

| PORTION     | DATE         | HEB DATE   | TORAH           | NEVIIM       | RENEWED     |
|-------------|--------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------|
| Ve'etchanan | 17 Aug. 2019 | 16 Av 5779 | Deut. 3:23-7:11 | Isa. 40:1-26 | Luke 3:2-15 |

This week's Torah portion begins with Moshe retelling to the Children of Yisrael the events of the past forty years. Moshe recounts his pleas to Hashem after the battles of Sichon and Og, in the hope that perhaps Hashem would rescind His decree and allow Moshe to enter into the Land. But, that was not to be the case.

This week's portion is always read on the Shabbat after Tisha B'av. This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Nachamu which means "the Shabbat of Consolation." It begins seven weeks of consolation taking its name from the first words of Yishayahu Chapter 40 of the haftarah. It begins a series of seven haftarot over the next seven weeks that focus on prophecies of consolation.

Moshe concludes the historical review which he began in parashat Devarim in today's Torah portion. He began by warning his people to keep Hashem's commandments and reminds them of the events at Mount Sinai when Hashem revealed Himself to them and presented them with the Torah. Moshe warns Yisrael that if they do not keep the commandments they will be exiled; but promises them that repentance is upon them and that Hashem will never abandon them. He reminds Yisrael of the miracles that Hashem performed for them, and how He sets aside three cities of refuge on the eastern side of the Yarden.

He then begins another discourse. And this one is all about the commandments. He begins to exhort the Children of Yisrael. He repeats the Ten Commandments, and chapter 6 of our Torah portion features the pre-eminently important verse Shema Yisrael as well as the first paragraph of the Shema recital prayer.

The portion is saturated and focused on Eretz Yisrael and the mitzvot (the Divine commandments). However, it is really a connection between the Land and the commandments. Moshe mentions the Land no fewer than 14 times and he refers to the Land as "the Good Land", "the land that Hashem gives you", and "the Land that He showed to your forefathers".

There's so much going on here in parashat Ve'etchanan. But, for the moment, let's focus on different aspect of the Shema Yisrael which is the most basic declaration of faith for the Yisrael. It is the most basic thing that a Yisrael must know. And that is the ultimate affirmation of the absolute and unique Oneness of Hashem. It's so important that the Torah itself, it instructs us to recite twice a day.

The Shema is a foundation of our faith, to believe that Hashem is One and that His is the most perfect and absolute unity. It expresses Hashem's unity is not just a statement of faith, but actually can be fulfilled at all times just by thinking. There is no limit when we use the Shema as a prayer, as a meditation, as a toolkit for growing closer to Hashem, as a conduit of Divine power and love, and opportunity for spiritual growth.

The first verse, "Shema Yisrael" is a call to the people of Yisrael to recognize Hashem as an El. It is to recognize His uniqueness and Oneness, and to accept the 'yoke'. The yoke means responsibility, of performing His commandments, and to accept His sovereignty over us.

We have already learned that this entire Sefer Devarim is like one long speech which Moshe is giving over to the people of Yisrael over a five week period before he departs this world. So, it's interesting that the Shema appears here in this part of the Torah. The sages wonder why the Shema appears this week. It almost seems misplaced. The sages explain that there is another tradition regarding its origin.

In the Talmud, Tractate Pesachim describes the scene in which Shema was originally recited by the patriarch Ya'akov's sons prior to his departing this world: "Said R. Shimon ben Lakish: (Quoting from Gen. Ch. 49) "And Yaakov called to his sons, and said to them, 'gather together and I will tell you.'" Yaakov sought to reveal the end of days to his sons, but as he was about to do so, suddenly the Shechinah departed from him. He lost his Divine prophetic inspiration, so he was prevented from telling them. He said, "Perhaps, Hashem forbid, one of my descendants is found unworthy to the El Shaddai, just as Yishmael descended from Abraham and as my father Isaac gave birth to Esav. Sensing his apprehension, his sons said to him: 'Shema Yisrael, Hashem who is our Elohim, He is Hashem who is One.'"

The sons' message to their father Yaakov was, 'Just as there is only One Elohim in your heart, so too there He is the only One in our hearts.' At that moment Yaakov declared in response, "*Baruch Shem k'vod malchuto l'olam vaed*, (Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever)" which is the traditional response to the Shema Yisrael. So according to this tradition, the Shema was part of this ancient dialogue between Yaakov and his sons. But this is an oral tradition and the Shema is not actually recorded in the written Torah in Genesis 49, it is only stated now, by Moshe, here in Va'etchanan.

Now, the Torah scroll has been written according to tradition that Moshe received from Hashem at Mount Sinai and it is written by hand in the exact same manner for 3500 years. The last letter of the word "*shema*" (שְׁמַע) is written with a large *ayin* (ע). And the last letter of the word "*echad*" (אֶחָד) is written with a large *dalet*. The two large letters, *ayin* and *dalet* spell the word '*eid*' (עֵד), meaning 'witness.' So, whoever recites the Shema bears witness to Hashem's Oneness. Yishayahu said, "You are My witnesses," declares יהוה, "And My servant whom I have chosen, so that you know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no *Él* formed, nor after Me there is none."<sup>1</sup>

The letter *Ayin* has the numerical value of seventy which also refers to seventy nations. And *dalet* refers to the four directions. Meaning, although Yisrael was dispersed among the seventy nations and to the four corners of the world, she (witness) testifies daily to Hashem's Oneness. The sages teach that the essence of this absolute and unique Oneness is all encompassing and simple unity, it is incomprehensible.

When we say, "שְׁמַע, יִשְׂרָאֵל: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְהוָה אֶחָד", we are declaring that Hashem is unknowable transcendental unity, but we declare that He is our Elohim...ours...accessible to us at all times. So too, in every blessing before addressing Hashem as the transcendental King of the universe (*Melech haOlam*) by calling Him Elokeinu. One of the most beautiful aspect of reciting the Shema daily is that it means we are accepting His *a-di-kut* (אֲדִיְקוּת, Godliness) upon ourselves every day.

"Shema" means we ourselves have to hear, but it means deeper than that. We need to understand, to pay attention, that He is our Elokeinu who is One. That means there is nothing else but Him. And His Oneness includes everything that has led us to this point. It includes everything that happens to us, because everything will ultimately be understood to be His compassion – "I am Hashem your Elohim."

As mentioned above, we read this Torah portion immediately after Tisha B'Av. In the ancient holiday of Tu B'av (this year it was August 16), it was celebrated in Holy Temple times as the happiest day of the year, because it expresses Hashem's unconditional and eternal love for His people? This is the Shabbat of Consolation.

<sup>1</sup> Yishayahu 43:10

And in the third verse (Devarim 3:25) of this week's Torah portion, Moshe wraps up the Tisha B'Av experience for us with the words, "Let me pass over and see the good land beyond the Yardēn, this good hill country, and Lebanon", which our sages tells us is an allusion to Moshe's deep desire to see Yerusalem and the Holy Temple. The Shema appears in our parasha because we read it on the Shabbat of Consolation.

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְהוָה אֶחָד שְׁמַע, יִשְׂרָאֵל: "He is Elokeinu" who is within our reach and He reaching out to us with His love. That is the consolation, the source of the greatest joy of all. And thus, we are commanded, "You shall love YHWH your Elohim with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." (Devarim 6:5) Everything brings us back to Him, is from Him, and we are commanded to love everything that draws us close to Him, all the midot, all the mitzvot. And the part of the process of our refinement and discovery as human beings. Even the suffering that comes upon us is to draw us closer. That is why this comes out on Shabbat Nachamu. This is our Elohim, that is the comfort.

Rashi tells us that one of the most basic intentions of the Shema is: Shema Yisrael – Hashem who is now, currently, Elokeinu- will one day in the future, be Hashem Echad – He will be recognized and acknowledge as the One True Elohim by all the nations of the world.