YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Principles in *Avodat Hashem*

**Shiur #01:**

***Keriat Shema* (I): The Fundamental Obligation and its Source**

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

**Introduction**

“And you, my son Shelomo, know the God of your father, and serve Him with single mind and fervent heart …” (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 28:9)

In these *shiurim*, we will deal with principles in *avodat Hashem* (service of God). We will discuss these principles mainly by contemplating our “duties of the heart”: the *mitzvot* of faith in God, the belief in the oneness of God, love of God, and studying His Torah. Accordingly, we will attempt to contemplate the connection between these *mitzvot* to our lives as *ovdei Hashem* (servants of God).

To provide a proper framework for our discussion, we will begin by examining the *mitzvot* of *keri’at Shema* (reciting the *Shema*) and prayer, *mitzvot* that constitute the foundation that shapes our world as *ovdei Hashem*. Since engaging in *avodat Hashem* is an incredibly daunting task, one that looms over the lives of even the most pious and well-meaning individuals like a towering colossus, our analysis will include both halakhic and philosophical discussions.

In this *shiur*, we will attempt to create a roadmap connecting the world of thought and ideas to their realization in the form of divine worship. We will take a cue from the order in the verse cited above – “Know the God of your father – and serve Him” – as well as from the order of topics in Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah.*[[1]](#endnote-1) We will then proceed from principles of Jewish thought to the laws of daily observance.

**The Source of the Obligation of *Keriat Shema***

*Masekhet Berakhot*, the first *masekhet* in the Talmud, opens with an interesting discussion regarding the proper times for *keriat Shema*. The *mishna* accepts as a fundamental and basic assumption the core obligation to recite the *Shema*, without noting the requirement to do so or the source of this obligation explicitly in any way. Puzzled by this, the *gemara* asks: “On what does the *Tanna* base himself that he commences, ‘From what time?’” The *gemara* answers simply: “The *Tanna* bases himself on the Scripture, where it is written, ‘When you lie down and when you get up’” (*Berakhot* 2a). According to this passage, the opening passage of *Masekhet Berakhot*, the verse “When you lie down and when you get up” teaches us the obligation of *keriat Shema*. Accordingly, this verse is cited later in the *masekhet* (*Berakhot* 21a) in response to the view maintaining that the obligation of *keriat Shema* is merely *mi-derabbanan* (rabbinically mandated). R. Yosef wonders how it can possibly be that the obligation of *keriat Shema* is not *mi-de’oraita* (mandated by Torah law), since the Torah states explicitly “When you lie down and when you get up.” Moreover, even Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai – who disagree regarding the manner in which the *Shema* should be recited – agree that this verse should serve to teach us the laws of *keriat Shema*. Their dispute revolves around the question of whether it should be derived from the verse that one must stand during the morning recitation of the *Shema* and lie down during the evening recitation of the *Shema*, or if the verse merely indicates that the *Shema* must be recited once in the morning and once in the evening, without any preference as to one’s physical position. In either case, Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel agree that this verse is the source for the obligation of *keriat Shema*:

Beit Shammai say: In the evening, every person should lie down and recite [the *Shema*], and in the morning he should stand, as it says, “When you lie down and when you get up.” Beit Hillel, however, say that every person should recite in his own way, as it says, “And when you are away.” Why then is it said, “When you lie down and when you get up”? [This means:] At the time when people lie down and at the time when people get up. (*Berakhot* 10b)

Opposing this view that the obligation of *keriat Shema* is necessarily *mi-de’oratia* is the position of the *Amora’im* who maintain that the obligation of *keriat Shema* is merely *mi-derabbanan*:

R. Yehuda[[2]](#endnote-2) said: If one is in doubt whether he has recited the *Shema*, he need not recite it again. If he is in doubt whether he has said *Emet Ve-Yatziv*[[3]](#endnote-3)or not, he should say it again. What is the reason? The recitation of the *Shema* is *de-rabbanan*, while the recitation of *Emet Ve-Yatziv* is *de-oraita*. (*Berakhot* 21a)

This approach appears to stand in direct contradiction to the straightforward understanding of the verse and with the apparent conclusion reached by the *Tanna’im*. To clarify this point, we must return to the verses and extract from them their true simple meaning. Once we do this, we will be able to understand the seemingly incongruous positions espoused by our Sages.

**The First Section of the *Shema***

Let us examine closely the verses from the first section of the *Shema*:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these words with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (*Devarim* 6:4-9)

The first two verses deal with the *mitzva* of recognizing the oneness of God and the *mitzva* of loving God. From the third verse on, the central topic that the text addresses is what should be done with “these words.” One should take “these words” to heart; one should impress them upon one’s children; one should recite them at all times and in every situation; one should bind them as a sign on one’s hand and as a symbol on one’s forehead; and one should inscribe them on the doorposts of one’s house and gate.

Two interconnected questions should be asked regarding this point. The first is a technical question: What does the Torah mean when it refers to “these words”? The second is a more fundamental question: What is so unique about “these words” that the Torah demanded that we engage so extensively and comprehensively in them, in all areas and all strata of life?

**Various Interpretations of “These Words”**

An examination of the simple meaning of the text leads us to suggest two central, seemingly contradictory possibilities for the identity of “these words.” On the one hand, we might suggest a more limited interpretation: that “these words” refers to some or all of the verses in the *Shema* itself. A more expansive, parallel interpretation is that “these words” refers to particularly significant parts of the Torah. If this latter position is taken to its logical extreme, “these words” could even refer to the Torah in its entirety.

Let us try to clarify the matter a bit more. Based on what is written in the verses, we are expected to tie *tefillin* to our arms and on our foreheads and to inscribe “these words” on the doorposts of our houses. In light of this, it follows that the expression must refer to a limited number of verses,[[4]](#endnote-4) since it would be extremely difficult to fit the contents of the entire Torah in one’s *tefillin* or *mezuzot*.

Following this reasoning, it seems that “these words” must refer to one of the following possibilities:

1. **The first verse: recognizing the oneness of God**. The plural “words” can apply to this verse alone, since the verse includes two distinct statements: a) that “the Lord” – who created the world[[5]](#endnote-5) – “is our God”; and b) that our God is “the Lord alone,” to the exclusion of any other deity. Alternatively, it can be argued that the two statements are that: a) the Lord is God; and b) the Lord is *our* God, whose dominion we accept upon ourselves. In other words, aside from the value of faith in God and the philosophical knowledge that God exists, we must also accept upon ourselves the yoke of God’s kingship.[[6]](#endnote-6)
2. **The first two verses: the oneness of God and loving God**. According to this possibility, it is easier to explain the existence of two distinct “words”: the oneness of God (“Hear, O Israel…”) and loving God (“You shall love…”).
3. **The entire first section of the *Shema***. “These words” refers to the entire passage containing the words “these words.”

These are the possible interpretations for “these words” if we maintain that the phrase must refer to no more than a short paragraph that one can feasibly tie to his hand and place on the doorposts of his house. However, if we examine the text once more, we will discover an entirely new direction in the third and fourth verses of the passage. In these verses, we are commanded to take “these words” to heart, to impress them on our children, and to recite them at all times and in every situation. These commands seem naturally to invite us to view the meaning of “these words” through a wider lens and to see the phrase as including the entire Torah. It is difficult to claim that the Torah’s demand to engage in “these words” so intensively could possibly be relegated to a mere few verses, as important as these verses may be.

Following this reasoning, it seems that we must interpret “these words” as one of the following possibilities:

1. **The entire Torah: from the first verse of *Bereishit* until the last verse in *Devarim***. This interpretation is mainly supported by the verses at the end of *Devarim* (*Devarim* 31:23-26; also see Ramban, *Devarim* 31:24[[7]](#endnote-7)).
2. **The entire book of *Devarim*, also known as *Mishneh Torah* (“copy of the Torah”)**. This interpretation is supported by the opening verse of the book of *Devarim*: “These are the words (*devarim*) that Moshe addressed…” The same Hebrew word – *devarim* – is used in the *Shema*: “These are the words (*eleh ha-devarim*).”
3. **The “*mitzvot* speech” in *Devarim***: In *Devarim* 6, Moshe is in the middle of relaying his “*mitzvot* speech,” which takes up most of the book of *Devarim* – from chapter 4 until the end of chapter 26. There, in the summarizing verses of the speech, Moshe explains to the nation the significance of the *mitzvot* and their purpose:

The Lord your God commands you this day to observe these laws and rules; observe them faithfully with all your heart and soul. You have affirmed this day that the Lord is your God, that you will walk in His ways, that you will observe His laws and commandments and rules, and that you will obey Him. And the Lord has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people who shall observe all His commandments, and that He will set you, in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations that He has made; and that you shall be, as He promised, a holy people to the Lord your God. (*Devarim* 26:16-19)

These *mitzvot*, according to Moshe’s description, are designed to create a unique Chosen People that is deeply connected to God. This connection is the key to transforming the nation into a holy nation. Obviously, there is an expectation and a demand that we take to heart these words, impress them on our children, and engage in them constantly.

**The Ten Commandments: A Unified Interpretation**

Having said all this, it seems that we can suggest an additional interpretation. This interpretation, in my opinion, comes the closest to the simple meaning of the verse. In addition, this interpretation will shed light on the entire approach that we have taken thus far.

After Moshe describes the revelation at Sinai and the Ten Commandments that were given there at the mountain, Moshe says to the people of Israel:

The Lord spoke those words (***ha-devarim ha-eleh***) – those and no more – to your whole congregation at the mountain, with a mighty voice out of the fire and the dense clouds. He inscribed them on two tablets of stone, which He gave to me. (*Devarim* 5:19)

Although this verse appears in chapter 5, it is certainly reasonable to claim that when Moshe uses the same phrase – *ha-devarim ha-eleh* – at the start of chapter 6, he is similarly referring to the Ten Commandments.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Given the plethora of possible interpretations for the phrase “these words” that we have outlined thus far, how can we determine the truth of the matter? In my humble opinion, there is no contradiction whatsoever between the interpretations. Rather, **all the interpretations are correct**.

“These words” include, on the one hand, the entire Torah,[[9]](#endnote-9) and on the other hand, relate to a small number of particularly significant verses. This concept is exemplified by the Ten Commandments, which represent the entire Torah while actually comprising only a limited number of verses. At the revelation at Sinai, we received the Ten Commandments, which contain embedded within them the full content of the Torah. In an incredible accomplishment, all the *mitzvot* listed in R. Sa’adia Gaon’s *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* are categorized based on the Ten Commandments.

The same concept is true here. “These words” represent the entire Torah. When we speak of the *mitzva* of Torah study, “these words” indeed refers to the entire Torah. On the other hand, when we speak of the *mitzvot* of *tefillin* and *mezuza*, “these words” are a small group of verses that represent the entire Torah.[[10]](#endnote-10) Even though *tefillin* and *mezuzot* only contain two or four Torah passages, in the Torah’s view, it is as if the entire Torah is written upon them.

**“When You Lie Down and When You Get Up”**

One fundamental question remains. How can we interpret the end of *Devarim* 6:4: “When you lie down and when you get up”? This expression can be seen simply as an extension of the rest of the verse; in other words, it refers to the *mitzva* of Torah study. According to this interpretation, the verse means that you must learn Torah at all times and in every situation: when you stay at home, when you are away, when you lie down, and when you get up.

However, it may be that the expression “when you lie down and when you get up” represents a unique, distinct command to recite “these words” every day – when you lie down and when you get up. Based on this understanding, we must view the expression as much more limited in scope; it would then refer solely to the *mitzvot* of *tefillin* and *mezuza*. If so, we must establish certain verses that one must read each morning and evening, verses that would represent the entire Torah.

In practice, this question regarding the meaning of “when you lie down and when you get up” is the same question at the heart of a dispute between the *Amora’im* recorded in *Masekhat Berakhot*. The *Amora’im* argued whether the words “when you lie down and when you get up” teach us that the *mitzva* of *keri’at Shema* applies twice daily or whether it is a general statement encouraging us to engage in Torah study throughout each day: “R. Yosef raised an objection to this: ‘When you lie down and when you get up’! Abaye said to him: That was written with reference to words of Torah” (*Berakhot* 21a). According to R. Yosef, the verses refer to *keriat Shema*. However, Abaye contends in response that the verses relate to the *mitzva* of Torah study.

The key to this dispute surrounding the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*, then, is the question whether the *mitzva* is *mi-de’oraita* or merely *mi-derabannan*. Abaye’s position (which serves to explain the position of R. Yehuda that we discussed above) faces numerous difficulties throughout various discussions in *Masekhet Berakhot*. Through these discussions, it seems consistently clear that the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* is *mi-de’oraita* and is derived from these verses. This is also the view of many *Rishonim*, including Tosafot(*Sota* 32b, s.v. *Ve-Rabbi*). Among other points that they make, Tosafot cite the dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel from *Berakhot* 10b that we saw above, which makes it clear that the expression “when you lie down and when you get up” is the basis for the obligation of *keriat Shema*.

I believe that the numerous difficulties presented by the *Rishonim* were what drove *Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona*[[11]](#endnote-11)to suggest a different explanation in support of the position that the obligation of *keriat Shema* is *mi-derabannan*:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: If one is in doubt whether he has recited the *Shema*, he need not recite it again, since Shmuel maintains that *keriat Shema* is *de-rabannan*. And even though it is written in the Torah, “When you lie down and when you get up,” Shmuel maintains that the Torah did not say this specifically with respect to *keriat Shema*, but that one should read from any part of the Torah that he desires. Our practice to recite this passage specifically is merely *mi-derabannan*, and therefore he maintains that he need not recite it again. (*Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona*, *Berakhot* 12b, s.v. *De-Amar*)

According to this explanation, even those who maintain that the obligation of *keriat Shema* is *mi-derabannan* do not insist that everything is *mi-derabannan*. Even they would agree that these verses represent a unique command from the Torah: the command of “when you lie down and when you get up.” But rather than being an obligation to recite the verses of the *Shema* specifically, it is an obligation to engage in Torah study in any place that one desires. Furthermore, according to this understanding, the Sages were the ones who then established that this *mitzva* should be fulfilled specifically through the recitation of the *Shema*.

Thus, the *gemara*’s statement that one need not recite *Shema* again if he is uncertain whether he recited it since *keriat Shema* is *mi-derabannan* only applies if he had already read other verses from the Torah on that same day. If he indeed did so, that means that he had already fulfilled his obligation *mi-de’oraita*. However, if he did not do so, then he would be required to recite the *Shema* again in a case of doubt. The reason for this is that the fundamental obligation is *mi-de’oraita* – according to all opinions.

We have seen, in light of the division in the verses, the two possibilities in understanding the expression “when you lie down and when you get up.” It is either more limited, referring specifically to the obligation of *keriat Shema*, or it may be more expansive, referring to the entire Torah, which is represented symbolically by the passages of the *Shema*.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. *Mishneh Torah* is Rambam’s great halakhic opus, also known as *Yad Ha-Chazaka*.The numerical value of *yad* is fourteen, which refers to the fourteen books that constitute the *Mishneh Torah*. The first book is entitled *Sefer Ha-Madda* and includes *Hilkhot Yesodot Ha-Torah* (the laws of the principles of the Torah), *Hilkhot De’ot* (proper behavior), *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (Torah study), *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* (foreign worship), and *Hilkhot Teshuva* (repentance). The second book is entitled *Sefer Ha-Ahava* and includes *Hilkhot Keriat Shema*, *Hilkhot Tefilla* (prayer), *Hilkhot Tefillin U-Mezuza Ve-Sefer Torah*, *Hilkhot Tzitzit*, *Hilkhot Berakhot* (blessings), and *Hilkhot Mila* (circumcision). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Some versions read: “R. Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel”; see, for example, Rif’s version (Rif, *Berakhot* 12b). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The prayer immediately following the *Shema* of *Shacharit.* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This assumes that we follow *Chazal*’s interpretation of this verse: that the verse requires us to put *tefillin* on our arms and heads and to place *mezuzot* on the doorposts of our houses and gates. However, see Rashbam’s commentary in *Shemot*: “According to the true meaning: This should be a permanent memory for you, as if it were inscribed on your hand, as in, ‘Let me be a seal upon your heart’ (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 8:6)” (Rashbam, *Shemot* 13:9). Based on this interpretation, the verse should be understood allegorically, meaning that it should be as if the words of Torah were written on your arm, on your head, and on the doorposts of your house. Certainly, in this case, the expression “these words” can be interpreted broadly to refer to the entire Torah.

   The Rashbam’s approach is supported by explicit verses in *Mishlei*:

   My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your mind retain my commandments; for they will bestow on you length of days, years of life, and well-being. Let fidelity and steadfastness not leave you; **bind them about your throat, write them on the tablet of your mind**. (*Mishlei* 3:1-3)

   The language of binding and writing, which alludes to the verses of the *Shema*, are clearly meant to be understood allegorically here.

   Of course, Rashbam did not, God forbid, intend to negate *Chazal*’s tradition that the *mitzvot* of *tefillin* and *mezuza* are derived from these verses. In a forthcoming *shiur* dealing with the essence of the *mitzva* of *tefillin*, we will discuss the relationship between the “true meaning” of the biblical text and *Chazal*’s exegetical traditions. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. We will expand upon the notion of God as the Creator in forthcoming *shiurim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. We will discuss all of this further in a forthcoming *shiur*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Also see Ramban, *Devarim* 31:9. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This interpretation of *ha-devarim ha-eleh* is suggested by Ibn Ezra in the name of “the dissenters”:

   “These words” – the dissenters have applied this phrase to the Ten Commandments, and they also believe that the Ten Commandments are meant in the verse “inscribe them on the doorposts of your house”; but the truth is that “these words” denotes *all* the commandments. (Ibn Ezra, *Devarim* 6:6)

   Ibn Ezra rejects this position from a practical perspective, and also because of *Chazal*’s tradition that the *mitzva* of Torah study is not limited to the Ten Commandments alone but rather applies to the entire body of *mitzvot*. (Also see the discussion below regarding the ancient custom to recite the Ten Commandments as part of *keriat Shema*.)

   In my humble opinion, this interpretation of the verse is fundamentally plausible, as we will explain in the main text. Of course, it is clear that in practice, *Chazal*’s tradition is binding both with respect to Torah study in general and in relation to the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* specifically. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Based on this, it is possible to accept any of the expansive interpretations, as the same principle is at the heart of each one of them: either the entire Torah or a text that stands in for the entire Torah. Indeed, the book of *Devarim* is such a text, as its name *Mishneh Torah* attests. It seems that the “*mitzvot* speech” fits this description as well, as it is the main part of the book of *Devarim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. We will address the relationship between the general *mitzva* of Torah study and the *mitzvot* of *tefillin* and *mezuza* in a forthcoming *shiur*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Shita Mekubetzet* follows this approach as well, as does Ritva. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)