly, a walking skeleton appeared at the door of the barracks and announced: "The Germans have raised a white flag over their quarters, gathered their weapons, and are sitting in a group on the ground." The war was over. They were free to leave.

The news managed to revive Eliyahu—who had not eaten anything for several days—and the other exhausted barracks residents. With supreme effort, he got to his feet and went outside, walking toward the place where everyone was now heading—the food storage. He managed to grab a sugar beet, but before he could exit the storage, it was snatched from his hands.

Outside, he met the Klein brothers. He suggested they leave together, and they agreed, starting to walk through the forest without knowing where to go. There were no signs, just a forest and a tangle of trees. They were still afraid of the SS, who could shoot from between the trees, but they continued forward.

After a while, they suddenly saw a military vehicle overturned among the trees. They hid among the trees, but there was no movement in the area. One of them approached the vehicle and signaled to his friends. When they carefully approached, they discovered a dead SS soldier. The vehicle was full of new SS uniforms. Without much thought, they selected several suits for themselves and threw away the rags they were wearing, which were infested with billions of lice.

The uniforms were embroidered with SS symbols, and they tried to remove the symbols with a piece of metal, but it didn't work. Suddenly, three American soldiers, two dark-skinned and one light-skinned, jumped toward them from a military vehicle, shouting, "Halt! Documents!"

The Americans waved their weapons threateningly, and one of the survivors who had emerged from the forest shouted, "Jewish! Jüdisch! Yevrey!" (Jew in English,

German, and Russian). To prove his Jewishness, one of the men pulled a document from his pocket and handed it to the American. The American examined it and noticed the German swastika displayed on it. The suspicion against the three grew, and in post-war Europe, the victors didn't need much reason to punish Nazi Germans.

Suddenly, the light-skinned American soldier separated from the other two and approached the three, shouting in Yiddish, "Du bist a Yid?" (Are you Jewish?). "Yes!" "Do you know how to pray? Do you know the Shema Yisrael?" The man burst into tears, and with a voice that shook the entire forest, he cried out: "Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad."

The American soldier and the survivor hugged each other and cried.