YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Se­­rvice

By Harav Baruch Gigi

***Keriat Shema* (VI): The Aspect of Torah Study Within *Keriat Shema***

**Introduction**

In the previous *shiur*, we noted that R. Shimon bar Yochai viewed *keriat Shema* as a fulfillment of the *mitzva* of Torah study. This connection is reflected in a number of *halakhot*. Some of these examples are unique to R. Shimon bar Yochai’s position. Others, while understandable according to other approaches as well, can be explained particularly well according to his position.

**The Exemption of Women from *Keriat Shema***

The *mishna* teaches (*Berakhot* 3:3) that women and slaves are exempt from the obligation of *keriat Shema*. The *Yerushalmi* comments on this:

From where [do we learn] that women [are exempt from the obligation of *keriat Shema*]? [From the verse,] “And teach them to your children” (lit. “your sons”) (*Devarim* 11:19). To your sons – and not to your daughters.

According to the *Yerushalmi*, women are exempt from the obligation of *keriat Shema* because they are exempt from the *mitzva* of Torah study. It seems to follow from this that the main aspect of the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* lies in the fulfillment of the *mitzva* of Torah study.

The *Bavli* does not mention this reason for the exemption of women from *keriat Shema*. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that this exemption is rooted in the general exemption of women from all time-bound positive *mitzvot*. Indeed, the *gemara* states:

[That they are exempt from] *keriat Shema* is self-evident – it is a time-bound positive *mitzva* and women are exempt from every time-bound positive *mitzva*. (*Berakhot* 20b)

It seems that the dispute between the two Talmuds reflects two fundamental ways of understanding the essence of the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*. According to the *Yerushalmi*, *keriat Shema* constitutes a fulfillment of the *mitzva* of Torah study. In contrast, according to the *Bavli*, it is a fulfillment of the *mitzva* of accepting upon oneself the yoke of God’s kingship.

This notion is stated explicitly in the continuation of the *gemara*, which states that there is reason to obligate women in the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* despite the fact that they are exempt from time-bound positive *mitzvot*:

You might say that because it mentions God’s kingship [it is different]. We are therefore told [that this is not so].

However, it seems that this idea is contradicted by a statement in the *Yerushalmi*, in its explanation of the exemption of slaves from *keriat Shema*:[[1]](#footnote-1)

From where [do we learn] that slaves [are exempt from the obligation of *keriat Shema*]? [From the verse,] “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (*Devarim* 6:4). Whoever has no master except God [is obligated]. The slave is excluded [from the obligation of *keriat Shema*] because he has another master. (*Yerushalmi* *Berakhot* 3:3)

According to the *Yerushalmi*, slaves are exempt from *keriat Shema* because they bear the yoke of another master and thus cannot properly accept upon themselves the yoke of God’s kingship. As a result, even according to the *Yerushalmi*, it turns out that *keriat Shema* represents accepting the yoke of God’s kingship – in direct contradiction to what we learned regarding the exemption of women.

In theory, it could have been claimed that there is a dispute within the *Yerushalmi* over the primary focus of *keriat Shema* – the acceptance of the yoke of God’s kingship or Torah study. However, the *Yerushalmi* presents three different proofs from which it derives the exemptions for three different groups: women, slaves, and minors. Women are exempt because they are not included in the *mitzva* of Torah study; slaves are exempt because they cannot accept upon themselves the yoke of God’s kingship; and minors are exempt because they, too, are not included in the *mitzva* of Torah study.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since these three proofs are presented together and in sequence, it would not make sense for the different explanations to represent fundamentally different approaches.

Therefore, in my humble opinion, it seems that we must find a different way to explain the apparent discrepancy in the *Yerushalmi*. To begin, we will assert that the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* is indeed rooted in the *mitzva* of Torah study. However, it is a unique form of the *mitzva* of Torah study, whose contents deal exclusively with the acceptance of God’s kingship. The *mitzva* is **to learn Torah** when you lie down and when you get up, focusing on the passages that deal with **accepting the yoke of God’s kingship**.

In light of this, it is clear that neither those who are exempt from the *mitzva* of Torah study nor those who are exempt from the *mitzva* of accepting the yoke of God’s kingship can possibly be obligated in this *mitzva*. There is thus no contradiction between the different statements in the *Yerushalmi*. The two reasons for exempting women and slaves from the obligation of *keriat Shema* work in tandem and are rooted in the same basic principle.

In contrast, the *Bavli* maintains that the main aspect of *keriat Shema* is accepting the yoke of God’s kingship. As we will demonstrate shortly, even the *Bavli* maintains that the *mitzva* of Torah study plays a key role in the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*. However, according to the *Bavli*, the element of Torah study within *keriat Shema* is **an expression of the acceptance of God’s kingship**. Torah study serves as a means of accepting the yoke of God’s kingship. It seems that this is the approach that we attributed to Rambam in the previous *shiurim*: that Torah study – “*talmudo*” – is an expression of the realization of recognizing the oneness of God and knowing Him.

**“He Who Reads from That Point On Does Not Lose, Like One Who Reads in the Torah”**

The *mishna* states: “He who reads [the Shema] from that point on does not lose, like one who reads in the Torah” (*Berakhot* 9b). The *gemara* explains:

R. Mani said: He who recites the *Shema* in its proper time is greater than he who studies the Torah. For since it says: He who reads from that point on does not lose, like one who reads in the Torah, we may conclude that one who recites the *Shema* in its proper time is superior. (*Berakhot* 10b)

The *gemara* implies that one who recites the *Shema* after its proper time is rewarded as one who reads from the Torah, whereas one who recites the *Shema* at its proper time receives a greater reward than one who simply reads from the Torah.

Why was it necessary to declare that one who recites the *Shema* after its proper time is rewarded as one who reads from the Torah? Why would we think that such a person would not be rewarded in this manner? There is no reason to think that he is any different from one who studies Torah verses at any time of the day, in any setting; such a person is certainly rewarded for his efforts! Thus, it must be that the meaning of the *mishna*’s statement is that one who reads the verses of the *Shema* receives a unique reward for his Torah study, one beyond that of regular Torah study. Of course, it is even more preferable that one recite these verses in their proper time.

Based on this understanding, there are three levels:

1. Torah study in general, at any time and in any place
2. Torah study through the verses of the *Shema*
3. Torah study through the verses of the *Shema* at their proper time, i.e., when one is obligated in the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*

All of this leads us to the conclusion that there is an element of Torah study within *keriat Shema*. This approach fits well with both approaches that we have presented thus far –the position of the *Yerushalmi* that the main aspect of *keriat Shema* lies in Torah study, as well as the position of the *Bavli* that the element of Torah study within *keriat Shema* is a means of accepting the yoke of God’s kingship.

**The Blessings of *Keriat Shema* and the Blessings of the Torah**

Earlierin *Berakhot*,the *Yerushalmi* states:

It was taught in the *mishna*: The officer said to them, “Recite one blessing,” and they did so. What blessing did they recite? R. Matna said in the name of Shmuel: It was the blessing over the Torah. And they recited the Ten Commandments, [the passages] “Hear, O Israel!”; “If, then, you shall obey”; and “The Lord spoke.” (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:5)

It is stated explicitly in the *Yerushalmi* that the blessing that they recited before *keriat Shema* was called “the blessing over the Torah.” This blessing is the blessing we call *Ahava Rabba* (“Great Love”), but the *Yerushalmi* calls it “the blessing over the Torah.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In contrast, the *Bavli* does not call *Ahava Rabba* “the blessing over the Torah.” In fact, the *Bavli* mentions a dispute over the identity of this “one blessing” that the people were instructed to recite – either *Ahava Rabba* or *Yotzer Or* (“Who Forms Light”). In any case, the *Bavli* does not call it “the blessing over the Torah.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

***Keriat Shema* Exempts One from Torah Study**

The *gemara* in *Menachot* states:

R. Ami said: From these words of R. Yose we learn that even though a man learns but one chapter in the morning and one chapter in the evening, he has thereby fulfilled the *mitzva* of “Let not this book of the Torah cease from your lips” (*Yehoshua* 1:8). R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai: Even though a man but reads the *Shema* morning and evening, he has thereby fulfilled the *mitzva* of “Let not this book… cease from your lips.” (*Menachot* 99b)

This passage establishes two points:

1. One who learns Torah in the morning and in the evening fulfills his obligation to “Let not this book of the Torah cease from your lips, but recite it day and night.”
2. One who recites the *Shema* in the morning and in the evening fulfills his obligation to “Let not this book… cease from your lips” according to R. Shimon bar Yochai.

R. Shimon bar Yochai’s position that one who recites the *Shema* in the morning and in the evening fulfills his obligation of Torah study is understandable if we view the main aspect of *keriat Shema* as a fulfillment of the *mitzva* of Torah study. However, according to R. Yehoshua ben Korcha’s position that the main aspect of *keriat Shema* is accepting the yoke of God’s kingship, it is difficult to understand how one can fulfill his obligation of Torah study merely by reciting the *Shema*.

We must conclude, then, that all positions acknowledge that *keriat Shema* contains some element of Torah study (even if it is merely as a technical means of accepting the yoke of God’s kingship), and thus one who recited the *Shema* can be viewed as having learned Torah on that day.

**“They Interrupt for *Keriat Shema* but Not for the Prayer”**

I believe that the strongest proof in support of R. Shimon bar Yochai’s position, which views the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* as a fulfillment of the *mitzva* of Torah study, is found in *Yerushalmi Shabbat*. The *mishna* in *Berakhot* (1:2) states: “They interrupt [their Torah study] for *keriat Shema*, but they do not interrupt for the Prayer (i.e., the *Amida*).” The *gemara* explains:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai: As to people such as ourselves, who are occupied in Torah study, even for *keriat Shema* we do not interrupt our studies. R. Yochanan made that statement in his own name: As to people such as ourselves, who are not occupied in Torah study, even for saying the Prayer, we do interrupt our studies. This one is consistent with his views expressed elsewhere, and so is that one. R. Yochanan is consistent with other statements of his, for Rabbi Yochanan said: Would that people prayed all day long! Why? Because prayer never goes to waste. **R. Shimon bar Yochai is consistent with his views expressed elsewhere, for R. Shimon bar Yochai said: If I were standing at Mount Sinai at the time that the Torah was given to Israel, I would have beseeched the Merciful God to create for that man [me] two mouths – one with which to labor in Torah, the other to serve all my needs in general.** He retracted and remarked: Now, if when we only have only one mouth, the world cannot stand on account of the slander that it speaks, if there were two mouths [in each person], how much the more so…

**But does not R. Shimon bar Yochai concur that they interrupt their work to make a *sukka* and to prepare a *lulav*?And does not R. Shimon bar Yochai concur in the view: One learns in order to carry out the *mitzvot*, not in order not to carry them out, [and if one studies them but does not do them,] it would have been better for him if he had not been created?** R. Yochanan said: He who studies not with the intention of carrying out what he learns – it would have been better for him if his backbone had been turned on his face, and if he had not come forth into the world. **The reason for the view of R. Shimon bar Yochai is this: This [i.e., the *Shema*] is to be impressed** [as in “Impress them upon your children”]**, and that [i.e., the words of Torah] is to be impressed, and they do not interrupt one thing which is to be impressed on account of something else which is to be impressed.**

And have we not learned: He who reads from that point on does not lose, like one who reads in the Torah? Lo, this [*keriat Shema*] at its proper time is more beloved than [reciting] the words of the Torah. R. Yudan said: Since R. Shimon bar Yochai was very sharp[[5]](#footnote-5) in learning the words of Torah, therefore he took the view that [*keriat Shema*] is not more beloved to him than [reciting] words of Torah. (*Yerushalmi Shabbat* 1:2)

This passage from the *Yerushalmi* makes it very clear that the main aspect of the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* is the *mitzva* to “impress them” – in other words, the *mitzva* of Torah study.

At this juncture, we must clarify well the distinction between the respective positions of R. Shimon bar Yochai and R. Yochanan. Why does R. Shimon bar Yochai maintain that for him, and only for him, it is not important to fulfill the *mitzva* of Torah study through *keriat Shema* specifically? We will answer this question once we understand the difference between the *mitzva* of Torah study through *keriat Shema* and the general *mitzva* of Torah study.

In principle, one could distinguish between the two *mitzvot* based on Ran’s commentary in *Nedarim* 8a. Ran distinguishes between the *mitzva* of Torah study that one must fulfill “when you lie down and when you get up” and the *mitzva* of “Impress them upon your children,” the *mitzva* of knowing the Torah – that words of Torah should always be at the tip of one’s tongue.

However, based on our analysis thus far, this distinction seems unlikely. In addition, according to this explanation, it is unclear why both of these forms of the *mitzva* of Torah study must be derived from these verses specifically.

Therefore, it seems that the main purpose of the *mitzva* of Torah study is to help forge an intimate connection between man and his Creator. R. Chayim of Volozhin formulated this idea exceptionally well in his famous work *Nefesh Ha-Chayim*:

And he should intend to attach himself to the Holy One, blessed be He, via his learning the Torah, specifically to cause himself to attach with all of his powers to the word of God – that is, the *halakha*. And in this way he will actually be attached to Him, blessed be He, so to speak, for He and His will are one, as is written in the *Zohar*. And every judgment and *halakha* from the holy Torah is His will, blessed be He, for that is what His will decreed, that such is the judgment, kosher or disqualified, impure and pure, forbidden and unrestricted, guilty and innocent.

And furthermore, if he is occupied with stories that have no bearing on any judgment, he is also attached to the speech of the Holy One, blessed be He. For the entire Torah, in her generalities, specifics and details, and even what a young student asks of his teacher, all of it was emitted from His mouth, blessed be He, to Moshe at Sinai…

As is explained in the holy Torah in the *Mishneh Torah* [*Devarim*]: “To love the Lord your God” (*Devarim* 30:8). And our Rabbis *z”l* explained it in *Nedarim* (62a), in the *beraita* that deals with involvement with Torah, refer there [for more details], and the end of the verse, “holding fast to Him” (*Devarim* 11:22).

For that reason King David stated: “I prefer the Torah from Your mouth to…” (*Tehillim* 119:72) – he said that my heart rejoices in my labors in the holy Torah with great courage when I realize that she is the Torah from Your mouth, that each actual word from the Torah that I am currently involved with, all of it was emitted, and even now it is being emitted from Your mouth, blessed be He. (*Nefesh Ha-Chayim* 4:6)

But how can the common man reach this level, at which whenever he learns Torah he feels a sense of intimacy with God? How can a person reach a stratum where he can view every topic that he studies as the word of God to the world, and where he genuinely understands that to connect with this word is to connect with God Himself? In order to reach this level, one must prepare himself properly as he begins to study.

Because of this, the Torah provided us with the *mitzva* of Torah study within the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*, which deals with the concepts of the oneness of God, loving God, and studying His Torah. By reciting these verses, one enables himself to feel this sense of intimacy with God that will hopefully accompany him through his regular regimen of Torah study.

All this applies to an average person. However, R. Shimon bar Yochai was no average person; he was “very sharp” in learning Torah and did not need this preparation. By virtue of his amplified perception, R. Shimon bar Yochai was able to see that every word of the Torah possesses the sublime depth of the divine word. As a result, even if he was dealing with mundane topics such as the case of an ox that gored a cow, he would see the divine word in this topic in exactly the same way as “You shall love the Lord your God.”

If this is so, the rest of humanity certainly requires this preparation before engaging in Torah study to strengthen them and enable them to learn Torah through love and closeness to God. This preparation also serves to instill in us a stubborn desire to achieve profound knowledge of the entire Torah, as we are reminded that all of Torah is God’s wisdom and will.

R. Shimon bar Yochai himself expressed this idea elsewhere, in the *Zohar*:

R. Shimon said: Woe to the man who says that the Torah came simply to relate stories and tales of mundane matters. If it was so, even at the present day we could produce a Torah from simplistic matters, and perhaps even nicer ones than those. If it came to illustrate worldly matters, even the rulers of the world have among them things that are superior. If so, let us follow them and produce from them a Torah in the same manner. However, all matters in the Torah are of a superior nature and are uppermost secrets. (*Zohar*, *Parashat Beha’alotekha* [*Bamidbar* 152a])

R. Shimon bar Yochai stresses that the Torah is a garment and all the topics within the Torah are lofty ideas and divine secrets.

R. Shneur Zalman of Liady expressed a similar idea in the *Tanya*:

As explained in the *Zohar*, “Torah and the Holy One, blessed be He, are truly one.” This means: Since Torah is the wisdom and will of the Holy One, blessed be He, it is one with His glory and essence… God compressed His will and wisdom in the 613 *mitzvot* of the Torah and in their laws, and in the letter-combinations of the *Tanakh*, and in the exposition of these verses found in the *aggadot* and *midrashim* of our Sages *z”l*, in order that every *neshama* or *ru’ach* and *nefesh* in the human body will be able to grasp them with its intellect, and [in order] that it fulfill them, as far as they can be fulfilled, in action, speech, and thought… Therefore has the Torah been compared to water, for just as water descends from a higher level to a lower level, so has Torah descended from its place of glory. It is God’s will and wisdom, and “Torah is one and the same with God,” Whom no thought can apprehend at all. From there the Torah has journeyed in a descent through hidden stages, stage after stage, in the *hishtalshelut* of the Worlds, until it clothed itself in material matters and things of this world, which comprise nearly all the Torah’s commandments and their laws, and also in the physical letter-combinations written with ink in a book, the 24 books of Torah, Prophets and Writings. So that every thought be able to grasp them, and so that even speech and action, which are on a level lower than thought, be able to grasp them and clothe themselves in them… For this reason, it has been said: “One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than the whole life of the World to Come.” For the World to Come consists of enjoying the radiance of the Divine Presence; it is the pleasure derived from comprehension [of Godliness]. Now no created being, even of the higher realms, can comprehend any more than a glimmer of the divine light, for which reason it is referred to as “the radiance of the Divine Presence.” But as for the essence and glory of the Holy One, blessed be He, no thought can comprehend Him at all. Only when it apprehends and clothes itself in Torah and its *mitzvot* does it grasp and clothe itself in God Himself, for “Torah and the Holy One, blessed be He, are one and the same.” (*Tanya*, *Likutei Amarim* 4)

R. Shimon bar Yochai was able to see the entire Torah for what it truly is – the garments of God Himself – and thus he possessed the power to penetrate to the very foundations of the divine will. Thus, he had no need for the preparatory, intermediary verses of *keriat Shema*.

However, most people do require this intermediation in order to strengthen their love and sense of intimacy with God and His wisdom, the wisdom of the Torah. By reciting these verses, a person can transfer the experience of the divine to the rest of his Torah study, no matter what part of the Torah he chooses to study and no matter where or when this studying is set.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. The *Bavli* does not discuss the exemption of slaves from *keriat Shema* at all. It seems that the reason for this is simple: It is due to the general rule that a slave is obligated in *mitzvot* to the same degree that a woman is. In effect, the blanket exemption of women from time-bound positive *mitzvot* applies equally to slaves. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *Yerushalmi* states: “From where [do we learn] that minors [are exempt from the obligation of *keriat Shema*]? [From the verse,] “In order that the Torah of the Lord may be in your mouth” (*Shemot* 13:9). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is no other blessing that the *Yerushalmi* calls “the blessing over the Torah” aside from *Ahava Rabba*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The *Bavli* does state that the blessing of *Ahava Rabba* can exempt one from reciting the blessing of the Torah. Nevertheless, the *Bavli* indicates that the main way that one fulfills his obligation to recite this blessing is through the blessing of *Asher Bachar Banu* (“Who Has Chosen Us”); if one recited *Ahava Rabba* before reciting *Asher Bachar Banu*, however, he can exempt himself from the need to recite the standard blessing of the Torah. This fits well with what we have seen – even the *Bavli* acknowledges an element of Torah study within *keriat Shema*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This translation follows the version of the text that reads *chadid* here, meaning “very sharp.” However, the parallel text in *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:2 reads *tadir*, meaning “frequent.” In other words, R. Shimon bar Yochai would frequently be engaged in Torah study, and it was because of this that *keriat Shema* was not more beloved to him than other parts of the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)